Acequias, Polycultural Ghosts, and Decolonization

Sam Markwell
American Studies Department
samarkwell@gmail.com

Acequias, communal irrigation ditches found throughout the arid regions of North America settled by the Spanish and Mexican empires in the 17th and 18th centuries, are often traced by U.S. historians and archaeologists to Moorish medieval Spain. These approaches leave the connections between these social and material infrastructures in North America, Southern Europe and the Middle East at the level of a mere historical or linguistic trace. This paper utilizes a comparative approach to follow lines of connection from acequias in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands to communal structures and practices of water and agricultural governance in Spain (particularly Andalusia) and the Middle East, questioning and critiquing the distinctions between “over here” and “over there” and past and present made in the vast majority of work on acequias in the academic North. Situating these specific locations in relationship to global neoliberal political economy brings the shifting borders of colonialism/decolonization into relief. This paper draws on current discussions of the terms of the Enlightenment and their production through multiple ongoing and shifting colonialisms, outlining submerged possibilities for democratic government that exceeds the dictates and borders of colonialisms, imperialisms and nation-states.