

# Searching for the Origins of the Vancouver GA Conference (Guest Editor's Introduction)

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The origin of the idea for the Generative Anthropology Thinking Event is no easy thing to pin down. I am tempted to trace the narrative far back in my personal history to the year I first read Rene Girard, in a graduate course on critical theory held at Dalhousie University in 1983-84, taught by the Paul De Man enthusiast Alan Kennedy. I could go back to my first hearing the confident, crystalline, conversational timbre of Gans' voice in the knock-out essay "Sacred Text in Secular Culture," included in the *To Honor Rene Girard* collection. I could go back to a letter from Andrew McKenna sent by snail mail, in which Andrew confirmed with an insider's expertise that my impression of Gans' high rank and intellectual power among the collaborators and developers of "mimetic theory" was an accurate one.

Nor would it be unreasonable to start with the way that Christopher Morrissey and I *almost never met*. In a college residence lobby waiting for an airport taxibus at the end of the 2002 COVR conference at Purdue University, when Chris told me he taught in Langley, I thought he was speaking of the Virginian site of the CIA. No, he was speaking of the Vancouver suburb that held the satellite campus of Kwantlen University College, where I was teaching composition. What a wonderful small world! When Chris' curiosity about Gans (who'd spoken at the Purdue COVR) was joined to my hunger for conversation about Gans; when we later joined with Richard Van Oort, who just happened to be teaching at UBC, and Pablo Bandera, who just happened to be working as an engineer in Vancouver, thus was *Sparagmos!* born. Together we read almost all the major books Eric Gans had to that date written, along with some other texts. It needs to be asserted outright that I would never have gotten to the point of thinking I had some understanding of texts like *Originary Thinking* and *Signs of Paradox* without the patient help of these three men.

I believe it is much easier to "do" GA with other students of it than to do it alone. I have no quarrel with those who murmur that working through Gans' work can be "difficult." But the difficult is not the impossible. If one is not lazy and given to giving up easily; if one gets real help with it from people who have been doing it longer than one has (such as the help Richard Van Oort gave us); if one is constituted in the first place to have a certain determined, unembarrassed appetite for possible answers to the big questions about *the human*, one can eventually "get" the hypothesis of the originary scenic event and the heuristic of a minimal anthropology and begin to work with it. *Sparagmos!* proved to me the

efficiency of the “reading group” model as a way to wrestle with Gans’ work. The birth of *Sparagmos!* might deserve therefore to be named as the “origin” of the idea for the Generative Anthropology Thinking Event, because without the help of Richard and Chris and Pablo, I may well never have stuck with the founding texts of originary thinking in a sustained enough manner to get to the point where I had the audacity to attempt to organize a conference about GA. It might also deserve to be named the origin of GATE because when I did begin to dream about a conference, I imagined GATE to some extent as the logical extension, enlargement and expansion of *Sparagmos!*.... a kind of annual internationalized *Sparagmos!*

These musings aside, and in the spirit of the observation that originary thinking has a certain predilection for the punctual, I will present, however, just one vibrant memory as the one that does finally dominate when I search for the moment at which GATE originated. The final banquet for the 2006 annual meeting of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion in Ottawa was held in the main hall of the Canadian Museum of Anthropology; the tables with their fine glasses and sparkling plates were spread out in the presence of huge, towering, magnificent totem poles of aboriginal peoples of the Pacific Northwest. It was a tremendously memorable place to have a banquet. Among the people sitting at my table were Peter Koper from Michigan, Peter Goldman from Utah, and Ian Dennis of Ottawa. Peter Goldman expressed his hope that Eric Gans would be attending the following year’s COVR meeting in Amsterdam. Peter Koper and I shared our disappointment that Eric Gans had not been on the programme at the Ottawa conference then coming to its end; we exchanged confidences about the difficulties we encountered and the pleasure we took in wrestling with Gans’ work. The steady engagement with Gans’ work of my friend Ian was well known to me. Chris Morrissey was at the same banquet sitting at a different table. There were others as well in the room who were doing GA, thinking GA, who would have been more than eager to have clocked some exclusive time conferring with Eric Gans and with each other on the bundle of concepts, practices, principles, attitudes, methods, directions, ideas and assumptions that had grown up in the light of the originary hypothesis and that had come to be known as GA. I knew this. But Eric Gans was not there; he had not been there. At my table, all four of us wished Eric Gans had been there. We shared our wish for some opportunity to get together with each other and with Eric Gans himself and “do” GA. After the violence of the single most victimary public “lecture” to which I have ever submitted my trembling-enraged self in my entire life, a veritable incoherent spraying of white-guilt-inducing rhetoric which (amazingly) got some standing ovations from some of the banquet attendees (my partner Joanne convinced me to stay in my chair only for the sake of seeing the Ukrainian folk dancers afterward), I left that conference somewhat dispirited.

Six or seven months later, however, in January 2007, having enjoyed the benefit of extended research time (part of an Education Leave) granted by Kwantlen University College, I had produced some work on the Frankenstein myth that had met with the approval of Adam Katz

and then Eric Gans. I was by those miniature triumphs emboldened to ask Eric if he would come to Vancouver if I got half a dozen people to meet for a weekend of discussions and (perhaps) paper presentations. The alternative would have been the group's meeting in Los Angeles, which would have made it more awkward for me to organize but which would have removed the embarrassment of the conference being based partly on the personal generosity of Eric. I had (at that time) no budget, no capital, no resources, and no institutional endorsement. One might well date the origin of GATE from the moment of Eric's open-hearted promise to come to Vancouver with no guarantee of a substantial turnout.

Once Eric agreed to come to Vancouver, the Call for Papers went out, describing the event as a "participant-dependent" conference. Within two weeks, we had our minimum "six" people who were committed to attending—people coming from as far away as Connecticut and Ottawa, halfway across the continent. Within a few more weeks, we had endorsements from three offices Kwantlen University College. After a few more weeks, the number of people committed to giving papers had doubled to about a dozen. I was thrilled that a scholar of the stature of Eugene Webb had decided to attend and to contribute. By the end of June, an application for a Minor Research Grant from Kwantlen University College was successful; GATE was no longer strictly a "participant-dependent" event. The grant enabled us to fund two public lectures (one by Eric Gans and one by Eugene Webb), to do some advertising, and to provide some benefits to those participants who had invested travel dollars and registration fees and research-work time in the conference. The grant enabled us to celebrate in style, enjoying the space of beautiful meeting rooms on the fifth floor of the castle-like Iona Building at the Vancouver School of Theology on the UBC campus, rooms overlooking English Bay and the blue-green coast mountains of British Columbia.

I believe it is no boast to claim that the Generative Anthropology Thinking Event was a success. The contents of this special issue of *Anthropoetics* convey some of the reasons for that claim. I am proud of the writing and scholarship of the presenters. All of these papers have been revised and sharpened from the texts that were read at the conference. Adam Katz's inventive piece introduces a sharp idea of originary "lastness" to complement that idea of "firstness" which has gained useful currency among practitioners of GA. Ian Dennis' searching, subtle analysis of Byron's ironic self-presentation in the market society of romantic-era England demonstrates the fit between GA and author-centered scholarship. (At the conference, Ian shared a session with Peter Goldman, who presented some of his work on James Joyce. The papers resonated together in fascinating ways, partly by inadvertently demonstrating the manner in which an originary analysis of authorial production will tend to include fine-tuned considerations of writer-audience relationships.) Peter Koper's energetic analysis of judicial reason in Sophocles respectfully and persuasively challenges previous readings of *Oedipus* familiar to those of us interested in mimetic theory. Christopher Morrissey's paper deserves recognition as the most seriously direct "challenge" to one of the secular temptations in GA, that which would reduce the reality of God to an idea of God.

(From John Stuart Mill's "Theism": "...still the idea can only prove the idea, and not the objective fact..."). My own foray into similar territory, much less scholarly than Chris's and more unabashedly a celebratory exploration of Gans' thinking of God, may be taken to sit across from Chris' work. Together they might figure as a guarantee that the kind of anthropological theology (or theological anthropology) inspired by Gans' writing is anything but unidirectional. Last, I am grateful to Eric Gans for engaging with each of these revised papers in the closing piece of the volume; but I do beg all of you to read Eric's responses *last*.

The clearest evidence of the success of GATE, however, may turn out to be not the contents of this present volume but the future real events which are devolving, all signs suggest, from GATE. The exchanges were so valuable to the conference participants, in terms both social and intellectual, that without any hesitation a number of us agreed we should do something like it again next year. A second GA event is now being planned for late June 2008 at Chapman University (in Orange, California), hosted by Matthew Schneider. We hope to meet in 2009 at the University of Ottawa, where Ian Dennis will be organizing. We may well dispose of the name "GATE," which has gathered a little sticking power but which I would be happy to set free as a happy invulnerable orphan to wander in the crowds of lost acronyms. It does have a connotation of low-budget horror movies about the entrance to hell and the like. The fumbling of the acronymic football from GASE to GATE (nobody can ever accuse me of not having something of the *naïf* about my aura) is a goofy narrative at which I shall always laugh aloud.

I do hope that our numbers will double at the 2008 meeting. There were people who personally communicated to me their "regrets" at not being able to attend the Vancouver event, because I gave them so little lead time to make travel plans and research plans—including people from other continents. I hope that all those for whom my February 2007 invitation was too late may plan now to attend the second annual GA conference in California.

I wish to thank publicly the other human presences at the conference who each made big and favourable contributions: Eugene Webb, Richard Van Oort, Matthew Schneider, Amir Kahn, Christine Jones, Greg Nixon, Richard Watson, Douglas Collins, John Gay, Stacey Meeker, Clara Watson, Pablo Bandera, Joanne Horwood, Robert Fleming, Linda Schwartz, and Grant Allan. As for our debt to Eric Gans for giving us a new way to think about the human situation, it almost goes without saying. It was an honour for me to organize the Vancouver GA event, and it is now an honour for me to invite you to enjoy the essays contained in this special issue of *Anthropoetics*.