

**¿Postethnicity? – Identity Politics Reconsidered
North American Theories and Literary Practices in and outside of
German Multicultural Classrooms**

**Joint Student Conference of the American Studies Program (Barbara Buchenau) and the Teaching
Methodology Program (Carola Hecke)**

Invited Mentor: Paula Moya, Professor of English, Stanford University

**Tuesday, July 17, 2007
9:00 am – 6:30 pm
SUB Research Library
Papendieck 14
Tagungsraum**

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Szenario:

The 2007 stamp of the United States Postal Service shown above celebrates a famous moment in nascent identity politics: after the 1946 law suit filed by five Mexican-American fathers against a

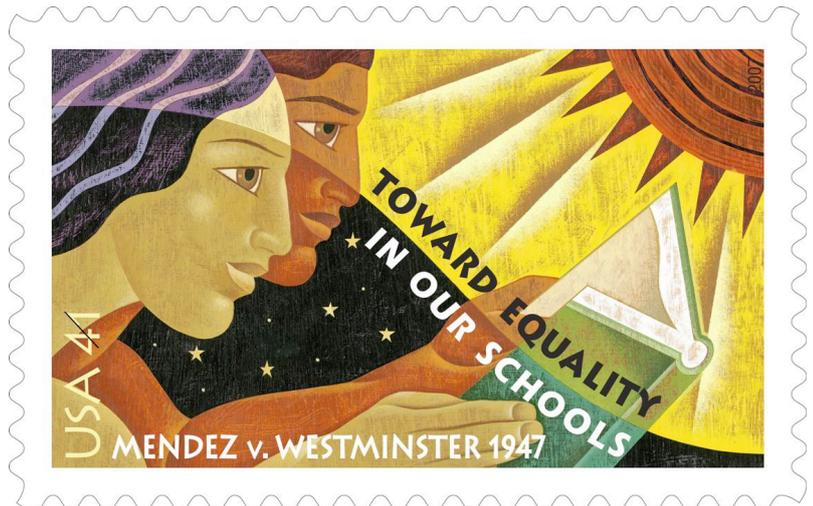
California school district, Mexican and Mexican-American students were no longer forced into segregated schools. The stamp enacts a public recognition of one of the first steps away from legal discrimination and towards equal opportunity of all students without consideration of their respective racial or ethnic identity. It appropriately bolsters a trend in higher education to publicly endorse a kind of visibly recognizable diversity of student body and staff alike. However, the public celebration of (visual) difference has also been accompanied by a larger trend of waning support for affirmative action programs, an increasing public 'colorblindness' and a persistent struggle over the continued legitimacy of identity politics. Those who fear that further public action in support of minority rights will result in forms of reversed racism often support the ideal of a postethnic nation which seeks to move beyond differences in "shape and color" (as David Hollinger has it). Recent research in the fields of psychology, sociology and education, however, suggests that multiculturalist agendas which embrace differences and respect identity politics might be more effective promoters of equality and social justice than concepts of diversity which aim at minimizing the public salience of ethnic, racial, and social identity.

Our Project:

This conference brings together students of American Studies and students of Teaching Methodology who investigate US-American multicultural theories, their literary repercussions, and their implications for public education from related, but distinct perspectives. In accordance to our respective disciplinary training, we also read literary texts for somewhat different reasons.

Carola Hecke's course "Teaching American Landeskunde [American Culture and Institutions]" prepares students for their future work as teachers of English in German high schools. The German school curriculum emphasizes intercultural learning in its foreign language classes. Ideally speaking, engagement with US-American language, literature, and culture should enable German students in high school to develop a better understanding of both the USA and Germany in the course of their studies. It should also enable them to move beyond their own culture, to see the world from a different perspective, and thus to challenge their own assumptions. Intercultural learning is expected to do two quite distinctive things: to provide students with an elementary basis to better understand aspects of the American mentality and to draw conclusions for the interaction with people of any different cultural background.

Barbara Buchenau's course "Postethnic America? Progressive Identity Politics in Recent American Literature" traces the debate over diversity and inclusion in a framework that seeks to avoid the pitfalls of the 'us vs. them' rhetoric



of recent German readings of the US-American 'Culture Wars'. The divisive rhetoric has too often led to insufficient conclusions concerning postethnic visions and identity politics. Linking cultural studies to literary studies approaches, the course practices the art of critical reading and thinking that investigates how literary texts establish meaning, how they shape opinion, why they can lead us astray, and how they make us believe them. From this perspective of textual criticism, literature emerges as a powerful and sometimes dangerous player in public debates over identity and diversity.

In our first workshop, mentored by psychologist Nicole Shelton (Princeton University), we investigated US-American multicultural theories and literary practices with a special focus on stereotype and prejudice. Following Professor Shelton's lead, we distinguished theories and practices (literary and educational) which downplay differences from those which emphasize them in endeavors to turn differences (of culture, race, ethnicity, class, gender) into communal assets. We found that this distinction itself sparked new difficulties, with minorities embracing a multicultural, differential logic, and the white mainstream supporting colorblind, universalizing concepts of social interaction.

Our endeavor to see how these divergent theories and literary practices can affect English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes in increasingly diverse German high schools led to three preliminary findings: (a) German concepts of intercultural learning acknowledge cultural differences, but ignore visual differences thus establishing a middle ground between colorblind and multicultural concepts, (b) the recognition of differences, visual as well as cultural, can have positive effects on the learning process, (c) stereotypes should be addressed in the classroom, and (d) literary texts, by many thought to be excellent training grounds for intercultural communication, need to be handled with extreme care. Literary texts have a strong impact on the shaping of a diverse society, since they have the potential to foster intercultural and interracial understanding, but are also present in stereotyping and the development of prejudices.

During our final conference, mentored by cultural theorist Paula Moya (Stanford University), we want to reconsider American identity politics from the vantage point of recent arguments for the continuing importance of struggles for social recognition. We also want to draw attention to the fact that most of the participants in the conference are outsiders in the American debate, who are nonetheless deeply implicated in a society that needs to address very similar issues. In Germany, neither the public display of visual diversity, nor the public struggle for minority rights has become as ubiquitous as in the USA. With the United Nations Report of Vernor Muñoz on the Right to Education in Germany (March 2007), however, it has become quite clear that we only think we do not need identity politics. This, we might argue, is not true: Germany fails to provide adequate education for its immigrants, and its school system is a profound element in the reproduction of social hierarchies. Additionally, German tendencies to opt for institutional solutions rather than grassroots movements of social solidarity are not likely to change the general trend of excluding students set apart by markers of race, ethnicity, class, or disability.

Our Learning Targets:

- to train effective presentation and discussion skills
- to practice professional behavior
- to demonstrate and (re-)evaluate academic insights
- to summarize and reflect on the insights gained by this term's work

Learning Targets - American Studies:

- to assess the role of identity in multicultural projects
- to reconsider 'identity politics' and to critically review attempts to move beyond them (USA) or to sideline them (Europe)
- to analyze literary interventions into identity and its politics
- to investigate how postmodern literature redesigns identity as slippery, yet persistently present
- to interrogate the powerful connections between literature and a society's contested goals

Learning Targets - Teaching Methodology:

- to see how literary texts portray aspects of the life of minorities in the USA
- to realize with the help of literary texts how experiences shape personality
- to learn about US-American society, the shaping of identity, and the consequences of discrimination
- to gather and test ideas for the teaching of US-American literature (e.g. choice of material, thematic focus) in German EFL classrooms
- to comment on the presentations referring to the goals of intercultural learning

Our Mentor:



Paula M. L. Moya

The mentor for our student symposium is Paula Moya, Associate Professor of English at Stanford University; a leading scholar in recent cultural theory, she is also the co-editor of an essay collection that gathers the main objective of our venture for this symposium – the reconsideration of identity and its politics - in its title: *Identity Politics Reconsidered* (2006).

Professor Moya received her PhD in English from Cornell University, N.Y., and a B.A. in English from the University of Houston, Texas. Her most important areas of specialization are American literature, the literature and culture of Chicana/os and Latina/os, and minority and feminist theoretical perspectives. At Stanford University, Moya teaches at the Department of English, but is also affiliated with the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, and with the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity. As the

Director of Stanford's Undergraduate Program of Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity (2002-03), she has promoted an academic environment that embraces and fosters cultural and intellectual diversity. In addition to the volume already mentioned, Professor Moya is the author of *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles* (2002) and the co-editor of *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (2000). Her work reevaluates concepts such as identity, experience, and knowledge from a perspective that refuses to treat these as inherently arbitrary and contingent. As a founding member of *Future of Minority Studies Research Project*, Paula Moya has helped to shape an interdisciplinary, mobile 'think tank' dedicated to a theory-based redefinition of higher education in a multicultural democracy. Numerous fellowships, honors and awards from Stanford University, the Ford Foundation and Cornell University, among others, underline Moya's cutting-edge contributions to research and teaching in the fields of multicultural theory and education, minority studies, and recent American literature.

Since it is our project to study the capacity of multicultural theories, literary texts and educational practices to address and to challenge racial and ethnic barriers in the United States and (to a lesser extent) in Germany, we are extremely honored to have Prof. Paula Moya as our mentor. She will share with us her insights into the salience of identity, social location and its impact on knowledge in a multicultural society.

Program:

9:00 am: Barbara Buchenau (American Studies, Göttingen), "Identity Matters: American Multiculturalism and the German Classroom"

9:15 am: Paula Moya (Department of English, Stanford University), "The Dialogic Potential of Multicultural Literature"

10:00 am: coffee break

10:15 am: session 1, chaired by Swantje Möller (American Studies)

Jenny Liebers (Teaching Methodology), "Teaching T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*"

Rebecca Scolah (American Studies), "T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* as Melodrama – Consequences for the Classroom"

Heiko Schöneburg (American Studies), "Nostalgia and Survival: Primitivism in T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*"

Jan Zimmermann (American Studies), "Stereotype and its Functions in T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*"

Alena Mehrtens (American Studies), "Safety and Fear – Fences in T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*"

12:30 pm: lunch

1:30 pm: session 2, chaired by Kim Staack (American Studies)

Bastian Heyduck (Teaching Methodology), "Teaching Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*"

Patrick Witte (American Studies), "A glance can freeze us in place; it can 'possess' us': Vision and Sight in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera*"

Christina Achtert (American Studies), "'When watching Mexican movies, I felt a sense of homecoming as well as alienation': Images in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera*"

Mahssa Kolyaie (Teaching Methodology) and André Lang (Teaching Methodology), "Teaching *L.A. Crash*"

3:45 pm: coffee break

4:00 pm: session 3, chaired by Anne Grothe (American Studies)

Inga Fries (Teaching Methodology), "Teaching cultural awareness with *non-fictional texts*"

Philipp Gektidis (American Studies), "Language and its Politics in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera*"

Carola Croll (Ethnology), "Mexican Americans in California State Prisons: Issues of Identity"

Stephan Demann (Teaching Methodology), "The *German multicultural classroom*: opportunities and problems"

6:00 pm: Carola Hecke (Teaching Methodology), Platform for Feedback

6:15 pm: glass of wine

Organizer:

Dr. Barbara Buchenau, American Studies Program

Tel: +49-551-3919626

e-mail: bbuchen@uni-goettingen.de

Co-Organizer:

Carola Hecke, English Teaching Methodology Program

Tel: +49-551-395840

e-mail: carola.hecke@phil.uni-goettingen.de

Department of English

Käte-Hamburger-Weg 3

37073 Göttingen

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