

Mellon Professor at Tulane Knows History of Measuring Minds

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Nã?Â©lia Dias, the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in Humanities at Tulane University for the spring 2009 semester, has organized a lecture series that examines the instruments and methods used to measure human bodies and mental capacities from the 19th century to the present. The first lecture will be held on March 13 at 4 p.m. in Hebert Hall, when Ken Alder, a professor at Northwestern University, will discuss the polygraph machine and American justice. This event, which will be followed by a reception, is free and open to the public, as are all the lectures in the series.

“The lecture series aims to explore the uses and role of measuring individual actions, bodies, and mental capacities, through a detailed examination of categories, instruments, and methodologies,” says Dias. “It seeks to point out how measuring processes and the values underlying them are embedded in, but also constitutive of, the broader culture they share.”

Dias is visiting Tulane from the University of Lisbon (Portugal), where she is an associate professor in the Department of Anthropology. She specializes in the history of anthropology and ethnographic museums. The author of a book and several articles on these topics, in recent years Dias' attention has turned toward the measurement and representation of the senses in the physical anthropological and medical discourse of late 19th century France.

“In my current research I attempt to write a history of the senses from the perspective of all those others ("primitives" and "peasants") who had their senses disciplined - but never completely subdued - by the colonial apparatus, medical profession, and social reformers,” says Dias.

The lecture series Measurement and Knowledge: The Quantification of Bodies and

Minds is connected to an honors colloquium Dias is teaching called "Bodies, Measurement, and Culture." It will feature four guest speakers:

March 13 - Ken Alder, Milton H. Wilson Professor in the Humanities at Northwestern University, "Body of Lies: American Justice and the Polygraph"

March 20 - John Carson, Department of History, Director Science, Technology, & Society Program, University of Michigan, "Measurement and Its Ambivalences: Assessing Mind and Merit in Early Twentieth-Century France and America"

April 3 - Norton Wise, Distinguished Professor of History at the University of California, Los Angeles and Co-Director of the UCLA Center for Society and Genetics, "Neo-Classical Aesthetics of Art and Science: Hermann Helmholtz and the Frog-Drawing Machine"

April 17 - Daniel J. Sherman, Department of Art History, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, "The Measure of the Primitive: Gaston Chaissac, Art Brut, and the Problem of Categories"

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