

Universität Rostock



Traditio et Innovatio



Philosophische Fakultät
 Institut für Anglistik/Amerikanistik
 Prof. Dr Gabriele Linke
 in Zusammenarbeit mit der German Fulbright Commission
 Sommersemester 2009

Contents

1	April 24, 2009: Robert W. Cherny — The U.S. Presidential Election of 2008 in Historical Context: Long-Term Stability and Critical Realignments in American Political History	2
2	May 8, 2009: Sue Ann Tretter — The Mythology of Baseball	4
3	May 22, 2009: Brian Reed — American Poetry in the 21st Century	7
4	June 5, 2009: Paul Spickard — Skin-Tone Discrimination among Asian Americans	10
5	June 19, 2009: Christopher S. Leslie — W.E.B. du Bois and Scientific Racism: Black Souls vs. Empiricism	13
6	July 3, Michael Rozendal: Thirties Poetry, 21st Century Politics: From Langston Hughes to Kerry and Obama	15

1 April 24, 2009: Robert W. Cherny — The U.S. Presidential Election of 2008 in Historical Context: Long-Term Stability and Critical Realignments in American Political History



Drawing upon a quite recent topic — the presidential election of 2008 —, Dr Robert Cherny related the political implications of this event to certain characteristics of American political history. He based his analysis on the thesis of historians that the long-term commitment ("alignment") of voters to a political party and agenda has been essential for the stability of the presidency. The move from stability to change is usually initiated by powerful events: voters start to question their loyalty with one party. This process of de-alignment is followed by a phase in which parties will try to win over these de-aligned voters with the help of new federal policies.

Dr Cherny continued to sketch U.S. political history from the Early Republic as the history of party systems while illustrating the re-alignments that occurred. Although the USA started without a party system (which was considered colonial British and therefore to be avoided), political groups quickly evolved. During the first party system, lasting from 1792 to 1832, two new parties established themselves: the Democratic Party and the

Whigs. One major innovation during this period was a new party institution: the national nominating convention.

Within the second party system (1828 to the 1850s) the extension of voting rights to all adult white males supported a different understanding of a party as a democratic feature and the act of (open) voting developed into a social event. Party loyalty was seen as a strong, genuinely male feature. During the third party system (1860 to 1896) the issue of slavery dominated the voting behavior. Party loyalty went along the racial or ethnic lines. The North was predominantly Republican, the South Democratic. Dr Cherny claimed that during the Civil War the Republican Party was able to secure life-long loyalty from Union Army veterans. As a result of their policy, Republicans were able to maintain a majority in the popular vote after the depression of 1893. They successfully won further seven victories within the fourth party system (1896 to 1932), which was also based on strong regional sources of support. In the early 20th century, the secret ballot was introduced, which loosened party loyalty. Then the depression came in 1929 and F.D. Roosevelt won nearly all the states. He led up to the fifth party system (1932 to 1968) with the New Deal initiating economic regulation and redistribution. In the late 20th century party loyalties changed and the so-called independent voters rose to importance. Although these voters lean towards one major party they differ in their voting behavior, and scholars therefore tend to see these voters' politics as a permanent or "extended de-alignment". Additionally, negative campaigning started to influence politics widely. In combination with opinion polls politicians mainly tried to address their target groups by discrediting the other candidates. Since 1968 the party system has been questioned. Voting behavior has become less predictable, and presidential elections have tended to be very close. Dr Cherny also classified the support for independent candidates as significant.

Dr Cherny named critics of the realignment and party system model but stated that they still keep the major concept. Another important concept that indicates the possibility for building a stable majority is coat tailing, which means that members of a new President's party get offices. Obama drew a high percentage of party members into the House. However, approval polls have indicated that Obama enjoys a high approval rate but has not been able to transfer his popularity to his party. These indicators already show that Obama has to face many obstacles. He promised fundamental changes in society but has been busy "undoing Bush" and handling foreign affairs. He will also have to cling to conventional politics to meet the demands by the financial crises. He will be measured by the policies he initiates when he wants to secure his rather impatient young voters' support. He mobilized Latino, African-American and women voters, but there was no massive

change in voter behavior.

The question if there will be a major re-alignment after the 2008 election could only be answered by mere speculation. Dr Cherny suggested that the change Obama may bring can only be recognized after 15 to 20 years.

Maria-K. Rau

2 May 8, 2009: Sue Ann Tretter — The Mythology of Baseball

(Lindenwood U / U Leipzig)



Sue Tretter with baseball cap, rally position

Dr Sue Tretter started her lecture with a few general remarks about culture being socially constructed and American culture being constructed through the amalgamation of many influences.

She then discussed various aspects of the mythology of baseball. Firstly, Dr Tretter talked about the history of baseball, which may have its roots in Cherokee stickball or British cricket. It became a popular sport in the 19th century and was played, for example,

at the time of the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln was reported to have played it, and Pres, Wilson and Kennedy shared that passion for the game.

A second aspect was the importance of the game for the assimilation of immigrants in American culture. There were, for example, Jewish teams such as "House of David" and famous Jewish player. Baseball was also played by teams organized by trade unions, companies, and schools. So-called "farm teams" are popular teams for everybody from which Major League players may be recruited.

In the 20th century, baseball was adopted by many ethnic groups, but they played in segregated teams. Japanese Americans played it in their internment camps during World War II. There were American Indian teams, a Negro League and others. Integration of non-white players in Major League teams started only after World War II and grew through the impact of the Civil Rights Movement. In World War II, baseball went international through army and navy teams travelling, but the women's leagues that were created during the war to keep the game going were closed in the 1950s.

Nowadays there are 30 Major League Teams, the Minor League, and the Little League teams (for children). Fans are trained from infancy, taken to the ball park, find "baseball buddies", play in the backyard and later in high school. The sport has become part of the American Dream and an American childhood. Dr Tretter also compared baseball with religion. Thousands gather in "The Church of the Holy Ball" to sing, "preach", share rituals such as the "7th inning stretch" and ritual foods (peanuts, hot dogs). Its prophets are the Hall of Famers, that is, those players who are represented in the Hall of Fame (e.g. Babe Ruth), which is located in Coopers Town, NY (the Jerusalem), and the Yankees Stadium in NYC is called "The Cathedral". These complex social practices make baseball a "civic religion".

Today, baseball is an inclusive spectator sport, and the baseball lingo has entered American English.



Post-colloquium in the Cafe Heumond

3 May 22, 2009: Brian Reed — American Poetry in the 21st Century

(U Washington, Seattle / Ruhr-U Bochum)



Rostock's students oohed and aahed when host Prof. Gabriele Linke introduced Associate Professor Brian Reed: He had graduated from Harvard, received a degree from Oxford and earned his Ph.D. at Stanford University. Dr Reed's research interests are American art and poetry. Thus he presented his most recent results on American poetry in the 21st century.

At the beginning of his talk Dr Reed made the hearer aware of the three main problems that occur when working with poetry: the question of analysis, of nationality and of continuity vs. rapture. Firstly, Reed offered a list of helpful points as to how to approach poetry. One can have an eye on the prizes a poet receives which offers a rough index of his or her general impact. The historical perspective may also offer some further information of historical events that relate to the poem. A much deeper reflection could be offered if one speaks to the poet directly. Secondly, the problem of nationality cannot be ignored in a globalized world that also offers extensive travelling. Therefore the usual frame of analysis — the nation state — breaks apart. People are transnational and immigrants are

becoming successful poets. Thirdly, the trauma of 9/11 and the Iraq invasion might have initiated a new age of anti-war poetry, but Reed argues that this is a continuation of 1950s and 60s anti-war poetry; the events did not influence the way people wrote.

In the second part of the lecture Reed introduced two poetry movements of the late 20th century. Both are considered unfashionable, but the results of his research show that they undeniably influence the movements of the 21st century. On the one hand, the scenic mode of the 1970s offers the anti-romantic aspect for current poetry. It was also expressed in “Grandmother”-poems, which later became parodied. And it provides present writers with an intimate way of clarifying their own relationship to the past. The scenic mode is characterized by a 1st person narrator in free verse and a conversational, so-called “natural” style. The poets are not aiming at sublimity but provisional clarity which usually offers psychological and spiritual insights. On the other hand, the avant-garde movement thought they could start a revolution through bad grammar. The language poets of the 1970s and 80s living mainly outside of the cities of New York and San Francisco challenged the view that capitalism is something natural. Due to their fragmentation of syntax and decentering of themselves in their poems they are even seen as a utopian movement. Their idea that a political transformation is possible through poetry is still considered valid today.

The third part introduced the main tendencies of 21st century literature and the visible influences of the late 20th century with the help of many exemplary poems. “Á la Mode Retro” is a first tendency of present-day poets. The retro-modernists go back to modernism. They concentrate on the issue of language and identity because they see contemporary life as chaotic and in their writings the poets try to put an imaginative order on it. Therefore the “post-modern” notion of a de-centered self is not an accurate term anymore. As examples he presented the poem “Praying (Attempt of June 14 '03)” by Jorie Graham from 2004 that uses a series of prayers for explaining the world. And according to Reed, Frank Bidart’s “In Fu Watches the Spring Festival Across Serpentine Lake” (2008) echoes Ezra Pound’s long poem “The Cantos” (1948) and T.S. Elliot’s rhythm.

Other poets can be seen in the tradition of the midcentury. They mirror the 1950s and 60s post-structuralists. Sometimes they are just using the older themes and styles to indicate rebellion against the very same. Reed introduced Laura Kasischke’s poem “Miss Congeniality” (2007), in which she describes a beauty pageant with a high use of assonance. In her questioning of femininity she mirrors mid-century poet Sylvia Plath in topic and style. Likewise African-American writer Kevin Young employs the device of an address to the nation in his poem “Americana” (2007) in order to criticize society. He

equals Langston Hughes' and Allen Ginsberg's verbal playfulness, quick rhyme and wit.

A second tendency in 21st century American poetry is the New Mainstream. Poems of the Hybrid Style movement do not receive prizes but they are studied and published. The poets utilize difficult devices (e.g. Language Poetry's technique and disruptions) making their work difficult to read. At this point Reed reasons that this may induce the reader to study the poem more deeply. "Nurse" (2006) by Mark Levine showed impressively the disjunctive style of their writing. The unexpected and unusual phrases are their way to experiment with the functions of language.

There is also the possibility of fitting poems into mechanical forms. The poets that are tired of free verse employ the Ghazal — an ancient design from Persian literature —, the Fibonacci series — a mathematical formula dictating the number of syllables for each line, or the Abecedaries — one letter of the alphabet for each line. All these structures create poems that are perceived either as peculiar or as very artificial in form. Reed presented the following examples: Natasha Trethewey; "Unkissed" (2009) by Native American Sherman Alexie, and "Star Chart" (2005) by Catherine Wing.

The third tendency Reed explored was the development of the New Avant-Gardes. The old avant-garde questioned their political purpose in bad grammar or syntax. But the "Flarf"-movement — beginning as an e-mail list in 2001 — kept the belief that their audience could be moved to take action. They showed the melancholy of the American leftist circles in deliberately bad jokes and parodies, usually in awful verse. They intended to reveal the hatred, inanity and illiteracy of mainstream America mainly using search engines and the internet. So did K. Silem Mohammed who looked up the words "peace" and "kittens" in 2003. He found the lines on the internet that make up a poem of the same name and it mainly deals with horrible "accidents" involving cats. His deliberate choice mirrors the pathologies of American society.

The other part of the movement is Conceptual Poetry which lost its political activism but still tends to be provocative in its opposition to the "À la mode Retro"-movements. While they obviously mirror Dada and Fluxus from the 1960s, the question arises if their work may be considered poetry. Even the poets consider themselves mere content providers who rearrange given material to receive pay checks. They criticize the myth of the creative genius. The 200-page book "The Weather" (2005) by Kenneth Goldsmith contains one year of recorded weather forecasts of a New York radio station. This is regarded as uncreative writing. Reed assumes that although the reader (who even buys the book) will probably start skipping through the pages, there may be some interaction with the book itself (hopefully at some point).

In the end Reed summarizes some final points. In his opinion it is obvious that rap, slam poetry and spoken word have not transformed poetry in the USA as significantly as he thought ten years ago. Neither has e-poetry gained an audience except maybe an academic one. Additionally, diversity is still an ongoing matter of concern, but different canons are starting to fuse. In general there is a huge fascination with artifice and technique in 21st century American poetry, which shows that poets are appropriating old techniques in new media. And the internet provides widespread access to sound and video files of performing poets. Saying this, Reed presents his audience valuable web pages or internet providers for contemporary American poetry: ubu.com; PennSound; poetryfoundation.org; poets.org; Electronic Poetry Center and Poets Against The War.

Maria-K. Rau

4 June 5, 2009: Paul Spickard — Skin-Tone Discrimination among Asian Americans

(UC Santa Barbara / U Münster)



“Ethnic questions are the questions of my life.”

Paul Spickard is professor of history and Asian American studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Driven by those questions he had conducted a study together with his students and he offered an intriguing insight.

While 3% of the U.S. population are Asian American, there are 25% Asian Harvard students. So Spickard felt the necessity to ask what their life looks like. The book *Is lighter better?* is the result of his survey which he considers a sociological study but then, correcting himself, judges “FSO”: figuring something out. His aim was not to provide methodologically correct data but to find access to hidden patterns of Asian American life in the USA. Thereby they conducted interviews with the very heterogeneous group of Asian Americans and Asian immigrants (Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Korean), who were supposed to assess their own skin color and what they think about it. Dr Spickard and his students also interviewed doctors. He elaborated on three themes that were the results of the interviews. Firstly, “Beauty is light.” Dark skin is traditionally not considered beautiful by Asians. This is still relevant in the mating and marriage market, especially for women.

Secondly, “Stay out of the sun.” In order to keep their skin light, Korean women protect it with gloves, scarves, helmets and even face masks. This phenomenon is also seen in Korea town in Los Angeles. Additionally, both men and women are discouraged from dating “dark-skinned” people. There even is the concern that then babies will come out “ugly”. This attitude mirrors an upper-class prejudice from Asia. Light skin means leisure, wealth and status because the person can afford not to work. Instead it obviously opposes the European attitude. Our post-industrial culture of work is done mainly in offices. That means tanned skin represents leisure and money (holiday, tanning studio). Those desires are (re-)produced by the tourist and advertisement industry. And while the Chinese travelled the world already centuries ago (e.g. diaspora to the Philippines 300 years ago), they always kept a close connection to China and its traditions.

Thirdly, skin-tone discrimination is linked to patriarchy. Women are supposed to be beautiful in an adherence to a beauty ideal. This is usually defined by men who themselves only need to look prosperous. Dark skin always means suffering criticism. And a mate should generally be lighter in his/her skin tone. Mainly immigrants struggle with the mania for skin bleaching. They are confronted with the paradox that in their home countries stores are selling bleaching creams while in the USA tanning lotions are sold.

This has a big impact on the assessment of skin color as Spickard shows with the results of his research. Participants (all of Asian background) were asked to invent a life

story for three girls they knew only from photographs. The girls were of the same age and educational background but their skin colors were of three different shades. The remarkable results were that all participants connected dysfunction and sexuality with the “lightest” girl, intelligence and success with the girl of “medium” skin color and traditional values with the “darkest” skin. Being asked whom they wanted to be (with), the “medium” light skin was first choice for both girls and boys. Parents instead chose the “darkest” skin due to their wish of having someone in the family still connected to traditional values.

Other features of his research included advertisements of skin-bleaching products targeting Asians and obscuring the harmful side effects through a pseudo-scientific choice of words. He also conducted interviews with doctors who specialized in ethnic corrective surgery. Spickard condemns this procedure as vicious because it is directed at a person racially. Especially the addictive quality of cosmetic surgery makes the issues even more problematic. In the end the question remained if the American dimension to the problem — namely choosing a girl with “medium” light skin for identification — indicates a change away from skin-tone discrimination among Asian Americans, or if the business and cosmetic industry will strengthen the association of beauty, upper-class status and wealth with light skin.

Maria-K. Rau



5 June 19, 2009: Christopher S. Leslie — W.E.B. du Bois and Scientific Racism: Black Souls vs. Empiricism

(Polytechnic University Brooklyn / U Potsdam)



Dr. Leslie presented an African American sociologist who tried to fight imperialist thinking and scientific racism as both a literary author and an eminent scholar: William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963). Leslie comprehensively illustrated the times W.E.B. Du Bois was born and lived in. It was the era of segregation and continuous struggle for Black people's civil rights and the recognition of Blacks in the academic world.

Contemporary pseudo-scientific approaches tried to prove that there was a biologically based hierarchy of races, implying that race was connected with intelligence and mental health and Blacks were inferior in those respects. Leslie showed how flawed and far-fetched these empirical methods proved to be. As a next step, Leslie commented on the way Du Bois thought he could change old perceptions of racial relations and instead offer new thoughts. In order to counter scientific racism, he became the first African American to conduct an empirical sociological study, published under the title *The Philadelphia Negro*

(1899). He showed that racist bias can be avoided in sociological research and that higher rates of crime and mental disease for Blacks had economic and social causes rather than biological ones.

With his book *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois chose a different approach to counter scientific racism. Each chapter covers different aspects of the life and history of African Americans, e.g. autobiography, education, sociology and history. The chapters are written within the essay tradition but also display modernist features, such as the incorporation of short scores of music, partly without their lyrics.

In order to bring forward evidence for his point that Du Bois intended to break down the reader's mind set, Leslie then analyzed the last chapter, "Of the Sorrow Songs", more closely. He argued that the aural epigraphs (scores of music) and the verbal epigraphs (poetry and spirituals) represent a challenge to the reader as to become active in order to engage with the content of the book. Therefore the reader's consciousness is shaken up.

Taking this a step further one may conclude that the active reader of Du Bois's texts was encouraged to fight against segregation and all the other inequalities contemporary African Americans suffered from.

Maria-K. Rau



6 July 3, Michael Rozendal: Thirties Poetry, 21st Century Politics: From Langston Hughes to Kerry and Obama

(U San Francisco / U Passau & Regensburg)



Defining and re-defining America as a nation is a recurring issue at the intersection of poetry and politics, of rhetoric and action. Dr. Rozendal intended to represent this phenomenon within contemporary politics and 1930s poetry and photography.

Both eras are connected by an economic recession and a political intention of mythologizing America. While the situation of the Great Depression in the 1930s may differ slightly from today's recession, both Barack Obama and Franklin D. Roosevelt have shown the ability to change the nation's mind set. According to Rozendal, Obama produced an "inaugural paradox". In his inaugural address Obama returned to America's mythical past referring to the "founding documents" and "the ideals of our forebears". And while this is commonly defined as a conservative return to the roots it also allows the president the opposing radical and progressive move towards the creation of a new American community (and thereby overcoming the Bush era). This invocation of American folk culture is the basis for dramatic transformation, according to Rozendal. The paradox then is obvious because a myth or the return to roots is normally utilized to stabilize a system (of values)

rather than change it.

The African American poet Langston Hughes also turned to radicalism and progressiveness when he published his political poem “Let America be America again” in the men’s magazine *Esquire* in 1936. Two voices elaborate on the American Dream either as an ideal view of America or as the lived experience that questions those ideals. The latter is the voice of the enslaved and impoverished and opposes the male Jeffersonian image of a yeoman farmer as the core of American society. As Rozendal claims, the language of nationalism used in the poem creates the nation’s history from below. Hughes, as a writer of the Harlem Renaissance, longs for liberation and the implementation of the egalitarian ideal.

This call for racial equality is opposed by the photography project initiated by the Farm Security Agency (FSA) during the New Deal. The pictures of the farmers suffering from the Great Depression portray these as suffering passively and nobly. Their purpose was to justify Roosevelt’s agricultural policies. Their character may be described as neither neutral nor propagandistic. Rozendal therefore suggests reading it as rhetorical material. It offers an insight merely into white poverty re-casting the myth of the active yeomen farmer. Its rhetoric of returning to basic American values supposedly creates aspiration and action.

This sense of a moment of transformation is also found in Hughes longer version of his poem “Let America be America again” published 1938 in *A New Song*, a workers’ magazine. When Hughes writes of “hope”, his promise of action lies within the people themselves. They have to be their own agents.

This aspect was neglected when Kerry employed the poem during his 2004 presidential campaign. His intention to end re-segregation with the help of the poem created a communist connotation inherent in the poem when selectively quoted. Additionally, Kerry failed in “exploiting” the poem due to his rather passive and “laid-back”-attitude towards American values and ideals. In contrast, Obama succeeded greatly in his 2008 presidential campaign when he promoted a grass-roots and dynamic self-image.

Maria-K. Rau

the one who dreamt our basic
came
a "homeland of the free."
?
d the free?

