

Title of presentation

“Stories of Graphemes and Genes: Diversity and Extinction in Languages and Species”

Proposal

In this paper I discuss the diversity and extinction associated with two elemental units – graphemes and genes. I compare the Biblical stories of Genesis and the Tower of Babel to the representations of extinction in Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy and Octavia Butler’s “Speech Sounds.”

In Judaic mysticism, the graphemes of the Hebrew alphabet are not arbitrary shapes that correspond to arbitrary sounds, but rather elemental units that are conceived as the building blocks of creation. Genes, likewise, are the elemental units of life. In Genesis, Adam names the animals as they pass before him, recognizing each animal’s nature and naming the animal accordingly. At the tower of Babel, human communication is diversified when one language is replaced with myriad languages.

The extinction of species Atwood evokes in her trilogy and the extinction of language that forms the premise of Butler’s story describe an apocalyptic end to the Biblical beginning. I am particularly interested in the connections between genes and graphemes, and how the three texts treat the beginnings and ends of elemental units.

In this era of artificial species (gene splicing, genetic modification) and artificial languages (those originating in non-fiction such as Esperanto, and those originating in fiction such as Klingon), it is both fascinating and important to explore the trajectory of our elemental units. A comparison of these three texts enriches not only our reading of each, but also our understanding of the origins, recombination, manipulation, expansion, and perceived possible ends of the basic modules of communication and life.