

Spring 2015 CDLTI: Orientalism, Photography, and Human Zoos: A Cross-Disciplinary Conversation with the Adnan Charara Collection

Participants:

Daniel Forbes (Director of Sheehan Gallery/Art)

Matt deTar (Rhetoric)

Elizabeth Miller (General Studies)

Suzanne Morrissey (Anthropology)

Jason Pribilsky (Anthropology)

Elyse Semerdjian (History)

Jonathan Walters (Religion)

David Schultz (Communications Department)

Summary by CDLTI Organizer Elyse Semerdjian:

This CDLTI was organized in order to convene a small group of faculty and staff interested in a collaborative project centered on the visiting Adnan Charara Collection of ethnographic photographs. The group not only read some of the latest literature on the history of photography—which we were able to buy with a combination of CDLTI and Global Studies funds—it also looked critically at the history of exhibition work in order to critically frame the forthcoming Sheehan Gallery exhibition titled “X-Posed” for Spring 2016. Having read some of the latest scholarship, participants were prepared to offer ideas about how to exhibit the photographs while attending to pedagogical concerns about reproducing the very stereotypes we seek to challenge. It was particularly useful to have experts in cross-disciplinary fields share their perspectives in the same room; for example, Libby Miller as an expert in Egyptian art was able to quickly issue concerns about some of the ideas generated for the exhibition that she saw as having the potential to reproduce Orientalist tropes. We also learned during our meetings that Jon Walters has a secret life as a collector of photography and has an encyclopedic knowledge of techniques of nineteenth century photography production. Furthermore, Matt de Tar was able to call attention to various viewing practices, a subject he teaches in his visual rhetoric course. Although Matt is leaving to teaching at Willamette, he has offered to co-curate this exhibition with me, which means there is potential to make the “X-posed” exhibit into a NW5C consortium event. He hopes to find resources to bring some of his students from Willamette to Whitman during the opening. Importantly, Daniel was in the room to guide our conversations by asking questions that were pertinent to the gallery; he also alerted us to both possibilities and limitations with regard to the exhibition.

The CDLTI included participants who will be teaching with the photographs in the 2015-2016 academic year. Suzanne Morrissey will use the photographs in her teaching of CAV as will Libby Miller in her Art and Visual Culture course. I will be teaching my “Woman and Gender in Islamic Societies” course in the Spring and plan on creating a unit using out CDLTI readings and designing an assignment centered on the exhibition. In all, we found that the photograph in some way bridges our disciplinary divides and allows us to have a concentrated conversation on a cross-disciplinary subject.

Finally, we are all interested in participating in an edited volume that I hope to edit with Jon Walters. We will be using this final report, along with other information we have gathered, to construct a book proposal this fall. We will begin the process of shopping for a press and hope that the edited volume will be a great teaching tool to those who seek to teach the photographs from a cross-disciplinary standpoint. We have also identified several scholars from off campus that we will approach to participate in the volume.

This CDLTI was incredibly productive and exciting, especially as we shared our disciplinary lenses on photography. For those of us organizing the exhibition and teaching around the exhibition in our courses, we walked away with a number of readings to use in our courses and ideas to share. I want to add one last note; the inclusion of Whitman staff members was for me a profound gesture towards inclusion. I would like to thank your office for allowing us to include non-tenure track faculty and staff who had much to offer our group as we thought through these issues. We have identified David Schulz to design the future volume, making this project Whitman-centered in all respects.

Responses from Workshop Participants:

Daniel Forbes, Director of the Sheehan Gallery and Professor of Art

The CDLTI, Orientalism and Photography, took the possibilities of such groups to an exciting place; one I've not experienced in previous groups I've participated in. Not only did this session combine with another CDLTI on collections as a part of its schedule, expanding the interdisciplinary dialogue, but it also helped to facilitate the mini-exhibition for the "Global Studies Unveiled" event that occurred in April of 2015. Beyond these immediate activities, however, the conversations generated with this group are continuing well beyond our original sessions, the group's explorations becoming part of the upcoming "X-posed" Spring 2015 Sheehan exhibition. Here, the texts explored and participant reflections upon our discussions will be visually realized in a very dynamic way through curatorial projects utilizing images from the Adnan Charara collection currently on loan to Whitman. Faculty in history, Art History/Visual Culture, General Studies, Anthropology, Studio Art, and English are already integrating information and images from this CDLTI and the Charara Collection into classes for the 2015-2016 academic year.

As the curator of the Gallery, involved at several levels of this CDLTI, the exhibition resulting from this group will be the primary result of my participation. Not only will I facilitate the faculty curators involved, but also coordinate a contemporary counter-part with both outside artists and elements from Whitman's own art collection. In addition to this, I am presently working with two student interns, providing an experiential learning opportunity related to collections and historical photography. I am also actively coordinating with faculty to make the Charara collection available for incorporation into various class projects. Within my Spring 2016 Material Translations course, there will be a photography project informed by the collection and class Gallery visit as well.

The Orientalism and Photography CDLTI was remarkably well organized. It highlighted to me once again, the importance of collections and the possibilities they offer at an

institution like Whitman when they are given appropriate support and made available to faculty. The conversations generated, as well as all the resources each member brought to the table were also an excellent reminder of what extraordinary people Whitman has in its community. I particularly want to acknowledge, the leadership of the coordinator of the Orientalism and Photography CDTLI, Elyse Semerdjian: her tireless energy and investment in this and the continuing projects has been key to all this group accomplished and continues to.

Jon Walters, Religion

I derived a number of tangible benefits from the Spring 2015 CDTLI workshop on "Photography, Orientalism and Human Zoos." I think the most exciting of these was the opportunity to engage in close intellectual work and discussion with colleagues whom I know, but do not ordinarily interact with in that way. Drawing together colleagues who work on aspects of this topic, which falls between the cracks for most of us, was stimulating in its own right, affirming of the importance of the topic, and a great opportunity to get to know these colleagues -- from a variety of Division I and Division II disciplines -- as fellow scholars. I suspect that in turn, especially the younger members of our community who participated found themselves ensconced within a supportive and collegial community, which benefits the College quite beyond the specifics of the discussions.

Second, my own thinking about the antique images that I work with, and the larger theme of Orientalism and its discontents, was greatly enhanced by having an opportunity not only to talk about my own materials with others, but to learn about their interests from them. In particular, the younger members of our workshop made me aware of post-Saidian perspectives that proved very helpful to me in thinking about Orientalism today, a discussion that became especially pointed when we focused on the upcoming Sheehan Gallery exhibition and associated volume. This enhancement of my research was facilitated not only by the good conversation with my colleagues, but also by exposure to the texts on the bibliography, most of which I had never read nor even been aware of in the past. This was especially true of three volumes which I read cover to cover, and which I will henceforth draw on in my scholarly writings and presentations about Orientalist images, and hope to integrate into my teaching the next time I have an opportunity (say, as an instructor in Asian Studies 160): Lutz And Collins, *Reading National Geographic*; Aloula, *The Colonial Harem*; Ali And Gartlan, *Photography's Orientalism*.

Third, because our work was indeed focused on upcoming, tangible projects -- the Sheehan exhibition of Adnan Charara's fabulous photography collection, the Spring 2016 Global Studies Symposium, and the volume we plan to produce out of these collaborations -- one of the real benefits of the CDTLI was this advanced, no-pressure opportunity to brainstorm on these projects. Weekly meetings with us all together, face-to-face, and focused on the issues that cluster around our topic were invaluable for creating a space in which this collaboration could begin, and also in getting "buy in" from all the participants in the CDTLI workshop. The wide range of disciplines and interests represented in our workshop made this especially worthwhile: for example, David Schulz helped us keep aesthetic and production issues in mind when discussing the potential publication, Libby Miller brought cutting-edge takes on museum spaces and the "message" of art presentations as we discussed the upcoming show (she was especially helpful in making us aware of the ways some of our more "gimmicky" ideas would

unintentionally reproduce Orientalist power structures), Daniel Forbes helped us stay realistic about what we can plan for that show, and worked very hard to give us all access to all the materials so that we can now proceed to select and begin writing about them; because we represented different research areas, as well as methods, we were able to talk about a pan-Middle-Eastern and even larger context (thus I was greatly assisted in seeing how my South Asian materials correspond, and in some ways differ, from those that dominate the Charara collection).

For all these reasons, I am very grateful to the College for funding this stimulating conversation, and I know we will be bringing our work to the attention of the whole campus in the exhibition, and the Symposium, and the publication, and finally in the ways these new ideas and texts filter into the teaching each of us contributes to the curriculum.

Matthew deTar (Rhetoric)

This CDLTI helped me to find answers to a number of challenges I have found in developing assignments in my Visual Rhetoric course and in course units on images in other rhetoric classes. Our group frequently discussed the way that the upcoming Charara collection exhibit at the Sheehan Gallery would be able to communicate a critical perspective on Orientalist tropes of viewing to students. These discussions explored ideas for incorporating student work into the exhibit and images of students at the exhibit. My Visual Rhetoric course has struggled to incorporate student-generated and/or local imagery into the analytic project of the course, but our discussions helped me develop two course ideas. First, since all students (even non-photographers) take pictures, I will begin having one of the blog post assignments in that class focus on an analysis of the social conditions, presumptions, and tropes that organize their amateur photography, especially travel photography. Second, our discussions introduced me to some of the archival collections at Whitman, and some of the display materials at Sheehan, and I now have a framework for a course unit on representations of space/place that is situated locally and relates to the environment the students actually live in. I will now be working to develop a course unit that offers students historical perspective on the “look” of their environment (campus, the town, etc.), where I had only before been able to come up with walking tour assignments (around campus and town) that did not include the comparative perspective that I thought was necessary but I couldn’t figure out how to incorporate.

The small collection of books and articles that I received with the money of the CDLTI has also already advanced my research. I teach courses that alternately focus on theories of linguistic representation and theories of visual depiction, and the readings in this CDLTI have helped me think critically about how to bridge these theories in my own work. Readings on the historical development of ideas of “objectivity” combined with readings on the appropriations of the mechanism of photography by the Ottoman state has helped me think the linguistic and visual forms of representation together through theory.

Libby Miller (General Studies)

My participation in the CDLTI workshop this semester has been productive for my research, as I continue to think about questions of representation in the Arab world, and in Egypt in particular. Furthermore, the experience will feed directly into my teaching next year. In the spring semester,

I will be teaching Introduction to Art History and Visual Culture. I plan to structure a unit of the class around the exhibition based on the Adnan Charara collection. Having the photographs at my disposal will be an invaluable tool to teach Orientalism.

Jason Pribilsky (Anthropology)

I participated in the CDLTI on Orientalism, Photography and Human Zoos for two main reasons: 1) to explore different theoretical and methodological approaches to photography; and 2) to investigate ways I could use photographic collections in my teaching. The first reason stems from my current research and writing on Cold War anthropology in the Peruvian Andes. One of the chapters of my current book manuscript focuses on the photographic work of visual anthropologist John Collier, Jr. I have written an article on Collier's work, soon to be in print, but I will be revisiting his work and my earlier ideas on photography and anthropology, when I convert the article into a book chapter. The CDLTI gave me a lot of food for thought for how to do this, especially in terms of analysis of the former properties of photography, methodology, and the actual layout of photos alongside text. The readings we did for this group were extensive and a number of these works will make an appearance in my book. I am grateful to have had the time to read them in depth and, especially, alongside the useful commentaries of peers from disciplines with well formulated approaches to photography.

While the Andand Chacara collection possesses photographs far afield from my area of research, I was interested in this project less for its content and more as a vehicle to explore pedagogical approaches to teaching with photographic collections. For the anticipated volume that will come from our group, I hope to research some of the transnational connections that furthered the circulation of photographs (and postcards more specifically). I am curious to look at ways photographs were reproduced in studios in Latin America and to get a sense of the diverse audiences that were consuming these images. In the process, I hope to figure out a few assignments I could do in a class or two of mine that would include using the photographs as a way to reconstruct the circulation and exchange of global images.

Suzanne Morrissey (Anthropology)

My original interest in participating in the CDTLI on Orientalist Photography and the Adnan Charara collection stems from my own work in visual anthropology as well as in teaching courses that directly address visual representations of ethnic and racial minorities and the global trafficking of those images. In particular, in anticipation of designing a course for RAES on the "Anthropology of Race" and teaching GENS 245 (Critical Voices) in Spring 2016, I will consider texts chosen for our CDTLI for those classes and link course content directly to the Charara Collection exhibit.

Broadly, I can in fact say that the group gave me exposure to new texts on Orientalist photography, innovative scholarship on the production of human zoos, and creative exhibit design. The scope of disciplinary perspective – from history to art history to museum studies to rhetoric – took my thinking in new directions that will find purchase in my future class development. Especially in the area of critiquing the construction of discrete racial categories for the production of knowledge in the social sciences and epidemiology (something that I address in upper level medical anthropology courses as well as in introductory courses in cultural

anthropology), I was introduced to new ways of thinking that are different from those I typically gravitate to. Especially from my colleagues in art history and rhetoric, this new knowledge supports interdisciplinary perspective that I need as a contributor to the RAES major and steering committee. Moreover, my disciplinary background has me always interested in museum exhibit purpose and design (i.e., anthropology is, for better or for worse, a field both implicated and deeply involved in museum-based, constructed representations of others); this CDTLI gave me a chance to dedicate time and energy I otherwise would not have found to ruminating on how to teach museums and critical race theory, textual analysis, and constructive exhibiting.

Finally, two specific outcomes came from my participation in the group. First, I was prepared to contribute my own pieces to the Charara exhibit and edited volume – both of which I am thrilled about. To work closely and creatively with my colleagues across the disciplines is an exciting prospect. Second, I was able to meet Libby Miller through the group and now, am working closely with her to write the GENS 245 syllabus (she will teach a section of the class in Fall 2015), choose course material, and arrange class activities around visiting scholars and museum exhibits.

David Schulz (Communications)

This semester, I participated in Elyse Semerdjian's CDTLI: Orientalism, Photography, and Human Zoos: A Cross-Disciplinary Conversation with the Adnan Charara Collection. I feel that it was a success on many levels. The fact that a CDTLI exists is a miracle. To have funding to read, discuss, and explore ideas in relation to the collection is essential to the success in learning for students at Whitman as this collection unfolds next year in various forms, as an exhibition, a catalog, and speakers/events that underscore issues and ideas relevant to most departments at Whitman.

I joined this group as an independent photographic artist and designer and feel that much of the research regarding histories of objectivity and orientalism has led to insights that will affect my own future projects, including any future involvement that I might have with the Adnan Charara collection at Whitman. Relations of photo production and dissemination were examined within the context of contemporary media practices and how some of those might be utilized in an exhibit of the collection. Additionally, the CDTLI has provided the funding for many of the books that we discussed to be acquired for my personal library, which I consider a huge asset.