

The Grammar of the Corpse: An Interview with Elizabeth Spragins

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REPUBLICS OF LETTERS features an occasional series of interviews with scholars who have recently been in conversation with the medieval and early modern community at Stanford University. These interviews seek to capture ideas in motion: how current and recent work came to be conceived, how projects develop and change, and how new knowledge emerges into public view. In keeping with the journal's aim of reflecting on the present moment in our disciplines, these dialogues invite self-awareness, retrospection, and analysis of the relevant fields.

In this interview, Elizabeth Spragins (Stanford PhD '17, now Associate Professor of Spanish, Medieval and Renaissance Studies at College of the Holy Cross) discusses her recently published book *A Grammar of the Corpse: Necroepistemology in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Fordham University Press, 2023) with Thiago Nunes Santana (PhD candidate in comparative literature, Stanford University). The book, which was awarded the 2021 Helen Tartar First Book Subvention and 2024 Roland H. Bainton Literature Prize, examines how the presence and representation of the dead—especially in contexts of war, defeat, and imperial expansion—shaped modes of knowledge and narrative strategies across the Mediterranean world and beyond. The interview touches upon key concepts of Spragins' work, such as "necroepistemology" and considers how corpses, in their ambiguity between subject and object, functioned as indices of truth, instruments of authority, and political devices. It highlights the intellectual trajectory that led to the book while also pointing to its broader implications for how we think about agency, temporality, and narrative within Mediterranean and colonial studies.



Thiago Nunes Santana: *In the book, you define “necroepistemology” as “a system of knowledge grounded in or transmitted through firsthand experiences of the material dead,” bringing together the symbolic and material dimensions of the corpse. Could you comment on how you arrived at this formulation—was it something that emerged directly from your reading of the sources? What were the decisive influences that shaped this concept, both within Mediterranean studies and in dialogue with other fields, such as anthropology or linguistic pragmatics?*

Elizabeth Spragins: The concept of *necroepistemology* emerged from my efforts to understand the function of corpses represented in a range of early modern Mediterranean literature (including a number of canonical texts from the Iberian globe such as Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, María de Zayas's *Desengaños amorosos*, Fernão Mendes Pinto's *Peregrinação*, or the Inca Garcilaso's *Comentarios reales*, as well as the less well-known texts that I study in my book). At the same time that I was noticing the prevalence of corpses throughout this corpus, I was reading scholarship (the work of Rolena Adorno and Walter D. Mignolo was especially critical for my understanding at this juncture) that examines early modern Iberian global historiography in terms of its epistemological interventions: How did witnesses at the furthest reaches of Iberian empires report their experiences to authorities? How did they prove to those authorities that what they said was true? What was at stake in being believed by figures of authority? What new techniques did such witnesses have to create in a world whose epistemological frameworks were being shaped and shifted by the very colonialism they were participating in? The early modern Iberian globe was a space in which simultaneously the reliability of information mattered a great deal but was especially difficult to verify. In such a high-stakes, unsettled epistemological space, purveyors of information had to develop new and innovative techniques for convincing their readers of the veracity of that information. Crucial for my recognition that corpses could be deployed as one such technique were Robert Harrison's *The Dominion of the Dead*, which helped me think of the relations between the living and the material dead in narrative terms, and Margaret Schwartz's *Dead Matter: The Meaning of Iconic Corpses*, which helped me articulate the symbolic function of corpses in representation. The term *necroepistemology* emerged relatively late in the project to describe this narrative technique.

Santana: *You situate the Battle of al-Qaṣr al-Kabīr within a broader Mediterranean framework and emphasize common aspects that link the representation of the body in the Spanish, Portuguese, and Arabic texts you examine. What were the significant methodological challenges in sustaining this approach, and how does this framing change our reading of the sources compared to accounts centered solely on Portuguese, Spanish, or Moroccan history? Do some aspects of the “grammar of the corpse” you reconstruct emerge because of this trans-linguistic and transcultural circulation?*

Spragins: The Mediterranean approach to the Battle of al-Qaṣr al-Kabīr was actually a strategy for narrowing the project to a manageable scope for what began as a dissertation project and turned into my first monograph. As my answer to your

first question indicates, this project began as a wide-reaching study that planned to look at corpses written in a variety of contexts and traditions, with little to unite them other than the phenomenon of the literary corpse. One of the touchstone texts with which I had been grappling since the inception of the project was Jerónimo de Mendonça's *Jornada de África* (1607). The obsessive enumeration of corpses in his account of al-Qaṣr al-Kabīr is the focus of the first chapter of *A Grammar of the Corpse*. As I began to grapple with the reality of writing the sprawling dissertation my committee had approved, I settled on the solution of narrowing my focus to al-Qaṣr al-Kabīr as an event with a marked focus on important corpses (those of the three kings who died there) and that had sparked the production of narrative in the different language traditions I was trained to work in. Working across these different language traditions allowed me to reconstruct both the event and the literary phenomenon more fully than if I had only written from the Portuguese or Spanish or Moroccan perspective. Had I only worked from the Iberian perspectives of Portuguese and Spanish witnesses and chroniclers, my understanding of the corpse would have been limited to its literary uses by those writing from moments of defeat and devastation. Working with the Moroccan sources, however, revealed other literary mobilizations of the corpse for those in power, a perspective that brought to light both the potential threat posed by an unruly corpse and the range of uses to which it could be put (i.e., necro-violence).

Santana: *Across the book, you trace strategies—shifting temporalities, integrating bodies into assemblages that reveal the interplay of different agentic powers, etc.—all of which seem to converge on the question of narrative authority. Could you expand on how the representation of dead bodies becomes a tool for asserting such authority? How do you see these varied strategies—visibility, concealment, integration into an assemblage, erasure—working across the book to shape narrative authority?*

Spragins: This question beautifully summarizes the core question the book as a whole attempts to answer. I would thus encourage the reader of this interview to go read the book to get a better understanding of the nuances of this argument. In brief, however, I suggest that corpses inherently represent the truth of human mortality and that mobilizing the sense of truth or knowledge present in that material entity lends authority to the claims of the person or people who invoke it. At a moment of upheaval about knowledge and of particular interest in the utility of the corpse for generating new knowledge and power (e.g., Vesalius's dissections, the emphasis on saintly relics by Philip II of Spain, to name only a few), corpses' symbolic and referential power emerges as one possible compensatory mechanism to give narrators some apparently solid ground upon which to stand and make their historiographical claims. Corpses have a propensity to disintegrate, to break apart, to be misidentified, to be misplaced, or otherwise to behave in unruly ways. This instability renders that ground far less solid than it initially appears and helps explain the more complicated strategies the book analyzes for textually mobilizing corpses.

Santana: *Chapters 1 and 2 depict markedly different treatments of the body: In the first, the corpses of soldiers are displayed and catalogued in detail, while in the second, the royal body is concealed or mediated through other voices. Do you see this contrast as pointing to a broader principle within the “grammar of the corpse”—that certain bodies, such as those of rulers, carry a distinct representational logic from that applied to other kinds of bodies? Could this open the way for, say, some sort of typology of corpses, in which each category—royal or common—carries specific narrative and political functions?*

Spragins: Chapters 1 and 2 capture different aspects of the corpse that critics like Robert Harrison, Thomas Laqueur, and Margaret Schwartz identify: They are both distinctly present, retaining some aspect of their occupant’s selfhood, and must be dealt with by the living (chapter 1), and they also tend to disappear and lose major aspects of their occupant’s selfhood, both in the moment of death and in their ongoing disintegration into pieces (chapter 2). Certain of those aspects may be emphasized depending upon the particular corpse (presence or propensity to disappear) and the use to which it is being put, as in the social categories to which the question refers, but I don’t think those categories apply across all corpses. In other words, I think there are cases of disappearing common bodies (to give a modern example, laws in the post-Vietnam era that impede the photographic representation of soldiers’ corpses, which effectively conceal from the public those “common” corpses) and troublingly present royal or otherwise politically powerful bodies (for example, the public preservation and display of Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos in a refrigerated crypt from 1993 to 2016). I think the affordances of the uses to which those corpses are put differ according to their relative status, but my sense is that it is extremely context-dependent. In the context of issues of royal accession that arise in the example of Sebastian I’s disappearing body discussed in chapter 2, it carries a unique representational logic within that context because of the ways in which that particular body was supposed to anchor the stability of the Portuguese state and the problematic ways in which it could not be made to do so. In representational terms, the authority that access to the corpse affords is complicated by the fact that witnessing such a powerful corpse can itself undermine the witness’s credibility.

Santana: *In chapter 3, you draw on anthropological approaches that challenge the subject/object divide, applying them to the status of the corpse. In this framework, “necroepistemology” entails a reversal of traditional epistemological categories: The corpse is not an inert object but can also function as an agent. Could you elaborate on how this shift in perspective reshapes our understanding of the dead in these narratives? How does this reconfiguration of subject and object affect the way these texts produce and transmit knowledge?*

Spragins: This chapter grapples with corpses’ liminality between subjecthood and objecthood, a quality that makes corpses particularly disturbing to their human observers and interlocutors. Were a corpse an entirely self-contained object, with no trace of subjectivity, with the potential to exceed the bounds of the body, it would

be a less powerful and compelling entity than humans find it, whether as a possible revenant, an intercessor, or otherwise still agentive agent in the world. One of the best theorizations I found to discuss the subject/object divide was Jane Bennett's study *Vibrant Matter*, which argues that there is vital materiality that runs across human and nonhuman bodies and that understanding the webs of relationships that bind those bodies together more accurately portrays how agency exists as a result of those configurations rather than only from fully conscious actions by human actors. Recognizing corpses as straddling both of the major binaries Bennett theorizes—human/nonhuman, subject/object—allows us to understand the very nature of that liminality. Attending to that contingent and context-dependent quality of the corpse in narrative allows us to notice more finely the nuances of agency and objecthood, to causality of action. Observing how corpses act as agents in many ways reveals them at their most productive of authority within a narrative space, where mere proximity to them rather than agency or power over them bestows authority on that narrative.

Santana: *Your analysis combines linguistic pragmatics, narratology, and affect theory alongside sustained engagement with Mediterranean studies and cultural history. What kinds of sources and academic training were decisive in building this approach?*

Spragins: At the heart of this project was a desire to understand what role dead bodies play in texts, under what circumstances, and for what reasons narrators contemplate them. Performance studies by scholars such as Rebecca Schneider and one media studies book by Margaret Schwartz helped me find the language to articulate what I was seeing in my primary sources: corpses that were either disturbingly present, like in Mendonça's text, or absent, like the corpse of the Portuguese king, whose disappearance would cause all sorts of political difficulties for his successor, Philip II of Spain. Understanding the corpse as a communicative object also allowed me to consider other ways in which the corpse was being deployed textually. In addition to asking where the corpse was, I also could ask when are corpses? How do they behave as subjects? How are they acted upon as objects? The mobilization of these different approaches to the corpse (linguistic pragmatics, narratology, affect theory) emerged organically over the course of the project as I observed functions that corpses served: as embodied index, as a both human and nonhuman object, as a lingering subject. My engagement across these different disciplines was part of my effort to find the best language possible to explain what I was viewing across my heterogeneous corpus. At the heart of this was my training as a literary scholar whose mentors emphasized the need to ground an argument deeply in the language of the object of study and for the theoretical apparatus of that argument to serve the text rather than vice versa.

Santana: *Thinking about your earlier dissertation, how did the project evolve from that stage into the book? Were there shifts in focus, methodology, or corpus that significantly altered your trajectory?*

Spragins: The process of proposing this project as a monograph to different presses was critical for refining the dissertation into a more coherent whole. The dissertation was organized along geographical and linguistic lines: Portugal/Morocco/Spain. I studied multiple primary sources in each geographical section in an effort to situate each source within the literary, political, and sociocultural context in which it was produced. This organization also moved from the most familiar story of the event—that told by the Portuguese—to the most understudied one—that told by Moroccan chroniclers. As a PhD student, this allowed me to tackle each of these different traditions in enough depth that I developed the competence to discuss different cultural assumptions around corpses, literary authority, knowledge transmission, and other such issues. As a literary study, however, this organizational structure had a number of limitations. Greatest among those limitations was the sheer length of each of these chapters and my own propensity to get lost in the historical details.

Monographs are about distilling down your most exciting ideas to their most comprehensible and compelling, and communicating them as clearly as you can so as many as possible of your colleagues want to read it, cite it, and talk about it. An editor of a press to which I proposed the book told me that the project was too “granular” and insufficiently “speculative,” which I have subsequently interpreted as code for, “This still reads like a dissertation.” At the time I was deeply offended, but in retrospect that feedback needled me into thinking harder about the bigger stakes of my project: Was I writing a book that was primarily about al-Qaṣr al-Kabir, or was I writing a book about the literary function of corpses? The former was a granular history project that reconstructed the event from the different perspectives of the different sources that I was working with. However, since I knew my answer to that—my real interest was in the corpses—this feedback, harsh as it was, forced me to think about ways to restructure the project so that instead of focusing on the different language traditions the primary sources I was working with came from, I started instead to try to characterize what these primary sources had revealed to me about the different functions of the corpse. Picking and choosing what my key ideas were and refining the most important takeaways I wanted the reader to get from them was crucial for my revision of the book. This was the process that allowed me to move from the primarily geography and language-based framework of the dissertation to understanding the corpse as a communicative object that could be deployed in different textual functions.

Santana: *What is your next project?*

Spragins: My current book project, tentatively titled *Tongues of Resistance*, maintains my focus on bodies and power but shifts its focus to consider how racial hierarchies that emerged from Iberian empire constructed, controlled, and were resisted by the bodies of minority groups like Moriscos and African and Afro-Iberian people. I’m particularly interested in how Arabic language use constituted and shaped these

racialized identities. Some of the texts I'm working with in the project include the language of the laws restricting Morisco cultural practices with particular focus on Arabic, a memorandum from a Morisco elder directed at Castilian authorities contesting those restrictions through a racio-linguistic conception of the Mediterranean region, Miguel de Luna's fake translation of the *Historia verdadera del rey don Rodrigo*, and the Lead Books, which forge a notion of ancient Christian identity with a core basis in Arab identity and Arabic language use. My contention is that each of these Morisco responses to institutionalized racio-linguistic discrimination is an act of race-bending, a racio-linguistic concept that describes how racialized subjects both make race matter and not matter, alternately reifying and destabilizing racializing discourses. A