

On Doing American Studies Today: The 2017 Postgraduate Forum

Helen Gibson, Anne Potjans, Simon Rienäcker, and Jiann-Chyng Tu

“In part thanks to the support by our teacher Heinz Ickstadt, among others, the first workshop of the PGF took place during the 1989 [...] In the fall of 1989 the PGF convened at the Freie Universität Berlin. In 1994, the PGF guest-edited a volume of *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, entitled *Theory in Practice: Recent Approaches to American Studies in Germany*. This was the very moment when the founders and first generation ‘activists’ of the Postgraduate Forum felt somewhat anxious about the future of their initiative. Would it prove sustainable once we pulled out of the enterprise and handed matters over to succeeding PhD students? It soon became evident that these fears were unfounded. In fact, looking back after twenty-five years, the achievements and professionalism of our younger colleagues stand out and we bow with much respect [...] The Postgraduate Forum is a vibrant network of young scholars engaged in research at the forefront of our field. Long live the PGF!”

Sabine Sielke, “25 Years of PGF: Past, Present, and Future,” *COPAS* 16.1

“And all we had in terms of a history was but a faint semi-knowledge of some nebulous founding myth of the PGF, a myth American Studies scholars are much in need of at all times, that traced the beginning of the Forum back in time to the late 1980s and back in place to the John F. Kennedy Institute at the Freie Universität Berlin. Thanks to the cultural memory of the German Association for American Studies, this history has been recuperated and we can now trace the genealogy back to the beginnings.

Karsten Fitz, “25 Years of PGF: Past, Present, and Future,” *COPAS* 16.1

The first Postgraduate Forum (PGF) took place at the John F. Kennedy Institute of Freie Universität Berlin in 1989. Almost three decades later, the Forum returned to Berlin in an era of acute social and political awareness reminiscent of the Forum’s significant theoretical and practical origins. The 2017 annual Postgraduate Forum (PGF), organized and hosted by doctoral candidates and research assistants from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and the Graduate School for North American Studies (GSNAS) at Freie Universität Berlin, took place from November 9-11, 2017 at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Titled “Shifting Paradigms in the Age of Trump? Current Perspectives on Doing American Studies,” the 2017 Forum sought to engage in critical interdisciplinary conversations and inspire new theoretical approaches on timely and topical issues in the United States from across the Atlantic.

The 2017 Forum hosted over 70 participants, including early-stage researchers from various disciplines in the field of American Studies from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland as well as professors, publishers, and editors active in the field of American Studies in both Germany

and the United States. The conference program featured 21 presentations in seven panels: “Colonial Subjectivity/Decolonial Practices,” “Marxist Critique and New Materialism,” “Shifting Domestic and Foreign Policies,” “Queer(ing) Cultural Practices,” “The Rhetorics of Politics Today,” “Spaces—Bodies—Identities—Consciousnesses,” and “Creating Cultural Memories.”

In addition to topical panels, the 2017 Forum featured two roundtable discussions. The first roundtable inspired discussions and engendered questions regarding publishing in the broader field of American Studies, both within Germany and across the Atlantic. Moderated by Simon Rienäcker, the roundtable’s invited speakers included representatives from various international publishing houses, journals, and book series. Discussions centered around the state of publishing with regard to traditional print technologies and possibilities for digital publishing as well as practical approaches to publishing one’s own work as an early-career researcher. The roundtable’s speakers reflected structural differences between German and U.S.-American publishing traditions as well as differing opinions on the preeminence of digital connectivity.

The second roundtable of the Forum, “American Studies in Germany Today,” was moderated by Helen Gibson and Jiann-Chyng Tu. The roundtable began with short position statements from numerous Berlin-based professors of American Studies: Prof. Dr. Eva Boesenberg (HU Berlin), Prof. Dr. Ulla Haselstein (JFKI, FU Berlin), Prof. Dr. Sebastian Jobs (JFKI, FU Berlin), Prof. Dr. Martin Klepper (HU Berlin), Prof. Dr. Martin Lüthe (JFKI, FU Berlin), and Prof. Dr. Boris Vormann (Bard College Berlin). Significant themes addressed in the position statements included self-reflexivity and embodied practice, cultural coding and memory production, the viability of interdisciplinarity in contemporary American Studies, geostrategic research considerations, intersectionality, tenure, and teaching. A lively question and answer session ensued and was followed by a reception where discussions continued.

The Postgraduate Forum has embraced thematic openness and fostered inter- and cross-disciplinary scholarship since its inception. While new funding guidelines stipulated a timely and topical thematic focus for the annual meeting, we sought to preserve the Forum’s

hallmark features in our emphasis on “doing American Studies.” The 2017 conference thus addressed ways in which academic discourse is responsive to its social and cultural environments and how we, as early-career researchers, actively engage with these environments in institutionalized settings. In an effort to stimulate such reflection, “doing American Studies in the ‘Age of Trump’” was taken as a thematic common ground and point of departure from which to ask whether recent cultural, social, political, and economic developments across the Atlantic and around the world have encouraged new perspectives on doing American Studies. The 2017 Forum thus became a platform for engaging with our Zeitgeist through an Americanist lens. We are pleased that this issue of *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies (COPAS)* reflects a cross section of the excellent presentations given at the conference.

COPAS 19.1 at a Glance

In her article, “The Vagaries of E Pluribus Unum: First-Person Plural Narration in Joshua Ferris’s *Then We Came to the End* and TaraShea Nesbit’s *The Wives of Los Alamos*,” **Michaela Beck** connects the mode of ‘we’ narration to the notion of *E Pluribus Unum* and critically interrogates how the two authors, Nesbit and Ferris, make use of this narrative device to not only investigate but also perpetuate the myth of an all-encompassing American ‘we.’ In so doing, she contributes to a discussion of the narratological as well as cultural function of ‘we’ narration, for example when she shows how this mode of narration functions as a leveling device that is “intertwined with the discourse of naturalizing a white middle-class perspective via narratives of conformity.” Looking at the collective voice as a literary device in connection with the American cultural imaginary, her analysis allows for a contextual understanding of the collective voice that moves beyond the scope of the books at the center of her article. Beck thus places her work not only within the field of narratology, but extends her analyses to a critical interrogation of contemporary U.S.-American cultural and social discourses.

In “‘Sing[ing] of the Middle Way’: Michael McClure’s Venture for a New Mode of Thought Between Natural Science and Mysticism,” **Stefan Benz** examines the epistemological concerns of Michael McClure’s poem “Double Moire for Francis Crick” (2010). Through a close reading of the poem, Benz examines McClure’s creation of a non-synthesized “middle way” vis-à-vis

the marriage of geological and biological sciences with Taoism and Zen Buddhism, allowing for epistemologies from both streams of thought. He focuses on the creation of a Taoist reconciliation of opposites as well as a Zen Buddhist notion of non-duality in the poem. Benz therefore guides his readers through ways McClure reiterates *moiré* patterning as a viable means of knowledge production. Alongside consolidated ethical claims against the humanist tradition dominated by anthropocentric dualism, Benz argues that McClure's application of *moiré* patterning in "Double Moire for Francis Crick" not only subverts but also questions how poetry, as a creative metadiscourse, becomes an appropriate and apt medium to posit alternative epistemologies.

Lea Espinoza Garrido's article, "*Luke Cage* as Postpost-9/11 TV: Spatial Negotiations of Race in Contemporary U.S. Television," investigates the upending of 'War on Terror' discourses through analysis of highly self-reflexive texts she deems evidence of a "postpost-9/11" mode of textual engagement. Such texts, and, in particular, the Netflix series *Luke Cage*, she argues, "challenge and subvert their own reliability by pointing towards internal constraints and contradictions as well as towards their own complicity in post-9/11 discourses." Most significantly, in highlighting the continuity of institutionalized racial oppression in the United States in the space of Harlem, "*Luke Cage* dismantles the illusion of racial profiling as a mere response to September 11, 2001 and, thereby, challenges one of the foundational assumptions of the War on Terror discourse," Espinoza Garrido writes. Grounding her analysis in *Luke Cage's* portrayal of complex Black American communities, she highlights 'postpost-9/11' TV's capacity to expose similarities in both the hypervisibility and marginalization of contemporary and historical Black and Muslim American experiences.

In her article, "From Criminal to Rehabilitated Prison Reformer: Gradual Identity Transformation in Charles McGregor's Prison Autobiography *Up from the Walking Dead*," **Katharina Matuschek** investigates the processes of identity transformation and meaning-making through the construction of social roles in an analysis of Charles McGregor's 1978 autobiography, *Up from the Walking Dead*. Her approach to the genre of prison autobiography synthesizes sociological theories of identity formation and social roles with the genre's capacity to act as social communication through the narrative construction of identity.

Matuschek applies this approach to the narrative of McGregor and his experiences as a young African American man who is sentenced to prison several times between 1940 and 1966. In response to his own experiences of incarceration, McGregor becomes a prison reformer and counselor for formerly incarcerated people.

In “Guilt, Shame, and the Generative Queer in Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go*,” **Anna-Lena Oldehus** explores identity and belonging through the lenses of queerness, affect, and narration. Incorporating approaches from queer and affect theories, and especially queer-of-color critique, Oldehus focuses on the relationship in *Ghana Must Go* between father Kweku and his son Kehinde, tracing the “moments of temporary coherence” that Oldehus argues constitute “a mode of generative queerness, as [Kehinde] dismantles and disrupts fixed identity roles and generates alternative forms of subjectivity.” Analyzing the temporal and spatial possibilities enabled by author Taiye Selasi’s rejection of chronological storytelling, Oldehus highlights the emancipatory power of queerness “to un-belong, to disidentify, and to generate new emotional forms of relating and affinity.”

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Yours,

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