

Humboldt-Princeton Strategic Partnership Grant Symposium

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, June 15-16, 2017

Gender, Sexuality, Queer and Trans Studies Write Back

Abstracts

Opening Lectures

Ulrike E. Auga, Käthe Leichter Prize Guest Chair for Gender Studies, Vienna University; formerly Professor for Gender and Religion (JP), Humboldt-Universität; Professor for Gender, Diversity, Cultural Theory, Humboldt-Universität

“Michel Foucault’s Confessions of the Flesh and the Performative and Material Body in the Documentary *Fake Orgasm*”

Michel Foucault’s unpublished lectures *On the Government of the Living* were the intended fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality*, to appear under the title *Confessions of the Flesh*. Held in the 1980s and published in 2012, the lectures explain the historical foundations of the obedience of the Western subject and how the confessional has largely shaped the ‘modern’ concept of the subject. Foucault locates these foundations in the connections between obedience and confession within early Christianity. In his genealogy of confession, he underlines that the ‘West’ developed a concept of confession as ‘liberation,’ which does not hold in other historic, geographic or epistemic contexts. The heritage is manifold: the confession-like perception of truth spread within Christian mission and colonialism exists in current fundamentalist environments but it is deeply anchored in presuming secularized discourses and experiences a renaissance in modern essentialist notions of identity.

Jo Sol’s documentary *Fake Orgasm* (2010) stages performer and activist Lazlo Pearlman, who explores the subversion of confessional culture via the use of the nude transsexual body. As a female-to-male transsexual performer, he experiences the strong request of the audience to confess his ‘identity,’ which he resists. The film is more than an examination of why people feign sexual pleasure; Pearlman performs a corporeal insurrection. The example denounces the production of an ontological, identitarian body and biopolitical regulations in face of certain regimes of truth, and allows for a genealogical and critical discussion of the body. Along the questions raised with Foucault and Pearlman central epistemological issues can be elaborated, resistance and futurity scrutinized, and notions of subject formation, agency, and human flourishing can be reworked in the light of performativity/ performance after the material turn. Therefore, various consequences for gender/ queer, post/de/colonial, and post-secular approaches can be drawn.

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Dara Strolovitch, Associate Professor, Gender and Sexuality Studies and Politics at Princeton University

“When Bad Things Happen to Privileged People: Race, Gender, and the Political Construction of Crisis and Non-Crisis”

This paper is part of a larger project that explores the political construction of “bad things” that come to be treated as crises by dominant political actors as well as those bad things that are not afforded this treatment, which I call non-crises. To do so, I use two sets of matched cases through which I explore the particular framings of two “bad things” that become defined as crises, comparing these alongside two analogous non-crises. The first set of cases compares political and media attention to the non-crisis of rising foreclosure rates in the “booming” 1990s with those of what came to be called the mortgage crisis that began in 2007. The second set of cases focuses on the implications and imbrication of whiteness and masculinity in the construction of the so-called Great Recession of 2007-09 as a “mancession” by comparing media and political discussions about rates of white male unemployment with these discussions when it comes to Black men, white women, and women of colour. These cases illustrate that the very notion of crisis relies on assumptions and practices that reflect, reproduce, and reconstitute prevailing attitudes and normative expectations about racialized and gendered inequalities.

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Panel 1: Intersexuality and Trans

Catherine Clune-Taylor, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Princeton University

“Intersexuality and Gender Dysphoria as Disorders of Cisgender Function: An Exercise in Critical Feminist Disability Studies”

In this presentation, I will briefly outline my account of the core pathology of both intersex conditions and gender dysphoria in terms of cisgender function, referring to the function of one’s physical sex characteristics are presumed to perform insofar as they are taken to provide a stable ground upon which reliable predictions about one’s future gender identity, behaviors, and preferences or desires can be made. I will argue that this account, and the analysis which it engages, are an example of critical feminist disability studies, in that it makes sense of current biomedical practice through a genealogy of the medical constitution of normal (and subsequently, abnormal) sex and gender.

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Ulrike Klöppel, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Institute for European Ethnology at Humboldt-Universität

“Biopolitics and Counter-Biopolitics of Gender Change in the German Democratic Republic”

In 1976, the Minister of Public Health of the German Democratic Republic issued the “Ordinance on the Conversion of Transsexualists.” In an international context, the East German State opted for a legalization of gender change – including gender reassignment surgery – quite early. How did the Ordinance come to exist? Of high relevance for this process were the efforts of persons who applied for an official change of their registered gender and, in many but not all cases, for a gender reassignment surgery as well. They approached doctors as well as the highest state authorities with their wish, addressing the latter via petitions, which was a practice supported by the leadership of the GDR. To push their cause, they provided highly emotionalized descriptions of their lives and suffering, while at the same time employing the rhetoric of the ‘dedicated socialist citizen.’ In my presentation, I read these activities as a kind of affective counter-biopolitics that met with socialist biopolitical strategies as much as they challenged them.

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Gayle Salamon, Associate Professor, English and Gender and Sexuality Studies at Princeton University

“Private Places and Fantasy Spaces: On ‘Bathroom Bills’ and State-Sponsored Detransitioning”

In this presentation, I suggest that the increasing visibility of transpeople has ushered in a new era, one in which trans identities are increasingly legible at the same time that there is transphobic backlash against that visibility. I will explore the ways in which legislative and bureaucratic systems in the United States have weaponized trans visibility in recent months, with the aim of policing the appearance of trans bodies in public space, and “detransitioning” transgender people.

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Panel 2: Cultures of Sexuality

Regina Kunzel, Professor, History and Gender and Sexuality Studies at Princeton University

“The Rise of Gay Rights and the Disavowal of Disability”

This talk considers the complex history of homosexuality’s entwinement with disability, marked most notably by its longstanding designation as a form of mental illness. In the years that followed, gay and lesbian activists worked to distance themselves from that stigmatizing association, successfully lobbying to remove “homosexuality” from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973. Revisiting the history of the gay liberationist battle against the psychiatric establishment through analytical lenses offered by critical disability studies and disability history, this talk tracks the exclusionary and stigmatizing effects of the insistence on homosexuality as “healthy.”

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Andreas Kraß, Professor for Medieval German Literature, Director of the Research Center for Cultural History of Sexuality at the Institute of German Literature at Humboldt Universität

Benedikt Wolf, Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Research Center for Cultural History of Sexuality, Recent German Literature and Queer Studies

Hannes Hacke, PhD Student and Research Assistant at the Research Center for Cultural History of Sexuality, Museum Studies, Sexuality and Queer Studies

Janin Afken, PhD Student and Research Assistant at the Research Center for Cultural History for Sexuality, Recent German Literature and Queer Studies

“Short Talk: Cultures of Sexuality – Presentation of the Research Center for the Cultural History of Sexuality”

The Research Center for the Cultural History of Sexuality is located at the German Department and collaborates with the Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies. After a brief overview of the first five years of the research center’s work (2012-2017), we will focus primarily on the three larger, externally funded projects we are currently carrying out. These three international projects (with partner universities in Israel, Poland, Spain, UK, USA) illustrate the broad range of historic periods, disciplinary areas and thematic fields of our work. Covering crucial periods of the 20th century, we conduct research on German-Jewish relationships, on the queer European culture of the 1970s and on the display of sexuality in museums. In the framework of these and several other research projects, we conceptualize sexuality as a historically variable entity, which should be analyzed in terms of historic contingencies and cultural formulations.

https://www.literatur.hu-berlin.de/de/forschung_idl/archive-forschungsstellen/forschungsstelle-kulturgeschichte-der-sexualitaet/archive-for-sex-research

Beate Binder, Professor for European Ethnology and Gender Studies, Humboldt-Universität

“Disentangling HIV/AIDS policies: Research projects on the AIDS Crisis and Political Mobilization”

I will present two research projects on HIV/AIDS carried out at the Institute for European Ethnology (together with Ulrike Klöppel and Todd Sekuler). Both are interested in the political mobilization following the AIDS crisis: as part of a European network, founded by HERA, the first project seeks to explore through the lens of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, how the past is mobilized in the unfolding of activism, health policy and citizenship in Europe. By analyzing the discourses and practices that make up HIV/AIDS policy in Germany, Poland, Turkey, the UK, and at the European level, EUROPACH aims to describe the varied citizenship claims (in terms of entitlements and responsibilities) that emerge across shifting notions of Europe. As the overall aim of the project is to unpack the logics of policy discourses, the Berlin based research team focuses on the German as well as on transnational histories that have been involved in the co-production of these policy assemblages. The second project, beginning in December 2017, focuses on Germany and studies the emergence, consolidation and frictions of the AIDS movement in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) during the 1980s and early 1990s.

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Christine Wimbauer, Professor for Sociology of Work and Gender, Humboldt-Universität

Almut Peukert, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Sociology of Work and Gender

Mona Motakef, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Sociology of Work and Gender

“Ambivalent Recognition Order. Doing reproduction and doing family beyond the heterosexual nuclear family”

In our presentation, we outline a project on the doing reproduction and doing family in LGBTIQ families in Germany, which we will run in the near future. Families beyond the heterosexual norm are still widely ignored by sociological research in German speaking countries. Recently, Germany has made hetero- and homosexual relationships more equal by law, but social, institutional and legal inequalities still exist. The main aim of the research project is to conduct an explorative, qualitative study of 12 non-heterosexual one- and more-parent families. A central theoretical goal is to develop an empirically grounded enlarged concept of the family and moreover to develop an extended understanding of parenthood against the background of an ambivalent recognition order.

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Panel 3: The Afterlife of Slavery and African American Literature

Tala Khanmalek, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Gender and Sexuality Studies and American Studies at Princeton University

“Legal Binds: Reexamining the 1871 Free Womb Law Alongside Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*”

This paper examines Brazil's 1871 Free Womb Law, the first of several gradual emancipation laws that freed the unborn children of enslaved women, to consider the ways in which rights-bearing discourse enabled the persistence of forced labor, thereby revealing the discursive and material continuities between slavery and freedom. Drawing on black feminist theory, feminist legal theory, and critical race theory to foreground the racialized and gendered dimensions of subjection in the context of freedom, I show how the Free Womb Law perpetuates bondage through the category of "slave mothers" in particular.

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Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Junior Professor of English Literature, University of Flensburg, Associate Member of the ZtG

“Queer Ethics of Reading: The Archive of Slavery between Affect and Surface”

Drawing on material from my second book in the making, *Familial Feeling: Queer Entanglements between Early Black Atlantic Writing and the Rise of the British Novel*, I propose that the emergence of modern Britishness was shaped globally already in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century before the high time of imperialism and should be related more strongly to the debate on the abolition of slavery. I read canonical British and early transatlantic literary texts as part of an entangled (rather than contrapuntal) literary history of British writing. My contribution to the panel will focus mainly on a methodological reflection on the ethical challenges of reading, particularly when dealing with the archive of slavery today. Contrasting the more overtly politicised queer impulse of embracing negative feelings, which critics such as Ann Cvetkovich propose, with what Stephen Best calls a depsychologising form of “surface reading”, I advocate a return to Sedgwickian queer reparative reading strategies that might function as a link between these supposedly contradictory methodological approaches.

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Wallace Best, Professor, Religion and African American Studies at Princeton University

“Looking for Langston: Themes of Sexuality and Subversion in the Life and Work of Langston Hughes”

African American Poet Langston Hughes has long evaded a clear, uncontroverted delineation of his sexuality and other key aspects of his life. My talk will demonstrate that such evasion was a strategy on Hughes’s part, as well as a significant assertion about the nature of “identity.” Designations of Hughes as a “gay poet,” therefore, are not so much wrong as missing the point and the bigger picture.

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Panel 4: Gender on Stage and Screen

Brian Herrera, Assistant Professor, Lewis Center for the Arts and Gender and Sexuality Studies at Princeton University

“Was Virginia Calhoun’s Problem Misogyny or Madness? A Methodological Ruminaton”

This informal rumination dips into my work toward my current book project *Starring Miss Virginia Calhoun*, a narrative portrait of a deservedly obscure early twentieth century actress, writer and producer. Because the snarl of fragmentary evidence documenting Calhoun’s life confirms the misogyny of her historical moment as emphatically as it suggests her possible mental illness, this presentation puzzles through the methodological uncertainties surrounding whether and how the historian should responsibly approach a biographical subject who might have experienced an undiagnosed/unconfirmed disability.

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Yumin Li, Research Assistant, Institute for Cultural History and Theory at Humboldt-Universität

“Shape Shifters: Cross-dressing and sexual deviance in *Piccadilly* (1929) and *Shanghai Express* (1932)”

The Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong (1905-1961) is today considered an ambivalent icon, who, on the one hand, was the first Asian American film star to gain international recognition, but on the other hand became the symbol of the hypersexualized Asian woman in film. In this paper, I will analyze the crossing of racial and sexual borders in two of her films, *Piccadilly* and *Shanghai Express*. This paper examines how the category of the ‘other’ is constructed along the lines of assumed sexual deviance. The relation between sexuality and race in these films is often reduced to processes of exoticization. However, I will show that they ought to be understood as interrelated through practices of appropriation, subversion, and chiasitic intersection.

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