

**Biopolitics – Geopolitics – Sovereignty – Life: Settler Colonialisms and Indigenous Presences in North America**

**Veranstalter:** Dr. Rene Dietrich, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz; Prof. Dr. Kerstin Knopf, University of Bremen

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**Bericht von:** Jens Temmen, American Studies, Potsdam University; Sonja John, Berlin

This conference investigated biopolitics and geopolitics in the settler nations of North America by analyzing continuing techniques of dispossession and surveillance of Indigenous populations and corresponding forms of sovereignty, agency, and life exercised in the matrix of biopower. Contributions addressed the questions how various biopolitical attempts to regulate Indigenous peoples subject Native nations to settler colonial rule.

In her keynote lecture, MISHUANA GOEMAN (University of California, Los Angeles) explicated her understanding of the Niagara Falls as heteronormative Euro-American place making that erases Haudenosaunee histories, land, and meanings of place. Combining the Falls' relevance as a hydropower plant and honeymoon destination the place has literally become a source of reproduction for the settler state; a reproduction only possible through the erasure of Native peoples, histories and epistemologies. She illustrated this erasure by tracing a whitening of the Maid of the Mist on postcard depictions. Goeman argues that the Niagara power plant became a model for subsequent damming projects that followed the same processes of displacement, dispossession and disregarding treaty rights by subjugating Native lands and bodies under state jurisdiction.

Investigating negotiations of settler colonialism, Indigeneity, race, land rights, and landownership in Afrofuturism literature, MARK RIFKIN (University of North Carolina, Greensboro) analyzed Octavia Butler's trilogy „Lilith's Brood“ to discuss the alleged incompatibility of Black freedom struggles and Indigenous self-determination. While the former can be framed as imaginaries of flesh, Rifkin argued, the latter is rather land-based, thus preventing any critical analysis

of these two projects by contrasting the violence of dehumanization through fungibility to dispossession through domestication. Rifkin claimed that „Lilith's Brood“ presents a speculative leap that allows for engaging and moving between these two struggles and their respective experiences and potentials. In this cross-examination of these two struggles through the novel, Rifkin further argued how supposedly larger struggles involving all of humanity can be used to elide the issue of Indigenous peoplehood by imagining it as a recalcitrant remainder that needs to be overcome for all of humanity to flourish.

ANDREA SMITH (University of California, Riverside) contended that discourses of settler colonialism, which justified Indigenous disenfranchisement and territorial dispossession in colonial America, and the logic of incarceration of the US-American justice system share notions of disability and unproductivity. Smith's paper steered attention to the fact that exploring the reciprocity of these two discourses is crucial to understanding the workings of the „school-to-prison-pipeline“ since settler regimes are effectively reproducing themselves by criminalizing the Other at the intersection of race, class, gender, and ability.

MICHAEL R. GRIFFITHS (University of Wollongong) explained the ways in which Indigenous belief systems are reductively reproduced within settler colonial systems as mere empirical data to sustain a desired Indigenous Otherness. Building on Sigmund Freud's and Chris Bracken's discussions of „pathology“ and Jeffrey Sissons' notion of „oppressive authenticity,“ Griffiths' application of Momaday's and Ibibara's work to Aboriginal title cases revealed the tendency within settler colonial subjects to actually desire Indigenous subjectivity to ultimately confirm Indigenous dispossession.

ROBERT NICHOLS (University of Minnesota) provided genealogies of various definitions of and approaches to the notion of dispossession across a number of disciplines. Commenting on the usefulness and ideological connotations of these angles, Nichols sketched a necessary theoretical framework to analyze and understand settler-colonial legal discourses of property and possession that,

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in turn, formed the discursive basis for the dispossession of First Nations. Nichols argued for a more nuanced understanding of these strategies that could impact and inform current projects by Indigenous activists and scholars.

Discussing how lingering heteronormative discourses of settler-colonialism inform political structures, AUDRA SIMPSON (Columbia University) exposed how particularly the Indigenous female body comes under scrutiny in gendered settler-colonial political structures of contemporary Canada. Her talk exemplified the erasure of Native women within these structures by referencing the Indian Act and discussing the hunger strike of Chief Theresa Spence. Citations of media and public responses to Spence's hunger strike revealed how the political claims were ignored but her body came under attack – her female Indigenous body whose fleshly appearance counterfeited the logic of the erasure of Native women. Simpson identified the sexist and racist responses to a female Native body that „fails to disappear“ as a powerful point of departure to question heteronormative logics of settler-colonial Canada.

Analyzing the dissecting and ridiculing paintings and performance art of Kent Monkman, KATHY-ANN TAN (University of Tübingen) showed how Monkman deconstructs presentations of the allegedly superior heteronormative western nuclear family over alternate sexualities. Monkman does so by placing homosexual scenes involving active Native and submissive white men in classic pieces of US-American art, thus questioning the over-romanticization of North American landscapes and its peoples.

BRIAN HUDSON (University of Oklahoma, Norman) investigated the functions and modes of Cherokee stories, finding that these stories are recognitions of the sovereignty of non-human species. Analyzing interpretations of oral literatures, Hudson identified notions of political interests of non-human species and recognition of non-human life through treaty relations.

GESA MACKENTHUN (University of Rostock) investigated the tropes of Native bisoncide and neo-savagism as part of a current ecocritical re-assessment of the repu-

tation of Native Americans. Notions of an „un-ecological Indian“ in the work of white scholars mean a radical departure from stereotypical-mythical representations and claim Native responsibility for the extermination of the bison, in turn impacting Native struggles over land, rights and resources.

SANDY GRANDE (Connecticut College) explicated how the privatization of care signifies another instance of Indigenous removal. Aging bodies are commodified and dehumanized in a process of public cost reduction very similar to biopolitical measures for geopolitical aims that regulate and affected the most vulnerable (the sick, the young, the confined). In a process of insitutionalization Grande saw the same mechanisms at work that increasingly eliminate elders from their meaningful positions in Indigenous communities as teachers and close connections to the spirit world.

NORBERT FINZSCH (University of Trier) exemplified how the Australian High Court uses the notion of Indigenous peoples as being nomads to refuse Native title on the basis of lacking authenticity. Because of these political and legal consequences, Finzsch criticized Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari for inserting conceptions of a „dangerous“ or „false“ nomadism into the cultural mainstream. Finzsch posited complex Indigenous conceptions of space and placemaking versus European ascriptions of nomadism.

Reclaiming of self-definition in a highly regulated environment was the topic of JACQUELINE FEAR-SEGAL's (University of East Anglia, Norwich) presentation that used „points of fracture“ in Carlisle student portraits to interrogate the story behind the photos. While the school and the photographers followed their own interests in taking, selling, and disseminating the (partially iconic) portraits, Fear-Segal explored how Carlisle students took control of their own performance and self-definition.

URSULA LEHMKUHL and LISA SCHAUB (both University of Trier) discussed how the Métis population reacted and adapted to the growing influx of settlers and the concomitant political, economic and cultural changes. Through analyzing interaction patterns the presenters outlined how Métis ap-

propriated European concepts and institutions as a means to secure continued political, economic and cultural dominance in the region and contributed considerably to the survival and development of the Red River colony.

Concerned with one of the most notorious forms of biopolitical practice, the era of Indian Removal, SABINE MEYER (Käte Hamburger Kolleg „Culture as Law,“ Bonn) investigated the representation of the trail of tears in Diane Glancy’s novel „Pushing the Bear“. She carved out how the novel negotiates the biopolitical effects on Native American lives and conceptions of life. Parallely, she investigated the Supreme Court decisions under Chief Justice John Marshall for their biopolitical and geopolitical aims of dispossession and found policies and politics of the removal era incoherent with constitutionalism.

RENÉ DIETRICH (University of Mainz) investigated how an emphasis on the relational in poetics of Indigenous life writing can be read in reference to what Andrea Smith has called „radical relationality,“ a position from which Indigenous nations, activists, and scholars challenge the naturalized order of settler nation-states. Using the figure of a mosaic, Dietrich stressed the dual force of Indigenous presence and the visibility of damage. Although healing/reparation occur, the fragmentation remains visible. Dietrich identified „radical relationality“ used in memoirs by Linda Hogan, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Deborah Miranda as a literary strategy in which relational forms of life writing are rendered as political acts, forms of activism, and thus literary strategies of disruption.

Participants sketched possible dimensions of „life“ as a critical category, such as individual/collective, age, religion, humanity, temporality, spatiality, visual agency, violence, disposability, and survival. Discussions outlined how possible classifications into hierarchies might impact practices and forms of sovereignty. Applying the term „geopolitical“ was advocated; used in internationalist political negotiations and signifying a point in a particular scale structure, it allows to investigate Indigenous recognition. Overall, theories of bio- and geopolitics were linked as an integral instrument to critique settler colonial

techniques and practices and to express that disposability of Indigenous bodies also means a disposability of alternate modes of being.

Yet, once past the critique, a conversation about translation set in that reflected the difficulties to emancipate from terminology continuously used for colonial dispossession and privileging European traditions of thought in Indigenous contexts. Panelists argued that Indigenous Studies are a complex field and encouraged colleagues to be willing to engage and listen to community members, respect their stories, and be accountable.

In sum, the conference participants investigated and discussed how exploring and theorizing politics and epistemologies of life in settler and Indigenous contexts in relation to bio- and geopolitical practices can help to formulate „life“ as a category for political analysis and critique in settler-Indigenous relations, in evolving formations of sovereignty and agency, and in the struggle for decolonization.

#### **Conference Overview:**

##### *Welcome and Introduction*

KERSTIN KNOPF (University of Bremen) and RENE DIETRICH (University of Mainz)

FRANK GOEBLER (Vice Dean for Research, Faculty for Philosophy and Philology, University of Mainz)

LAWRENCE RANDOLPH (Public Affairs Officer, U.S. Consulate General Frankfurt)

##### *Keynote Address*

MISHUANA GOEMAN (University of California, Los Angeles): „Electric Lights, Tourist Sights: Gendering Dispossession and Colonial Infrastructure at the Niagara Falls Border“

##### *Lands and Lives in the Geo-and Biopolitical Logics of Settler Colonialism*

MARK RIFKIN (University of North Carolina, Greensboro): „Fictions of Land and Flesh: Indigeneity, Blackness, Speculation“

ANDREA SMITH (University of California, Riverside): „Without the Right to Exist: the Settler Colonial Logics of National Security Law“

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*Theorizing Settler Colonial Geo- and Biopolitics*

MICHAEL R. GRIFFITHS (University of Wollongong): „Notes on Belief: Settler Fantasy and Indigenous Life“

ROBERT NICHOLS (University of Minnesota): „The Violence of Dispossession“

*Settler Colonialism, Indigeneity, and Gender*

AUDRA SIMPSON (Columbia University, New York City): „The State is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders and the Gendered Cost of Settler Sovereignty in Canada“

KATHY-ANN TAN (University of Tübingen): „Decolonial Aesthetics, Indigeneity and Queer(ing) Settler Colonialism“

*Forms of Life in Biopolitics, Animal Studies, Ecocriticism*

BRIAN HUDSON (University of Oklahoma, Norman): „Nonhuman Sovereignty and Cherokee Politics“

GESA MACKENTHUN (University of Rostock): „The Myth of the Unecological Indian: Bisoncide and Neo-Savagism“

*Reading by* DEBORAH A. MIRANDA

*Raised by Humans. Poems* (2015), *Bad Indians. A Tribal Memoir* (2013)

*Temporality and Spatiality of Settler Geo- and Biopolitics*

SANDY GRANDE (Connecticut College): „Indigeneity and the Biopolitics of Aging“

NORBERT FINZSCH (University of Cologne): „The Smooth Space of Nomads: Indigenous People and their Spatial Outopia“

*Dispossession and Violence vs. Agency and Sovereignty in Settler-Indigenous Relations*

JACQUELINE FEAR-SEGAL (University of East Anglia, Norwich): „Owning the Image: Native Students Claim Visual Sovereignty far from Home“

URSULA LEHMKUHL / LISA SCHAUB (University of Trier): „Resilient to Regulation: Métis Self-assertiveness and Adaptability to the Early System of Settler Colonialism in the Red River Area“

*Geo- and Biopolitics in North American Indigenous Literatures*

SABINE N. MEYER (Käte Hamburger Kolleg „Recht als Kultur“ / „Culture as Law,“ Bonn): “I was nothing but a bare skeleton walking the path”: Biopolitics and Life in Native American Removal Literature“

RENE DIETRICH (University of Mainz): „Radical Relationality, Settler Knowledge, and Indigenous Lifeworlds in Recent Native Memoirs“

*Final Discussion*

Tagungsbericht *Biopolitics – Geopolitics – Sovereignty – Life: Settler Colonialisms and Indigenous Presences in North America*. 25.06.2015–27.06.2015, Mainz, in: H-Soz-Kult 04.08.2015.