



## *Speculative Endeavors: Cultures of Knowledge and Capital in the Long 19<sup>th</sup> Century*

organized by Dr. Katrin Horn, PD Dr. Karin Höpker, and Selina Foltinek  
October 22–24, 2020

This conference investigates the ways in which cultures of knowledge and forms of capital intersect in the US during the long 19<sup>th</sup> century. Epistemological and economic concerns complexly intertwine in the US, which by 1900 had emerged as “the land of speculation” (Stäheli). Influential publications such as Thorstein Veblen’s *A Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Women and Economics* (1898) bear witness to the culmination of a growing interest in the commodification of the supposedly private sphere, in which personal information and confidential communication are intricately tied to economic concerns. At the same time, the rise of Wall Street, boom markets and financial panics, and the increasing incorporation of America leads to an experience of widespread economic volatility which pushes people to seek potential “insider knowledge” about the machinations of markets.

Different knowledges, as Burke contents, “may coexist, compete and conflict within a given culture.” Responding to the recent interest in histories of scientific, scholarly, legal, and otherwise official knowledges in this era, this conference instead seeks to address a variety of illicit, tacit, oral, unofficial, or subjugated knowledges. These might be marginalized by their association with racial and gendered minorities. Or they may find expression as libel, slander, innuendo, rumors, gossip, and any number of other ‘speculative’ or supposedly ‘baseless’ modes of transaction and information. Often these knowledges result from “connected knowing” (Adkins) and contain multiple “small, shared truths” rather than one “generalizable truth” (Spacks).

Yet despite their tenuous relationship to facts or publicly available evidence, these forms of knowledge are inextricably linked to economic concerns, while contributing to covert informational labor. Mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion closely regulate access to and speculative value of such information, as when in 1890 E.L. Godkin commented on how “a particular class of newspapers [...] has converted curiosity into what economists call an effectual demand, and gossip into a marketable commodity.”

To understand these intersections and tensions, the conference aims to facilitate a discussion of how these modes of knowledge relate to new forms of economic transactions and economic thinking (e.g. speculation). The conference furthermore seeks to discern how this connection influences and depends on innovations in cultural productions such as new literary techniques, new publishing formats, or new media like photography, telegraph, or telephone. Finally, it is interested in considerations of the specific archives scholars draw on to trace ephemeral and illicit forms of knowledge production and transaction.



Conference presentations are hence invited to explore the following key aspects:

- Methodology:

How do different scholarly disciplines address knowledge production as a result of both private and public practices? How do they locate epistemic shifts and trace changing forms of communication methodologically? What source material offers insight for inquiries into the complex relationship between capital and unofficial forms of knowledge?

- Theories and Case Studies:

How do notions of “information” become established as currency and how do they claim credibility? How do discourses of the informal, the non-explicit, or the illicit gain currency, as forms of rumor, gossip, and word of mouth become important sources of intelligence? How do speculative financial endeavors – whether for social status management or on Wall Street – trade on un/official information? What are paths, locales, and preferred media of dissemination? How is knowledge as (cultural) capital classed, gendered, and racialized? How do fictional representations allow us to access productions of knowledge and capital? How do new economic models shape US culture and literature?

The conference seeks to bring together a mix of papers that explore theoretical models of knowledge, knowledge transfer, and the commodification of knowledge and of specific case studies that analyze economic manifestations of knowledge and its communication. *Speculative Endeavors* is designed to foster an interdisciplinary debate among scholars in the fields of American studies, literary studies, history, history of knowledge, economy, gender studies, and critical race studies. While its thematic focus is on the US, the conference is actively seeking contributions that offer transatlantic and transnational comparisons.

Keynote speakers are **Peter Knight** (Manchester), author of *Reading the Market: Genres of Financial Capitalism in Gilded Age America* (Johns Hopkins UP), and **Lori Merish** (Boston), author of *Archives of Labor: Working-Class Women and Literary Culture in the Antebellum United States* (Duke UP)

Please send a brief abstract of 250–300 words as well as a short CV by November 22, 2019 to Selina Foltinek (Selina.Foltinek@uni-bayreuth.de) with the subject line “Speculative Endeavors.” Participants will be notified by mid-January 2020. Conference papers should not exceed 20 minutes. To facilitate in-depth discussion, we intend that paper outlines should be circulated in advance. An edited volume focusing on the conference theme will be published.

The conference is part of the DFG- project *Economy and Epistemology of Gossip in 19th- and early 20th-century US-American Literature and Culture*. Pending further funding, participants’ travel and accommodation costs may be covered.