

Editorial Introduction:
Women and Medicine in American Literature and Culture

Ingrid Gessner

The articles in this special issue of *COPAS* are the products of an advanced seminar on “Women and Medicine in American Literature and Culture” I taught at the universities of Regensburg and Bamberg during the winter semester 2014-2015. The interdisciplinary nature of the seminar was underscored by the collaboration of students from different disciplinary backgrounds on projects at the interface of medicine, health, and gender in American literature, film, and TV series. At Regensburg, seminar participants were mostly enrolled in the American Studies program as part of their teacher training; one ERASMUS+ student from Belgium, and several students from the international and interdisciplinary American Studies BA and MA programs completed the group. Their partners in Bamberg were also an international group with students from Germany, Italy, and China who were either enrolled in the English Studies BA program or the European Joint Master’s Degree program in English and American Studies. Together, students analyzed the representations of women in medical professions from historical, cultural, and literary points of view in ‘texts’ from the second half of the nineteenth century until today and presented their research results at a student symposium at the University of Bamberg on 12 February 2015 (for a course bibliography [click here](#)).

In the first section of the seminar, “Literature and Medicine in the Nineteenth Century,” we read and discussed examples of the nineteenth-century sentimental nurse narrative, such as Wesley Bradshaw’s *Angel Agnes* (1873) and *Mattie Stephenson* (1873). Access to the medical domain was desired by many but only attained by some American women. In an ironic commentary on Fourth of July celebrations in 1859 Sara Willis Parton (better known under her pen name Fanny Fern) drew attention to the restriction of nineteenth-century U.S. middle-class women to the domestic sphere, she quipped: “Can I go see anything pleasant, like an execution or a dissection?” (qtd. in Laffrado 1). Yet, of course she could not. The nineteenth century, with increasing vigor in the antebellum and Civil War periods, was marked by a debate on women’s roles and women’s place in society, which were commonly understood as limited to the private rather than the public sphere. Yet, the same period

witnessed the emergence of the women's rights movement with the first influential convention held at Seneca Falls in 1848, where women and men together drafted *A Declaration of Sentiments*. The manifesto demanded women's equal rights, particularly in areas such as the law, marriage, and the workplace. Indeed, in the second half of the nineteenth century a growing number of women entered the public realms of education and the medical professions. Taking into account that the social and political development of that century featured largely in writing by and about women, the seminar's reading list included excerpts from W.D. Howells's *Dr. Breen's Practice* (1881) and Sarah Orne Jewett's *A Country Doctor* (1884). Students were fascinated by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's fictional physicians from Dr. Dare to Dr. Zay, who performed acts of physical as well as metaphorical national healing, especially in the years after the Civil War. The agency of healing power is inherent in both her male and female characters, thus leaving room to suggest a transformative potential of facing and resolving medical and national crises open to both genders.

The ideology of separate spheres, together with the cult of domesticity situated within a "culture of sentiment" (Samuels) and the paradigm of true womanhood have provided tools to understand the nature of most literary works by nineteenth-century women. The ideology stipulated the protection of bourgeois white women in the domestic sphere and their separation from the economic and political corruptions of public life. Since its introduction in 1966 by Barbara Welter, the presumed dominance of the paradigm of true womanhood has been relativized by the discovery of coexisting alternative, at times even subversive, models and gender ideologies (Laffrado 6; see also Rupp; Saulsbury). The permeability of the borders between the so-called separate spheres has equally been shown (Baym).¹

For the second section of the seminar we focused on "The Cinematic Eye on Women Nurses: *The English Patient* (1996) and *Pearl Harbor* (2001)" and reviewed the basics of film analysis (Geiger and Rutsky; Wharton), including the importance of shots, camera angles and

¹ In her book Nina Baym comments on the "inadequacy of current gender-based distinctions between the public and private spheres, of beliefs that cults of true womanhood or ideologies of domesticity confined female literary behavior to overtly celebrating or subtextually undermining women's domestic incarceration" (4). See also Cathy Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher's collection of essays, *No More Separate Spheres!* (2002).

movements, sound, and editing. Watching *The English Patient* not only prompted us to discuss the representation of women nurses during World War II, but concepts of nationhood and instances of prevalent racism, misogyny and colonialism. Students furthermore analyzed the film's representation of transnational communities in Egypt under British occupation and in the Italian villa, where the 'English' patient (a Hungarian count), his Canadian Army nurse, a Sikh British Army sapper, and an Italian-Canadian spy come together. We looked at *Pearl Harbor* as a postmodern melodrama (White-Stanley) and passionately discussed this predominantly reactionary assessment of women's contributions to World War II in a pre-9/11 movie that eerily reflects the continuance of a neo-conservative backlash against women into the twenty-first century.

The third block addressed textual, rhetorical, and architectural examples representing the women veterans of the Vietnam War, most of whom served as nurses and physicians. Lynda Van Devanter's memoir *Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam* (1983) not only details her war experience but also her difficulties in finding an audience for the haunting images and traumatizing stories she brought home. Together with fellow veterans Diane Evans and Donna-Marie Boulay, Van Devanter successfully fought for the addition of a Women's Memorial to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

The joint one-day symposium, for which students from both universities convened at Otto-Friedrich-Universität in Bamberg, was undoubtedly the highlight of a work-intensive but equally rewarding semester. Twelve students, nine from Regensburg and three from Bamberg, presented the results of their research in 15-minute presentations. The other students either served as chairs and moderators or acted as well-informed experts asking and answering questions or commenting on their peers' presentations. All papers addressed the overarching question of how representations of women in or entering the medical profession helped to construct, perpetuate, or challenge gender hierarchies in the United States. They explored the intersections between medical and military culture and the role of gender in American literature and culture.

First Bamberg-Regensburg Student Symposium
Women and Medicine in American Literature and Culture

University of Bamberg, February 12, 2015, Room: U11/00.16




November 1943

10:15 – 10:30 Meet and Greet
10:30 – 10:45 Conference Opening (Nicole Konopka, Ingrid Gessner)
10:45 – 12:15 The History of Medicine and Gender: From the 18th to the 21st Century
 Chairs: Ramona Schmidt, Stefanie Wiethaler

Bettina Huber Bearing Independence: The Concept of Social Childbirth in Martha Ballard's Life Writing

Sebastian Friedrich Advancing Canada: Canadian War Nurses during the Cold War

Hannah Brodel *Lipstick in Afghanistan: A Modern Day Sentimental Nurse Fiction?*

12:15 – 14:15 Lunch Get-Together and Short Bamberg Walking Tour

14:15 – 15:45 Women, Health, and War
 Chairs: Paul Frent, Louisa Oberhauser, Chuang Wang

Simone Kinateder Acquiring Medical and Societal Reputation: Lynda van Devanter's *Home Before Morning* and Wesley Bradshaw's *Angel Agnes*

Saskia Hannawald Identity Construction in the War Zone: Lynda van Devanter's *Home Before Morning* (1983)

Anna Wolpert The Diversion of Lynda's Gaze in Lynda Van Devanter's *Home Before Morning*

16:00 – 17:30 The Cinematic Eye on Women and Medicine
 Chairs: Joke Bruns, Qingqing Yang

Susanne Büechl *Pearl Harbor* (2001): Nursing as Means of Emancipation during World War II?

Ines Schorr The Representation of Love in Times of War: An Analysis of Hana in *The English Patient*

Kathrin Pfeiffer Cancer Nursing in *Dying Young* (1991) and *Wit* (2001)

17:45 – 19:15 TV Medicine and the (Healing) Power of Women
 Chairs: Marc Geis, Caroline Guillaume, Anna-Magdalena Haßkerl

Barbara Biederer The Struggle of Female Surgeons between Job and Family: The Representation of Cristina Yang in ABC's *Grey's Anatomy*

Karoline Obermeier TV Medicine: Representing Women Doctors in *Scrubs*

Xenia Menzl Between Mother Figures and Sexualized Objects: Representing Women in *Scrubs* and *Grey's Anatomy*

19:15 – 19:30 Conclusion of the Symposium (Ingrid Gessner)

NTS
 ENTS IN CANADA

CALLING MORE WOMEN

Fig. 1. Bamberg-Regensburg Student Symposium Poster.

The day opened with a panel that gave a diachronic overview of the relation of medicine, war, and women from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. Bettina Huber (Regensburg) looked at midwife Martha Ballard's life writing to explore the concept of social

childbirth in a period when Americans were figuratively eager to give birth to independence. Sebastian Friedrich (Regensburg) was interested in Canadian military nurses during the Cold War and their role in what he called “advancing Canada’s women’s movement.” Hannah Brodel’s talk (Bamberg) asked whether Roberta Gately’s *Lipstick in Afghanistan* (2010) is not in fact an example of a contemporary sentimental nurse narrative modeled on the nineteenth-century prototype. Discussions between participants continued over lunch and were literally carried to the streets during a walking tour of Bamberg’s well-preserved old town.



Fig. 2. Participants of the Student Symposium in Bamberg on 12 February 2015. Photo by Judith Rauscher.

The next subset of papers focused on military medical women in the Vietnam War. Simone Kinateder (Regensburg) compared Lynda Van Devanter’s war memoir *Home Before Morning* (1983) and Wesley Bradshaw’s yellow fever novella *Angel Agnes* (1873). Saskia Hannawald (Regensburg) was interested in processes of identity construction in war zones and also chose Van Devanter’s memoir as a case study. As the last speaker in this section, Anna Wolpert (Regensburg) traced the narrative diversion of Van Devanter’s gaze in *Home Before Morning*.

The third section's panelists explored how women in the medical profession are seen through the eyes of the movie camera. Susanne Büechl (Regensburg) compared depictions of military nurses in Michael Bay's *Pearl Harbor* to historical accounts, which attribute an emancipatory role to the nursing profession during World War II. Anthony Minghella's adaptation of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* was analyzed by Ines Schorr (Bamberg), who was interested in the representation of compassionate and sexual love in times of war.

The last panel of the day was dedicated to "TV Medicine and the (Healing) Power of Women." Barbara Biederer (Regensburg) examined the depiction of Cristina Yang in ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* at the intersection of her social roles as Asian-American woman, surgeon, and mother. Women doctors in the comedy *Scrubs* were the focus of Karoline Obermeier's talk (Regensburg). She argued for a subtle postfeminist sensitivity that emanates from the series' main female character Elliot Reid but also cautioned the critical viewer to untangle the series' various stands of post- and anti-feminist agendas. In another paper that compared the two TV series, Xenia Menzl (Bamberg) in her analysis carefully positioned the female characters of *Scrubs* and *Grey's Anatomy* between mother figures and sexualized objects.

Students from both universities and faculty from Bamberg who attended the symposium were impressed by the scholarly quality of the presentations as well as the prudent and thought-provoking discussions of the event. It was at this point that the wish to publish the proceedings of the Bamberg meeting was first voiced.

The success story of the Bamberg-Regensburg student symposium on medicine and gender along with the present publication began much earlier, namely with a conversation between Udo Hebel, Chair of American Studies at the University of Regensburg, and Christine Gerhardt, Professor for American Studies at Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg. Both were interested in a closer collaboration between the two universities and between American Studies faculty and students. When they asked me in early summer 2014 whether I would be interested in teaching a course at Bamberg, I immediately jumped at the occasion and

suggested a collaborative seminar that would bring the entire group together in a joint one-day symposium at the end of the semester.

I presented the seminar's concept at the University of Regensburg's Center for Higher Education Didactics in September 2014. Discussing specific ideas, such as a blended-learning environment as well as other interactive components with practitioners, provided helpful feedback and led to the implementation of a video conference session, which contributed decisively to the smooth and successful start of the seminar. Technical support was provided by the knowledgeable and versatile staff at the University of Regensburg's data center, who not only facilitated the video conference, but integrated the Bamberg participants into the Regensburg Moodle system GRIPS so that both groups could exchange information and work together on collaborative assignments.

To be able to successfully prepare and present their own conference papers, students needed to experience what a scholarly presentation may look like. I gave a 15-minute talk in both seminars, with one of the students volunteering to act as chair and moderator. My paper on women and health in the Spanish-American War was followed by a Q&A session and a detailed feedback round. Before my talk, I had instructed each student to come up with at least one question they were to ask me about my presentation. The students' astute remarks and tough questions helped me refine the talk which I turned into an essay later.² Furthermore, every student had been given an assessment sheet (for a PDF version of the document [click here](#)). Criteria ranged from the presentation's contents, structure, and academic quality to aspects of performance, including delivery and use of media.

Preparations for the symposium began with a study and research phase for the conference papers shortly before Christmas. Students benefited from the material, study aids, and guidelines provided on GRIPS; consultation hours and advice via e-mail complemented this phase of the course. During the eight weeks between mid-December and the symposium, students researched, wrote, and crafted their presentations for the Bamberg symposium.

² A longer version of my presentations in Bamberg and Regensburg was later published in the *European Journal of American Studies* (Gessner).

Student conferences have become an integral part of the research landscape at least since the adoption of Bachelor and Master programs of study throughout Europe. Besides their obvious value as hands-on approach to academic exchange, they also prepare students for a fast-changing job market, in which large corporations and small businesses increasingly utilize similar forms of participation and cooperation among their young professionals. The Bamberg symposium was an ideal testing ground for students who are interested in taking part in similar events and in joining larger young scholars' platforms, such as the Postgraduate Forum (PGF) of the German Association for American Studies. I am all the more grateful that the editors of *COPAS*, who regularly publish the proceedings of the annual PGF Conference, after a rigorous but also extremely helpful peer review process, agreed to publish a selection of the pre-graduate work presented in Bamberg.

Additionally, the symposium offered the opportunity to exchange ideas and gain deeper insights into the structure of advanced programs of study at another university. The joint meeting strengthened the connection between Bamberg's and Regensburg's American Studies departments with the prospect of continued cooperation. For example, the experience gained during the Bamberg symposium significantly helped to organize the ERA³ American Studies Student Conference, which took place on 27 July 2016 at the Bavarian American Academy in Munich. Organized by Susanne Leikam (Regensburg), Timo Müller (Augsburg/Regensburg) and myself (Erlangen/Regensburg), the conference brought together fifty participants from the following universities: University of Augsburg, Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, LMU München, University of Passau, University of Regensburg, and University of Stuttgart. Like in Bamberg, the aim was to enable scholarly exchange between American Studies Master and advanced Bachelor students and students in teacher's training programs. In Munich, twenty students presented their work in plenary and parallel sessions. Participants gained a deeper insight into the various theoretical and methodical angles on the Anthropocene as it is currently discussed within the American Studies research community. The conference setup of larger

³ Erlangen-Regensburg-Augsburg. The conference title is derived from the fact that at these cities' universities seminars in the fields of biopolitics, ecocriticism and environmental justice were taught in summer 2016. As with the Bamberg-Regensburg cooperation, these courses served as 'hotbeds' for the papers delivered in Munich.

and smaller groups fostered the ability to identify common questions and to approach them from different methodological perspectives. Once again participants felt encouraged to continue their studies within the field and were given the opportunity to chat and network with students and faculty from other German universities over coffee and lunch.



ERA American Studies Student Conference
27 July 2016 • 9:30-18:30 • Bavarian American Academy, Barer Str. 19a, Munich

**Sandra Bartol • Ilona Baumgartner • Katherine Dufour • Lisa Feige •
Axelle Germanaz • Alena Grimbs • Nicole Hofmann • Kurt Kalanz •
Marie Kämpf • Iroda Karimova • Matthias Köbrich • Nico Kunz •
Alexander Lehner • Sarah Marak • Nicole Mittelstädt • Yasmine Nawar •
Judith Ohlendorf • Carolin Plutz • Lori Schiesl • Sandra Schlecht •
Stefanie Schuster • Katrin Sicklinger • Florian Zitzelsberger**

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U of Augsburg

The conference is supported by the Chair of American Studies, U of Regensburg,
and Bayerische Amerika Akademie, Munich
amerika-akademie.de



Fig. 3. ERA American Studies Student Conference Poster.

I believe this is what American Studies is and should be all about: to engage practitioners in dialogue about (U.S.-)American culture, history, politics, and society and to make students

part of the conversation early on in their course of studies. Academic questions of social, racial, and gender equality and justice are important, but to transfer the knowledge produced in the ‘ivory tower’ to our immediate environment, and to acknowledge and support social, cultural, and political change—especially during challenging times—is all the more important. I believe that in this “post-factual” era of “post-truth” and “alternative facts,” the role of a critical, future-oriented pedagogy for the subsistence of democracy is paramount. Current global problems, including climate change and connected environmental and medical injustice, a widening gap between genders and classes, and a reinvigorated racism, need to be addressed in- and outside of our classrooms. Student conferences, and young scholars’ organizations and platforms such as the PGF and COPAS are excellent venues to foster exchange, collaboration, and activism. To the editors, thanks for giving us room on the COPAS stage; to the readers, I hope you enjoy reading the present issue and feel inspired to make your own contribution.

Ingrid Gessner

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