

Panel Proposal

DGfA Annual Conference 2026

University of Münster: “Kinship in American Studies”

### **Sideways Kinships: Counter-Hierarchical Relations in American Studies**

Panel Organizers:

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Confirmed speaker:

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In the Haudenosaunee creation story, the world begins through horizontal relation. As Skywoman falls from the sky toward the water, animals like geese, loon, otter, beaver, and sturgeon aid in surviving and creating the world she will inhabit (see Kimmerer, 3–5). Animals do not serve her, but welcome and co-create with her. Abenaki historian Lisa Brooks uses the metaphor of ‘the common pot’ to invoke that “creation is cooperative, drawing on the insights and abilities of all members of the group to solve the problem at hand” (2). She reminds us: “It is the wigwam that feeds the family, the village that feeds the community, the networks that sustain the village” (4). These dramatize counter-hierarchical kinships—social and ecological bonds that are cooperative rather than exploitative or exclusionary.

In this panel we propose to investigate forms of social bonds that exceed hierarchies. In our own historical moment, hierarchical forms of social domination seem inescapable and damning. We propose therefore to dedicate a panel toward collectivist, democratic, and non-hierarchical forms of social relation—lived practices that disrupt, sidestep, or rupture imposed categories of kinship, descent, property, and governance—collaboratively theorizing historical and potential ways that people can organize themselves in spontaneous, horizontal forms in a colonized North America. Such sideways practices are never seamless, but frequently full of ambivalence and contradiction. They can be marked by failures of totality as much as by liberatory

promise. But this panel insists, nonetheless, there are indeed possibilities and historical precedents of horizontal ways of organizing social power. To assess and theorize these, we welcome a comparativist, interdisciplinary panel with objects of study across centuries and places to assess forms of horizontal kinship.

A number of recent scholars have sought to examine such attempts at non-hierarchical bonds. Fred Moten, for example, theorizes the relationship of rupturing syntax and revolution, reading “the disruption of the Enlightenment linguistic project” as part of “a rearrangement of the relationship between notions of human freedom and notions of human essence” (7). For Moten, “the break” is where hierarchy ruptures through improvisational reorganization: “The imperatives of improvisation” revealed in tension with “the nonimprovisational [...] re/capitulation of that imperative” (70–71). Marxist theorists like Joshua Clover, meanwhile, have theorized spaces of non-hierarchical social forms, with the commune, for example, representing a “social relation, a political form,” a “tactic” and “communality of various social fractions” that is the collective “breaking of the index between one’s labor input and one’s access to necessities” (187–90)—where capitalist value disintegrates and new forms of relating to each other and to objects can arise. As Mark Rifkin shows in *The Politics of Kinship*, settler liberalism naturalizes hierarchical orders of kinship and governance while rendering other, non-hegemonic forms of relation as aberrant, illegible, or racialized. Indigenous scholars such as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) and Kim TallBear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate) likewise underscore how dispossession is a rupture of kinship ties to land, ancestors, and more-than-human relatives, not just territorial. Taken together, such perspectives across disciplines in American studies frame counter-hierarchical practices as messy, affective, and often unstable contact zones that exceed imposed, hegemonic categories.

In this panel, we ask: How do counter-hierarchical forms of relation emerge across American cultural and political life? How do they, across centuries and places, endure, fail, or transform in tension with hierarchical structures of settler colonialism and capitalism? Papers in this panel might thus be historical (examining historical events of horizontal relations), cultural-critical (examining literary or other cultural objects that theorize horizontal forms of power), or theoretical (themselves positing new forms of

radical-democratic or horizontal ways of relating to each other). Possible papers could include analysis of events or cultural objects related to non-hierarchical social forms, such as:

- Pre-colonial Indigenous social relations
- Indigenous survivance and resistance to settler colonialism
- Black radical and abolitionist traditions (fugitivity/Moten's "break")
- Nineteenth-century utopian movements and communal experiments
- "Back-to-the-land" and mid-century counterculture
- Labor, socialist, anarchist, and pacifist collectivity
- Contemporary Indigenous activism (e.g., #NoDAPL, Land Back)
- Protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter
- Aesthetics and counter-hierarchical kinships

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## Works Cited

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