

Images of Germanness among the Descendants of German Immigrants to the USA: A Study on the History of Memory of Migration and Identity

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Abstract

My PhD aims to examine how second-generation German-Americans negotiate their sense of self against the background of their migration heritage. It explores their perception of what being German means for them, their relationship towards their German and American heritage, and their notion of Germany as (imagined) home.

The study focuses on second-generation German-Americans whose parents or one parent came to the USA after 1945. This includes the last (non-Jewish) German mass migration to America from 1945 until 1960 as well as later migration streams until 1990. The second generation has not often been the topic of research yet, despite of the fact that such research can contribute to a better understanding of the forming and preserving of hybrid identities by migrants and their descendants.

These processes can be best examined by looking at the collective memory of German-Americans consisting of cultural memory (festivities, official rituals, memorials, etc.) and communicative memory (stories, traditions, and material culture being passed on within families). My PhD concentrates on communicative memory through the lens of oral history and material culture. This enables me to discover what stories and artifacts are passed on within families. My research material consists of 80 oral history interviews with descendants of German immigrants that I conducted on the East Coast, the Midwest, and the West Coast, and of material culture my interviewees brought with them. These objects hold a special meaning regarding their German heritage.

At the "The Heritages of Migration" conference I would like to present the first research results of my interview and material culture evaluation. They are discussed within the theoretical framework of cultural history and diaspora studies, illuminating "realms of memory" (Pierre Nora), "invented traditions" (Eric Hobsbawn/Terence Ranger), as well as concepts of home and belonging (Benedict Anderson; Homi Bhabha).