

The Comparative Literature Luncheon Series presents:
“Hew Locke’s Ruined Persons: From Corporations to Racial Persons and Beyond”

Lisa Siraganian
John Hopkins University



Monday, April 8
12:30–1:30 p.m.
102 Kern Building

In law, an “artificial person” is a non-human legal entity—not a single human being, but an organization, such as a corporation, that the law recognizes as a “fictitious person.” But what exactly is that? This talk begins to address that question and its history, taking the acclaimed work of contemporary British-Guyanese artist, Hew Locke, as an occasion to illustrate a set of legal historical, cultural, and aesthetic claims. Locke’s multimedia work helps us explore theories of artificial, expansive personhood—for trees, fetuses, elephants, and AI—and we will see how those theories emerged out of corporate personhood, the original model of artificial personhood. More surprisingly, these ideas developed from a combination of theories of business enterprise, the state, and legal thinking about the status of free African Americans. The talk thus develops the argument, first, that current understandings of artificial, expansive personhood retain that historical origin, albeit obscured; and, second, that both the origin and its obscuring support a natural-seeming process that removes power from government and the public and onto property and capital. The historical development of expansive personhood continues to impact the way artificial personhood functions, while also obscuring its failures from view.

Lisa Siraganian is the J. R. Herbert Boone Chair in Humanities and Professor of Comparative Thought and Literature at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. She is the author of *Modernism and the Meaning of Corporate Persons* (Oxford 2020), winner of the Modernist Studies Association Book Prize and the Modern Language Association’s Matei Calinescu Book Prize, and *Modernism’s Other Work: The Art Object’s Political Life* (Oxford 2012), shortlisted for the Modernist Studies Association Book Prize. Her scholarship has been supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the American Council of Learned Societies, and she was the recipient of an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation New Directions Fellowship that funded the completion of her law degree (J.D.) in 2019. She is also the Editor of *Volume D (1914-1945)*, one of the five volumes of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Tenth Edition* (2022).

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