

Language as Archive & Method in the Vast Early Americas

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Georgetown University

Sponsored by the Georgetown University Department of History & the Omohundro Institute for Early American History and Culture

This workshop invites scholars to ‘think with’ language evidence as both an archive and a method for accessing the perspectives of African and indigenous communities of the early Americas. The workshop addresses the challenge of reconstructing the intellectual worlds of African and indigenous people living in the vast early Americas whose lives escaped capture in the colonial archive precisely because they existed primarily in their enslaved or indigenous status in the eyes of the colonial state. The difficulty of accessing the thinking of these ‘undocumented intellectuals’ stymies our ability to fully understand the contradictory motivations and ideas shaping colonial American contexts. Relying on the traditional archives and methods of the historian, we are left with a partial view of the worlds in which undocumented intellectuals worked, even as we seek an intellectual history of the early Americas replete with the multiple, conflicting perspectives we know thinking, politically engaged African and Native American men and women must have used to make sense of and act on their world.

The interior worlds of men and women whose stories and ideas were not recorded in written form were, of course, debated, celebrated, and commemorated through words poured with libations over graves or whispered in hushed rebellion and raucous song. Historians have used language evidence to connect individuals and groups to cultures of ‘origin’. The ‘new’ philology of Latin Americanists pushed further, opening conceptual histories that balanced indigenous and European worldviews in the making of colonial contexts, however unequal the terms of interaction. Yet, these approaches struggle to identify arguments crafted across the many indigenous and African languages spoken in the early Americas or fully embed intellectual histories in their fraught precolonial contexts. This workshop invites scholars to open History’s epistemologies to the same level of critique we extend to the colonial archive on which our discipline remains over-reliant through the analysis of language as archive and method. Crucially, the workshop balances this call for new examples and practices of history with training opportunities in the adoption of linguists’ methods to historians’ needs.

The conference is conceptualized as both a traditional workshop featuring discussion of pre-circulated, works-in-progress (four panels on Saturday; 12 presenters) and an introductory, hands-on methods training workshop in the comparative historical linguistic analysis of African and Native American language material in the Americas. We have limited funding to support participation of scholars from the global south and graduate students.