



R a d b o u d U n i v e r s i t y
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S p r i n g A c a d e m y

**Grounding Transnational American Studies in
European and American Contexts**

**Master Programs in Transatlantic Studies at
Radboud University Nijmegen, NL and
American Studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen,
Germany**

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GROUNDING TRANSNATIONAL AMERICAN STUDIES

Mission Statement

As an academic discipline American studies today faces a world in which the specific cold-war logic of the American Century has ceased to be accepted light-heartedly in many of the arenas in which it used to be particularly effective: public diplomacy, popular culture, collective memory, urbanity. Whereas generations of scholars in our field took it for granted that American culture and American goods had a major, if conflicted role to play in the global campaign for democratization, this straightforward political instrumentalization of (cultural) production is today much less certain. When approaching American literature, culture, media, history, and politics as European and U.S. American academics in these times of accelerated political and cultural transformation, if not outright revolution, we believe that it is useful to better “ground” our scholarly analyses in the contexts in which they will be taking effect. Grounding is a research method and strategy that was first developed in the social sciences in the 1960s. The intellectual activity of grounding is soundly lodged in hermeneutics, connecting the traditional methods of textual interpretation with qualitative approaches that allow for the integration of field work, participant observation, interviews and self-reflection into the standardized procedures of textual, cultural and social analysis. We propose to adapt this dynamic epistemological and methodological school to our own purposes of conceptual thinking about the insights to be gained by American studies inquiry in an age of re-enforced borders and new border thinking.¹ In this Spring Academy we want to ground our work in a threefold manner: First regarding the

¹ See Barney Glaser & Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, 1965. One particularly relevant reinterpretation of grounding is Tamara Caraus and Elena Paris’ edited collection *Re-Grounding Cosmopolitanism: Towards a Post-Foundational Cosmopolitanism*. London: Routledge, 2016.

premises, second, regarding the theoretical frameworks, and third regarding geographic dispositions and opportunities for research, case studies, and valorization.

First, we consider it crucial to acknowledge the underlying premises which inform the theories and methodologies of transnational American studies in both European and U.S. American contexts. Only if we bring to the forefront the unconscious, often implicit narratives and values which guide our choices regarding objects, theories, and methodologies, can we initiate a process of strengthening the outside perspective on American culture, politics, and the economy. In what ways do we organize narratives about developments in American culture and academia? The five romances with “America” which American studies theoretician Winfried Fluck traces are helpful. He distinguishes between the romance with the American founding myths (such as the success story, the frontier myth or the melting pot), the romance with popular culture (or the so-called “outlaw-and-defiance romance”), the romance with Southern culture, the romance with American modernism and postmodernism, and the romance with the popular myth of a democratic culture.² One might add three more romances such as the romance with the west, the romance with American technology, and the romance with Anti-Americanism (a romance ex negativo).³

Second, we need to ground our critical thinking in innovative theoretical frameworks, which allow us to understand scholarly work within the United States while becoming aware of opportunities that can be found in modifications or novel

² Winfried Fluck, “American Studies and the Romance with America: Approaching America through Its Ideals.” *Romance with America? Essays on Culture, Literature, and American Studies*. Ed. Laura Bieger and Johannes Voelz. Heidelberg: Winter, 2009. 87-104, here 89-90. Print. Compare also Heike Paul, *The Myths that Made America. An Introduction to American Studies*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2014. 11-42.

³ For another ex-negativo romance, the nightmare of environmental destruction see Caroline Levander, “Transnational American Studies in a Warming World.” Keynote Address, *Bavarian American Academy Conference 2016: Cultural Mobility and Knowledge Formation in the Americas*. June 30, 2016.

approaches developed in European academia.

The challenge is to turn the alleged disadvantage of being so far removed from “the homeland” into an asset. The distance from the physical space of the United States and its border regions allows – this is our hope and conviction – for a nuanced perspective on the US as a global agenda setting country whose effects are often different from the processes which inform the frameworks of “encoding”, to use an expression by Stuart Hall.⁴ The European perspective can contribute to challenging what Amy Kaplan called “the tenacious grasp of American exceptionalism.”⁵ Understanding, mapping, and analyzing the cultural sources of American power and its effects means that European scholars and students can embark on transnational American studies with confidence and without a felt need of self-provincialization. The Dartmouth series *Re-Mapping the Transnational* edited by Donald Pease is but one example which places special importance on transnational and European perspectives on the US.⁶ This encouraging development needs continued debate to allow students to formulate a persuasive answer why they chose – of all places – to study American Studies in Nijmegen/The Netherlands, Duisburg-Essen/Germany or Warsaw/Poland, to name but a few places with lively American Studies programs in Europe.

Third, we understand grounding as a geographical practice, as a comparative approach, which renders American studies particularly relevant in the vicinity of the very universities where we are studying, working, teaching.

⁴ Stuart Hall, “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse.” Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1973.

⁵ Amy Kaplan, “The Tenacious Grasp of American Exceptionalism. A Response to Djelal Kadir, ‘Defending America Against Its Devotees’.” *Comparative American Studies* 2.2 (2004): 153-59.

⁶ Donald Pease, ed. *Re-Mapping the Transnational: A Dartmouth Series in American Studies*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 2010. (<http://www.upne.com/series/TASS.html>)

Paul Lauter argued in his September 2014 keynote speech at the Salzburg Seminar: “You cannot do American Studies today and confine yourself to events that have occurred, or writers who have composed, within the boundaries of the now-50 states that constitute the US of A.” Speaking from the perspective of American literature, he argued that complicated work is ahead, such as “finding the manifold ways by which an international text milieu [i.e. a space in which creative writers and teachers function today] affects what is written and how it is read.”⁷ For American studies, text milieus might be extended into ‘cultural milieus’ in which text is understood as discourse in the Foucauldian sense. Whatever kind of sources, media texts, spaces, and developments we analyze, whether as American scholars and students or European scholars and students working in the field of American studies, we produce answers and results that are always “acts of cultural self-description.”⁸ Ideally, this involves self-reflexive as well as comparative textual and practical work in regional archives and local settings; it means to reach out to public institutions related to American politics, economy, or culture, to include comparativist field work and dialogic formats as well as to study sites of memory that are far more than a record of a distant national event.

Again, the culturally diverse European network of universities offers a particularly promising basis to ground transnational American

⁷ Paul Lauter, “You Cannot Do American Studies Today and Confine to the Boundaries of the Now-50 States.” Keynote Address. *Salzburg Global Seminar 2014*. September 28, 2014. <http://www.salzburgglobal.org/news-media/article/paul-lauter-you-cannot-do-american-studies-today-and-confine-to-the-boundaries-of-the-now-50-st.html#.VFm7He f7p7E>

⁸ We borrow this expression from Frank Kelleter, “Response to William Uricchio.” *American Studies Today: New Research Agendas*. Ed. Winfried Fluck, Erik Redling, Sabine Sielke, and Hubert Zapf. Heidelberg: Winter, 2014. 383-97, here 305; Kelleter’s reference is to Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997, here 879-93. In this response Kelleter uses Luhmann’s idea of the prominent role played by implicit and explicit self-descriptions to emphasize that American studies scholarship cannot help but to “participate in the activities of [its] objects of observation” thus giving insights into the multiple “dependencies between a culture’s knowledge and performance of itself” (305).

studies by offering multi-national perspectives. We will focus on triangular perspectives on (civil) war, liberation, commemoration and political protest on the one hand and on urbanization, deindustrialization, and the move towards greener, sustainable postindustrial cities on the other hand. How can students and scholars from the Netherlands, Germany, and the U.S. trace American legacies of peace-making and of city-management in a transnational and comparative fashion?

Our goal in this Dutch-German-American Spring Academy is a threefold grounding of Transnational American Studies as a form of *engaged comparative teaching, research, and valorization* with an emphasis on multi-national perspectives in interactive classrooms.

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