

Heidelberg Center for American Studies

Spring Academy Report

March 23-27, 2015

The 12th annual Spring Academy started early on March 23rd with a reception in the Atrium of the Curt and Heidemarie Engelhorn Palais. Twenty participants from thirteen countries and representing fourteen nationalities, were welcomed by Heidelberg University's Vice Dean for International Relations, Professor Dieter Heermann. Highlighting the multitude of academic opportunities in Heidelberg, Professor Heermann expressed his pleasure in seeing cooperation realized with events like the Spring Academy, keeping alive connections the University of Heidelberg has with over 400 institutions worldwide among students, faculty, and staff. He touched upon the importance of the Spring Academy as an intellectually stimulating occasion for collaboration across disciplines and reminded all to make the most of their time during the sessions as well during the breaks.

Following Professor Heermann, Dr. Wilfried Mausbach spoke of the accomplishments and activities of the HCA in relation to the University of Heidelberg's international objectives. As Executive Director of the HCA, Dr. Mausbach highlighted important aspects of sponsorship and scholarship at the HCA, noting its areas of research, academic programs, and social outreach initiatives. John Deere Europe, the Spring Academy's long-time sponsor, was also recognized for its continued patronage and unflagging support that has since made the conference a fixture among post-graduate events worldwide.

Subsequent to the reception, Dr. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Dr. Mausbach (Ms. and Mr. Spring Academy) commenced the Warm-Up Session. After a raucous ice breaker, the group tackled the question of how to state in one word (or a very succinct phrase) what American Studies is. Suggestions included "multifaceted," "paradox," "mashup," "complicated perceptions," and "socio-cultural critique of the USA." In spite of the preliminary conclusion that American Studies is a rather un- or under-defined field, several attempts

were made to at least approximate a definition of American Studies. The difficulty encountered by the participants to come up with a definition of American Studies led to a discussion of the future of American Studies. Several participants voiced concerns that their field of study seems to be shrinking in their countries as American Studies departments are dismantled, but that such institutions are vital to their professional careers to make space for their own research. This prompted Dr. Mausbach's proposal to first ground topics solidly within a specific discipline and only then move on towards interdisciplinary work, instead of organizing American Studies as area studies. Tom Bishop argued that this is essentially already the case for most American Studies students as they have often done their undergraduate work in a specific discipline and have only then moved on to the interdisciplinary field of American Studies. Elin Käck noted that especially if there's no actual American Studies department at one's university, it is important to at least have a thick description of what American Studies is/are. To come up with such a description/definition, Bishop replied, is exactly what becomes complicated by the fact that most scholars pursuing American Studies do so from the point of view of their specific discipline. Sarah Robey agreed with this and added that some identities, once formed, are difficult to break away from and that to create an American Studies identity, while simultaneously maintaining one's disciplinary grounding can be particularly trying. Nevertheless, while concluding that there are many difficulties facing American Studies as a distinct field of research, about half the participants are currently doing their research in American Studies departments. The group discussion, while not yielding any fixed definition of what American Studies are, nonetheless ended with consensus on the importance of the international aspect to American Studies.

The first panel, entitled "Body Politics: Fictions and Visual Cultures," was chaired by Dr. Fischer-Hornung. The panel brought together two presentations from very different fields but with a common focus on body politics. Chia-wen Kuo (National Cheng-chi University, Taiwan), invoked bold themes from an important era of American crime fiction in her presentation: "Sex, Violence, and Anarchy: Body Politics in American Crime Fiction from the 1920s and 1940s." The presentation looked at hardboiled fiction offset in LA in the 1930's and 1940s alongside film noir to uncover how the three primary themes (sex, vio-

lence, and anarchy) are reflected in the body politics of the texts. Celeste Sharpe (George Mason University, USA) followed Kuo with a presentation on representations of disabled bodies in media and ad campaigns by national organizations during the Cold War, entitled “I NEED THEM!: Toward a Media-rich, Networked Study of Disability, Representation, and Values in Cold War America.” Sharpe, who is doing a digital dissertation, is looking at how national organizations for disabilities marketed themselves, made claims on who they serve and why by way of carefully crafted ad campaigns. Focusing in particular on two organizations, the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (March of Dimes) and the Muscular Dystrophy Association, Sharpe demonstrated how the images used in their campaigns affected the larger cultural perception of physical disabilities and also had an influence on the identity formation of disabled people.

The first day concluded with a guided walking tour with and on Mark Twain in Heidelberg. After the traditional group photo on the Old Bridge, the participants warmed up with a traditional German meal at a historic German restaurant in the Old Town.

Tuesday’s session began with “Poetic Crossings” chaired by Dr. Fischer-Hornung. First to speak was Elin Käck (Linköping University, Sweden) on “The Euro-American Relationship in Writing: Counterhegemonic Literary Strategies.” Her dissertation centers on William Carlos Williams, who, according to Käck, was able to write the first truly American novel by making use of certain literary strategies, like poetic diction or mock apostrophe, that were in opposition with European traditions and conventions. He thus provided the tools for counter hegemonic interventions in American writing, which were necessary for a break with European conventions.

The day’s second speaker was Joanna Mąkowska (University of Warsaw, Poland), who gave a presentation on “The Corporeal Turn in the Works of Mina Loy and Adrienne Rich.” While regarding Loy as an American poet of transatlantic modernism, Mąkowska contrasted her with Rich, which she considers a radical poet. Despite their differences in aesthetics, the works of these poets converge in their emphasis on the female body and its transcendence.

After a brief coffee break, Noelia Gregorio Fernández (University of Alcalá, Spain), began the third panel with “Borderless Chicano Cinema: The Films of Robert Rodriguez.” She posits Rodriguez as a rebel of Chicano cinema. Focusing on representations of culture and identity, Fernández raised the questions of how to define cultural manifestations which vary wildly in his films and what terminology to use for the hybridity of style, genre and characterization that are a hallmark of Rodriguez’ movies. Pablo Gómez Muñoz (University of Zaragoza, Spain) followed Fernández with another presentation on film, more particularly on “American Culture and the International Style in Science Fiction Cinema: A Cosmopolitan Perspective.” Emphasizing global interconnectivity, Gómez Muñoz argued that many contemporary science fiction films deal with globalization by being self-reflexive, multi-lingual and artisan in nature, thus creating what he calls “international cinema.” Gómez Muñoz’s cosmopolitan perspective and definition of international cinema were much-debated following his presentation.

The fourth panel and final session on Tuesday revolved around the theme of “Music Defining Ways of Life” and was chaired by Dr. Wilfried Mausbach. The session’s first speaker, Daniel Rothschild (University of Melbourne, Australia), pitched a revelation on Walt Whitman as an opera singer and aficionado whose love of bel canto music reveals more of the man than has been written. The presentation, “Whitman: The Body Bel Canto,” allowed Rothschild to explain how greatly this specific type of opera singing influenced the physical being of Whitman and in turn revealed itself in his works. Concluding that Whitman’s poetry and writings are a literary description of being the body bel canto, his way of creating identity resonates in his ontological melding with the music through vocalism, awakening potentialities. The final speaker of the day was Masayoshi Yamada (Doshisha University, Japan) on “A People’s Music?: The Cultural Politics of Jazz Fandom and the Alternative Archives of History.” Rather than focusing solely on music, Yamada centralized his argument on the agency and freedom of fandom in jazz music and the roles of fans in shaping a new understanding of history and politics in jazz. Sifting through archival records of selected musicians in American jazz history, Yamada found references to Civil Rights issues and Black Power in the music that fans responded to, raising the importance of archival material as rich sources of insight. Questions and a lively

discussion raised the issue of measuring agency and effectiveness on political and social issues that Yamada was still delving into, but was glad to receive comments on.

Wednesday's first session, "Cultural Borderlands," was chaired by Dr. Fischer-Hornung. Nicole Poppenhagen (University of Vienna, Austria) gave a presentation on "Myths and Mysteries: (Re) Creating Transpacific Memories in Chinese American Family Narratives." Her central argument being that family narratives define the transpacific community in a new way, Poppenhagen argued that Chinese-American memoirs resist dominant and hegemonic experiences recounted in historical accounts and instead bring up alternative histories. The panel concluded with Nawel Zbidi's (University of Arts and Humanities of Sousse, Tunisia) presentation on the complexity surrounding bi-cultural life of Arab Americans. Her talk, "The Writing of Food in the Ethnic Borderland: Food as Emblematic of the Investigations on Arab-American Culture and Identity in Diana Abu Jaber's *The Language of Baklava*," examined "food" in the ethnic borderlands and its role as a tool of negotiation between cultures. As a continuation of the fifth panel, Lesley Gissane (University of Western Sydney, Australia) spoke about "Afterness: New Directions in the Post 9/11 Novel" by targeting the literary representation of Muslims in several novels. Gissane outlined how Islam has become the counterpoint to Western ideals in many post 9/11 novels.

Wednesday's second panel ended with Nathalie Schmidt (Columbia University, USA) whose presentation, "In God's Name: Do the Religion Clauses of the First Amendment Create a Right to Discriminate?" explored how the Religion Clauses are being interpreted in current legal cases in the United States as a way to understand the extant influence of religious beliefs. Schmidt's presentation also touched upon the confluence of gay rights and religious liberty conflicts arising in legal issues and how far states intervene or interfere in both areas while also looking at the problem of discrimination cases at the state and federal levels.

Wednesday afternoon's final session, "Gaming and TV Fiction," included presentations by Min Kyung Yoo (Free University Berlin, Germany) and Carmen Ng (Hong Kong Poly-

technic University, Hong Kong). Yoo's presentation, "Performing Modernity and Hybridity: South Korean Melodrama TV Series and the U.S.," discussed the reflection of western culture in South Korean shows performing hybridization. The ultimate question Yoo sought to address was how national identity is formed and whether its formation is predicated upon a meeting of the Other? She ended on the notion that one never arrives at a complete identity because it is a never-ending process, but what helps to strengthen identity is understanding it in the face of conflict. To conclude the seventh session, Carmen Ng (Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong) spoke about a unique area in American Studies: video games. Her talk, "Playing War: Engaging the Postmodern Military in Metal Gear Solid," addressed multimodality that articulates themes in digital games, which she claimed are: "Are a combination of real rules and fictional worlds." The game analysis framework Ng uses in her work depends mostly on narrative analysis and does not simply focus on the interactive parts of the game. Using Metal Gear Solid as a case study, Ng explained that the game exposes bio-political control issues and brings up questions about what makes a human "human" in an increasingly militarized world, thus tackling real-world ideological issues within the game world.

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 imparts 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. Oliver Neumann, the group was lead on a walking tour of the main factory to see the extensive operations in Germany for this American company. Back in the visitor's center, the group was treated to a light reception, a chance to test drive the tractor simulator, and have pictures taken standing next to a large trademark tractor.

The HCA's own Research Associate and Ph.D. Coordinator, Dr. Tobias Endler, introduced Thursday's first session, "The Atomic Age and Its Discontents." The day's first presentation was Sarah Robey's (Temple University, USA) talk on "Scientific Authority, Popular Education, and Public Safety in the Early Cold War." Robey looked at how nuclear

weapons have altered citizen-state relationships in the Atomic Age. Arguing that citizenship, public science, space and geography were all affected by the advent of nuclear weapons, Robey explained how the scale and scope of these new weapons changed public opinion on the meaning of war as well as citizens' responses to state actions and public demands. The eighth panel ended with Tom Bishop (University of Nottingham, UK) and his presentation entitled, "'Gun-thy-neighbor' The American Fallout Shelter, Masculinity, and the Early Cold War," which will be one of the first studies of American fallout shelters ever to be written. While the focal point revolves around fallout shelters, Bishop explained that the issues he seeks to unravel include positing the image of the militarized male against the domestic male consumer, discussing a fusion of ethics and fatherhood during the early Cold War period, and deciphering impacts on masculinity resulting from nuclear survival tactics (including propaganda).

After a brief coffee break, Associate Professor of History at San Francisco State University, Dr. Charles Postel, was introduced by Dr. Endler as an "open-minded and constructive" expert in doctoral work. Dr. Postel chaired the final panel for the day on "Left to Center: Socialist and Cooperative Histories." Lorenzo Costaguta (University of Nottingham, UK) presented first on: "Which Way to Emancipation? Race and Ethnicity in American Socialist Thought (1876-1899)." Outlining some of his research findings, Costaguta explained that the information analyzed suggests that socialist groups within the larger movement were indeed critically controversial. This being another under-researched area in American Studies, Postel encouraged Costaguta to continue with his research. The second speaker was Alexia Blin (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris), who gave a presentation on "Cooperatives and the State, the Ambiguous Normalization of Voluntary Organizations." Her research looks primarily at the question of state involvement in Wisconsin cooperatives between the 1870's and 1930's to see how the state handled cooperatives and government intervention over time. During the discussion, many questions were answered about the basic concept of cooperatives as few had come across the issue prior to Blin's presentation. Dr. Postel was able to shed light on federal action in respect to cooperatives as well as some of the larger trends occurring within the cooperative movement at the time.

Thursday concluded with a workshop on “Academic Writing and Publishing,” lead by Dr. Fischer-Hornung and Dr. Sherry Föhr. Participants were given tips and motivational instructions on writing their theses by Dr. Föhr who runs 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.

Friday morning began with a workshop by Dr. Charles Postel (San Francisco State University), who spoke on “American Populism, Past and Present,” as one of the most powerful movements in American history that is currently being reconsidered by historians. Postel outlined the history of populism from its beginnings as a democratic movement mainly consisting of farmers, to Populism today and the links that remain between its beginning and its current reincarnation.

After lunch, the 10th and final panel began with a presentation on “Marginalized Tribes: Shared Experiences of Jews and Native Americans in the Trans-Missouri West, 1850-1930” by Mikal Eckstrom (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA). Basing his work on digital records and methodologies to thematically analyze Native-Newcomer histories, Eckstrom spoke on the way Midwestern Jews in the 19th century exhibited dismissive behaviors towards American Indians in order to claim a new identity of whiteness, motivated in part by federal pressures to contain American Indians. Responding to participants’ questions and feedback on his research, Eckstrom was able to posit the larger shift of American immigrant Jews from their place within the larger Anglo-American settlement group to their eventual role in intimate colonialism.

To conclude the conference, Friday’s “Cool Down” session discussed 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 on in Monday’s warm-up session: “voice”, “narrative”, revisit”, “crossroads”, “agency”, and “archive” were among many new ideas. The one over-arching theme that participants

thought did best to tie together the conference's work was, "Connect the dots." They also concluded that American Studies succeeds in bringing diverse fields closer together while also positively complicating perceptions. After the cool down session, the HCA hosted a farewell dinner in honor of the participants, who contributed to another successful Spring Academy.

Kimberly Martines