

Cathy Covell Waegner

"Cultural Palimpsests on the Ethnic Shore: Re-functionalizing Seaside Forts"

ABSTRACT

The sediments of forts on the Eastern USA seaboard divulge a multifunctional history of palimpsests of use; the military powers of the New World constructed defensive forts which later served as sites of incarceration for Native “renegades,” many of whom had never previously viewed the ocean, as well as – in the case of Fort Monroe in Hampton/Virginia – as a federal “loophole of freedom” (beginning in 1861) for runaway slaves during the American Civil War. I call on such cultural theorists as Andreas Huyssen, Michel Foucault, Paul Gilroy, and Jace Weaver to support the concepts of (a) two-way dynamic processes interrelating palimpsestic layers, as well as (b) the littoral as generating particularly intensive contact trajectories and functions. A form of Huyssen’s “productive remembering” can be found in the shaking up of the static trope of the palimpsest, actively linking the present and the layering of the past through what I call an “imaginary of the functional,” as in Diane Glancy’s work *Fort Marion Prisoners and the Trauma of Native Education* (2014) in which she re-presents the 72 Plains Native prisoners’ experiences at the ever-changing and heterotopic seaside Fort Marion (St. Augustine/Florida) in connection with her own childhood ordeals as a Cherokee pupil in Kansas City. The prisoners produced colorful “ledger drawings,” many depicting their coastal encounters, that were, among other things, a form of palimpsestic protest against incarceration and ethnic disrespect by the overwhelming EuroAmerican hegemony (“each powerful expression drawn over the colonial accounting, symbolically reclaiming a kind of tribal autonomy” [Kimberly Blaeser, “Mochi, Prisoner of War,” 2015]), and against the fixed musealization of presumed vanishing Native life. The circulatory and littoral paths of the Native and African American fort-dwellers crossed in strikingly palimpsestic ways, evoking transcultural-historical dialogue: The first shipload of unfree Africans (1619), captured from the Spanish by the Dutch, was unloaded in the English colony of Virginia at the very site of later Fort Monroe on the outskirts of Hampton, which in 1868 became the venue of a school for newly emancipated African Americans; the Natives released from Fort Marion in 1878 were shipped to that same location, 17 of them to attend this school. All of the now freed prisoners actually toured Fort Monroe, thus walking in the footsteps of the slaves who had audaciously sought freedom there just 17 years earlier.

BIO

Cathy Covell Waegner taught American Studies at the University of Siegen in Germany until her retirement in 2013. She obtained degrees from the College of William & Mary (BA) and the University of Virginia (MA, PhD). In addition to her work on William Faulkner and Toni Morrison, she has published on Native American authors and issues, transculturality in the ethnic bildungsroman, minstrelsy, AfroAsian “postmodernist passing,” 400 years after Jamestown, “hybrid tropes” in film, and the interaction between American and European cultural phenomena. Waegner edited *Mediating Indianness* (Michigan State University Press, 2015) and co-edited project volumes with Norfolk State University scholars and conference proceedings with colleagues in France. Her current research focuses on contemporary Native American literature and transcultural diasporas.