



Nordamerikastudienprogramm
Institut für Anglistik, Amerikanistik und Keltologie

Events | Veranstaltungen
Winter Term 2011-2012



Venla Oikkonen
University of Helsinki

“Across Science and Religion: The Cultural Politics of Evolution”

Friday • 3 February 2012 • 9:00-10:30 am • Room 2.015
Institut für Anglistik, Amerikanistik und Keltologie
Regina-Pacis-Weg 5 • 53113 Bonn

Evolutionary psychological ideas of human nature have been criticized for being reactionary and methodologically unsound. Venla Oikkonen’s presentation shifts the focus of critique to the intertextual commitments of evolutionary psychology by placing it within the tradition of evolutionary narratives. She examines two forms of evolutionary narration that emerged in the 1990s: the so-called “evolutionary epic” that views evolution as a source of spiritual guidance, and openly atheist “philosophical naturalism” that understands all phenomena as ultimately material. Both narrative traditions build on sociobiologist E. O. Wilson’s vision of evolution as an epic in *On Human Nature* (1978), which in turn appropriates the ambiguous foundational potential in Darwin. Crucially, these narratives all appropriate religious discourse, pointing to the complex dynamic through which structure and context produce meaning. Connecting this narrative strategy to the “intelligent design” controversy in the U.S. as well as to the epistemic “science wars” of the 1990s, Oikkonen argues that these similarities and differences are indicative of the constraints and potential of evolution as a cultural narrative. They also suggest that evolutionary psychological stories of gender, sexuality and human nature are not a necessary outcome of Darwin’s textual politics.

Venla Oikkonen is a University Lecturer in Gender Studies at the University of Helsinki, Finland. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Helsinki in 2010. Her dissertation examined the cultural transformations of evolutionary narrative in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Her essays have appeared in *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Science as Culture*, and in the edited collection *Masculinities, Femininities and the Power of the Hybrid in U.S. Narratives* (Winter 2007). She is currently working on a postdoctoral project that examines national narratives in the age of genomics.