



Universität Rostock  
Philosophische Fakultät  
Institut für Anglistik/Amerikanistik  
Prof. Gabriele Linke  
in Zusammenarbeit mit der  
German Fulbright Commission



Sommersemester 2006

## 4<sup>th</sup> Fulbright Lecture Series American Culture, Past and Present

---



### **Hoyt Wheeler - The Future of the American Labour Movement (April 21, 2006)**

In the first lecture of the Ringvorlesung "American Culture, Past and Present", we heard Hoyt Wheeler about the American Labor Movement, about which he wrote the book "The Future of the American Labor Movement" (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Since watching Michael Moore's "Roger and Me" we are maybe more aware of the miserable state in which American employees are: low wages, long hours, and hard work without the insurance we have in Germany. In the United States you can consider yourself as very happy if you have a job that takes the costs when you have an accident at work. Furthermore, your boss can fire you at any time without any reason, except racist or sexist. And it probably is more than easy to do so, anyway.

To improve the horrible state of the rights of the employee the first labor union was started in 1866 and gained such important achievements as the eight-hour day. It was created to give workers a voice as loud as the employers' voice. To gain the rights they deserved. The only problem back then was the violence that turned every demonstration into a fight and therefore didn't help to improve the reputation of the unions. But the labor movement nevertheless did a lot to improve the conditions of work, today, though they still aren't perfect.

We all have seen movies or series in which people strike. In Germany we right now face a real waterfall of strikes every week but in America it isn't as easy as that. Most workers still refuse to get into a union. They are afraid of the consequences, they don't want to lose their jobs. Workers don't want to risk anything. They have families, and with a non-paid strike over several days or even weeks, they cannot feed them. Many workers refuse to get into a labor movement. They are not convinced of the power of a union and the unions themselves cannot prove that power if they don't have any members. One might call it a vicious circle.

But Mr. Hoyt didn't want us to leave with a feeling of despair and so he gave a recent example of

what the united power of workers might accomplish. On May 1st 2006 immigration workers in America went on the streets and struck for the Immigrant rights. How this might affect the American economy and the rights of the immigrants isn't clear, yet, but we hope and wait.

by Juliane Waack

### **Further Information:**

[Moore School of Business \(U South Carolina\) - Hoyt N. Wheeler  
Immigrant Solidarity Network](#)



### **Ann Miller - Japanese Americans and Their Contributions to Hawaiian and American Society (May 5, 2006)**

It is strange how little attention a "minority" of the American population receives that has with more than 1.000.000 inhabitants not really a minor influence on the American culture. But since their immigration which started a hundred and fifty years ago, they had much more to endure than being ignored.

First settling down in Hawaii and being good workers, the Japanese soon aroused the anger of the Caucasian people because they worked harder for less money. The problem was not blamed on the capitalist employers but on the Japanese workers. But what should follow, nobody could have known.

As Ann Miller told us about in the second lecture of the "Ringvorlesung", Japanese-Americans, if I may use the hyphen, were discriminated, expelled, and finally imprisoned in so called "relocation camps" in 1941. In the time during and after the Second World War, the USA treated their Japanese and Chinese people (which, in their ignorance, they couldn't distinguish from each other) like second- and third-class citizens.

Only Hawaii seemed to be an exception. Due to economic reasons not humanistic ones they could stay. The Japanese and Chinese population made up about 50%, and the loss of so many workers would have been devastating for the economy. But even there, they were ruled by white businessmen. The Japanese weren't angry, only a few went to court. They were disappointed and did everything to erase the shame that had been brought on them. They even signed up for the army to fight for the country that had abandoned them and put them in camps, that had separated families and that had taken their houses and property. They wanted to show that they were worth being Americans. Thousands signed up, only a few were taken into the army and again they had to face a lack of acceptance.

In the training camps in the South, nobody knew where to put them, neither the white nor the black soldiers wanted them in their rooms. No one knew where they had to sit in the bus or which bathroom they should use. But their engagement in the war was worth it.

In 1945, the relocation camps were opened and the "prisoners" were set free. But to what freedom - since they were left with nothing? 1987, 42 years later, American politicians finally apologised and promised every survivor of the camps 20.000 Dollars. It took another 5 years till the first

money was paid and a veil was spread over this poor chapter of American history.

I have to confess, I hadn't known this before. A friend of mine told me, until the movie "Schnee der auf Zedern fällt", he didn't know either. But why? Shouldn't we read about it in the history books as we read about the cotton fields of slavery? Shouldn't there be more than one movie? Why isn't it taught in American schools, as Ann Miller told us? It should be. There was talk that something like that shouldn't ever happen again - in times of the Guantanamo prison - but if no-one knows what did happen, no one will learn.

In these times, Japanese aren't discriminated anymore, at least not more than every other ethnicity in America. Hawaii, for example, has become a lovely and multi-cultural place to live in, in which the Caucasians as a minority aren't treated less kindly than everybody else. But it still is the question why it couldn't be like that much earlier.

by Juliane Waack

### **Further Information:**

[Asian Nation: Asian American History, Demographics & Issues](#)

[Japanese American National Museum: Hirasaki National Resource Center](#)



### **Larry Greene - The Harlem Renaissance (May 19, 2006)**

In the third session of the Fulbright Lecture Series, we heard Larry Greene talking about the Harlem Renaissance. Finally, literature and arts were discussed in a lecture series that doesn't seem to leave out anything.

The Harlem Renaissance took place around the 1920s and was about to change the identity of black Americans. At that time, the double consciousness of their African and their American identity was engraved on the minds of these people, who theoretically had the rights of citizens but weren't treated as such. Many started to wish they were white, tried to behave like them, to become them. The Harlem Renaissance changed that situation fundamentally.

Before the World War I, most black Americans lived in the South of the USA which, as we all know, wasn't the best place to be treated equal at that time. But due to the war, many men from the North became soldiers, and the North needed workers. During the Great Migration, black Americans from the South went to the North, and the cultural center soon was found in Harlem. The intellectual elite wanted African American identity to be redefined in the minds of the people. They wanted to change the people. Criticisms and questions arose.

One thing the Harlem Renaissance brought up in literature and arts and music as well was the issue of identity. On the one hand, black intellectuals wanted to strengthen the confidence as Americans, on the other hand they searched for ties to Africa. The feeling of being neither American nor African was illustrated in poems like "Heritage" by Countee Cullen, that talks about the loss of identity.

Another topic the Renaissance dealt with was protest. Certainly, the cultural center in Harlem brought up critical voices, and they grew as the community grew. Many white intellectuals also

started to question capitalism and war and took part in the movement. In 1924 intellectuals (William E.B. du Bois, James Johnson, etc.) created a forum for young black artists to compete in the city club NY. And many got contracts for novels and poems.

Poets and authors went to Europe to study in the center of culture at that time, also known as Paris. They exchanged opinions, influences, and ideas and experienced fewer prejudices than in the U.S. and more acceptance as real artists. They went back with the hope that some day America would change its attitude towards its black citizens.

Interesting is the fact that even though the poems and pictures dealt with the loss of identity, only few of the artists went to Africa to search for their "roots". As Mr. Greene said, the fact that Paris with its Schools of Arts and the mass of artists and intellectuals was more attractive probably was a reason for that.

The Harlem Renaissance changed many people and even art. As we learned from Mr. Greene, Cubism was strongly influenced by African art. And with the words of Langston Hughes I will end the third report of the lecture series:

### **I, too, sing America.**

I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed -

I, too, am America.

*Langston Hughes, 1925*

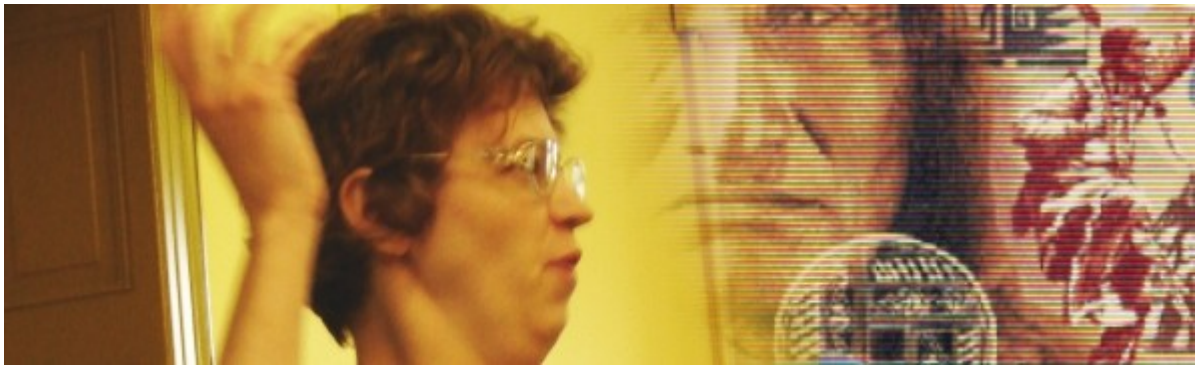
by Juliane Waack

### **Further Information:**

[Schomburg Exhibition](#)

[Harlem Renaissance: A Brief Introduction](#)

---



### **Cheli Reutter - Double-Crossing the Western Frontier in Native American Literature (June 16, 2006)**

In the fifth Fulbright lecture, Cheli Reutter talked about "Double-Crossing the Western Frontier in Native American Literature". She introduced several literary texts about Native Americans in the times of the "Wild West" and the Gold Rush and afterwards compared them with texts about Native Americans by Native Americans of the present.

Who thinks that there is much diversity to be found in the Western literature as there are masses of books about cowboys, buffalos, and Indian tribes, is terribly wrong. Either the brave cowboy heroes had to deal with the mean savage who ravaged the houses of innocent settlers and abused virgins and children, or the brave cowboy received help from the 'noble savage' who was a rather charming but not very civilized person.

I am unsure which pattern I find worse. The noble savage was more an interesting object for the American settlers than an equal human being. As Cheli showed us, even popular novels such as "Little House on the Prairie" by Laura Ingalls Wilder didn't really try to dispel the notion of the other and less civil man.

"Get me that little Indian baby", says Laura, in the novel, to her Mum, as if it were a little puppy, and when she tells her Dad that the "good Indian" smells, one might raise an eyebrow and swallow the disappointment about so much rudeness which is comes from supposedly more civil people.

In the second part, Cheli Reutter introduced a few Native writers and their (obviously) different writing. Hyemeyohsts Storm, who was accidently spelled wrongly on the given handout, is the world's foremost speaker for the Mixed Blood People and a famous writer of books like "The Seven Arrows" "Song of Heyoehkah", and "Lightning Bolt". In his books he tries to explain that every culture has its beliefs and that people are able to live all together.

Another famous writer is Gerald Vizenor, who was awarded the "Lifetime Achievement Award" from the Native Writers' Circle in 2001. In his work "The Trickster of Liberty", he forms the character of the trickster into a satirical fiction that both reflects the opinion of non-native and native Americans about indians.

The last writer we got to know was Roger Welsh, "a humorist, folklorist and essayist", who isn't actually a real Native American but writes as if he is. In his book "Touching the Fire" he combines stories about a fictional tribe (the Turtle Creek Tribe) into a funny, sad and intelligent view on the past, present and future of Native Americans.

Native Americans were double-crossed in the past and don't face a joyful situation now either. They were murdered, slaughtered, and betrayed; their image in American literature is that of the wild savage who, even when noble, is far from equally intelligent and moral. Even in books by European writers such as Karl May, who showed the Native Americans much more positively, the characterization is shallow and one-sided, and the white hero nevertheless stays the 'real' hero. Native American writers try to change the long-told lies about the Wild West, and even though many Americans probably aren't very happy to hear about it, many others are eager to learn and might approach literature more critically in the future.

by Juliane Waack

## Further Information:

[Hyemeyohsts Storm](#)

[Minnesota Author Biographies Project: Gerald Vizenor](#)

[Roger Welsch](#)

[Review... and other Tales by Roger Welsch](#)

---



### **Julia Foulkes - African Americans and Dance (June 30, 2006)**

In the fifth lecture of the series, we heard a very passionate Julia Foulkes talking about "Ambassadors with Hips: Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus and Dance in the African Diaspora".

Dance was neglected in cultural studies for a very long time. It was seen as pure entertainment which had nothing to do with cultural analysis. Nowadays, it is seen as part of larger cultural and political movements, and we know that dance is a form of art that has an impact on other arts and that is as old as music itself.

In the lecture we heard about a certain style of dance, i.e. African American dance, which evolved round about the time of the Harlem Renaissance movement, in the 40s. It was a new form of dance, different from ballet and Modern Dance.

Katherine Dunham, born in 1909, and Pearl Primus, born 1919, were the most important representatives of this form of dance, and increasingly, they combined elements from different styles such as modern dance, African dance and ballet. Both also went to college and studied anthropology, and later they approached African and Caribbean cultures partly as anthropological observers doing field studies.

Katherine Dunham travelled to the Caribbean to search for her roots and found the natives dancing in a way that was pure folklore, part of community life, and driven by emotions. Back in New York she created "L'AgYa", a show that was based on a fighting dance and soon gained the admiration of the public.

Pearl Primus went to Africa herself and did the same, she shared the everyday life of African tribes and studied their culture and dances, which resulted in the design of new forms of dancing.

Both started to talk about their experiences and considered themselves as anthropologists, though many scientists said that they were too close to the cultures to be objective. Nevertheless, they helped to create a positive and subtle image of African and Caribbean cultures.

Both worked to help young artists, they established schools for dance, and their troupes were highly international with people from Africa, Mexico and elsewhere.

With the piece "Southland", Katherine Dunham created a very political story in which an innocent black man gets accused by a white woman for rape and is hanged. Underlined by Billy Holiday's tragic song "Strange Fruit", the show got much attention, but Dunham lost supporters because the show was too political. Primus also used the song in a dance called "Strange Fruit", which is about a woman's reaction to a lynching.

Dunham and Primus tried to fight racism in the U.S., tried to help end colonialism in Africa and support the countries of their ancestors. They weren't just mere dancers, they were ambassadors

(with hips) who helped create a better understanding of African culture in the U.S. and Western Europe.

Nevertheless, both had to face problems when they travelled to Africa and the Caribbean islands. Some natives there accused the women of stealing their dances and making profits from the native and tribal cultures. They felt they were competitors, or that the women represented a form of American imperialism. Neither Dunham nor Primus mentioned these struggles to the outside world; they knew better.

What is remarkable about these women is that they never wanted to separate black culture from white culture; they tried to combine elements of both. Both worked with white and black dancers and offered their lessons to all people who were talented. They indeed were ambassadors who helped to develop a unity of cultures. They showed that art isn't for art's sake, as many modernists claimed at that time. Art is for the people, it is about culture and life. Dance and dancers express gender politics and racial politics.

by Juliane Waack

### **Further Information:**

**[Great Performances: DANCE IN AMERICA: Free To Dance](#)**  
**[Vance's Fantastic Classic Black Dance Theatre - DANCE STUDIO](#)**

---



### **Erik Mortenson - The Beat Generation** **(July 14, 2006)**

Everything has an end, and unfortunately the Fulbright Lecture Series also came to its end last Friday, 14th July. But fortunately it ended with an excellent lecture about the Beat Generation, a topic for which I had been waiting for months.

Erik Mortenson, who seemed to be completely in love with his subject matter, talked about the Beats, about Kerouac, about Ginsberg and what this literary movement wanted and represented.

America in the fifties - everyone wanted a house, a car, and everyone wanted to forget the shock of the war and go on with their ordinary lives. People were happy with a job, home and two kids and a dog. America was in Cold War with Russia, and "freedom" was the word of the hour. Language was used to make people feel better and to assure them that everything was fine, but actually it only transported manipulation and hilarious slogans as "duck and cover" in case an atom bomb would come down. At this time, a young group of writers in New York felt that this mood wasn't what they wanted. They started to write and to live non-conventional lives and thereby created the image of the Beatniks.

Their aim was to live without thinking of the future, without planning every detail of life and without hiding their real feelings behind empty phrases. The "Beats" talked about what really was going on in their minds and celebrated the moment. Jazz was their music, completely living from

the moment and forming a connection between the artist and the audience.

They didn't understand and share the need for control that most people at that time felt. Kerouac wrote that this control was just a means to hide the anxiety about the future: "And all the time flies by them and they know it and that too worries them to no end."

Allen Ginsberg criticised the term "freedom", which was a lie rather than an empty phrase. Freedom was supposed to be for the average white worker. Freedom wasn't for women though, or blacks, or homosexuals. The term's radical implications scorned Americans. "America I've given you all and now I'm nothing." The Beats wanted their freedom through living it. They travelled, wrote, lived in open communities and talked and talked and talked.

As Eric pointed out, the Beats offered an alternative for society, whether realistic or not, instead of simply rejecting it. In their believing in multiple truths rather than "the" truth, they also prefigured the post-modern world in which every single person has his/her own reality.

Today, the Beats are seen as a part of the past like the hippies and punks, I would assume. Even though they shaped the fifties and sixties, their way of life can't be an alternative for today's society. If everyone lived for the moment, everything would probably break down.

But as many with movements, it shouldn't count whether their ideas were unrealistic or not. They changed something in the minds of the people. They stimulated those minds to think about real freedom and the real moment.

Maybe Eric was right when he suggested that we take a bit of the Beatnik philosophy into our lives.

"He has to blow across bridges and come back and do it with such infinite feeling soul-exploratory for the tune of the moment that everybody knows it's not the tune that counts but IT..."(Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*)

by Juliane Waack

**Further Information:**

[The Beat Page](#)  
[Beat Werke](#)