

Heidelberg Center for American Studies
Spring Academy Report
March 21-25, 2022

From March 21-25, 2022, the Spring Academy conference virtually hosted twenty international Ph.D. students to explore, discuss, and provide feedback on their respective American Studies research projects. This year's participants joined the HCA Spring Academy chairs and facilitator from four different time zones, from the Canadian West Coast to Hungary, representing universities in nine countries. Before the official conference start, participants joined the Spring Academy organizing team Julia Nohle, Virginia Zentgraf, and Julian Kramer for a tech Q&A on Sunday afternoon, guaranteeing a smooth technical run throughout the week.

The following Monday afternoon, HCA director Welf Werner officially opened the conference. He warmly welcomed all participants, emphasizing that the uncertainties surrounding the ongoing global pandemic had not discouraged students across the globe from applying. Earlier this year, the selection committee had chosen 20 out of 94 applications, once again bringing together, as Werner remarked, a diverse group of young researchers from 11 different countries: Austria, Ecuador, France, Germany, Iraq, Ireland, Italy, Romania, Turkey, the UK, and the USA. Spring Academy facilitator Dr. Wilfried Mausbach expressed his regret that current circumstances did not permit an in-person conference for the second year in a row. However, the Spring Academy organizers had built on the previous year's successful online conference, continuing to preserve the conference's lively character. The traditional academic "speed dating" now took place online on the "Glimpse" platform, allowing participants to get to know each other and gain insight into their peers' projects in a fast-paced one-on-one conversation. As such, it served as an energetic start while simultaneously introducing the larger question of the future directions of the field of American Studies. Following this accelerated beginning, the participants, facilitator, and Spring Academy team decreased their pace as they went into the first panel's in-depth topical discussion.

Participants had posted a 15-minute slide or video presentation introducing their project in the run-up to the conference. During the panels, each speaker had 5 minutes to build on their presentation and set incentives for the following 35-minute discussion. Under the broader topic of "Capitalism," two panelists shared their research with their fellow participants and panel chairs, Prof. Dr. Welf Werner and PD Dr. Martin Thunert. Andrei Belibou from the Freie Universität Berlin presented his thesis, "Subjects of Capitalism: Identity Politics, Class, and Poverty." Thereby, he opened a conversation on a possible identity politics of class, challenging the perceived divide between identity politics and class politics. Turning towards economic history, the second presentation by Matteo Rossi from the Università degli Studi di Torino focused on "The Politics of Economy: Henry Carey and the Rise of US Capitalism," specifically Carey's Protectionist turn. The following debate surrounded the question of which part of Carey's ideas were uniquely American versus products of transnational exchange.

After a coffee break, everyone returned for the second panel, "Religion, Bodies, Power," chaired by Prof. Dr. Jan Stievermann. First up, Cody Musselman from Yale University

presented her research project on "Spiritual Exercises: Fitness and Religion in Contemporary America," an ethnographical study of the relationship between religion, health, and capitalism, exemplified by the fitness brands Crossfit and SoulCycle. The participants were fascinated with this project and eagerly explored the presented case study on Crossfit, purity, and the Paleo Diet, as well as the general parallels between Protestant religion and the two fitness brands. Venus Bender from Goethe-Universität Frankfurt then shared her thesis project, "Prayers and Protest: How Religion Shaped the Black Power Movement," asking about the role of church-based activism in Black Power. This underexplored issue sparked a lively conversation on research difficulties for topics that have received little attention and how to approach researchers, contemporary witnesses, and their relatives. Participants and facilitators concluded the conference day with open chats for both panels, during which they exchanged more ideas, comments, and tips in an informal environment.

The second conference day started with a panel on "Visual Culture" moderated by PD Dr. Margit Peterfy. María Beatriz H. Carrion from the City University of New York presented her research project on "Picturing Americans: Indigeneities and Modern Visuality." While still at the beginning of her writing process, Carrion engaged her peers in discussing how to best balance examples and methodology. Joining from Ludwigs-Maximilians-Universität München, Ricarda Wolf complemented the panel with a presentation on " 'The Personal Is Political' – Handwriting as Personal Testimonial in Political Artworks of the USA in the Context of Social Movements." A lively discussion on the development and cultural influence on handwriting and the pseudoscience of graphology followed.

After a break, a second panel on "Migration and Refugees," chaired by facilitator Dr. Wilfried Mausbach commenced. First, Victoria Gonzalez Maltes from the Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociale in Paris shared her thesis project "'They are made of the stuff of which good Americans are made': American resettlement programs for refugees from Europe after World War II (1948 -1960)." The participants debated the issue of desirable versus undesirable refugees and exchanged advice on doing archival research. Özlem Atar from Queen's University in Kingston, Canada, shared a literary and ethical perspective on migration. Her thesis focuses on "Justice in Trump Era Family Narratives of Irregular Migration from Central America and Mexico to the United States." Questions about the definition of justice followed the presentation. These and more ideas were again hotly debated during the end-of-day open chats.

The Spring Academy shifted its analytical focus to literary and cultural studies on the third conference day. Chaired by PD Dr. Philipp Löffler, the first panel, "Transnational Literature," hosted Fenja Heisig from Osnabrück University and Daphne Orlandi from the Sapienza-Università di Roma and the TU Dortmund. Heisig presented her research on "Literature as Transnational Property. Francis Lieber and the Copyright Debate in the USA." While Heisig was looking to her peers for advice on improving the structure and analytical approach, her presentation opened a discussion on clearly focusing scholarly theses and source selection from a vast oeuvre of writing. Facing a similar issue, Orlandi complemented the discussion with her presentation on "The Permanent Literature of the World: Ralph Waldo Emerson's Models of European and World Literature and Their Implications for a Globalized

World." It shifted the discussion to questions of the Western Canon and the role of Emerson's Americanness in his quest for "global literature." Both presenters were happy to note how well their topics fit together.

The Spring Academy also offered practical guidance for the participants with a workshop on Writing and Publishing following the first panel. Former Mrs. Spring Academy Dr. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Dr. Sherry Föhr answered questions on a myriad of topics. First, Dr. Föhr gave advice on all matters of writing, from getting started to writing a convincing conclusion. Then Dr. Fischer-Hornung gave insights into the academic publishing world and tips on publishing one's work.

The day's second panel was moderated by Wilfried Mausbach, the facilitator of the Spring Academy. This panel revealed that the confrontation with the increasingly threatening climate change and possible strategies for coping with the climate crisis are highly relevant both in literature and in literary studies' engagement with it. Marina Pinger from Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen was the first presenter on the topic of "Ecocriticism" and presented her project on "Re-Imagining Climate Futures: Alternative Imaginaries in American Literature and Culture." Pinger introduced the predominant research focus of the past decade, which has examined the actors and the perpetuation of such narratives, and explained why her research approach emphasizes the analysis of the collective climate vision itself and its modes of representation. Kirby Archer from the University of Exeter presented her research on "The Environmental Activist in Contemporary US and Canadian Literature," specifically her chapter on the connection between environmental activism, religion, and mental illness. Her kick-off speech sparked a lively debate among the participants, with many sharing examples of other novels they know where this is featured. Debates continued in the open chats, which rounded off the conference day.

On Thursday, the Spring Academy started with a panel on "Literature and Poetry." Chair Philipp Löffler welcomed speakers Thomas Howard from the Washington University St. Louis and Hal Coase from La Sapienza Università di Roma. Howard provided insights into his research on "Pragmatic Ambiguities: Aphoristic Thinking in the American Nineteenth Century," leading to a lively discussion on how cultural aspects like Transcendentalist and Pragmatist traditions influence and shape cultural and political thought in the US until this day. While Howard's project is situated at the literary intersection between prose and poetry, he argued that the widespread use of aphorism in 19th-century literature greatly aided the explosion of literary criticism in the following century. Hal Coase brought the debate to the Twentieth Century with his presentation on " 'A region of silences' – Barbara Guest and the limits of lyric" Combining broader definitions of these two terms with the changing self-understanding of an individual was an issue the group debated together. Before moving into the next event of the day, participants took the opportunity to recharge during a virtual coffee break.

Previous conferences included a tour through the John Deere factory plant in close-by Mannheim, a treasured item on the agenda of the Spring Academy since 2004. Thankfully, Spring Academy sponsor John Deere Mannheim offered the participants a virtual factory tour. Public Relations Manager Ralf Lenge welcomed everyone and introduced John Deere's business activities in Mannheim and overall. Factory Specialist Hendrik Strubel then guided

the virtual tour through the sacred production halls of John Deere, offering insight into the factory and the manufacturing and testing processes from the smallest gears to the finished tractor. The virtual format enabled Spring Academy participants to access areas of the Mannheim site that are usually closed to visitors. The ensuing Q&A was lively, and the participants had many questions, including about the gender make-up of John Deere and the agricultural sector and the specific regional challenges to which the company has to react.

The next panel broadly addressed "African American Studies" from a historical and a literary perspective. With Wilfried Mausbach as chair, Bruno Walter Toscano from the University of Pisa and Hogar Najm Abdullah from the University of Szeged presented their thesis projects. Toscano opened the panel with his presentation on "Black Feminism Beyond Borders: The Transnational and Intersectional Struggle of African American Feminists (1970s-1980s)." The participants readily discussed the terminological meaning of transnational and troubles with accessing sources and witness reports. A hot topic in American Studies, the panel also included a discussion on who can or cannot, should or should not write histories that are not part of one's realm of experience. Abdullah followed this discussion by sharing his research on "African American Masculinities in Ann Petry's Oeuvre: An Intersectionality Perspective." Again, the participants discussed terminology, this time for intersectionality, and how to approach it when applied to masculinity. The fourth day of our conference ended with continued discussions in the open chat.

The final day of the Spring Academy 2022 began with a panel on "Body Politics" with speakers Odin O'Sullivan from University College Dublin and Julie Dickson from Freie Universität Berlin. In the first presentation on "Blood, Sweat, Respect: A Genealogy of Reaction Hardbody Cinema," O'Sullivan outlined one chapter on the body of the neoliberal action hero as a sight of capital accumulation as presented on their social media accounts. The participants and chair Wilfried Mausbach eagerly discussed this topic, bringing forth perspectives from their fields and how they experienced the neoliberal action hero. They also exchanged ideas on how to best deal with an ever-growing source catalog like social media. Julie Dickson followed this discussion with a presentation on "Unruly Bodies, Ambiguous Books: Female Embodiment in Recent Short Story Collections." This project on linked short story collections, also called cycles, explores how the form shows bodies and embodiment, part of a larger trend of attention on body discourses. Soon the participants discussed the differences between body and embodiment and the role of publishing in creating the cycle. They continued these conversations during the coffee break before all participants returned for the final panel.

The Spring Academy's last panel focused on "Native American Epistemologies," chaired by Margit Peterfy. Angela Benkhadda from the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn began and shared her research on "Native American Historical Fiction: Conflicting Epistemologies and Political Discourses." Presenting her peers with concrete questions, Benkhadda looked for concrete feedback on her approach and how to best order her thesis, which the participants readily discussed. Nina De Bettin Padolin from the University of Graz focused on the potential of drama and theater in her presentation on "Drama's Ecocritical Capabilities of Decolonizing Indigenous Epistemologies." She, too, asked for

specific advice from the other participants, first on how to better find her voice in academic writing, and secondly, whether she should rigidly separate analysis and theory or if she could intertwine the two. The participants and chair happily examined her options with her. Both presentations lead to further exchange in the open chats after the end of the panel.

Eventually, the Spring Academy participants, facilitator, and organizing team came together one last time for the conference's Cool Down and Feedback session. They all reflected on current and future trends in American Studies. Moreover, they explored how the past week and their peers' projects had impacted their idea of this changing academic discipline. Although they had only met virtually, participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to connect with peers from many different countries—connections that hopefully will last and build a foundation for networking within a rising generation of exceptional scholars.

Virginia Zentgraf and Julia Nohle