

## A Meeting by the Archive— American Studies, History, and Literature

### Workshop Organizers:

Mahshid Mayar (Universität Bonn) & Gulsin Ciftci (Universität Münster)

*"In the beginning, there was no history or literature: there were just tales, mythic narratives of the legendary past. It was a storyteller's duty to praise the ancestors, both real and divine, so that the contact between the past and the present was not broken." – Kuisma Karhonen*

The archive is that meeting place where literature and history—the minute and the monumental, the felt and the documented, the residue and the redacted—come together. Whether subverting and dismissive of disciplinary boundaries or fostering a critical collaboration between the two disciplines, this meeting takes place in ways that inevitably blur the lines drawn to keep the two disciplines apart. Against these premises, we posit that it is not untrue that history and literature are both rivals and kin for they are referentials to imagined or evidentiary pasts in an interminable interdependence; that history and literature have been sculpted into distinct disciplinary bodies in an attempt to fully dismantle these distinctions would be a fool's errand; that history and literature employ divergent methodologies, but their respective methodologies are concerned with what Coviello understands as "the thorniness, the non-negligible density, of primary texts" (3); that whether written or oral, history and literature both involve contingent, anxious, embodied practices that strike a dialogue as they meet by the archive, a "dialogue between historical versions of the past and their literary reenactment" (Quanquin and Roudeau 1).

The study of the interdigitation of literature and history is nothing new. Led by Hayden White, Lionel Gossman, Saidiya Hartman, and others, the past half a century has witnessed numerous attempts at rubbing down the arbitrary divide between history (empiricism/fact) and literature (imagination/fiction) that emerged in the 19th century and was further calcified in the 20th. Against and despite these divisions, archives function as referentials—guiding inquiries and giving body to doubts and hesitations that shake and shape researchers' understandings of the past and its representations. This is, in great part, thanks to radical re-imaginings of the archive in the past few decades. Hartman, for instance, sees the archive as "a repository of practices, a textual trace of the repertoire that transforms and refuses the given" (xxxviii); pursuing similar mold-breaking queries, Antoinette Burton underlines the critical labor carried out by "archives of ordinary people," underlining "the need for archive stories" (6).

Critically engaging with such foundational shifts in the use, re-imagination, and problematization of archives today, our Call for Papers is an invitation to Americanists—historians and literary studies scholars alike. We encourage participants to explore a range of archive-oriented practices in our field that are inevitably informed by the intersection of subjective experiences, intellectual motivations, and embodied desires of not only those who create, curate, and use archives but also those whose work is archive-conscious. In this light, we are looking for submissions that discuss the manifold ways history meets literature in archives; explore the methodological and thematic overlaps between the two fields as they sieve through archival scraps; and trace and make legible the gaps, silences, and absences in the make-up of archives from a wide range of angles, including (but not limited to) the following:

1. How does literature draw upon historical discourses, question agreed-upon historical narratives, or complicate what we understand by "archives," in terms of genre (e.g., historical romance, historical fantasy, realist literature, and documental poetry); aesthetics; technique and form (e.g., mockumentary, multimodality, erasure); and in terms of meta-discursivity (e.g., *The Lost Children Archive* [2019], *The Archivist* [1998])?
2. How does history benefit from the literary imagination and practices, as seen in narratives of the self (e.g., literary biographies and auto-theoretical accounts), literary modes (e.g., "critical fabulations" [à la Hartman]), alternate histories, parallel accounts of the past (e.g., literary history, history of the book, literary markets), et cetera? How is the nameless, faceless individual imagined *into* the fabric of history through the medium of literature?

3. In what ways does understanding (variants of) the past as relevant to the present hinge on a coterminous reliance on both history *and* literature, i.e., on their collaboration? How are the ways in which the “past” *can* and *should* be read materialize via the archive-goers’ labor (be it a historian or a poet), their objects of study (i.e., the archival material), the mode of narrative, and exclusionary regimens (e.g., who and what gets to be archived?)?

Please send abstracts (ca. 300 words) and speaker bios (ca. 150 words) to both organizers, **Dr. Mahshid Mayar** (mmayar[at]uni-bonn.de) *and* **Gulsin Ciftci** (gulsin.ciftci[at]uni-muenster.de), by **03.01.2025**.

#### **Confirmed Speaker:**

PD Dr. Julia Nitz (Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg), “Literature Feeds the Archive: Confederate Women's Civil War Records and the Making of US History”

#### **Works Cited**

Burton, Antoinette. “Archive Fever, Archive Stories,” in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, edited by Burton, Duke UP, 2005, pp. 1-24.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. 1997. W. W. Norton & Company, 2022.

Korhonen, Kuisma. *Tropes for the Past: Hayden White and the History / Literature Debate*. Brill, 2006.

Quanquin, H el ene and C ecile Roudeau. “Introduction: Encounters,” in *Intimate Frictions: History and Literature in the United States from the 19th to the 21st Century*, edited by Quanquin and Roudeau. *JTAS*, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.11407>.

Quanquin, H el ene, and C ecile Roudeau. “A Conversation with Peter Coviello”. *European Journal of American Studies* 11.1 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.11532>.