

## **Conference Report on the 2011 Postgraduate Forum of the German Association for American Studies**

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Amerikastudien (DGfA) Postgraduate Forum (PGF) at Justus Liebig University Giessen, November 4 - 6, 2011

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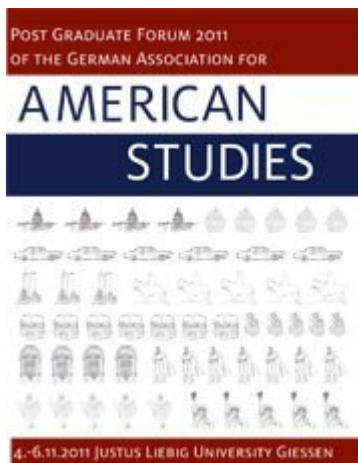
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## Conference Report on the 2011 Postgraduate Forum of the German Association for American Studies

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From November 4 to November 6 the 2011 Postgraduate Forum (PGF) of the German Association for American Studies (DGfA) was hosted by the Department of English and the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) at Justus Liebig University Giessen, organized by DANIEL HOLDER, ANDREAS HÜBNER and OTTILIE P. KLEIN. Roughly sixty young German and international researchers pursuing their doctorate and post-doctorate degrees in American Studies met in Giessen to discuss current work-in-progress and participate in eight thematic panels from fields as interdisciplinary as American culture, literature, history, and politics.

The DGfA's PGF was initiated more than twenty years ago by early career researchers within the German Association of American Studies, reacting to pressing theoretical developments in (transnational) American Cultural and Literary Studies. Since then the PGF has been organized annually by different organizational teams at different universities within Germany and has become one of if not the most important forum for young scholars in the field of American Studies to present and discuss current work-in-progress during their doctoral and post-doctoral qualification phases as well as meet and connect with fellow scholars in the field. Before this year's PGF in Giessen, the conference, for instance, was held in Leipzig, Munich, and Münster. The Giessen PGF was kindly supported by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Amerikastudien (DGfA), the Gießener Hochschulgesellschaft, the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC), as well as the Department of English at Justus Liebig University Giessen.

Opening remarks were given by WOLFGANG HALLET (International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture and Department of English, Justus Liebig University Giessen), UDO HEBEL (Department of English, University of Regensburg and President of the DGfA), and FLORIAN BAST (University of Regensburg), who introduced the online journal Current Objectives of

Postgraduate American Studies (COPAS), in which the postgraduates' contributions will be published in early 2012.

The conference was opened on Friday by GRETA OLSON (Giessen), Professor of English and American Studies in the Department of English at Justus Liebig University Giessen, with a keynote lecture entitled "Political Positions in American Cultural Studies." In her lecture as well as in the following discussion, Olson pursued the question and place of the 'political' within the field of American Studies, arguing for an essentially political approach to American Studies which would challenge earlier and more institutionalized approaches to the field. This, among others, Olson delineated through the example of teaching the popular romance novel *Twilight* and its various cultural reproductions—be it in film or in material culture—from a critical perspective.

The papers of the eight thematic panels concentrated on a broad variety of topics, offering different theoretical and methodological as well as decisively interdisciplinary approaches to U.S. and transnational American cultural production in fields such as literature and literary history, art history, film and new media or cultural history, thus presenting a wide-range of current doctoral and post doctoral work in American Studies.

The first panel, which focused on contemporary literature, was opened by KAROLINA GOLIMOWSKA's (Berlin) talk in which she presented a close reading of David Hare's play *Stuff Happens* (2004). Dealing with the political controversies surrounding the Iraq War, the play's ironic treatment of the diplomatic relations between British and American political leaders, according to Golimowska, offers a critical perspective on how political decisions are made and, more generally, on the idea of American exceptionalism. The ironic title of the play, for



instance, is a reference to the comment made by the former secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld ("Stuff happens") when faced with the exceedingly deteriorating situation in Baghdad during the Iraq war. Golimowska's reading of the play states that *Stuff Happens* can be considered a humorous and yet critical response to post-9/11 transatlantic politics.

In the second panel, "Film and the New Media," LUISA SEHLEIER (Cologne) provided a fresh look at cinematic representations of disability from a psychoanalytic point of view. Drawing on Lacanian theory, Sehleier explained why portrayals of disability are frequently met with both fear and fascination. While the reappearance of disabled types such as the 'charity crip,' the 'sinister crip,' or the 'supercrip' in film evoke pity and hence a sense of superiority, the often discriminatory portrayal of disability reinforces the dissociation of the 'abled' from the

disabled. This ambivalence in dealing with disability can be traced back to underlying psychic mechanisms and, according to Sehleier, is an indication that cinematic portrayals of disability primarily speak to a non-disabled audience.

KARSTEN SENKBEIL's (Hildesheim) comparative approach to religiousness and sports in American and German sports media closed the third panel, "Theoretical and Comparative Approaches". In his case study of various representations of the football player Tim Tebow—a professed Christian who takes an active part in campaigns organized by ultra-conservative Christian organizations—Senkbeil demonstrated the close link between sports(wo)men and religion in the U.S.. German media, on the other hand, not only take on a rather distant stance towards religiousness in sports, but also openly discuss the problems arising from integrating devout athletes into non- or multi-religious teams. Senkbeil concluded that despite the differences in media representation of religious athletes in Germany and the U.S., sports in its performative aspect and communal experience seems to have become itself an Ersatzreligion for postmodern culture.

In the fourth panel, "Art Histories," papers on an American art exhibition abroad, TV series and suspense-formulas as well as photography were given. KATHARINA FACKLER (Regensburg) presented a paper on the representation of poverty in 1960s United States. Focusing specifically on a case study of a photograph of one of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "poverty trips" taken during his "War on Poverty" campaign which was launched in 1964, she outlined several functions of these images. Whereas a first function of these photographs could be identified in the fact that they served to gain public support for the President's "War on Poverty," a second major function was to be sought in their international dimension, as these images proved to be an important aspect of the cultural Cold War during the 1960s, highlighting that the U.S. was capable of fighting the poverty of its own citizens. Finally, these images drew on specifically U.S. (artistic) tropes and values such as the agrarian ideal, or the self-made man, which emphasized their cultural embedment and their diachronic dimension which contributed to the signifying power and effect of these images.



The fifth panel, "Shifting Identities," was introduced by CARRIE KHOU's (Mannheim) presentation on the figure of the New Woman in American and Japanese short stories. In her comparison of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "Turned" (1911) with Araki Ikuko's "The Letter" (1912), Khou found striking parallels in the portrayal of the New Woman and the depiction of issues such as marriage, adultery, and women's autonomy.

These similarities, according to Khou, suggest that the New Woman is a literary phenomenon that is much more transnational than believed. Moreover, the portrayal of the figure of the New Woman in the two short stories reflects an identity that is subject to change. New

Woman hybridity can therefore be considered to have subversive potential to expose dichotomous gendered identities such as the New Woman vs. the True Woman as arbitrary.

Panel six focused on historiographical research in current American Studies. In his paper, WILL BUCKINGHAM (New Orleans, LA) gave new insights into the topic of musical training and early jazz in New Orleans, with an emphasis on African American institutions of education. By delineating the development of jazz in New Orleans in the late 19th and early 20th century, its connection to the city's community life, and the role of African American institutions of education, Buckingham challenged two prevailing narratives; namely the narrative that jazz is connected to simple genius, as well as the one that individual musicians on their own overcome "supposed hindrances placed on them by their environment."

Instead, the focus on African American institutions of education in New Orleans—such as the Fisk School, the Colored Waifs' Home for Boys, as well as Straight University—challenged such narratives by highlighting that jazz training was firmly placed within an educational system which gave rise to artists such as Louis Armstrong, Arthur P. Williams, or Osceola Blanchet.

The seventh panel, "African American Literatures," was introduced by MARGARET HUNT GRAM (Cambridge, MA). In her paper, Gram turned to an analysis of Chester Himes's 1945 novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and its approach to civil rights. Through a close reading of the text, Hunt highlighted the role of the state and government within the novel. This is a role, which, as she argued, was an underestimated but important one, particularly so as the Civil Rights Movement and its literature sparked a general, renewed interest in the role of the federal government, and as the movement could and should itself be understood as a battle over the American state, its functions and meanings. In this sense, Himes's text reacted to a central strategy of the Civil Rights Movement which Gram identified as "selective statism," the notion that parts of the state can be employed to advance the situation of African Americans even though the state itself was not to be changed in total.

The second conference day was rounded up with a film discussion hosted and led by MARTIN LÜTHE (Munich) who presented a paper on Jim Jarmusch's movie *Ghost Dog* entitled "'The Sword and the Sample': Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog: The Way of Samurai* and Hip Hop Culture." In his paper, Lüthe outlined the role and function of the soundscapes in the film, namely the role of hip hop music and its interconnection to Jarmusch's cinematic narrative, thereby adding an important dimension to the study of Jarmusch's movie, as well as to the study of music within film studies in general.

In the conference's last panel that dealt with 19th century U.S. cultures, DAVID ROSE (Berlin) approached aspects of violence and community in 19th century Western pioneer narratives with a special focus on the (Western) frontier narrative by Nat Collins, *The Cattle Queen of Montana*. Drawing on theoretical work by both Georges Sorel and Richard Slotkin, the paper highlighted not only violence's negative dimension, but also its constructive function, as reflected in an "increased recognition of the multiple intersections that connect violent acts and processes of communal bonding." In this sense, violence was fundamental to the

westward-expanding nation during that time, which Rose delineated through a close reading of Collins's text, thereby being able to paint a fresh picture of the intricate interconnections of violence and community in the construction of the U.S. as imagined community during its westward expansion of the 19th century.

Last but not least, this year's PGF highlighted the growing transnationalization and internationalization of the field of American Studies giving international participants a forum to share and discuss their works-in-progress with German peers. This year, the PGF was pleased to welcome MARGARET HUNT GRAM (Harvard University) and WILL BUCKINGHAM (Tulane University) in Giessen. For the future and in accordance with the growing internationalization of American Studies, the PGF plans to cooperate more strongly with European graduate networks in



the field of American Studies. A selection of the conference papers will be published in the American Studies graduate e-journal COPAS in spring 2012, which will be edited by this year PGF's organizational team.

As a follow-up to this conference, the PGF will organize the Young Scholars Forum as well as the PGF Workshop at the DGfA's annual convention taking place in Mainz in May 2012. Considering this year's success of the conference, the new hosts as well as the participating young scholars can already look forward to the next year's PGF, which will be hosted at the University of Marburg.