CULTURAL MOBILITY AND KNOWLEDGE FORMATION IN THE AMERICAS

Conference at the Amerikahaus, Munich, June 30 — July 2, 2016. Co-organized by the Bavarian American Academy and the German Historical Institute Washington; with additional support from Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. Convenors: Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson (GHI) and Volker Depkat (University of Regensburg / Bavarian American Academy, Munich). Participants: Anna Brickhouse (University of Virginia); Barbara Buchenau (University of Duisburg-Essen); Ángela María Franco Calderón (University of Valle); Jürgen Gebhardt (University of Erlangen-Nuremberg); Barbara Hahn (University of Würzburg); Markus Heide (University of Uppsala); Susanne Lachenicht (University of Bayreuth); Caroline Levander (Rice University); Stephen M. Park (University of Texas Rio Grande Valley); Heike Paul (University of Erlangen-Nuremberg); Christian Pinnen (Mississippi College); Ursula Prutsch (University of Munich); Eberhard Rothfuß (University of Bayreuth); Kerstin Schmidt (University of Eichstaett-Ingolstadt); Rainer Schmidt (University of Dresden); Alan Russell Siaroff (University of Lethbridge); Jobst Welge (University of Eichstaett-Ingolstadt).

Over the course of three days, scholars in history, social and cultural sciences, and American studies examined aspects, dimensions, and major problems of cultural mobility and knowledge formation in the Americas from an interdisciplinary and comparative perspective. The conference was introduced by Volker Depkat, who drew attention to the positioning of this conference in the field of hemispheric American studies, which have been discussed as one way to transnationalize the study of U.S. history, politics, economy, and culture or as a frame for comparative studies. He emphasized that hemispheric approaches, as different as they are in their disciplinary and interdisciplinary manifestations, share a set of premises that have repercussions for the way we conceptualize American studies as such. The two categories of knowledge formation and cultural transfer have been selected as useful discursive frameworks introducing a common analytical focus for discussions among and between the various disciplines.

The first panel, chaired by Volker Depkat, examined the intellectual construction of the Americas. Susanne Lachenicht in her presentation, “How the Americas became the Americas,” brought together national and colonial histories of when and how this happened. She delineated this process using primary sources such as Spanish, Portuguese,
French, English, German, Italian, and Dutch maps, travel narratives, and natural histories from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

Lachenicht focused on the process of when and why the competing imperial powers stopped using specific, national terms for the Americas such as *France antarctique*, *Nouvelle France*, *Nueva España*, and adopted the term *Americas* to designate North, Meso, and South America.

In his presentation, “The “Hemispheric Frame” and Travel Writing of the Early United States,” Markus Heide focused on the inception of the struggles for independence in Spanish America. His reading of American travel reports shed light on the discourse of the Western hemisphere and the meaning and functions of this particular transnational symbolic space in the period preceding the rise of the cultural discourse of the Monroe Doctrine. Heide explored the emergence and construction of the hemispheric frame by posing questions like: How did Anglophone American authors of the early nineteenth century think about their young nation’s relation to other newly emerging nations of the so-called New World? How did travelers from the United States represent societies, cultures, peoples, and political systems of the Western hemisphere? How do “racialized” and gendered metaphorics shape the accounts of the hemisphere? The idea of the Western hemisphere, as Heide argued, played a particularly effective role in giving expression to the national self-conception as a republic that overcame colonialist rule and at the same time fostered imperial entitlement.

In her keynote presentation, “Revisiting Hemispheric and Transnational American Studies,” Caroline Levander considered the importance of hemispheric and transnational thinking in a time of environmental crisis. Accepting, as recent findings show, that the 1610 arrival of Europeans in America and the consequent impact on atmospheric carbon levels inaugurated a new human-dominated geological epoch known as the Anthropocene, Levander discussed the role twenty-first-century hemispheric and transnational American studies play in the resulting climate change crisis that has little respect for national geopolitical boundaries.

The second panel, chaired by Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, discussed various aspects of slavery and emancipation in the Americas. In his presentation, “Cultural Transfer of Racial and Legal Traditions: Natchez Mississippi during the Age of Revolution,” Christian Pinnen reconstructed the relationships among aspiring planters, struggling colonial administrators, and African laborers in Natchez, Mississippi.
He placed the colonial lower Mississippi Valley at the center of his analysis of the role played by different definitions of race and subsequent modes of racial oppression and Atlantic African empowerment. In the process of multiple imperial shifts in the region, black people helped to create and shape legal cultures by manipulating different European legal systems to expand their rights. By illuminating the complex interactions of slavery and law in the microcosm of the Natchez District, Pinnen investigated how black people navigated the different legal and racial definitions of the British, Spanish, and American societies that ruled Natchez throughout the eighteenth century.

In her talk, “Slave Emancipation in Brazil and the Role of the USA in the Abolition Process,” Ursula Prutsch traced the impact of the migration of several thousand confederate cotton farmers to slave-holding Brazil, where abolitionists had just begun to implement anti-slavery discourses. While U.S.-American planter families founded colonies like Americana and tried to retain as much of their antebellum lifestyle as possible in this South American monarchy, two Brazilian abolitionists looked towards the United States in order to formulate their political ideas and strategies: the wealthy Afro-Brazilian engineer André Rebouças and the former slave Luiz Gama, who dreamed of a United States of Brazil. Prutsch concluded that the U.S. South applied Jim Crow laws and apartheid, while the racist Brazilian society established a very flexible color line where race was strongly defined through class.

Jürgen Gebhardt chaired the third panel, which analyzed “The Political Conundrum of the Americas: Multiple Political Cultures and the Diversity of Political Regimes.” In his presentation, “The Political System of the Americas, 2000 to 2016,” Alan Russell Siaroff proceeded in a largely hierarchical way to lay out the evolving governmental and institutional differences in the countries of the Americas during the twenty-first century. He began by making a distinction between liberal democratic, electoral democratic, and autocratic regimes before turning his attention to all democracies, distinguishing between parliamentary and presidential systems. For parliamentary systems he emphasized the standard pattern of single-party government as opposed to coalitions. For presidential systems Siaroff outlined the evolutions of term and term limits, where there has been considerable “loosening” in Latin America. He examined the extent of populism and “outsider” presidential candidates versus more institutionalized party systems and their relationship to the level and stability of democracy.
In his paper titled “Latin American Constitutions: Poisoned Presents or Façades for Dictators?” Rainer Schmidt focused on the discrepancy between progressive constitutional documents and latently regressive political culture. This tension lead to conflicts and even violent movements against Western constitutionalism. Latin American history of the last two centuries provides numerous examples, as Schmidt pointed out. He argued that these tensions show up as well in ideas of the *homem cordial*, the warm hearted man, in Brazil and more recently in critiques of neoliberal dominance resulting in the “new Latin American constitutionalism” manifesting itself in the recent wave of constitutions passed in Bolivia, Venezuela, and Ecuador. According to Schmidt, each of these elements expresses doubts about the potency and adequacy as well as the moral and functional superiority of Western liberal democracy in the Latin American context.

The fourth panel chaired by Heike Paul covered “Settlement Studies and Border Thinking in the Americas.” Titled “Mistranslation and Beyond,” Anna Brickhouse’s paper reflected on the role of mistranslation in her own research and the productive possibilities of embracing mistranslation over other values — mastery, for example, or the untranslatable. She also discussed the role of translation and mistranslation in *Estrella Distante* by the late, great Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño, whose novella about the aftermath of the CIA-sponsored coup in Chile begins with a mysterious, (mis)translated epigraph from Faulkner.

In her paper, “Colonies of the Mind or the Arts of Typological Thinking,” Barbara Buchenau addressed epistemic violence of intercultural encounters in the colonial and early national Northeast. French and British American narratives of exploration, captivity, settlement, and early nation-building, she argued, have been instrumental for a progressive blending of distinct schools of thought and interpretation. Distinctive Christian hermeneutic practices were connected with and replaced by new forms of ethnic and racial stereotyping. Analyzing textual as well as visual representations of encounters between Iroquoians, Europeans, colonials, and later U.S. as well as Canadian citizens, she delineated how transatlantic and hemispheric traditions of interpretation are continually reassembled and changed through confrontations with incompatible data. These procedures, as Buchenau pointed out, are crucial to the formation of knowledge economies in which the concept of Iroquoia ceases to function as a marker of territory, community, and political power.
only to re-emerge as a transcendental image of national possibilities and potentialities. Buchenau concluded that the mobility paradigm of contemporary social and cultural theory allowed to bring older work on colonization and on religious typology to bear on current insights into the processes through which widely accepted knowledge is being forged.

Kerstin Schmidt chaired the fifth panel titled “The Pan-American Literary Imagination is Up for Debate,” in which contests and convergences in hemispheric literary relations were addressed. Stephen M. Park talked about “NAFTA and the Literary Imagination,” exploring the role of neoliberal economics in the recent literature of Canada, the United States, and Mexico. He considered how the debates surrounding NAFTA in the 1990s brought the rhetoric of neoliberal economics into popular culture. Since the economic and political rhetoric that supported free trade relied on narrative, metaphor, and other literary devices, NAFTA was itself a work of economic fiction. By surveying a number of North American writers — from Octavia Butler to Carlos Fuentes and Margaret Atwood — he examined the ways in which neoliberal economic policies have been represented and rewritten in literature. Park concluded that the confluence of economic theory and literary theory reveals the gap in NAFTA’s fiction and the way writers throughout the continent have tried to process the logic of free trade.

In his presentation, “The Boundaries of Reason: The Legacy of E. A. Poe in Latin America,” Jobst Welge approached Poe’s influential short stories from an inter-American and transnational perspective. As Welge stressed, Poe’s texts often depart from European settings and models. Welge centered his presentation around the question: What does it mean that the North American writer’s basic concerns and concepts are transposed to South American contexts? He showed that the genre of the short story played a crucial role in the consolidation of literary systems in South America at the end of the nineteenth century. Writers such as Machado de Assis (1839–1908) from Brazil or Horacio Quiroga (1878–1937) from Uruguay self-consciously resorted to the model of Poe in order to investigate the relation between self and other, between the norms of reason and manifestations of the irrational. Welge concluded that the genre of the Poe-inspired short story assumed an important role in the Latin American literary system by oscillating between universal aesthetic principles, requirements of the market, and the local, specifically American threats to the norms of a rational modernity modeled after Europe.
Barbara Hahn chaired the sixth panel, which investigated the African heritage in Latin America. In his paper, “Collectivism in the Afro-Brazilian Favela: Locality, Self-Organization and the Fight for Recognition,” Eberhard Rothfuß provided a deep insight into the challenging gap between rich and poor in the city of Salvador da Bahia in northeast Brazil. This gap — dialectically connected to skin color, literacy, education, processes of exclusion, and high unemployment rates — results in a very unequal supply of public consumer goods and housing for the poor, who are mainly of Afro-descendant origin. Focusing on processes of collective governance in a deprived working class neighborhood, Rothfuß clearly showed that self-organized communities in favelas are capable of articulating their needs and interests collectively since they do not fall within a defined institutional framework or existing system. Being excluded from urban resources, political participation, and societal recognition, Rothfuß concluded that the favelados focus their community and identity building strategies on a shared blackness without ethnicity.

Ángela María Franco Calderón addressed the notion of collectivism on the Colombian Pacific coast, which has a very special connotation. In a sociological sense, this notion can be explained by analyzing the significant role of collective life in the communities of this region, based on values such as cooperation and solidarity. Using a spatial approach, collectivism is represented in some elements of urban and architectural patterns that have been implemented by communities in the construction of their villages, with a strong influence of African patterns modified over 500 years by Colombian social and environmental conditions. Calderón explained which elements represent the value of cultural heritage and collectivism in Afro-Colombian culture through the lens of vernacular urbanism and architecture. She included a brief analysis of the legal framework that recently conferred special property rights to the Afro-Colombians in the Pacific region through a process of collective titling.

The panels brought participants into a productive dialogue with each other, stimulating discussions during and outside of the panel sessions. Participants discussed the current state of their field and sharpened their own disciplinary perspectives to identify interdisciplinary trajectories for further research.

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