

ABSTRACT for proposed presentation at Örecomm seminar, June 6th 2011

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From Media Ethnography to Theatrical Production:

Voices, Transformations, and Instigations with RE-GENERATION

Debra Vidali (Emory University)

In 2010, I wrote and produced a documentary theatrical work based on ethnographic and interview research into young adults' engagements with media and politics in the United States. The play entitled "RE-GENERATION: A Play about Political Stances, Media Insanity, and Adult Responsibilities" had three showings in Atlanta, with a total audience attendance of 150 people. This talk aims to contribute to our understanding of what it means to be a public intellectual and to bring research results to wider audiences through artistic forms, or other non-conventional forms of research dissemination.

At the start of the seminar, I will show a 5 minute video with clips from the November performances.

A theatrical work was not an anticipated outcome of the original research. I went down this path only after I realized how much might be gained from relaying and juxtaposing slices of conversation, and from exposing audiences to the power of individual stories and dilemmas. The research results challenge existing conceptions of stereotyped apathy, as well as stereotyped activism, and I wanted to share that with a wider audience. As an activist, I also wanted to instigate conversations. From the research, I was struck by how the conversations that people had with me were very different from the ones that they were having with each other. They shared uncertainties, struggles, and frustrations over our public life and our complicated media landscapes. My hope was, and continues to be, that this ongoing experiment in scholar-activism contributes to new insights and breakthroughs both within and across generations, particularly in what are increasingly complex times for public sphere engagement in the U.S.

The talk will be divided into three sections: Creative License; Split Identities and Multilingualism in Scholar-Activism; and Public Engagement. In the first section I describe the basic research, the genesis of the idea for a play, and the creative license that I took to bring the research to the stage. While the original research was based on interviews and participant-observation with 90 individuals, the play contains 15 characters. Approximately 80% of the play's dialogues are verbatim material from the research. This veracity factor was powerful for audiences, but it also presented a challenge for characterization and dramatic flow. Without my direct voice as narrator or professor, there was also the challenge of leaving people guessing how it all hung together. Such challenges are discussed in the second section. After seeing the play, many audience members wanted to know: What is the main finding? Who is right? What do you think? How does this compare to other eras? Where are we headed? Many still wanted to hear "the professor" from the proverbial ivory tower, while I was hoping they would talk more to each other than to me! Such issues raise

the question of split identities, and the need to be multilingual, i.e. fluent in more than one communication register and genre, as we conduct and communicate about our research in non-conventional forms. The final section assesses this experiment in public engagement, and reports on the use of Facebook and other social media to continue the conversations around RE-GENERATION.

Also, fyi, here's a link to a review of the play: <http://bit.ly/lgtnEi>

And a cite of one research publication:

Spitulnik Vidali, Debra. 2010. "Millennial Encounters with Mainstream Television News: Excess, Void, and Points of Engagement," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20(2):372-388.

BIO Statement

Debra Spitulnik Vidali is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Emory University. She received her Ph.D. in 1994 in Anthropology and Linguistics from the University of Chicago, and joined the Emory faculty in 1993. Vidali's current research focuses on public sphere theory, the theory and practice of media ethnography, the relations between media and publics, and the circulation of discourse. Her major ongoing project, "Media, Citizenship, and Political Engagement in the Lives of Young American Adults" interrogates the concepts of public connection, political subjectivity, citizenship, and the public sphere. Through close analysis of recorded conversations and ethnographic research conducted with 90 young adults in the Atlanta area, Vidali challenges existing conceptions of stereotyped apathy and "generation," and documents the complex uncertainties, struggles, and frustrations that young adults have about public life and the complicated media landscapes in the United States.

Vidali has published widely (as Spitulnik) in the interdisciplinary field of media anthropology, and was a leading voice in the subfield's crystallization in the early 1990s. She has also published widely on issues of methodology and critical epistemology at the intersection of anthropology and media studies, and at the intersection of sociocultural anthropology and linguistic anthropology. Her previous research has focused on the complex media and language landscapes of contemporary Africa, particularly as they relate to public spheres and popular culture. Topics include: media and democracy in Africa; talk radio and oral traditions in Africa; ethnography of media audiences in Zambia; the nation-building functions of Zambian radio; multilingualism and codeswitching in Zambia; the semantics of the Bemba language; and the politics of alternative media in Africa. She has received research grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Wenner-Gren, Rockefeller Foundation, Spencer Foundation, National Science Foundation, Fulbright-Hays, and the Social Science Research Council, among others. She currently directs Emory's Critical Media Literacy group and an interdisciplinary seminar on "Navigating Media Environments and Media Futures."