

# ASPECT NEWSLETTER



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## From the Editor

By Reed W. Taylor



We are approaching the end of ASPECT's second year with the wrapping up of the spring 2010 semester. Spring is the time for renewal; we are excited to celebrate the progress of the current ASPECT students and welcome the third cohort of ASPECT students in the coming fall semester.

In this issue, we want to share the benefits of ASPECT team-taught course offered this semester. The topic of the Spring 2010 ASPT 6004 Interdisciplinary Approaches to Social, Political, Ethical, and Cultural Thought class is 'Bioethics, Biopolitics, and Biohistory'. ASPT 6004 team-taught courses are an integral part of the ASPECT curriculum that brings together experts from multiple disciplines to form a unique synthesis of interdisciplinary experience.

ASPECT team-taught courses have attracted students from other programs, including students from History, Philosophy, Political Science, SPIA, and STS. Previous topics for ASPECT team-taught

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courses are: 'Spatial, Postcolonial, Performative, and Animal Turns' in spring 2008, and 'Neo-liberalism and Society' in spring 2009.

This issue also includes a reflection from a current student, two book reviews and a summary of ASPECT GSA events in 2009 - 2010. We hope this issue will encourage students and faculty to join us in the ASPECT GSA speaker series, events and functions in the future.

*Merdeka!*

## Spring 2010 ASPT 6004 Bioethics, Biopolitics, Biohistory

By Chad Lavin PhD, Paul Poenicke, and Eli Jamison

What happens when you get an analytic philosopher, a critical theorist, and an environmental historian together to examine how economic, political, cultural, and technological forces intervene in real life processes? This is what the professors and students in this year's co-taught theme seminar, "Bioethics, Biopolitics, Biohistory" (ASPT 6004) sought to find out. The answer, as it turns out, was pretty surprising.

The professors, James Klagge (Philosophy), Chad Lavin (Political Science) and Mark Barrow (History) brought a diversity of interests and approaches to the issues -- approaches that were distinct and at times contradictory, but more often than not spoke to each other in rather unexpected ways.

The course opened by considering J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* -- a reading that the seminar returned to regularly throughout the semester, with its themes of animal cruelty, individual ethics, and rhetorical strategy. But before jumping in to a sequence of weeks dedicated to specific issues, each professor took a week to introduce a theoretical orientation to the class material. Klagge started with the chapters on ethical reasoning from Peter Singer's *Practical Ethics*, Lavin with Michel Foucault's introduction of biopolitics in *The History of Sexuality and Society Must Be Defended*, and Barrow with a series of essays considering how the concept of "wilderness" often obscures the co-evolution of humanity and



nature.

From here, the class jumped in to a series of discussions of specific ethical, political, and environmental controversies, such as killing (especially abortion, euthanasia, and vegetarianism), nature preservation and species extinction, poverty and famine, environmental justice, and organ transplantation and cloning.

A persistent -- and somewhat surprising -- theme throughout the class was the issue of political agency. Considering the difference between individual and ethical level analyses and more structural and political interventions, the class was often caught between reassuring suggestions that individuals (or groups) are capable of addressing various situations of injustice or danger and discouraging suggestions that such responses are never adequate to deal with underlying

Please see *ASPT 6004* on page 4

## Discovering ASPECT

By Shien-Hauh Leu



I first discovered the ASPECT program by chance while I was still in the early stages of my graduate education. Being an interdisciplinary PhD program, ASPECT did not seem like something I would ever associate myself with, both for practical and ideological reasons. Nonetheless, ASPECT struck me as a unique and intriguing program that I could not simply dismiss from my thoughts even if I did not consider it to be a viable option to pursue. And indeed, I could not have been more wrong in my initial assessment of the program.

As I progress through my studies, the inherently interdisciplinary nature of "research" became increasingly clear to me; it almost seems unnatural to artificially restrict the scope of inquiry to satisfy a predetermined set of criteria as to the proper constitution of a given field of knowledge. This artificial limitation, however, is perhaps a necessary practical and ideological concession that enables the possibility of knowledge. Indeed, how does one attain the disciplinary mastery in multiple fields to engage in genuine interdisciplinary work? In its negative mobilization, this ideological perspective is often used to suppress interdisciplinarity. Yet,

if there is such a thing as true interdisciplinarity, it must also involve a redefinition of traditional conceptions of disciplinary boundaries--if such boundaries are established merely in exchange for the possibility to allow the beginning of knowledge, perhaps it is time to radically reconceptualize the very meaning of knowledge and to recover the material and ideological immediacy that produces and reproduces such exclusionary inertia.

ASPECT is therefore a timely intervention that creates an open space free from old prejudices that formally overdetermine the value of one's output. The coursework requirements attracted me to the program insofar as it is structured precisely to resist such overdetermination by allowing considerable flexibility in deciding the knowledge one wishes to pursue without imposing explicit prohibitions or comprehensive prejudgments. The GTA component of the program is also a major draw that gives students the opportunity to engage in work that has a direct contribution to one's intellectual and professional growth. My own GTA assignment has been within the philosophy department, even though my formal background is not in the field of philosophy. True to the vision of the program, my lack of formal qualifications is not perceived in itself as a limitation to the kind of work that I might pursue. On the contrary, I am being given the training and resources to successfully integrate the requisite expertise into my own repertoire of usable knowledge.

## *La Nueva Mestiza*: The Unearthed Potential of ASPECT Community

By Jordan Hill



Julie Klein's *Humanities, Culture and Interdisciplinarity* reawakened in me an awareness of one of the most seminal interdisciplinary texts when she noted that "Integration is being promoted by a critical cross-cultural interdisciplinarity that is forging *mestiza* methodology standpoints and methodologies, curriculum transformation, and program development that also advances integrative goals."<sup>1</sup> The text I am referring to is Gloria Anzaldúa's masterpiece, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, as a text which *embodies* a cross-cultural, radical, interdisciplinary way of engaging in knowledge production. Klein acknowledges that integration cannot be merely the synthesis of the methodologies from various disciplinary perspectives, for to do this is to leave the 'unnatural boundaries' of disciplinarily intact, which leaves us in the aftermath as vagabonds scouring for the leftover morsels of in the alleys of the academies ivory towers. In order to circumvent this

future potentiality it becomes necessary that we work to integrate not within the confines of an academically defined and skeletal definition of capital "I" Integration; instead we must grapple with the notion of a *mestiza* methodology to the extent that we break down what we came here with so that we may redefine not merely academic conventions which quietly struggle to reaffirm for us their importance in our habitually normative discourse, but that we may in fact shed the skin of our "I". We must allow room for ourselves to investigate new formulations of methodological substantiation: what temporal and spatial constraints have we taken for granted? What kinds of questions are not only underrepresented, but to take it a step farther, what kinds of questions have we yet to even considered asking? These challenges rest on the limiting bedrock (and indeed, the sheer granite faces) of a culture that stresses individuality yet provides so many Faustian offerings to operate with the shared discourse of the prefabricated disciplinary structures.

Two thoughts emerge from this: first, are we willing to accept support from those who travel this lonely road with us only in the sense that they too have forgone the creature comforts of disciplinary dormitories in order to address questions that lie in the abyss? This question is fundamental; this question is difficult in the sense that honestly addressing the propensity of intellectually thoughtful individuals to engage one and other in honest dialogue is no small feat when one admits one's own social tendencies; and this question must be wrestled with and answered in an affirmative that is allowing of the variation that

*"ASPECT creates an open space free from old prejudices that formally overdetermine the value of one's output" – Shien-Hauh Leu*

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## Book Review:

By Juan Carlos Sanchez-Sierra

**Ng'weno, Bettina.** *Turf Wars: Territory and citizenship in the Contemporary State*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. 299 p

In anthropology the analyses of state, NGOs, or civil institutions have become more common in the last years. Following such trend, this book reflects on recent political dimensions opened by afro-descendants and their relations with the Colombian state. Centered in the territorial disputes in the Cerro Teta, Municipality of Buenos Aires in southwestern Colombia, Bettina Ng'weno introduce us to the convergence of *mestizo* peasants, indigenous and armed actors in dispute against afrocolombianos, in the context of structural adjustment and the implementation of a new Constitution (1991).

Bettina Ng'weno is an anthropologist educated in USA (Johns Hopkins) who teaches at University of California, Irvine. Originally from Kenya, her interest in afro-descendants in Colombia is an important aspect of the field work she undertook, and how individual identity can be a meaningful aspect in social research, something she widely discusses in the introduction of *Turf Wars*. Whilst writing this research, she received the academic influence of Michel Touillot and Joanne Rappaport, two leading scholars engaged in the debates on memory and politics in the context of ambiguous cultural identities in the contemporary Colombia and Latin America. It is also important to mention that the program where she studied and wrote a PhD dissertation emerged in the 1960s as a pioneer attempt to professionalize the discipline in the new theoretical tendencies based upon a deep revision of researcher's ethical and epistemological

standpoint. In a more general perspective, programs in Anthropology like the one formed at Johns Hopkins were intended to reverse the catastrophic effects of early Area Studies programs in North American scholarship.

The central argument of *Turf Wars* is that during the implementation of neoliberal politics juridical categories of authority and property concurred in the process of transformation of the state -in terms of form and function. The result is twofold. First, new juridical mechanisms and forms of self-government emerge as alternatives for ethnic groups allowing them to make effective territorial claims. Secondly, state's definitions of ethnic groups play a decisive role whilst territorial re-structuration takes place, especially in the context of claims for administrative autonomy and resource management.

Concerned by the reciprocal perceptions between the state and those social groups historically segregated from the legal structure contained in the national Constitution, Ng'weno's research is mainly the state and its contradictory situations emerged during the zenith of neoliberalism. The setting is also complemented by the myriad conflicts and articulations that the relation between state and afro-descendants —also called *afrocolombianos*— emerged as a result of their territorial claims, and how multiple incumbent actors fostered meanings, practices, and spaces where the state left traces of its footprint. Ng'weno successfully presents slow motion of juridical claims intertwined in the intricate labyrinth of minute legal procedures, piling demands in an array that overshadows state institution functionality.

The author starts by defining notions such as Afro-colombian, ethnicity, territory and property, based on the context of juridical changes after Colombian 1991 constitution, and the historical

Please see *Turf Wars* on page 4

## Book Review:

By Dana Cochran



**Kupperman, Karen Ordahl.** *The Jamestown Project*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.

In *The Jamestown Project*, Karen Ordahl Kupperman seeks to reposition the Jamestown colony “within its true context,” one that reflects its success rather than failure (2). She shifts the existing historical emphasis from Jamestown as the hard luck, disaster-ridden first American colony to its emergence as the “archetype of English colonization” (3). Kupperman's extensive background as an early American specialist by no means limits the content of this book to a simple discussion of Jamestown proper. In fact, she offers a complicated and thorough analysis of the complex intermingling of politics, economics and religion as those factors affected exploration and colonization in the trans-Atlantic world of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Furthermore, she follows a pattern established in previous works such as her 2000 book,

*Indians & English: Facing Off in Early America*, by characterizing the native inhabitants of the North America as active participants who exhibited agency in their relationships with Europeans and were not just victims of colonization.

Kupperman tells an involved back story about the actors and the circumstances leading up to Jamestown and provides a fascinating history of alliances, betrayals, privateering and double dealing as European powers were jockeying for front position in the colonial wars. Contacts between Europeans and Indians for the decades preceding both Jamestown and Plymouth had familiarized the natives with white traders and explorers. Kupperman concludes that the native leaders “had developed a series of strategies for handling them,” which may partially explain why the Indians maintained an uneasy relationship with the settlers instead of refusing aid altogether (7). One fact remains undisputed throughout colonial settlements in New England and points south: The Europeans would not have survived without receiving aid from the native population.

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injustices.

Another related and also recurring discussion focused on styles of argumentation and method. This was never more clear than in the contrast between Peter Singer's cool rationalism and the passionate particularism found in Donna Haraway's *Companion Species Manifesto*. While Singer focused on presenting detailed justifications for his positions with little rhetorical flourish, Haraway poured bombast and passion into her work, defending her thinking with playful stories, sharply-worded contentions, and imaginative yet convincing accounts of superior ethical possibilities. The class discussed Singer and Haraway as updating a debate stretching back to ancient Greece, where Socrates encouraged his listeners to rational dialogue, while his student Plato used the emotive aspects of rhetoric to supplement logic.

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Kupperman introduces and concludes her book with one major observation about colonization. It was expensive and dangerous, with no return on private investment during early years and no guarantee of any return even later in the process. She also makes a strong point that the Spanish and English were looking at colonization as a proverbial pot of gold at the end of their seagoing rainbow. The underlying motivation of monarchial and private investors was always profit. Secondary considerations were establishing outposts in far flung places and making Christian converts out of native populations. These factors make Jamestown's

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dynamics of Afro-descendants. Beyond the obvious fact of their disenfranchisement, Ng'weno emphasizes the emergence of local integrative strategies among these communities based on alternative forms of cooperation. The intersections of the social actors in play disclose alliances and disputes, and the liaison between autonomy and agency. At the center of her analysis there is the self-definition as 'ethnic group' and how by using this strategic movement afro-descendants increased their capacity of dialogue and negotiation with the state. Besides, in the neoliberal context the distinction between 'territory' —as an inalienable cultural heritage— and 'land' —a profit oriented notion based on assumptions that frame modern nation-state reference to a particular type of economic productivity— privileged their innovative perspective on resources preservation and sustainability in front of toothless claims from *mestizo* peasants or indigenous groups usually articulated to traditional political parties or violent mechanisms.

In the book, the analysis of combined interest opens the discussion on categories used to define communities in Colombia, before and after 1991 constitution. After the implementation of the new legal

These methodological differences opened into what was probably the most consistent ground of disagreement among class participants. For while defenders of Singer's demanding ethical prescriptions often took issue with the disengaged or abstracted approach of the more political or historical writings, many wondered if the discourse of ethics was itself appropriate to a particular historical or political condition, dependent on particular constructions of nature, species, or power that, if not accepted, threatened to derail the entire project. Similarly, while many were drawn to Foucault's sweeping study of the construction of sovereignty and the ordering of life, others wondered about the veracity of the historical narrative being told, or if such structural thinking undercut the need for individual judgment.

success even more surprising. Its settlers and investors persevered throughout years of economic and human loss as a result of malnutrition, disease and confrontations with natives.

This book is a fascinating history in the hands of an excellent writer and conscientious historian. But Kupperman dazzles a bit too much with her pre-Jamestown history and only comes back to the heart of her argument on page 210. However, that central story is a comprehensive, but accessible, narrative about the early years of Jamestown.

framework, afro-descendants emphasized cultural aspects that enable them to claim particular jurisdictional circumscription, an important turf in legal terms, and a strategic tool in claims about territoriality. The author presents afro-descendants agency as the convergence of self-definition, autonomous government, cultural struggles for recognition, and the instrumentalization of law and legal concepts to fight for rights and space in the region/nation political landscape. Territorial defense became a legitimate mean to open a path in the obscure codes of legal action historically controlled by the elite and *mestizo* sectors.

Although Ng'weno presents successfully conflict effects and its involvement in Buenos Aires and Cerro Teta, and the role of the state as part and parcel —via the National Army and the private interest defended by far right paramilitary forces—, the book does not illuminate neither the dangers of juridical decisions in the interest of local communities considering the usual backfire of any attempt to oppose or condemn state decisions, nor possible side effects of poor sectors pitted against each other. Particularly, the danger of 'ethnic' conflict deserves some attention, considering the knowledge she have of similar examples throughout sub-Saharan Africa, where some of the bloodiest conflicts flourished in the name of ethnic rights and local/regional interests.

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would no doubt proceed from such a liaison. Second, and most importantly, what would this kind of community look like and how would it empower self-reflexivity because of the innumerable temptations that will no doubt emerge and suggest a return to more comforting and facile surroundings? The vision of ASPECT to not merely follow the pack but to break new ground has been, rather amazingly, created and thus provides the ground from which to operate. The trap though, is to believe that this structure is the endpoint from which we can now go about or respective agendas. My argument, is that we are not standing on the mountaintop or even lounging near the river valley; we are instead in the metaphor provided above, on the impenetrable bedrock surface of an infinitely expansive terrain of undefined proportions, and thus can venture out on our own, unsupported into uncharted territories with the likely scenario that we will continue the trend of interdisciplinary invisibility, or we can expend feminine sweat, masculine tears, and unified blood together in our mutual quest to create an intellectual community that is focused not just on our personal betterment, but on the creation/renewal of a society committed to the advancement of human inquiry in realms that have not yet been given a full opportunity to emerge.

1. Julie Klein, *Humanities, Culture, and Interdisciplinarity: The Changing American Academy*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 196.



ASPECT student meeting in January 2010 – From left to right: Na Mi, Xiaochen Zhang, Dr. Tim Luke, Martin Saavedra, Lyusyena Kirakosyan, Alfonso Vergaray, Jordan Hill, Nina Salmon, Shien-Hauh Leu, Marc Thomas, and Reed Taylor

## Summary of ASPECT Events 2009 – 2010

### ASPECT GSA Speaker Series Events 2009-2010

Twice a year, ASPECT GSA Speaker Series invites scholars from a wide range of disciplines and backgrounds to Virginia Tech. Invited scholars give a public lecture, a workshop with ASPECT students and an interview conducted by ASPECT students.

October 26th 2009:

ASPECT program and ASPECT GSA invited Dr. Arnold Farr from University of Kentucky to present his lecture on 'Marcusean Theory and Liberation Praxis: Beyond the Pathology of One-Dimensionality'.

April 9th 2010

ASPECT GSA and ASPECT program invited Dr. Siti Kusujarti from Warren Wilson College to present her lecture on 'Tsunami, Civil Society, and Shariah Law in Aceh: How does Disaster Affect Gender Relation?'



*ASPECT GSA congratulates Dr. Wolfgang Natter on his new appointment as the new Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at St. Bonaventure University*

*“an intellectual community that is focused not just on our personal betterment, but on the creation/renewal of a society committed to the advancement of human inquiry” – Jordan Hill*

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Questions and Comments?

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## **FALL 2010 ASPECT COURSES**

ASPT-5984 SS: Walter Benjamin - Politics, Religion & Culture

ASPT-5984 SS: Knowledge in a Social World

ASPT-6104 Interdisciplinary Perspectives in Methodology

ASPT-6204 Feminist Epistemology

ASPT-6904 ASPECT Professional Development

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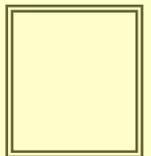
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**TO:**