

## Remembering: Transnational Memory Cultures and American Studies: The 2022 Postgraduate Forum

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KEYWORDS: PGF; American Studies; Memory Studies; Transnational Relations; Interdisciplinarity

Judging from the great number of books, news articles, and roundtables published and broadcast in 2022, the public appetite for history and memory appears to be as strong as ever. However, historical truth and "the correct memory"—especially in relation to who is allowed to assert and judge them—have become contentious issues, regardless of the impossibility of reducing complex historical circumstances to a singular objective version of events. Moreover, the why, how, where, and when of the representation of memories have also become powerful instruments in ideological and political battles, as they are used to undermine already marginalized perspectives, frequently also in the production of national narratives. Only in October 2022, for example, a politician of the German far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) was photographed dancing on top of one of the stone slabs at the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin, displaying his contempt and disrespect for the memory of around six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Such occurrences in recent years reveal an attitude toward memory that highlights the antisemitism and racism of the far-right. In the realm of literature, questions of who is remembered how have become increasingly controversial in the US after several Republican-led states moved to ban a large number of books from classrooms and public libraries, specifically targeting titles featuring LGBTQIA+ characters and themes, characters of Color, and books critically examining race and racism. Likewise, the "war of memory" that accompanies the ongoing debate over the removal of Confederate monuments in the US, which has also been utilized in a transnational context by Russian President Vladimir Putin in an attempt to legitimize his unprovoked and brutal attack on Ukraine's sovereignty, exemplifies why memory is important and embattled and attracts increased scholarly interest.

It is with all of this in mind that we organized the 32nd *Postgraduate Forum* (PGF) of the *German Association for American Studies* (DGfA/GAAS) at the University of Regensburg from November 10-12, 2022, which informed the contributions to this current issue of COPAS. After the prior iteration of the conference unfortunately had to be moved online due to the emergence of yet another variant of the novel coronavirus, a somewhat relaxed rate of infections and the general availability of vaccines allowed the 2022 PGF Conference to take place in a hybrid format. This afforded doctoral students and early-career researchers of the

German American Studies community a much-needed opportunity to reconnect in person—as well as to take part in events beyond the lecture halls—while also allowing those unable to travel to participate in the discussions. Despite the obvious limitations and technological hurdles that such a format necessarily imposes, it was evident throughout the conference that the postgraduate scholars in American Studies had not broken their stride in the face of the challenges that world affairs and life in academia present but were ready and willing to confront them head-on.

The interdisciplinarity fundamental to the topic of memory integrates different elements and thereby links disciplines, discourses, and media in order to examine the question of memory. This "togetherness" was evident both during conversations and discussions throughout the conference as well as in the contributions to the panels, all of which opened up and explored the links between cultural memory and a host of different related topics. The conference featured five panels, an excursion to the *Flossenbürg Concentration Camp Memorial and Museum*, as well as a workshop on mental health and academic responsibility. The subjects of the panels were: (1) Environment and Cultural Memory; (2) Cinematic Memories; (3) Transnational Memory Cultures; (4) Identities and (Counter-)Pedagogies; and (5) Representations. The excursion to the *Flossenbürg Concentration Camp Memorial* consisted of a guided tour of the former camp grounds and its museum, followed by an open discussion with the director of the memorial, Jörg Skriebeleit, who also presented a more in-depth perspective on the memorial's work and the current challenges staff is facing. In the workshop titled "Academic Accountability, Responsibility, and Mental Health," Alexandra Hauke (University of Passau), Juliane Tomann (University of Regensburg), and Jiann-Chyng Tu (University of Regensburg/HU Berlin), as well as representatives of the *Center for Graduate and Postgraduate Researchers* (WIN), raised issues of diversity, representation, and mental health in German American Studies and discussed them with the participants. They also highlighted the increasing precarity in academia and the long-lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The overarching topic of Memory Studies was also at the heart of the keynote lecture by Jeffrey Olick (University of Virginia). In his talk "The Politics of Regret Revisited," Olick investigated the development of what he calls the "politics of regret." Such politics acknowledge and apologize for difficult pasts and Olick systematically traced earlier versions of the politics of regret as well as current responses. By specifically discussing recent German debates and contrasting them with what he frames as current American exceptionalism in memory politics, Olick mapped out the entanglements and differences of both discourses, asked what changed during the past decades, and reflected on possible future trajectories of memory studies.

## Memory in American Studies

This brief summary already hints at the multitude of perspectives and directions that studies of cultural memory can take for literary scholars, cultural studies scholars, historians, and sociologists with roots in the field of American Studies or an interest in the study of different aspects of American cultures. What the panel discussions, keynote, and visit to the memorial all highlighted was the much-agreed notion that memories are not objective images of past realities or perceptions, but highly subjective and selective representations which, as an act, take place in the present. To quote Astrid Erll, “individual and collective memories are never a mirror image of the past, but rather an expressive indication of the needs and interests of the person or group doing the remembering in the present. As a result, memory studies directs its interest [...] toward the particular presents of the remembering” (8). These insights, which are at the core of cultural memory studies today, have a long tradition themselves, as earlier memory studies scholars stood on the shoulders of philosophical giants.

The long tradition of the analysis of memory can be traced from Plato’s idea of the mind as a wax tablet to Augustine’s autobiography as a form of memory and John Locke’s idea of memory as the source of the self, and to a teleological conception of history as a history of progress, or the close alliance between nation states and a sense of the past. These, and many other lines of thought, all flow into the development of contemporary theories of cultural memory. Our use of the term “collective memory” is largely based on scholars such as Maurice Halbwachs or Aby Warburg, who studied cultural memory systematically in a social context and within the framework of a modern theory of culture. Halbwachs’s work had an enormous impact on the understanding of collective memory, even if he did not refer to it as such. He assumed that personal memory does not exist on its own but operates within the framework of a sociocultural environment. We remember as social persons, with a specific set of identities, structures, and processes by which we understand our surroundings. This understanding also entails the creation of shared versions of the past through forms of interaction and communication, also within larger cultural communities. Following Halbwachs, different scholars from various academic disciplines have used the concept of collective memory as an interdisciplinary framework.

From the 1980s onwards, the topic of memory again provoked interest in the humanities and social sciences, resulting in what we today call “Memory Studies.” Most influential in this endeavor are Pierre Nora’s idea of “places” or “*lieux*” in French national memory and Aleida and Jan Assmann’s shift towards cultural memory studies. The latter’s description of cultural memory in contrast to collective or communicative memory is regarded as a methodological and political category that unifies and stabilizes a common identity.

Today, the focus has further shifted toward Transnational Memory Studies with concepts like “traveling memory,” “entangled memory,” and “multi-directional memory.” The plurality of memories, as well as the different flows in which memories travel, inspired different ground-

breaking studies. Well-known scholars in the field, for instance Astrid Erll, Alison Landsberg, Jeffrey Olick, Ann Rigney, or Michael Rothberg, have contributed to its flourishing, putting us young scholars in the privileged position of finding a methodologically rich, varied, and interdisciplinary field.

Nonetheless, an abundant and multifaceted field comes with challenges, such as the multiplicity of concepts, some of them (e.g., *lieux de memoire*) remaining undertheorized despite their limitless extension and transdisciplinary adaptability. This richness also makes us increasingly aware of our responsibilities as scholars. Not only because we have to address the effects of the continued bearing of past hurts in the present but because we should acknowledge that collective memory reconstructs the past according to the needs of the present. Thus, acts of remembering and the cultural representations of the past involve selections, absences, and multiple—potentially conflicting—accounts.

Awareness of agency, inclusion and exclusion, our own positionality, and the acknowledgment that we participate in a western-Eurocentric discussion inform our academic work. In times of ongoing culture wars, we feel that it is our responsibility as scholars and educators to teach our students to think critically about distinguishing fact from fiction and to recognize opinion from propaganda and manipulation. In this way, we can do our part in setting the direction and tone of current debates. However, that same responsibility comes with a lot of pressure that adds to the already existing charms and challenges of pursuing a PhD, such as workload, deadlines, precarious contracts, anxieties, and imposter syndrome. This means that we also have a responsibility towards ourselves and our physical and mental well-being, without which doing our work well is next to impossible. Thus, the role of memory in American Studies comes full circle through the centrality of remembering to take care of ourselves and each other, which we hope was reflected in our conference.

### **COPAS 24.1 at a Glance**

The articles in this volume offer a glimpse into the multifaceted discussions and conversations we had during the 2022 PGF conference and further exemplify the variety of ways in which memory studies can be approached from an American Studies background:

In her poetry collection *The Black Unicorn* (1987), Audre Lorde shows the ways in which those who do not comply with the normative ideals of contemporary US culture are especially vulnerable to societal marginalization and violence. In their article “Norms, Myths, and Vulnerability: Audre Lorde’s Reconstruction of Self in ‘125th Street and Abomey’,” Julia Machtenberg analyzes Lorde’s construction of vulnerability and uses this poem as an example to outline how Lorde drew from West African cosmology as a method to regain agency in the face of marginalizing and violent forces. Machtenberg argues that Lorde reconstructs her speaker’s vulnerable socio-cultural position as a potential site for transformative processes of intersubjective self-(re)formation.

How could seventeenth-century Puritans deal with the perceived fall from grace and desolation in their native country England and what, in turn, would it mean for them to leave their homes for an uncertain fate in the “New World”? In her article “‘England Hath Seene Her Best Dayes, and now Evill Dayes are Befalling Us.’ Nostalgia in Puritan Culture,” Katerina Steffan examines these questions using the example of the English tailor John Dane, who recollected his wanderings from home and journey to New England in his spiritual autobiography. By investigating how Dane employs nostalgia to both make sense of and emotionally cope with his separation from home and his family, his conversion experience, and his ultimate decision to leave for New England, Steffan argues that nostalgia was decisive in how early modern Puritans understood, experienced, and practiced in their daily lives, both emotionally and intellectually.

Continuing along the thread of environmental and cultural memory, Fritz Bommas looks at the fundamental tension between the individual and the environment at the heart of settler-colonial histories and narratives in his article “Chronicling the Capitalocene: History, Colonialism, and Capital in Annie Proulx’s *Barkskins*.” After first situating Proulx’s 2016 novel within the context of the Capitalocene, Bommas turns to its historical narrative in which the individual human is simultaneously de-centered through an environmental broadening of the historical account, while a renewed focus is put on the human, based on the central roles of inequality and exploitation within the context of environmental destruction. He then examines the novel’s representation of the destructive cycle of capitalism-colonialism founded upon the twin logics of elimination and (false) infinity. Bommas makes the case that *Barkskins* enacts a critique of the underlying principles of the Capitalocene, yet remains strongly dedicated to the past as no particular vision of the future is offered up, even as history broadens in scope beyond the human.

Investigating the entanglements of water and memory in Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* (2011), Hanna Masslich analyzes the multiplicity of literal and figurative references to water—again broadening the scope of human memory through environmental forces—while referring to the Anthropocene, new materialist water scholarship, as well as Black Studies in the process. Her article “Salvage Watery Memory: Water and Memory in Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*” argues that the element of water scales up the temporal and spatial scope of the narrative, thereby situating Hurricane Katrina in the history of transatlantic slavery and the Middle Passage. Functioning as a keeper of memory and archive in the novel, water evolves as a substance that enables the concurrent examination of racialized histories and contemporary environmental disasters.

In her article “‘The Time Loop Nightmare of Being a Black Man in the US’: Black American Cultural Memory in the Short Film *Two Distant Strangers* (2020),” Jana Rosebrock concerns herself with Black American cultural memory and the translation of historical experiences into contemporary narratives. *Two Distant Strangers* presents a particularly potent example in this context, as it directly takes up contemporary discussions of the *Black Lives Matter*

movement—especially in the wake of the brutal murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin—and further problematizes issues of racial profiling and police violence in the United States. She thus analyzes the film both on the level of the impact that collective memory had and still has on the formation of Black American identit(ies) and the role that representations of collective trauma through communicative memory play in the re-negotiation of racial identit(ies) in light of the long history of racial violence in the US. Consequently, Rosebrock argues that films like *Two Distant Strangers* are substantial contributions to Black American cultural memory and as such both add to and challenge the predominant narratives about Black American histor(ies) and identit(ies).

Continuing the thread of depictions of traumatic violence in film, Johannes Vith's article "Trauma at the Movies: Cinematic Memories of Columbine" analyzes how cinematic representations mediate school shootings in a US context. While the Columbine High School shooting of 1999 has become a cultural icon for school shootings in the United States and beyond, only few cinematic adaptations of its events exist. In his article, Vith addresses how these movies nonetheless impact the culture of remembering Columbine in myriad ways. He argues that films about Columbine use different strategies to mediate the trauma of the shooting, which ultimately serve to reframe the original trauma due its cinematic interpretation, as well as being potentially re-traumatizing in their own right. Nonetheless, as traumatic events such as Columbine often lack clear causes and effects, Vith argues that film is particularly effective in mediating trauma.

Transnational cultural performances and cross-continental entanglement are the focus of Christian Knittl's research on the *German–American Institute* (GAI) in the Bavarian city of Regensburg in the 1960s. Two cultural exhibitions, "Native American Traditions" and "The Status of the African American in the Development of American Culture," provide rich material for analyzing knowledge production engendered through transnational cultural performances by a state-funded institution. Through these examples, Knittl elucidates how such performances evidence appropriated knowledge and engage in stereotypical, racist notions of subaltern cultures. Complicating these dynamics, however, he also contends that the subtle nuances of these performances can lead to a problematized and heightened awareness of the intricacies and struggles of the depicted cultural groups. Through this discussion of the GAI in Regensburg, Knittl illustrates how collective memory is impacted by performance, demonstrating the pivotal role local areas can play as sites of transnational contact zones.

And finally, Kristina Seefeldt's article on the remembrance of the Global War on Terrorism highlights the intersections of cultural memory studies and public history regarding a highly timely and controversial topic. Scrutinizing plans for a central memorial in one of the United States' most symbolic spaces, the National Mall in Washington, DC, as well as the diverse actors and interests behind them, she critically reflects upon potentials and challenges that come with remembering the United States' longest war against the backdrop of settler colonialism and selective memorialization. By including already existing memorials for the Global War on Terrorism in smaller communities, as well as the commemorative landscape

planned at the National Mall in her analysis, she highlights the emotional components of memory work in progress.

## Acknowledgements

There are a great many people to thank for their help and support in putting together the 2022 PGF conference and this dedicated issue of COPAS, though unfortunately we are unable to mention everyone in the space allotted to us here. First, and most importantly, we would like to thank all the panelists and discussants for their thought-provoking and inspired contributions that made the conference the wonderful occasion that it was, as well as for being willing and eager to turn their talks into the papers presented in this issue.

We would also like to extend our gratitude to the *German Association of American Studies* for its continuing support of the PGF, and particularly for the guidance through the organizational intricacies of putting this conference together. In this vein, we would also like to thank the University of Regensburg for supporting the conference, and particularly Sabine Kirmayer of the American Studies department and Paul Vickers, manager of the Leibniz ScienceCampus “Europe and America in the Modern World” and the Department for Interdisciplinary and Multiscalar Area Studies (DIMAS), without whose tireless efforts we would not have been able to juggle the dual challenges of organization and funding. We would also like to thank Jörg Skriebeleit for his time and willingness to present open and critical insights into the work that is being done at the *Flossenbürg Concentration Camp Memorial* and Alexandra Hauke, Juliane Tomann, and the representatives of *Center for Graduate and Postgraduate Researchers (WIN)* for sharing their expertise and insights during the workshop. Last, but not least, we would also like to thank our student assistants Anna Alkofer, Rye Bittl, Simone Blessing, Ian-Riley Goddard, and Magdalena Merkler, who served as the logistical backbone throughout the conference.

Moreover, we would also like to thank the members of Team Stuttgart—Whit Frazier Peterson, Jana Keck, and Melissa Schlecht—for their help and willingness to share their experiences in putting a PGF conference together, as well as for their efforts in making the transition as smooth as possible.

Finally, we would also like to thank the COPAS editorial team, namely Gulsin Ciftci, Paula von Gleich, Fenja Heisig, Juliann Knaus, Stephen Koetzing, Whit Frazier Peterson, Florian Wagner, and Corina Wieser-Cox, for their help and guidance in making this current PGF issue become a reality.

We are also pleased to announce that we have officially handed over the PGF responsibilities to Team Hannover at the Annual Meeting of the DGfA/GAAS in Rostock, leaving the planning of the 2023 conference in the capable hands of Alejandra Bulla, Stefan Dierkes, Hanna Masslich, Katerina Steffan, and Lujain Youssef. We are excited to see what they have in store for us at the Leibniz University Hannover from November 9-11, 2023, and look forward to

again being inspired by the work of our fellow postgraduates in German American Studies, this time with the theme of “Spaces of Affect in the Americas.”

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