

“Education is a social process. Education is growth. Education is, not a preparation for life; education is life itself.”

These words by American educational reformer and philosopher John Dewey capture the two-pronged idea of why we are all here today. On the one hand, it puts in a nutshell the entire concept behind what awaits us in the next 48 hours and what made you want to come here—education among fellow students and a new environment in another city, and even another country. On the other hand, Dewey’s words refer to the educational value of the organization process behind this conference.

It is great to see so many enthusiastic graduate students from across Europe here. Until tomorrow night, we will have the unique chance to listen to interesting presentations, meet fellow students from all parts of Europe, benefit from their feedback, and hopefully you will leave Leipzig with a mind broadened by new insights, food for thought, and inspiring conversations—thereby putting into practice Dewey’s words. Meant as a critical forum for MA-level students, this conference gives all of us the chance to not only present our research but also to develop new ideas and pose questions. This is what education is all about and it will without doubt enrich our personal and academic lives. For many of us, this is the first academic conference, and for many, I also assume, it will not be the only/last one. This is what makes this conference an experimental stage, a glimpse of what lies ahead of us.

Not only does the quote by John Dewey explain our wish to be part of this educational experience, it also reveals what brought this conference into existence in the first place. Based on the idea of hand-on learning, which Dewey famously advocated, American Studies Leipzig integrated a module into its MA program making it the task of its 2nd year MA cohort to organize a conference, the first of its kind for MA-level students. I feel thus very honored to stand before you today as one part of the six-strong organization committee. Together, we would like to welcome all of you to this first graduate conference hosted by American Studies Leipzig. We hope you all had a good trip and some of you also a good first night here in Leipzig. We also welcome Sheila Lalwani

and Consul for Public Affairs James Seward from the US Consulate General here in Leipzig.

Our interest in the conference's topic was first sparked through one of our modules entitled "Rethinking the Americas," and it forms part of a broader academic trend in American Studies, dubbed the transnational turn, which has questioned many assumptions on which American Studies had been resting throughout the twentieth century. Trying to get a fuller picture and gain a more complete understanding of the United States has meant to look beyond and across its national borders and see mutual interdependencies. The idea of "placing America in a transnational world" allows us to unearth hidden connections between the US and other countries and cultures and thus enables us to see that what we call globalization today has actually been part of the world's history for much longer. By investigating globalization and the social processes it entails it becomes possible to deconstruct long-established ideas, such as spatial borders, territories, nations, and identity. Many of the presentations which we will enjoy over the next days pick up this paradigm shift by looking at diasporas, migration flows, transnational movements and the representations thereof in literature and film. The conference's more specific sub-title seeks to embody a space of inquiry beyond a mere good or bad dichotomy of what globalization means and what effects it has.

As an interdisciplinary conference, we encouraged contributions exploring literary and cultural representations of the Americas as well as presentations interested in political, sociological, and historical topics. We received 28 applications from Europe and the US investigating notions of a transnational America from various fields of inquiry, of which seventeen presentations were selected and grouped into six different sessions. After the keynote speech, we will start out the conference with the session "Transnational Locations of Home," in which a transnational America will be approached through the concept of home and how this relates to identity constructions in various transnational settings. Applying theories such as Homi Bhabha's "third space" and Aleida Assmann's "Erinnerungsräume" to ethnic and migrant literature as well as a science fiction TV series, the presentations will explore notions of borderlands, belonging, and cultural conflict.

The session "Conflicts in the Americas" this afternoon includes three presentations that deal

with controversial issues and sources of conflict in the Americas. Even though the presentations are devoted to very different places and spaces—California, the US-Mexico borderlands, and Brazil—, they are nevertheless all concerned with the effects of global dynamics on these environments. We will hear about immigrants’ anticipation of and disillusionment with the American dream, the new US policy to tackle the drug war across the US-Mexico border, and the changing face of a Brazilian social movement.

Our third session later today, entitled “Transatlantic Perceptions & Influences,” will focus on different interactions across the Atlantic and will inquire about the influence these cultural interactions exert on the perceptions on both ends. Our presentations will examine, for instance, the perception of the European Union in the US, of American political culture in a global context, and the perception of different American cultural agents in present-day Afghanistan.

Tomorrow morning, we will begin the day with looking at possible victims of globalization. By analyzing possible negative implications of media, capitalism, and crime on globalization and vice versa and how these interdependencies are depicted in popular culture, the three presentations apply concepts such as global village, global dump, and gendered agency to popular culture; and a spoken word performance strives to challenge established parameters of an academic address.

The session “Identities and Globalization” is interested in representations of identities. Through the lens of literature, the presentations assembled under this roof will approach the interplay of identity construction and aspects of globalization by examining more closely the relationship between identity and the US as a superpower, gendered transnational and migratory experiences, and the fragmentation of identity resulting from globalization.

Our last session tomorrow afternoon, entitled “Globalizing Media, Culture, and Identity,” evolves around the media’s impact on individual lives. The media’s globalization, as expressed in the Internet as well as the predominance of US-American popular culture formats across the world, has raised questions about its effects on the receiving end—individuals and societies with different cultural backgrounds and codes. Using the Internet and the emotional culture of US-American TV

shows as a starting point, the two presentations will address their effects on social interaction and the non-American spectator.

The topics of all these presentations mirror not only the fruitful broadness of the topic at hand but also the myriad disciplines and methodologies that inform American studies, ranging from literature, economics, sociology, and cultural studies to political science, history, and film studies. That this exciting graduate student research from across Europe is gathering here in Leipzig for the next two days has been made possible through the generous support from our sponsors. A grant from the US Consulate General allowed us to award travel grants to most of our German presenters. Also, the university's Förderer und Freunde Association supported us and ensured the international travel grants. Moreover, we are grateful to the Hobbie-Mancke family, and the Fulbright Commission that enabled the keynote speech by Sheila Lalwani.

So, to all of you, thank you for coming, welcome to Leipzig, and enjoy the conference!
Thank you.