

Heidelberg Center for American Studies

Spring Academy Report

March 20-24, 2017

The 14th annual Spring Academy started on March 20th with a reception in the Atrium of the Curt and Heidemarie Engelhorn Palais. Twenty Ph.D. students affiliated with institutions in six countries and representing eight different nationalities were welcomed by the HCA's founding director Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Junker. Professor Junker, who pointed out the special opportunity the Spring Academy offers as a place for networking and early cohort formation.

Dr. Wilfried Mausbach, the HCA's Executive Director, and one of the two facilitators of the Spring Academy, followed Professor Junker with a brief introduction of the HCA. Pointing out the HCA's three pillars - education, research, and public outreach - he located the Spring Academy within these fields of research.

Following a brief reception that afforded everyone the chance to mingle and meet Dr. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Dr. Mausbach, the Warm-Up Session commenced. Brief introductions by all participants were followed by rapid-fire summaries of their Ph.D. projects as part of an ice-breaker. This was followed by an extended discussion of American Studies, exploring the uniting /connecting issues as umbrella term for all the projects presented throughout the week. Suggestions included "interdisciplinary," "opportunity," "critical" and "expansive." The discussion centered on the issue of interdisciplinarity. Helen Gibson named it as a very clear theme in every dissertation. Starting from this topic, the different levels of interdisciplinarity were discussed. Jack Davy pointed out the need of the right tools to achieve this "...disciplinarity and the need of all of them in everyone's dissertation. The importance of place lingered in the discussion, when the participants talked about "opportunity", Wilfried Mausbach and Helen Kilburn naming the American Dream and its connection to place. The term "expansive" was connoted with a spatial component, being explained by Thomas Cobb as expansion during Manifest Destiny. Lena Mattheis applies this term to cultural art, saying that she often notices paintings to be vast or expansive in the way of looking at them differently. In the geographical context, Finola Prendergast points out that nation-states are oftentimes used as limiting factors, whereas Dorothea Fischer-Hornung clarifies that it is a false assumption that nation-state borders are vanishing. What was missing in the collection of terms were things such as "gender", "race" or "ethnicity".

The first panel, entitled “Englishness and Otherness in Early America,” was chaired by Dr. Wilfried. Helen Kilburn (University of Manchester, UK) focused in her presentation “Religion, Empire, and ‘Sorts of People’, in Maryland 1634-1689” on the influence of English Catholics on the formation of slavery in Maryland, analyzing property ownership, land access, and wealth as compared to English Protestants. She points out that most of the land ownership in Maryland was Catholic, meaning that they had better access to credit and thus an easier access to slaves and a means of social worth. Aynur Erdogan (University of Groningen, Netherlands) followed Kilburn with a presentation on “The Imagined Turk in Early America” in which she focused on the portrayal of Turks in 18th Century America, trying to categorize western representation of the Orient. Oriental tales were very popular during that time. She also argues that there was an oriental equivalent to the noble savage, the Grateful Turk. Erdogan develops her own categorization of Turks: the Polygenic Parallelism (everything is related to everything), Adaptation (with the example of Aladdin) and Derivation (philosophical messages are secularized and moved into the oriental context).

After a brief coffee break, L. Sasha Gora (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Germany), started the second panel on “Exploring Material Culture”, chaired by Dr. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung with “Culinary Landclaims: A History of Indigenous Restaurants in Canada”. Gora’s presentation centered on the issue of food as a universal thing that brings people together and can be used to study land. Doing so, Gora focused on the First Nations who used to live on this land and ways of their food to claim and reclaim land. In her dissertation she uses food as cultural negotiation and analyzes restaurants and cookbooks which serve original Indigenous food. In this context she defines authenticity not based on the ingredients used but rather by who eats it. The panel’s second speaker was John Davy (University College London, UK), who gave a presentation on “Miniaturization and communication on the Northwest Coast.” In his dissertation, Davy focuses on miniatures made by Native Americans along the Coast of British Columbia and tries to look at the mimetic relationship between those miniature objects and their larger resemblants. He argues that miniatures are deliberately distributed to make people in museums or governments think or act a certain way. When the material culture of Native Americans was banned, miniatures were still allowed. This enabled the indigenous peoples to keep up the carving tradition and thus serves as a method of cultural resilience. Davy claims that he is the first to focus on miniaturization from this region in anthropologic terms.

Tuesday’s session began with “Interventions: Cultural Representations of Post-Cold War U.S. Foreign Policy” chaired by Dr. Tobias Endler. First to speak was Thomas Cobb

(University of Birmingham, UK) on “Decade of Ambivalence: How Hollywood films from 1999-2009 allegorized US foreign policy.” In his dissertation he makes the claim that foreign policy theories of hard and soft power often interact in Hollywood films. The movie *There Will Be Blood* can be interpreted multilayeredly. The relationship between the characters can be, on the one hand, interpreted as relation between the Bush administration and the public Evangelicals. During the occupation of Iraq, on the other hand, the Iraqi people can be analyzed as Evangelicals. According to Cobb, directors intentionally refer to political events to give their films a political reading. The day’s second speaker was Tatiana Prorokova (Philipps University Marburg, Germany), who gave a presentation on “From Fiction to (Semi-)History: U.S. Contemporary Interventions in Film and Literature.” She, also, focuses on the fictional representations of U.S. interventions that were carried out since 1990. She argues that war fiction is not exclusively fictional but presents a connection between history and fiction, thus can be named “docu-fiction”. War-docu, in this regard, does not teach history but helps to understand it.

After a brief coffee break, Romain Gilibert (Université d’Aix-Marseille, France), began the fourth panel on “Claiming Citizenship – at the Ballot Box and on the Freeway” with “Understanding the Latino Electorate in Texas.” Gilibert’s dissertation aims at analyzing the growing importance of the Latino vote for American politics. In Texas, 87% of the population is of Mexican decent and the Latino voters make up 38% of the Texan population. Mexicans are a fairly young population, thus there are only 3.8 mio people eligible to vote, from a total of 13.3 mio. But only 2.3 of the eligible voters are even registered. The “sleeping giant” has a relatively low voting turn-out as compared to African-Americans or Whites. Gilibert wants to trace back why the turnout in Texas is so low and what political parties do to reach out to them. Helen Gibson (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany) followed Gilibert with a presentation on “Chauffeur Blues: Cars as Spaces of Social Transgression, 1895-1939.” She emphasized the importance of the car in the early 20th century as one method to change race relations. In her dissertation, Gibson analyzes the automotivity of black chauffeurs in the United States, meaning the personal agency inherent in the act of driving. The car, in contrast to public transport, represents both public and private space and can thus be seen as another unique way to fight in the Civil Rights Movement.

The panel on Wednesday concluded with a workshop on “Academic Writing and Publishing,” led by Dr. Fischer-Hornung and Dr. Sherry Föhr. Participants were given tips and motivational instructions on writing their theses by Dr. Föhr who used to facilitate the Writing

Resources Center in the English Seminar of Heidelberg University. Dr. Fischer-Hornung shared her expertise in the publishing world as a co-editor of a scholarly journal. The workshop proved effective and instructive to participants. Afterwards they were offered the opportunity to make an appointment for an individual consultation on either writing or publishing.

The second day concluded with a guided walking tour through Heidelberg with Krisitan Willenbacher which was moved to the historical student prison because of bad weather conditions. The evening ended with a traditional German meal at a historic German restaurant in the Old Town.

Wednesday's first session, "Transnationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and Afropolitanism", was chaired by Dr. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung. Lena Mattheis (University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany) gave a presentation on "'I don't rely on paint alone' – Palimpsestous Street Art in Chris Abani's *The Virgin of Flames*." The novel, Mattheis focuses on, is set in East Los Angeles and deals with the protagonist's motivation to paint. The palimpsestous relationship, overwriting something when the removed is still visible, is being analyzed in this regard. Mattheis describes Street Art as translocal since it exists in an urban environment, centered on a wall but is also connected to other places as it has an influence on the surrounding area. The virgin, of which the novel speaks, also connects places and can thus be seen as translocal. The panel concluded with Sandra Garcia Corte's (University of Oviedo, Spain) presentation on the issue of Afropolitanism. Her talk, "Afropolitanism: Solution or restriction?" tried to grasp the new definition of the African in a context of spatial reorganization. The term, first introduced by Taiye Selasi, captures the fluidity and cosmopolitanism of a new generation. Garcia Corte then analyzes Anglophone narratives and their spatial importance in regard to this new context to test its applicability to narratives.

After a brief coffee break, the second panel of the day, chaired by Dr. Wilfried Mausbach on "The Screening and Greening of American Business", was started by Natasha Neary (Northumbria University, UK) and her presentation on "*Fun and Facts About American Business*: The Production of Harding College's economical, educational film series." Focusing on the long 1950s from World War II until the 1960s, she analyzes the TV series, which aimed at educating the broad public on businesses. The capitalist propaganda served as fruitful method to explain economy to the common people. Adding entertainment to the series was intentional and useful in this regard but still the series main focus was the education on economic freedom and opportunities. In this time period, the show presented a view on economic issues and themes that had never been used before. Christian Gunkel followed Neary with a presentation on

“Rethinking Green Consumerism – How American Entrepreneurs Set out to Change the Market for the Better.” He specifically concentrates on Green Consumerism and analyzes market actors who focus on one of the goals for sustainability defined by the United Nations in 2015. While governments are lying behind in this regard, Gunkel’s main focus is the role of lifestyle politics for said businesses and the critique thereof. An example he mentions is Toms campaign “One for One” – for every shoe sold one pair will be given to a child in need in a developing country.

After the lunch break, the seventh panel on “Gendered Histories and Historiographies” was chaired by Dr. Patrick Miller and was started by Rosie Knight on “Thinking Intersectionally: Motherhood and Intra-gendered Exploitation in the Antebellum South.” Knight focuses on how motherhood was also shaped by exploitation and uses the lens of intersectionality which provides the openness to do such. Motherhood, according to Knight, takes different meanings in race and class and is especially distinct for black motherhood, which is being associated with bad or ignorant mothers. When talking about black mothers, they are usually referred to as mammies to white children or as absent and disinterested to their own. Knight points out that these processes of categorization have social and material consequences. The presentation was followed by Héloïse Thomas (Université Bordeaux Montaigne, France) on “The Feminist Premise(s) of Reconstructive Historiographies” arguing that feminists need to dismantle what has been assembled in writing history. Thomas clarifies that history has been created by men ever since but this tradition is changing over the last 60 years. The question that comes up is if our approach to history changes too. Thomas’ goal is to reclaim authority and to open up a space for erased voices to speak on their own.

Following the final panel for the day, the Spring Academy participants were then escorted to Mannheim for a private tour of the John Deere Europe factory. As sponsor of the Spring Academy, John Deere not only supports the program financially but displays their success with participants as one of the greatest American-German partnerships in manufacturing. Following a warm welcome and introduction by Public Relations and Brand Management Manager, Dr. Ralf Lenge, the group was led on a walking tour of the main factory to see the extensive operations of this American company in Germany. Back in the visitor’s center, the group was treated to a light snacks and was able to have pictures taken standing next to or sitting in a large trademark tractor.

Dr. Tobias Endler introduced Thursday’s first session, “Cultural Moments: From Poetry to SciFi.” The day’s first presentation was Finola Prendergast’s (University of Notre Dame, USA) talk on “Dystopia and Deregulation: The 21st Century’s Minor Genre”, in which she

argues that the genre of science-fiction/fantasy is more suited to portray moral discourse about contemporary problems than more traditional genres. The tradition of American Dystopia has changed from an oppressive state to a passive state than enables chaos. The neoliberal dystopia, as Prendergast refers to it, might have ended with Donald Trump's election of presidency and the resurgence of the 20th century dystopian tradition of authoritarian governments.

The eighth panel ended with Amanda Licato (Stanford University, USA) and her presentation entitled, "'Out from Behind this Mask': Persona in African American Poetry, 1830-1930" focusing on black poets as a rich source to understand the lyric/ poetic persona. Licato draws her methodology back to the Greek and Roman drama in which a new mask was used for a new speaker and the latter melted into the role. In this context, she defines persona as a measure of various constructions of identity, wearing a mask that is not only masking. Licato explains her focus on African American poets as their peculiar power in regard to history and her possibility to read the black identity as a hollow mask.

After a brief coffee break, the ninth panel, chaired by Dr. Ulrike Gerhard, "Urban Narratives in the Big Apple", was started by Nico Völker (Justus-Liebig-University Gießen, Germany) with his presentation on "A 'Park' Grows in Brooklyn: The Atlantic Yards Project and Narratives of Urban Redevelopment." Völker aims at analyzing the Atlantic Yards redevelopment program and its implications for Brooklyn. The project is being narratively constructed and the change of name to "Pacific Park" exemplifies the nostalgic yearning to a greener living - even though there is no park being build but 17 high-rise towers with mixed use. The second speaker of this panel, Jessica Bird (Temple University, USA) gave a presentation on "For the Legal and Peaceful Enjoyment of Citizens: Street Vendors, Prostitution, and the Regulation of Public Space", analyzing street vending and its regulation in New York City. In her presentation she focuses on vending as well as prostitution as two central themes that were discussed in the city in the 1970s. During this time, over 22.000 people were vending without a license and threatening small business, so it was said. This led to an increase of peddler restrictions that resulted in them being pushed to outer boroughs. Prostitution as well was acted against by several anti-prostitution drives on public spaces and private properties.

Friday morning began with a workshop on "Symbols Matter: Race and the Politics of Popular Memory" facilitated by Dr. Patrick Miller (Northeastern University, USA), in which he argues that accounts from the past are rendered and remembered to add to a long history of white supremacy. The question coming up in his workshop is how to confront offensive

symbols. After bringing some of his own examples, such as the confederate flag controversy or symbols at American colleges that include slave pictures and Indian mascots, he opens the discussion to everyone, giving the chance to share their stories and observations.

After lunch, the 10th and final panel on “Vision, Sight, and Blinding”, chaired by Dr. Fischer-Hornung, began with a presentation by Maria Kaspirek (University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany) on “The Battle for Authority: Literary and Scientific Configurations of Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century America” dealing with mental hygiene in Antebellum literature. She argues that literature and science were more closely connected than today and contain their own source of knowledge. In this sense, “literature as an exposition of science” was used to test and expand medical theories. The last presentation of the day was given by Madeline Williams (Harvard University, USA) on “Visions of Belonging: The Politics of Blindness and Sight in the United States, 1884-1935,” exploring the history of blindness as disability. The term “disability” is a 20th century word, helping to grasp changing notions on the construction of blindness as a social and cultural category in the 19th century. Williams also focuses on the retrolental fibroplasia epidemic in the 1940s and 50s among premature babies which caused their blinding. She tries to recover the untold story of this children at Schools for the Blind and their parents participation in scientific and medical discourse of more recent times.

To conclude the conference, Friday’s “Cool Down” session started out with a feedback section and prompted new questions about the direction of American Studies. New key words about what American Studies is were added to the ones collected in Monday’s warm-up session: “authenticity,” “responsibility,” “transnational,” and “multi-faceted” were among the many new concepts. The participants expanded their foremost focus on interdisciplinary and expanded existing topics. Based on the closeness of all the circles carrying the ideas on the chart, they agreed that some ideas brought up in Monday’s session were now strengthened while others were problematized. After the cool down session, the HCA invited the participants to a farewell dinner at a prestigious German restaurant to celebrate another successful Spring Academy.

Stella Müller