



Nordamerikastudienprogramm
Institut für Anglistik, Amerikanistik und Keltologie

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Lecture Series

**"Current Issues in North American Studies and Cultural Studies"
Summer Term 2013**

Dr. Sarah Wasserman

North American Studies Program

"Fun with the Future-Past: Amusement and Obsolescence in 1930s New York"

Tuesday • 9 July 2013 • 6:00-8:00 p.m.

Room A • Department of English, American, and Celtic Studies • Regina-Pacis-Weg 5

What's so much fun about the past? This talk uncovers the unexpected relationship between obsolescence and amusement by examining the specific case of 1930s New York. Amusements such as Coney Island and the 1939 New York World's Fair enticed visitors with surreal dreamscapes and exuberant optimism about the near future. But these glimpses of progress and plenitude on offer were complicated by constant encounters with the ephemeral and the obsolete. In this talk, I explore the tension that these amusements stage between permanence and transience, sentimental memory and utopic imagination, the yet-to-come and the already-past. I revisit Coney Island and "The World of Tomorrow" through narratives that depict these futuristic sites with a focus on their nostalgic, transient, and retrograde qualities. Through attention to several texts, from Willa Cather's "Coming, Aphrodite!" (1920) to Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000), I argue that amusement often results from an encounter with a future that spectators can mourn at the very moment of its emergence. A day at the fair or an afternoon on the boardwalk therefore reveal the ways that our visions of the future are always bound up with the pleasures of the past.

Before joining the North American Studies Program at Bonn, Sarah Wasserman received her M.A. in Humanities from the University of Chicago in 2005 and her Ph.D. from the Department of English at Princeton University in 2012. She has taught courses in American literature, film, cultural studies, and composition at both the University of Chicago and Princeton. Her research interests include contemporary literature, material culture studies, critical race studies, urbanism, psychoanalysis, and critical theory. Her work appears in *Contemporary Literature*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *The Journal of American Studies* and *Research in English and American Literature*. Dr. Wasserman is currently at work on a book about literary representations of ephemeral objects in American culture from the beginning of the 20th century until today.