“Will-o-wisps of science: Micrographs and Early Twentieth-Century Virus Visualization”

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Examining the state of literary criticism, Edward Said argued that a theory “travels.” While theory takes up humanist concerns, its intellectual and political implications adapt to and are adapted by the contexts of its deployment. We might say that a theory functions like a virus. In 1946, U.S. biochemist, Dr. Wendell Meredith Stanley, received the Nobel Prize in chemistry for being the first to isolate a virus in pure crystalline form. As science historian Lily E. Kay pointed out, Stanley’s crystallization was later challenged, but the authority of his claim—to have verified the existence of the virus as a discrete infectious agent—persisted. Stanley’s crystallization produced the first visual images of the tobacco mosaic virus as photographs rendered through the electron microscope. These micrographic images shifted scientific authority into U.S. hands during and after the war years. Stanley’s lab, which owned and restricted the use of one of the world’s first electron microscopes, continued to control the representational output of this new technology for some time. This paper seeks to understand the implications for the challenge to Stanley’s authorial stake on the virus visualization. It addresses the virus as a theoretical device to consider how the micrographic output of the electron microscope operated as a powerful visual hermeneutic that oriented a representation of global North and South relations. How did the convergence of scientific visual technology and print media in the micrographic virus images enable the conception and surveillance of the movements of people, capital, and information across social and spatial boundaries? How did virus visualization erect nation-state borders while also designating them as fundamentally transgressive? How does the virus proffer a range of liberal humanist concerns while also dismantling the integrity of the modern subject to propose what Walter Mignolo calls a decolonial “other thinking”? PLEASE NOTE: This paper is part of a panel submission. The title of the panel is "Towards an 'Other Thinking': Decolonial Imaginaries and Postcolonial Hauntings" and includes co-panelists Anjali Nath, Dr. Paul Amar, and Dr. Macarena Gomez-Barris.