



**AUTHORITY AND TRUST:  
INTERDISCIPLINARY AND  
COMPARATIVE  
PERSPECTIVES  
BOOK OF ABSTRACTS**

October 16 – 17, 2020

## “Authority and Trust: Comparative and Interdisciplinary Perspectives”

This conference hosted by the research training group “Authority and Trust in American Culture, Society, History and Politics” explores the emergence and transformation of authority and trust in American politics, society, religion, literature, and culture from the nineteenth century to the present.

Authority and trust are conceived of as dynamic and complementary concepts: authority pertains to the tension between power and legitimacy and implies the ability to induce voluntary obedience; trust, by contrast, often connotes personal and intimate relationships among equals. Trust also extends to larger impersonal entities and institutions, and authority, as a social relationship based on voluntary compliance, seeks the trust of those who are asked to comply.

The conference seeks to investigate different elements of authority and trust within the U.S. context and how the sources, functions, and manifestations of authority and trust have changed over time. We focus on the following key areas:

- 1) The Authority of the Modern State and Trust in Public and Social Institutions
- 2) The Urban Dimension of Authority and Trust
- 3) Authority and Trust in Culture, Literature, and Religion

The division between these areas provides a starting point for a larger interdisciplinary discussion between history, political science, geography, literature, linguistics, cultural studies, media studies, and religious history.



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## Friday, October 16, 2020

<b>13:15 – 13:30</b>	<b>Welcome</b>
<b>13:30 – 15:00</b>	<i>Prof. Dr. Dr. Aleida Assmann</i> TBA  Moderation: Prof. Dr. Günter Leypoldt
<b>15:00 – 15:15</b>	<b>Break</b>
<b>15:15 – 15:45</b>	<i>Sergey Vedernikov</i> “The Lack of Political Trust and Its Role in Post-Katrina Conspiracy”  Moderation: Maren Schäfer
<b>15:45 – 16:15</b>	<i>Sabine Elisabeth Aretz</i> “The Anarchist Zeitgeist and Occupy Wall Street: An Example of the Effectiveness of (Radical) Anti-Authoritarianism?”  Moderation: Cosima Werner
<b>16:15 – 16:30</b>	<b>Break</b>
<b>16:30 – 17:00</b>	<i>Lucas Mathis</i> “Thinking the Service of Democracy: The Philosophical Dedication of Woodrow Wilson”  Moderation: Georg Wolff
<b>17:00 – 17:30</b>	<i>Roman Bischof</i> “Doctor-Patient-Nurse: Negotiations of Trust and Authority in 20th century Mental Illness Narratives”  Moderation: Aline Schmidt
<b>17:30 – 18:00</b>	<i>Mascha Helene Lange</i> “Can a Rapist Be Trusted? The Transmedial Negotiation of Sexual Violence, Trauma, and Regaining Trust in the Elva-Stranger Case”  Moderation: Claudia Jetter
<b>18:00 – 18:15</b>	<b>Closing</b>

*All times are given in Central European Summer Time (CEST, UTC + 2hrs)*

## Saturday, October 17, 2020

- 09:00 – 09:30**      *Lucia Toman*  
“Between Fact and Fiction: Autofiction and Fake Memoir in the Light of Textual-Authority and Reader’s Trust”  
Moderation: Sebastian Tants-Boestad
- 09:30 – 10:00**      *Kamila Mirasova, PhD*  
“Nostalgia as a Source of Authority or the Phenomenon of Ayn Rand’s Popularity”  
Moderation: Tim Sommer
- 10:00 – 10:30**      *Jesús Blanco Hidalgo, PhD*  
““We’re Building Something Here”: An Analysis of Conspiracy in *The Wire*”  
Moderation: David Eisler
- 10:30 – 10:45**      **Break**
- 10:45 – 12:15**      *Juniorprof. Dr. Florian Böller*  
"Global Order 2020: The End of US Authority?"  
Moderation: Prof. Dr. Ulrike Gerhard
- 12:15 – 12:30**      **Break**
- 12:30 – 13:09**      *Olga Thierbach-McLean, PhD*  
“Loving America, Distrusting Government: The Ideological Feedback Loop of Political Cynicism and Apolitical Patriotism”  
Moderation: Aleksandra Polińska
- 13:00 – 13:30**      *Jessica Fuss*  
“Tracing Authority and Trust through Changing Notions of the Heroic in Post-9/11 America”  
Moderation: David Eisler
- 13:30 – 13:45**      **Farewell**

## **Presentations**

<b>Sabine Elisabeth Aretz</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Roman Bischof</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Jesús Blanco Hidalgo</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Jessica Fuss</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Mascha Helene Lange</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Lucas Mathis</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Kamila Mirasova</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Olga Thierbach-McLean</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Lucia Toman</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Sergey Vedernikov</b> .....	<b>11</b>

**Sabine Elisabeth Aretz**

**The Anarchist Zeitgeist and *Occupy Wall Street*: An Example of the Effectiveness of (Radical) Anti-Authoritarianism?**

On September 17, 2011, upon a call published in the anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters*, protestors gathered in Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan to “occupy Wall Street” and subsequently birthed the Occupy movement against wealth inequality and the political systems that aggravate it. Prominent Occupy Wall Street (OWS) activists have self-characterized the movement as “anti-capitalist” and “anarchistic.” For many critics who view OWS’s lack of clear leadership and demands as its weak spot, the movement’s radical distrust in authority was ultimately the reason for its downfall. Others, however, argue that OWS’s leader-less platform was a significant part of what ultimately became its function: multitudinously communicating an anti-establishment sentiment.

OWS has attracted a lot of scholarly attention. Clearly, as part of a global wave of anti-austerity protests, the movement’s structure, method, and cultural impact are compelling. Nevertheless, the literature on OWS regarding the assessment of its approach to leadership within its own structures and authority, in general, is as divided as it is numerous. Because several of OWS’s most prominent founders or leaders are academics themselves, their reflections on the movement are a particularly interesting insight into the (academic) discourse surrounding OWS, especially regarding its ‘anarchism.’

My analysis of the (self-)reflecting literature written by OWS organizers David Graeber, Mark Bray, Micah White, and Nathan Schneider reveals a discourse in which OWS is portrayed to reveal the effectiveness of an inconclusive anti-authority stance. As Occupy Wall Street has inspired a new “generation” of grass-roots social movements, better understanding the roots and functions of its anti-authoritarianism allows for a productive insight into the role of trust and leadership in grass-roots organizing from which conclusion for emerging and future social movements with regards to their contribution to an anti-authoritarian zeitgeist can be drawn.

Having received her Bachelor’s degree in English Studies and Media Studies from the University of Bonn in 2018, **Sabine Elisabeth Aretz** is now a graduate student of North American Studies in Bonn. She is currently finishing her thesis analyzing the conceptualization of the interplay of racism and capitalism in *Black Lives Matter* and *Occupy Wall Street*. Most recently, Sabine published part of her research on domestic violence and stalking advocacy in a collection on *Violence in American Society*. Sabine holds a scholarship from the German Academic Scholarship Foundation.

## Roman Bischof

### Doctor – Patient – Nurse: Negotiations of Trust and Authority in 20<sup>th</sup> Century U.S. Mental Illness Narratives

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, literary accounts of mental illness have had a close relationship with the public discourse on psychiatric care and the trust placed in institutions and healthcare professionals in the U.S. Bringing to attention abuses suffered by patients in mental asylums, autobiographical and autofictional accounts like Clifford Beers' *A Mind that Found Itself* (1908) and Mary Jane Ward's *The Snake Pit* (1946) have provided critics of psychiatry with exemplary narratives and imagery alike. In fiction, too, issues of trust and authority were negotiated. Most prominently, Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) has been read as a critique of state authority as well as psychiatry.

The period of institutionalized care, however, also brought forth more nuanced depictions of doctor-patient relationships, such as Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Joanne Greenberg's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964). Despite featuring instances of maltreatment, these fictionalized autobiographies provide accounts of resurgence from mental illness at the hands of skilled and empathic psychiatrists, foregrounding trust as a decisive vehicle in the recovery process.

Even after deinstitutionalization and the rise of neuroscience fundamentally changed psychiatric care towards the end of the century, issues of trust and authority still feature prominently in U.S. literary works, such as Susanna Kaysen's memoir *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) and Wally Lamb's novel *I Know This Much Is True* (1998).

In this talk, I use readings of literary texts to discuss narrative and stylistic ramifications of changing concepts of trust and authority in the context of psychiatric care in the U.S. throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, I seek to highlight the intricate interplay between political, scientific and literary discourses on mental health and the significant impact literary narratives and imagery have across disciplines.

**Roman Bischof** studied English and German Literature at the University of Konstanz, Biology at the ETH Zurich and English and History at the University of Basel. In 2016, he received his Master of Arts from the University of Basel with a thesis on embodied concepts of war and war experience in First World War poetry. Currently, he is writing his PhD thesis on representations of mental illness in contemporary Anglo-American novels. Since 2017, Roman Bischof is employed as an assistant to the chair of Literatures in English/North American Studies at the Department of English at the University of Bern.

**Jesús Blanco Hidalgo**

### **“We’re Building Something Here”: An Analysis of Conspiracy in *The Wire***

David Simon’s series *The Wire* (HBO 2002-2008), has been acknowledged as a landmark of twenty-first century narrative. Its wide-scope social, political and economic analysis of a decaying city of Baltimore that metonymically represents many others in the times of post-industrial capitalism has rightly been compared to the comprehensiveness of the classical realist novel. Indeed, in its study of the close interrelations of apparently separate social groups, *The Wire* may be said to embark in a depiction of the systems that govern the workings of many contemporary urban societies.

One of the most interesting aspects of the show is the centrality and multivalence granted to conspiracies. This importance goes beyond the obvious one to be expected in a narration involving actual criminal conspiracies. Indeed, in *The Wire* conspiracies appear to be not only the prerogative of drug dealers but also the basic mode for advanced police work, politics and finance in Baltimore. This article takes its cue from critical work on the series by Fredric Jameson (2010), Slavoj Žižek (2012) and Toscano and Kinkle (2015), which it seeks to expand and complement. I focus on conspiracy not only as a thematic element but also as a rhetorical device which acts as a welcome generator of narrativity in what Žižek has called *non-evental* times; as a specific analytical instrument of realism that may be used to illuminate the systemic complexities of late capitalism; and as the site of communitarian and Utopian impulses in a culture characterized by depolitization.

**Jesús Blanco Hidalgo** teaches English at the University of Córdoba and IES Maestro Eloy Vaquero secondary school. In 2015 he obtained his PhD at the University of Córdoba, where he has been a lecturer since 2017. He is the author of *Jonathan Franzen and the Romance of Community: Narratives of Salvation* (Bloomsbury 2017). Currently he is part of a Spanish government-funded research project called “Secrecy, Democracy and Dissidence in Contemporary Literature in English” (2019-2022), which integrates faculty from the universities of Córdoba and Granada.



**Jessica Fuss**

**Tracing Authority and Trust Through Changing Notions of the Heroic in Post-9/11 America**

In line with Marshall Fishwick's notion that heroes are best studied as "barometers to the national climate of opinion," this paper will argue that looking at shifting notions of the heroic can help us discern fluctuations of public trust as well as yield useful insights into how various actors in society have established themselves as having a powerful presence in determining what counts as heroic and what constitutes "true Americanness." In particular, I will focus on the heroization of Captain Chesley Sullenberger who achieved national icon status on 15 January 2009 when he successfully landed US Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson River. Analyzing his rise to hero status against the backdrop of a variety of nationally significant events, including (the lingering trauma of) 9/11, the Great Recession, and the recent presidential elections, this paper will strive to offer a glimpse of the needs, desires, and concerns of post-9/11 American society. In doing so, it will help us unearth various factors that have eroded Americans' trust not only in political and economic leaders but also in one of America's former pillars of pride, namely the aviation industry. A thorough examination of Sullenberger's heroic narrative reveals a multiplicity of social phenomena, such as a (perceived) crisis in morality and national leadership or a dwindling belief in the benefits of technological progress and the automation of work, that have led to a decline in public trust in national leaders and organizations. I will furthermore show how the two most prominent "hero-makers" in American society, i.e. the media and Hollywood, have established themselves as authorities that set the standards for heroism and thus contribute to a significant degree to the (re-) conceptualization of national identity in post-9/11 America.

**Jessica Fuss** is a PhD candidate in American Studies at the University of Tübingen. She holds a bachelor's degree in History and English and a master's degree in American Studies. Her doctoral research investigates the construction and cultural functions of heroes and the interrelatedness of national identity and heroism. Specifically, she employs the case study of Chesley Sullenberger's heroization as a lens through which to examine the social, cultural, and political dimensions underlying the post-9/11 American psyche. Her other research interests include American history from the colonial period to the reconstruction era, the American presidency, the history of medicine, as well as animal studies.

**Mascha Helene Lange**

**Can a Rapist Be Trusted? The Transmedial Negotiation of Sexual Violence, Trauma, and Regaining Trust in the Elva-Stranger Case**

Subject positions for both victims as well as perpetrators of sexual violence are often highly ideologically charged. Feminist criticism has extensively assessed the profoundly harmful stereotypical imaginations of (mostly female) victims as passive, violable, disabled, and less capable of objectivity. Depictions of (mostly male) perpetrators, on the other hand, have been studied to a lesser extent. The memoir *South of Forgiveness* (Elva and Stranger, 2017) is an unprecedented example of life writing which breaks with conventional victim-perpetrator patterns as it presents a survivor of rape telling her story in joint authorship with the man who perpetrated the crime. *South of Forgiveness* addresses difficult questions pertaining to authority (Who is allowed to speak about sexual violence?) as well as trust (Are all perpetrators to be mistrusted? How can rape be reconciliated?). Elva and Stranger also distribute their story internationally in a TED-talk titled “Our Story of Rape and Reconciliation” (2016), which has since amassed millions of views. The scope and format of the TED-talk differs immensely from that of the memoir, illustrating possibilities and pitfalls of transmedial storytelling in the representation and (re-)negotiation of gendered violence. In the age of new media with its distinct means of distribution and participation, discussions about gendered violence are necessarily shifting to transmedial platforms, #MeToo being the epitome of that process. Crucial questions that will be addressed in the presentation therefore concern the relationship between transmedial strategies of representation, the circulation of images of sexual violence, and their relevance for the negotiation of different subject positions in the US-American cultural context.

**Mascha Helene Lange** graduated from the University of Leipzig with a B.A. in American Studies and a Staatsexamen thesis on “Narratives of Intersex” in 2018. Having worked as a graduate teaching assistant at American Studies Leipzig subsequently, she received a grant for pre-doctoral research (the Pre-Doc Award) from the Research Academy Leipzig in 2019. In 2020, she continued teaching at American Studies Leipzig, and since July this year, holds a PhD-scholarship from the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung. Her dissertation project investigates transmedial negotiations of gendered violence in contemporary US-American literature and culture.

**Lucas Mathis**

**Thinking the service of democracy: The philosophical dedication of Woodrow Wilson**

While the dissolution of public trust in the American democracy nearly comes to mind as a self-evidence, one does not always equally ponder over a reverse proposition: How exactly does the American democracy trust its own public?

This talk will offer a brief reflection over the theoretical nature of democracy in America, by looking at a pivotal figure of its evolution: Woodrow Wilson. Unique by his career path, the 28th president of the United States is renown for committing America to a war-effort for a world 'made safe for democracy' in 1917, significantly inspiring America's self-embraced mission as a democratic world champion. Moreover, he was the only American president to have been a professional academic, in a career spanning 35 years between 1875 and 1910 during which democracy was at the centre of his intellectual attention. But while the articulation between Wilson's thought and political action is well studied, what he precisely meant by democracy remains ambiguous.

This talk will explore various aspects of Wilson's thought on democracy, ranging from his vision of history, his racist theories, and even his religious inferences. It will demonstrate that, as contradictory as it may sounds, Wilson believed that only a specific few were in fact fit for democracy, and that only a meriting elite could effectively uphold this ideal, while the people at large, regardless of their rights, could simply not be trusted with maintaining, let alone cultivating democracy.

Looking through these lenses, this talk will develop the argument that beyond a symptom of failure, distrust is also a normal, even foundational element in the fabric of the American democracy as it has developed, for better or worse.

**Lucas Mathis** studied history in France and the United Kingdom where he recently obtained a Master of Research from the University of Leicester. He is primarily interested in American political philosophy and the influence of historical narratives in its development from the 18th century and up to the current times. His research interests lie at the crossroad of history, political science, and philosophy.

**Kamila Mirasova**

**Nostalgia As a Source of Authority or the Phenomenon of Ayn Rand's Popularity**

Recent political situation in the USA has caused an explosive increase in interest in Ayn Rand, the Russian-born American writer and philosopher. Although not acknowledged by Academia, she has had a huge impact on the opinions of American citizens. In the current research the author discusses how the technique of myth-making employed by Rand increases her popularity. The study considers Rand's myth-making rooted in nostalgia. It is theoretically based on the works by Zygmunt Bauman and Roland Barthes. It traces how in the novel "Atlas Shrugged" Rand, pursuing her views, creates myths about the present and past by removing certain historical events from their real-life contexts. The deformed images are bound to meet the nation's longing for an idyllic life. To a certain extent, Rand's nostalgia for an idyllic free-market America that never existed prefigures the historical narrative underlying President Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again", which played a decisive role in the presidential election in 2016. Rand's version of nostalgia, just like "Make America Great Again"-ism, fills this void, which accounts for the value that Rand's novel still holds for readers today. Thus, the study of Rand's version of nostalgia helps comprehend the state of things in the contemporary United States, particularly in its politics, which bespeaks of the importance of Rand studies in a narrower sense.

**Kamila Mirasova** received her Ph.D. in world literature (candidate degree in philology) from Kazan Federal University (Russia). Her thesis was devoted to the analysis of Ayn Rand's novels in the context of American popular culture. Currently a research associate with Kazan Federal University, she has published over 10 articles analyzing literary aspects of Ayn Rand's creative work. In 2019 Kamila Mirasova won the scholarship of the Russian Foundation for Fundamental Research to investigate the manifestation of Ayn Rand's philosophical and aesthetic views in her novels.

**Olga Thierbach-McLean**

**Loving America, Distrusting Government: The Ideological Feedback Loop of Political Cynicism and Apolitical Patriotism**

The U.S. has long been known as a society of contrasts in which seemingly irreconcilable tendencies coexist. One of these paradoxes is that Americans have been found to be the most patriotic among Western nations and simultaneously to display the highest levels of political cynicism. And while presently public confidence in political institutions seems to have reached a new and dramatic low point, the pronounced distrust of political elites is a constant that can be traced throughout American history. In an intellectual tradition strongly shaped by individualism and anti-statism casting the state as an antagonistic intruder into people's private lives has become a cultural default. And yet, despite this widespread antipathy against government, studies have also indicated that the concept of 'the nation' has a distinctly positive ring to most U.S. citizens, and that they identify strongly with their country's goals.

At the heart of the puzzling discrepancy between deep-seated aversion to state authority and ardent patriotism is a longstanding conceptual disconnect. As political sociologist Alan Wolfe has argued, "Americans make a distinction between America, which they love, and the government, which they distrust." In other words, America as romantic myth and America as political fact are habitually separated, with the national community being predominantly thought of in terms of the abstract values of the *American Creed*, not the concrete workings of the body politic.

This paper traces the cultural sources of the dichotomic view of "innocent America" versus "corrupt government." It seeks to show how the romanticized aspirations to national life combined with the skepticism of political processes undermine public trust by generating an ideological feedback loop, in which individualistic tenets, disenchantment with politics, and patriotic glorification of America interlock and amplify each other.

**Olga Thierbach-McLean** is an independent scholar, journalist, and literary translator. After studying North American literature, Russian literature, and musicology at the University of Hamburg and UC Berkeley, she earned her doctorate in American Studies at UHH. She is the author of numerous articles on U.S. political and popular culture, as well as of the book *Emersonian Nation* which traces the resonance of Emersonian individualism in current U.S. discourses on personal rights and social reform. Her main research interests are in contemporary U.S. politics and particularly the intersections between politics and literature, American Transcendentalism, and the intellectual history of liberalism.

**Lucia Toman**

**Between Fact and Fiction: Autofiction and Fake Memoir in the Light of Textual Authority and Readers' Trust**

Recent years have seen a remarkable surge in various self-narrative genres and forms. This paper looks at – and compares – two of them: autofiction and fake memoir. Autofiction refers to a form of fictionalized memoir, in which an author-narrator describes events from whose veracity he/she keeps ironic distance. By pretending to depict real-life events from the author's life, fake memoir violates the tacit autobiographical pact, based on the premise of referential 'truth', between author and reader.

Owing to the deconstructive power of Postmodern skepticism, the flimsy boundaries between fact and fiction are dissolving. We have become wary of truth claims and aware of the limits of our memories. Therefore, memoir finds itself in the need to renegotiate the relationship between its fictional and referential dimensions. One possible result of this renegotiation is autofiction; another, a failed one, is fake memoir.

From a certain perspective, fake memoir and autofiction seem like complete opposites: While fake memoir fakes its referentiality and so ends up betraying readers' trust and expectations, autofiction does not build readers' trust on false pretenses, therefore, its fictional elements do not do a disservice to its referential ones. In other words, by not concealing its fictionalized nature, it succeeds in maintaining the trust of its readers.

However, autofiction and fake memoir can also be perceived as genre-wise indistinguishable. The moment of exposure, which is what separates the two categories, is usually extratextual. To illustrate this, I will describe the case of Margaret B. Jones's *Love and Consequences* (2008), exploring its initial success, exposure as fake memoir and subsequent downfall. Ultimately, I seek to examine fake memoir and autofiction as potential heirs to the memoir genre and to compare the narrative effects of both in relation to their textual authority and readers' trust.

**Lucia Toman** is a doctoral researcher at the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) at Justus Liebig University of Giessen, where she conducts research on the transformations of unreliable narration in contemporary literary fiction. She completed her master's degree in comparative literature and literary criticism at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2018. Her research interests further include narrative theory, literary Postmodernism and the limits of language in literary fiction.

**Sergey Vedernikov**

## **The Lack of Political Trust and Its Role in Post-Katrina Conspiracy**

Political trust is defined as a basic evaluative orientation toward the government founded on perceptions of how well the government is operating according to people's normative expectations (Hetherington 2005). Events like natural disasters are litmus tests for governments of any level as the way they respond to them will be scrutinized by the media and by the public.

Hurricane Katrina of 2005 is the most devastating disaster to hit southern US states in decades. The hardest-hit areas such as New Orleans have large African-American communities. Unfortunately, government agencies of all levels demonstrated a serious lack of preparedness in dealing with the consequences of the disaster, which has inevitably resulted in a drastic decrease in reliance on the authorities. However, even prior to Katrina African American communities demonstrated low levels of trust in political institutions. Shingles first establishes a link between the racial group and its political trust: as African Americans transfer blame from themselves to the system they become less trusting of government (Shingles 1981). Another study asserts that mistrust in government is exacerbated by a number of factors such as racial identification, large racial disparities in economic success, social inequality, and under-representation (Avery 2006, 2009). All of the above-mentioned factors existing to a different extent within African American communities before 2005 were exposed by Hurricane Katrina and renewed public discussions.

A lack of trust, especially in the circumstances of a natural disaster, inevitably leaves a void in communication between the affected community and the authorities. The essay explores how existing mistrust, exacerbated by Hurricane Katrina, has led to the propagation of conspiracy theories, particularly the one about the intentional destruction of New Orleans levees to forcibly remove the poorest African American communities from the city.

**Sergey Vedernikov** is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Freiburg. He received an M.A. in British and North American Cultural Studies from the University of Freiburg. His research interests include linguistics, modern history, and sociology of disaster. His current Ph.D. thesis "The Rhetoric of Disaster. In Search of Resilience in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina" concerns the disasters impact on culture and the narratives evoked in their aftermath, particularly focusing on the conceptualization of the narrative of resilience in different texts of post-Katrina discourse.