

Call for Papers Final Conference

Voices & Agencies: America and the Atlantic, 1600 – 1865
University of Duisburg-Essen (Campus Essen)
7-8 March 2024

Over the last three years, the DFG Network “Voices & Agencies: America and the Atlantic, 1600 – 1865” has gathered biannually with the goal of sharpening notions of voices and agencies for the benefit of American and Atlantic Studies. Its goal was to conceptualize the ways in which contemporary scholarship can investigate voices and agencies of the past without superimposing today’s paradigms and to engage critically with the ideologies apparent in current concepts of agency. Many of the scholars in the network engaged with non-canonic and neglected authors, texts, and cultural phenomena, weaving them into established critical discourses. The focus gradually expanded to include plants, animals, and objects like books, whose active impact needs to be taken into account without superimposing a concept of human agency.

Agencies often manifest in and as texts: fissures in the formal coherence of literary and non-literary writing allowed us to identify the entangled nature of subversion and acquiescence, pathos and structure, personhood and regulated authorship. In *Through a Glass Darkly*, Greg Dening writes of early America as “a place of thresholds, margins, boundaries. It was a place of ambivalence and unset definition. The search for identity in that place was multivalent and unending” (2). North America and the larger Atlantic World between 1600 and the mid-nineteenth century present a cultural force field in which concepts of the self and their expression in writing shifted. For example, the fact that at times self-expression in writing was accompanied by an equal measure of self-negation (as in the imperative “*topos modestiae*” and the self-degrading formulas of conversion narratives) resulted in ambiguities and contradictions that informed changing concepts of identity and selfhood. If the early-American and nineteenth-century selves were porous, unstable, “multivalent and unending” constructions, the same can be said of their voices and agencies.

As the network neared its conclusion, new perspectives began to open: speakers and guests found themselves critiquing ideas of voices and agency in self and text ever more strongly, and questioning their relevance for the improved Atlantic Studies toolbox they imagined. Is the metaphorical “voice” too firmly grounded in the anthropocentric and the ableist? How do we transcend the condescending gesture of “giving voice to the voiceless” in the archive? Is agency the tool of an imperialist and colonial discourse, or at least fraught with the traces of Eurocentric, white supremacist

paradigms? In the network's final conference, we would like to open these conversations (and beyond) to a broader audience.

The conference welcomes inquiries about voices and agencies in early America up until 1865. We celebrate hemispheric, archipelagic, interamerican, multilingual, and transnational approaches and look forward to papers about, and beyond, the following topics:

- Agency, voice, and personal expression,
- The personalized voice before the mid-nineteenth century,
- Silenced voices, submerged texts in the archive, but also the silences within the agencies that did find cultural expression,
- Theories of the archive,
- Ways to counteract presentism in historical research,
- Ways to circumvent the gesture of "giving a voice" to silenced actors of an archived past,
- Considerations of recent 'turns' (environmental, actor-network, material texts, new materialism, objects-oriented approaches) and their relation to agency.

Send your abstract and a short bio blurb (max. 250 words) to ilka.brasch@engsem.uni-hannover.de and elena.furlanetto@uni-due.de by **December 15, 2023**. Depending on the number of conference participants, we might be able to cover some travel and accommodation expenses.