

IS NOW THE ERA OF OUR DISSENT ?

AMERICAN AMBIGUITIES



12th Annual Graduate Conference

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF
NORTH AMERICAN STUDIES
FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

22-24
May 2019

Cover image: Women's Rights Quilt, Emma Civey Stahl, ca. 1875

2019 Organizing Committee

Francesco Bacci

Fabian Eggers

Lisa Matthias

Anna Rauscher

Guido Rohmann

Simone Sannio

Cameron Seglias

Ali Yasar Tuzcu

12th Annual Conference

Whatever happened to consensus?

In the wake of World War II, the United States came to occupy what many proponents of American exceptionalism have long asserted to be a unique place in modern world history. Official and quotidian versions of postwar American self- understanding became dominated by narratives of a nation dedicated to such liberal values as “freedom” and “justice,” both at home and abroad. With the cultural and legislative strides made by radical social movements of the 1960s and 70s, however, this narrative began to unravel. In light of this, American identity has since found itself in a state of persistent ambiguity. But what if this ambiguity was already present at America’s founding? What if this crisis of identity is to be located in the ambiguities of the Enlightenment itself, but has only recently become perceptible? What can we see when we look closely at the ambiguous image that is America?

The 12th annual Graduate Conference hosted by the Graduate School of North American Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin will explore the interdisciplinarity of American ambiguities and consider their relevance across numerous fields of research. How are ambiguous ideals of American freedom simultaneously modes of exclusion for certain groups? What effects have these ambiguities had on policy-making and public discourse? How have they been depicted through old and new literary and visual forms?

Schedule

Wednesday, 22 May

12:30 Registration

13:30 Introduction

Fabian Eggers

Welcome Address

Frank Kelleter

14:15 The Life and Death of Theory

Chair: Dominique Haensell (Freie Universität Berlin)

Silvia Ammary (John Cabot University)

The Aesthetics of Ambiguity in the Modernist American Novel

Sonja Pyykkö (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)

“Hybridity” and Generic Ambiguity in Contemporary American Life Writing

Vedran Catovic (University of Michigan)

Radical Relativism and Relative Radicalism in the US Humanities

15:45 Coffee Break

16:15 Representation and Race from the Harlem Renaissance to #BlackLivesMatter

Chair: Birte Wege (Freie Universität Berlin)

Anne Urbanowski (Université de Tours)

Fur Coats and Cadillacs: The Disambiguation of the Black Middle Class in James VanDerZee’s Photographs

Meili Steele (University of South Carolina)

Ambiguities of Race and Normativity: Ta Nehisi Coates’s Challenge to Barack Obama and the Brown v. Board of Education Paradigm

Sabine Elisabeth Aretz (Universität Bonn)

“We Are Expansive”: The Rhetoric and Aesthetic of Ambiguity in the #BlackLivesMatter Movement

17:45 Coffee Break

18:15 Keynote

Andrew Hartman (Illinois State University)

A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars

20:45 Buffet

Thursday, May 23

9:30 Snacks & Coffee

10:15 Keynote

Laura M. Stevens (University of Tulsa)

Longing for Salvation, in Early and Late America

11:45 Coffee Break

12:15 Flickering Enlightenment: Ambiguity in Early America

Chair: Cameron Seglias (Freie Universität Berlin)

Nicole Hirschfelder (Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen)

Great (Un)Equalizers? A Re-Consideration of Early American Quakerism

Lee Flamand (Freie Universität Berlin)

Dark Enlightenment? Charles Brockden Brown's Gothic Novels and the Riotous Young Republic

Christine Marie Koch (Universität Paderborn)

"He can take everything away from me, but he can't take my heritage!" Ambiguous Representations of Colonial Georgia, Identity Constructs, and Exclusion through Memory Politics

13:45 Coffee Break

14:15 Reassessing Liberalism in the American Century

Chair: Maximilian Klose (Freie Universität Berlin)

Ben Zdencanovic (Yale University)

“It Would Be a Strange Paradox”: US Global Economic Power, the End of New Deal Reform, and the Birth of the British Welfare State, 1944-1951

Heleen Bloomers (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

Changing the Narrative: Assessing Legacy-Writing on the War on Poverty

Salvador S. F. Regilme Jr. (Universiteit Leiden)

Human Rights in Distress Amidst American Decline and Trumpism

15:45 Coffee Break

16:15 Negotiating Space in the Country and the City

Chair: Sönke Kunkel (Freie Universität Berlin)

Eugénie Clément (EHESS)

Protecting the Territory: Practices, Ontologies, and Dialectics of Diné Resistances

Laura Kettel (Freie Universität Berlin)

Freedom and Constraint: The Ambiguities of Public Space

Laura op de Beke (Universiteit Leiden)

Ecoambiguity in Walden, a Game, and Other Environmental Video Games

17:45 Coffee Break

18:15 Keynote

Jared Farmer (Stony Brook University)

Tree-rings and Empire in the Late Holocene

Friday, May 24

9:30 Snacks & Coffee

10:15 Keynote

Anne Driscoll (Brandeis University)

The Ambiguities of Losing Innocence and Finding Justice
in the Age of the Internet

11:45 Coffee Break

**12:15 Not Just Fun and Games: Popular Culture and the
American Self-Image**

Chair: Annelot Prins (Freie Universität Berlin)

Meike Robaard (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen)

What's in a Game? Playful Puzzling Histories and the Cultural
Symbolism of Monopoly, 1900-1950

Gizem Tellioğlu (İstanbul Üniversitesi)

The Ambiguity in Social Roles of Women in 1950s American
Advertisements

Ilias Ben-Mna (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)

Post-Imperial Ambiguities in Hollywood Superhero Movies

Speakers

SILVIA AMMARY

John Cabot University

SABINE ELISABETH ARETZ

Universität Bonn

ILIAS BEN-MNA

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

HELEEN BLOOMERS

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

VEDRAN CATOVIC

University of Michigan

EUGÉNIE CLÉMENT

EHESS

ANNE DRISCOLL

Brandeis University

JARED FARMER

Stony Brook University

LEE FLAMAND

Freie Universität Berlin

ANDREW HARTMAN

Illinois State University

NICOLE HIRSCHFELDER

Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen

LAURA KETTEL

Freie Universität Berlin

CHRISTINE MARIE KOCH

Universität Paderborn

LAURA OP DE BEKE

Universiteit Leiden

SONJA PYYKKÖ

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

SALVADOR S. F. REGILME JR.

Universiteit Leiden

MEIKE ROBAARD

Rijksuniversiteit Groningen

MEILI STEELE

University of South Carolina

LAURA M. STEVENS

University of Tulsa

GİZEM TELLİOĞLU

İstanbul Üniversitesi

ANNE URBANOWSKI

Université de Tours

BEN ZDENCANOVIC

Yale University

Keynote Speakers

ANNE DRISCOLL

Brandeis University

Anne Driscoll is an American award-winning journalist (*The Boston Globe*, *New York Times*, *People*) who has investigated wrongful convictions as senior reporter at the Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism at Brandeis University in Massachusetts, as a US Fulbright scholar (2018-2019) at the National University of Ireland, Galway, and as a US Fulbright scholar (2013-2014) and project manager of the Irish Innocence Project at Griffith College Dublin. Originally trained as a social worker, who spent years counseling court-involved adolescent girls, she is the author of a self-help series of guidebooks for girls called *Girl to Girl*. As a journalist, she has devoted her career to covering issues of human rights, social justice, and human development and has sought to make a difference in the world, one story at a time. She was the 2016 recipient of the Salem Award for Human Rights and Social Justice, gave a TEDx talk "We Are All Witnesses" in 2018, is a Moth storyteller and the author of the Amazon Kindle memoir series about her life in Ireland called *Irish You Were Here*.

The Ambiguities of Losing Innocence and Finding Justice in the Age of the Internet

Wrongful convictions happen in every jurisdiction of the world. The issue of innocent people convicted of crimes they didn't commit happens with far more frequency and far greater consequence than anyone previously suspected. Now with the advent of DNA forensic evidence being used routinely in the courts, wrongful convictions are recognized as one of the newest and most pressing human rights and social justice issues around the globe. And surprisingly, the media has had an arguably ambiguous role in relation to wrongful convictions with a history of both helping to condemn and convict innocent people and also of exposing miscarriages of justice and freeing the wrongfully convicted.

JARED FARMER

Stony Brook University

Jared Farmer is a professor of history at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and a spring 2019 fellow at the American Academy in Berlin. Prof. Farmer specializes in environmental history and the history of the American West. He is the author of *On Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape* (Harvard, 2008), winner of the Francis Parkman Prize from the Society of American Historians; and *Trees in Paradise: A California History* (Norton, 2013), winner of the Ray Allen Billington Prize from the Organization of American Historians. Prof. Farmer's current research on trees and temporality has been supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and the Andrew Carnegie Fellows Program.

Tree-rings and Empire in the Late Holocene

People like to imagine what trees would say—if trees could speak—as witnesses to the past. By thinking with trees, people inevitably speak for trees. These speech acts say more about humans than plants. Prof. Jared Farmer's lecture considers the cultural history of an iconic American plant: *Sequoiadendron giganteum* or giant sequoia („Mammutbäume“ in German). Confronted with the novelty of mammoth trees, Americans invented three new ways to think with trees. First, they imagined living sequoias as omniscient witnesses of non-local, discontinuous events. Second, they used cross-sections of fallen sequoias to install historical timelines in museums. Third, they used sequoia tree-ring data to develop graphical chronologies of climate. The more Americans gave speech to their biggest, oldest trees, the more they thought about ephemerality, including the future death of their republic. Through this illustrated lecture, Prof. Farmer cross-references the science of dendrochronology, the pseudoscience of eugenics, and the ambiguities of American empire.

ANDREW HARTMAN

Illinois State University

Andrew Hartman is Professor of History at Illinois State University. He is the author of *Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School*, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, and co-editor of *American Labyrinth: Intellectual History for Complicated Times*. He is currently at work on his third book, *Karl Marx in America*, which is contracted to be published by the University of Chicago Press. Hartman is the winner of two Fulbright Awards. He was the Fulbright Distinguished Chair in American Studies at the University of Southern Denmark for the 2013-14 academic year, and he is currently the Fulbright British Library Eccles Center Research Scholar for the 2018-19 academic year. Hartman co-hosts the intellectual history podcast, *Trotsky and the Wild Orchids*.

A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars

"Make America Great Again." Donald Trump's now famous campaign slogan evokes the fervent belief among many Americans that the nation is no longer theirs. The slogan has had contemporary appeal, to be sure. But it also speaks to a narrative of decline that has defined conservative attitudes since the 1960s. At bottom, it is a call to revive and restore the orderly, disciplined, and authority-respecting America that seemingly held fast before the 1960s. Related, this was the America before the sixties social movements endowed people of color, women, gays and lesbians, immigrants from strange lands, and other seeming outsiders and fringe characters with the privilege to call themselves Americans. In this way, Trump's slogan marks but the latest volley in the culture wars that have polarized the United States for decades. This lecture will explore the grand historical arc of these culture wars with an eye for how it helps us make sense of Donald Trump and a polarized American political culture.

LAURA M. STEVENS

University of Tulsa

Laura M. Stevens is Chapman Associate Professor of English at the University of Tulsa. She is the author of *The Poor Indians: British Missionaries, Native Americans, and Colonial Sensibility* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), as well as articles dealing with the literature of Protestant Christian mission, emotion studies, Native American and First Nations literature, women's writing, early modern scriptural interpretation, and transatlantic circulations of peoples, ideas, and texts. Her work has been supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Fulbright Foundation, the Huntington Library, the John Carter Brown Library, the American Philosophical Society, and the Oklahoma Humanities Council. She received the University of Tulsa's Outstanding Teaching Award in 2009. She was Editor and then Co-Editor of *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* for 2005-16, President of the Society of Early Americanists for 2015-17, and President of the South Central Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies for 2006-07. She is on the editorial boards of *Early American Literature*, *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, and *Studies in Religion and Enlightenment*.

Longing for Salvation, in Early and Late America

This talk will link the United States' present to its colonial past through reflections on a desire and a discourse that contemporary Americans hold in common amidst their political and indeed paradigmatic oppositions: the quest for salvation. While they differ profoundly about what constitutes salvation, the political left and right agree that America needs to be saved. Energizing this salvation discourse are clashing temporalities, with longings for foregone pasts, expended potentials, and lost opportunities propelling vivid eschatologies in both pop culture and politics, including visions of apocalypse.

This talk will ask what we might learn about the current American moment by exploring an earlier manifestation of salvation discourse from the colonial era: missionary fantasies, which differ from missionaries' reports not only in their unrealistic depictions of Christian conversion, but also in their marshalling of white, English readers' imagination and desire. These novels

and poems deliver the pleasure of witnessing souls being saved without asking their readers to help save them. Attention to this genre invites closer scrutiny of the affective and imaginative frameworks for contemporary calls to "save" America. Does the salvation discourse of this current moment embrace fantasy, inviting withdrawal from the world as-it-is by holding out the consolations of better futures, better pasts? Or does it call audiences to act within the exigent present, joining battles or spreading the (actual or metaphorical) gospel? Are the objects of salvation efforts actually in need of saving, and how is it clear when salvation occurs? This talk will open discussion on these and other questions provoked by this overlap between America's present and past.

Notes

Notes

Notes

