

Call for Papers: “Interpreters in Western History”

April 14-15, 2022

Miami University

Oxford, Ohio

At every historical juncture, interpreters were active and present, conveying meaning between mutually unintelligible peoples; bartering for goods and power along borders; and translating intentions from gestures, acts, and words. As a conduit of information, the act of interpretation has been central to Western history. In a habit of inattention that is ready for change, historians have rarely focused on these essential figures in history. Just as important, historians have seldom noticed that they are themselves the inheritors of this role: as they transmit messages from the people of the past to contemporary readers and future scholars.

This coming April, a two-day symposium will be held at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, to bring together scholars with an interest in exploring the roles—and powers of—interpreters throughout the Western (North American) past. We welcome proposals for papers, or topics of presentation, relating to one of our two organizing sub-themes: the academic study of interpreters in Western history, and the contemporary parallels and implications of this past. We welcome any approach to this understudied history, but potential topics might include:

- the lives of individual interpreters, analyzed with an eye to larger historical dynamics;
- the private interests of families or other kinship networks, and how these same connections could serve state interests;
- how Indigenous peoples engaged in or refused communications with explorers, trappers, missionaries, agents, settlers, or officials;
- contemporary U.S. foreign policy and global interests, and how these follow (or diverge from) the paths of military interpreters;
- the interpretations of historians of bygone eras, and how their work reframed the past, for better or for worse;
- the unintended consequences of mutual misunderstandings;

- the power of imperial literature to shape views of encountered “others”;
- trans-cultural literature and its associated cultural influence/meanings;
- the epistemology of historical translation;
- the business of interpretation, and how certain actors or companies capitalized on cross-cultural connections, then and now;
- interpreting misinformation and disinformation over the span of American history.

With support in part from Miami’s Department of History and the Myaamia Center, this symposium is especially keen to interrogate and reframe the power of interpretation from a number of potential angles, including region, chronology, and methodology. We will prioritize submissions from scholars or members of the public that address exchanges and historical inequities sustained by underrepresented peoples in the Western past.

This symposium extends previous informal conversations held by a working group of Western historians. We anticipate building off of this symposium to hold future conversations at the 2022 Western History Association conference, and to shape the resulting ideas and articles into a published volume, edited by Patricia Limerick (University of Colorado) and Andrew Offenburger (Miami University). Additional participants include Alice Baumgartner (USC), Taylor Cozzens (University of Oklahoma), Zachary Guiliano (University of Colorado), and Farina King (Diné, Northeastern State University).

Submissions: Please send an abstract (250-300 words) and a two-page CV to interpreters2022@gmail.com.

Deadline: December 17, 2021

Funding: Limited funds for travel and accommodations are available.