

„Corona in den USA – Der Podcast des Heidelberg Center for American Studies“

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„Protest and the Pandemic – A Conversation with HCA Student Terence Wride“

Terence Wride, HCA

Anja Schüler: Hello and welcome to a special edition of the HCA Podcast. Two months ago, the death of George Floyd sparked a wide-spread protest movement against racial injustice and police violence in the U.S. While protests in many cities subsided after a few weeks, they continued in a few places, most notably in Portland, Oregon, which has seen protests every night from May 29. Today, we will be taking a closer look at those long-standing and intensifying protests and the reaction of the federal government. My name is Anja Schüler, and my guest today is Terence Wride, who is a native of Oregon and a student in the HCA's Master of American Studies Program. He has just recently returned from the United States. So, welcome back to Heidelberg, Terence. I understand that recent trip back to the United States was a little bit more than you bargained for. Can you briefly describe your experience to our listeners?

Terence Wride: Of course, thanks for having me on. I planned a trip back to the U.S. for a sibling's wedding,; my brother was getting married. It was supposed to be for three weeks and it ended up being about for four months just because of cancelled flights due to the Corona virus. It kind of happened overnight, just as we arrived, and we ended up staying with my in-laws in Salt Lake City, Utah, for nearly three months. Then I went to my family, who is now in California. But I also spend some time in Oregon as well. But I am happy to be back in Germany.

Anja Schüler: And you just got out of quarantine?

Terence Wride: That's right, fourteen days of quarantine with my wife and my two-year-old-son. We made it!

Anja Schüler: It's good to have you back out. We talked earlier a little bit, when I met you on the street yesterday. This Podcast is about protest movements, and you mentioned to me yesterday that you also actively participated in the protests. Where was that?

Terence Wride: Yes, when George Floyd was murdered and the protests began across the nation, I was in Salt Lake City in Utah. Although Salt Lake is overwhelmingly white, there were daily protests, and so I felt it was important to participate and be part of that collective voice and support #BlackLivesMatter and condemn police brutality.

Anja Schüler: And so they were marching daily... can you give us some details? For example, who was typically out there in the streets, what were the demands of the protesters?

Terence Wride: So, the media kind of portrayed the protests as kind of disparate and not very well-organized. They did begin with the #BlackLivesMatter Salt Lake City Chapter, leading the protests we saw already in Minneapolis, and demanding police accountability and racial justice. The crowds mainly consisted of young adults and were overwhelmingly white as in Utah is – I would say – a very white state. But lots of people showed up to these marches, and in the beginning the protests were paired with some pretty inflammatory writing. A car was

flipped and burned, and some buildings were covered with graffiti – federal buildings were – which was actually pretty standard throughout the nation. The police would swiftly deploy military-style-tactics, swinging the clubs, firing tear gas and bullets, budging protesters. One of the most, I think, “famous” clips from the Salt Lake City protesters was about an elderly man being hit and knocked down by an aggressive police-man, as well as a counter-protester who came with a bow and arrow in support of the police and began to shoot arrows which was pretty frightening. It was interesting, though, to see the protests in Salt Lake, also to begin to reflect more of the demographics and racial make-up of Salt Lake. And at the end of May, just a couple of days before George Floyd was murdered, Salt Lake City police officers murdered a 22-year-old Latino-man, named Bernardo Palacios-Carbajal. I was in Utah, in Salt Lake, and the police refused to release the body for over a month without giving a reason, and people were understandably really upset, especially with which was going on with George Floyd. So this was all happening during the #BlackLivesMatter protest. It came out that the officers fired 34 shots at Bernardo, even though he was running away from the police. And when they released his body, his fingers had been blown off because he had been shot so many times. It is just terrible stuff, and in the end, the Salt Lake City district attorney did rule that the killing was justified. At that time, the protests seemed to intensify. And it became even more personal, I think, for Salt Lake City protesters because it was about George Floyd and #BlackLivesMatter, but also about this murder of Bernardo. And, you know, I don’t think that Bernardo’s death would have received the same reaction if it had not been for the moment of #BlackLivesMatter. And he is from a neighborhood that my sister-in-law and her family is from, she is Afro-Latina. So it just felt even more personal that I marched in protests for her, for Bernardo, George Floyd and other people colored and in danger of a racist police force.

Anja Schüler: So you talked a little bit about the reactions of the authorities in Salt Lake City. Have federal forces moved into Salt Lake?

Terrence Wride: The national guard was called out by Utah’s governor pretty early on, and so there was a considerable military presence throughout the marches and protests which was actually frightening. And after the initial protests, there was also a city-wide curfew issued by the democratic mayor, and so it seems like both sides were against the protesters.

Anja Schüler: Have the protests subsided in Salt Lake City since?

Terrence Wride: In Salt Lake City, more or less, there were some protests that were ongoing because of Bernardo’s death and what came out from the Salt Lake City DA’s office. Throughout the demands, how to deal with police funding, being diverted to education... That has not happened, and so there seems to be kind of indifference. But I think, maybe one of the most potent results, though, of the protests, was that they did started a discussion at one level at the universities. My alma mater, for example, should include a class on racism and ethnicity as part of their general educational requirements for new students. And so, between the DA’s decision of Bernardo and the funding of police not really happening and the treatment of the protesters... well, there weren’t any immediate change which brought the issue of racial injustice to a lot of white-middle-class Utahns that may have never known that Utah is actually one of the states with the highest per capita deaths of black people by police. And actually, Utah is also a state with eight sovereign Native-American tribes and reservations. In this state, Native American Women make up 30 percent of all our reported rape cases, even though they make up only one percent of the American population

In 2017, I co-founded a multi-cultural-community activist group to address those issues, and it centered on renaming a prominent landmark in Utah around the time when I was finishing my Bachelor's degree. And, you know, the name was "squawkee," which is a sexually derogatory term, and they are frequent throughout Utah. And so, when we began this activist group, we called it "RePeak." Then in 2017, the community was pretty overwhelmingly negative towards the renaming-initiative. I was working at the mayor's office during that time as an intern to work on the name-change-effort. He even withdrew his support of the initiative when he began a congressional election campaign because it was too controversial to work on that issue, you know. And so, while we'd actively campaign on the name-change, we have been doubling effort in the past couple of years, pushing public education on the issue. And it became clear that it was going to take some time to get the necessary support, and there was lot of push-back. But during this time, just in the past two months, we have had fewer concerns. The community members started outreaching support, and just two weeks ago, one of Utah's state senators reached out to us. She said that this was the time to push it through and that she would really like to help us. And we just heard back from the border geographic names. They said that they would get this in soon, that they are going to push through that name change. So, it has brought a lot of things in Utah.

Anja Schüler: It is really great that this initiative would just really been going on for a few years and that it is now getting the attention it deserves in this debate about racial injustice. I would like to move on now to a different place, to your home state of Oregon. Of course, the attention has been focused on Oregon, in particular on Portland, Oregon, since President Trump employed federal agents there in early July to protect federal buildings, and the local authorities there fear that these forces are abusing their authority. They are tear-gassing protesters and pulling them into unmarked vans – that has gotten lots of attention. Portland's mayor spoke of an "attack on our democracy" and speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, even called the agents "storm troopers." I think that was quite remarkable. I am sure you are following these developments. What impact do you think does this deployment of federal forces have on the protest's movements in Portland?

Terrence Wride: By the time federal agents were sent, #BlackLivesMatter-protests over George Floyd had already subsided, more or less. So they became revived; and the feds would be dragging protesters which would lead to this "Wall of Mums" and others protesting through the protester's sake.

Anja Schüler: Could you explain the "Wall of Mums"?

Terrence Wride: With the happenings with the federal officers being sent in, there has been a nightly group of Portland mothers that come. They basically make a wall to protect the protesters and it has actually been a really cool thing to see a community come together in that way... something maybe unseen before.

Anja Schüler: It has become a demand that the federal forces leave. Has it become an essential demand or is it more like an additional one, in addition to the demands for social and racial justice?

Terrence Wride: It kind of has taken over. From what I have seen, it has taken the front. What initially started as protest on racial injustice – although that should not be discredited either, I

know that Portland's city council passed a bunch of changes to the police for the next years – basically turned into anti-fascist protests which actually long had been active in Portland.

Anja Schüler: So it is quite a complicated story about which groups are involved, about how the demands are changing and how this movement has resurged after it had quited down. This resurgence of the movement, as you mentioned, is it limited to Portland or have we seen it in other cities as well?

Terrence Wride: As it is right now I don't know if that we have seen the same elsewhere. Oregon is a special place for a lot of reasons: It is Portland in particular which has to deal with a history of racist problems. But it also has a very active body of liberal activism. The Pacific North-West, Portland in particular, is very known for that. I would not be surprised, however if we started seeing similar protests in places like Chicago, in New York; other places where Trump has promised to use federal force.

Anja Schüler: We have to see how that develops. Of course we can't let you off without a question about the election: Do you think that the deployment of those federal forces to Portland has helped the president in his bid for re-election, or do you think it could backfire? Yesterday Oregon's governor announced that the forces would withdraw. We don't know whether it is really going to happen, but what do you think will be the impact of this on the elections?

Terrence Wride: First of all, I think the active deploying of federal forces in Portland when the protests had more or less subsided, is less entirely political. These battles between Trump, the Republicans and Democratic cities is really two-fold. Trump is overwhelmingly unpopular in urban cities in the U.S., but he is still very strong in rural places, and that was actually very clear in my last month in Oregon. I am from a small town a few hours south of Portland, and the difference between the rural outskirts and the city center were politically night-and-day-differences. You hardly can drive a mile outside without seeing the Trump sign, and you gradually get into the city, and it changes. Many places are like Portland in Oregon that had long been known as incredibly liberal places where it would be hard to find even a Trump supporter, it seems like. A lot of political commentaries have been stating it out. I think, the most immediate political question is how whites and suburbanians are going to respond to this. So, by provoking clashes between protesters in places like Portland, it looks like he is trying to convince white suburban voters that he is the last line of defense between them and the chaos of Portland.

I think it is working in places like Utah, to be honest. I know a lot of these suburbs in Salt Lake City are seeing it, they are afraid after police cars flipped in Salt Lake after a couple of months ago. I think Trump is getting a lot of white middle-class-voters just as he did in 2016, unfortunately.

Anja Schüler: Just like Nixon did, with law-and-order after the protests [in the 1968 elections]. We have to see how that will be in three months, in the November election.

Thank you very much for this conversation, Terrence, and for your insights. You have been listening to the Podcast of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies at the University of Heidelberg. My name is Anja Schüler, and in the coming weeks our podcast will continue to focus on some of the topics we discussed today. I will be talking to political scientist Florian Böller about polarization in U.S. society and politics, and I will be talking to Britta

Waldschmidt-Nelson about the #Black-Lives-Matter movement.
So stay tuned, and most importantly – stay safe and healthy.