



Radboud University  
Duisburg - Essen  
Spring Academy

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

**Master programs in American Studies at  
Radboud University Nijmegen, NL,  
the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany,  
and the University of Wyoming, USA**

# GROUNDING TRANSNATIONAL AMERICAN STUDIES

## Mission Statement

When approaching transnational American studies in European and U.S. American contexts we need to ground<sup>1</sup> our work in a threefold manner: First regarding the 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

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<sup>1</sup> Grounding is a research method and strategy first developed in the social sciences in the 1960s (Barney Glaser & Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, 1965). It is soundly lodged in hermeneutics, developing qualitative approaches which combine the study of texts with field work, participant observation, interviews and self-reflection. We propose to adapt this dynamic epistemological and methodological school for 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. One particularly interesting reinterpretation of grounding is Tamara Caraus and Elena Paris' edited collection *Re-Grounding Cosmopolitanism: Towards a Post-Foundational Cosmopolitanism*. London: Routledge, 2016. Print.

democratic culture.<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup>

**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 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.<sup>4</sup> The European perspective can contribute to challenging what Amy Kaplan called “the tenacious grasp of American exceptionalism.”<sup>5</sup> 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 Don Pease is but one example which places special importance on transnational and European perspectives on

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<sup>2</sup> Fluck, Winfried. “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.

<sup>3</sup> For another ex-negativo romance, the nightmare of environmental destruction see Levander, Caroline. “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. Web.

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

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

the US.<sup>6</sup> 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 of 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.

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.”<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> Ideally, this involves self-reflexive as well as

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<sup>6</sup> Pease, Donald, ed. *Re-Mapping the Transnational: A Dartmouth Series in American Studies*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 2010. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Lauter, Paul. “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. Web.

<sup>8</sup> We borrow this expression from Kelleter, Frank. “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* (1997). 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

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 studies by offering multi-national perspectives. We will focus on triangular perspectives on war, liberation, commemoration, political protest, urbanization and deindustrialization, transgressive cultural and musical imaginaries from World War II to today. How can students and scholars from the Netherlands, Germany, and the U.S. trace American legacies in a transnational and comparative fashion? Case studies involve sites of memory related to World War II, the music and media of oppression and liberation, urban and posturban transformations in the U.S., the Ruhr region and the Netherlands. A combination of classroom lectures and debates, field work, consultations with peers and excursions offers a promising experiment of grounding by comparing triangular approaches and results, for example via online learning platforms. In addition, students equipped with digital communication devices and powerful shareware tools are invited to combine theoretical analysis with the very means they use to retrieve information, namely documentary films, photo essays, or the programming of new smartphone apps to present their research and their own archives, be it oral history, visual archives created with smartphones or discovering archives in the digital and analogue realm.

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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activities of [its] objects of observation” thus giving insights into the multiple “dependencies between a culture’s knowledge and performance of itself” (305).