



Nordamerikastudienprogramm
Institut für Anglistik, Amerikanistik und Keltologie



Lecture Series

"Current Issues in North American Studies and Cultural Studies"

Winter Term 2012-2013

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University of Virginia

**"Regulating the Militia: Black Power, Revolutionary Autobiography,
and the Right to Bear Arms"**

Tuesday • 4 December 2012 • 6:00-8:00 p.m.

Room A • Institut für Anglistik, Amerikanistik und Keltologie • Regina-Pacis-Weg 5

In just half a century, the right to bear arms in American culture has evolved from a revolutionary tool of radical minority activists to a rallying cry for white supremacists and the far right. This paper examines the Second Amendment's volatile racial politics by analyzing actions and writings from the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s, focusing on the Black Panther Party's campaign to end racist policing. Although the Black Panther Party theorized its strategy of "picking up the gun" within the bounds of the US Constitution, the reality of openly armed, black men and women marching in military formation inspired drastic legislative and executive efforts to disarm the Panthers. Soon hampered by serial arrests, incarceration, and violence, the Party turned to book publishing as a way to burnish its image and pay growing legal bills. The strategically crafted autobiographies of Huey P. Newton, George Jackson, Angela Davis, and others served as works of literary self-fashioning and, in the absence of an impartial criminal justice system, public testimony. The writers all drew from and recast familiar American revolutionary narratives, playing on ideas of tyranny and self-defense and exposing tensions inherent in the right to bear arms. These works record a tumultuous national history from the perspective of the black revolutionary, whose story reveals the fundamentally racial terms in which Americans understand their violent national origin.

Mai-Linh Hong is a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Her current research project focuses on race and militarism in American literature and culture from World War II to the post-9/11 era. Mai-Linh Hong holds a J.D. from the University of Virginia School of Law and an M.A. in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University. Her article "A Genocide By Any Other Name: Language, Law, and the Response to Darfur" appeared in the *Virginia Journal of International Law* in 2008.