

## Interview with PGF Conference Keynote Speaker Anne Potjans (HU Berlin)

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transcribed by Adebola Ojo



*Figure 1: Anne Potjans from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin talks about her experience as the Keynote Speaker at the 2023 PGF Conference “Spaces of Affect in the Americas.” Watch the video of the full interview, edited by Mandana Vabebi, here: <https://flowcasts.uni-bannover.de/nodes/yXGaL>.*

Interviewers: *So, thank you first of all for doing this interview with us.*

Anne Potjans: Of course, thanks for asking me!

Interviewers: *How do you feel about your first time as a keynote speaker at a conference?*

Anne Potjans: Oh wow, yeah! That was big somehow. I think for scholars, especially for emerging scholars and I guess also still in the latest stages, being a keynote at the conference is always one of those milestones in your career. When that happens, you know that there are people, other than the five people you usually talk to, interested in what you are doing. Of course, it is an honor to

get that space to present your work and to be in touch with people about it! I was definitely very nervous before it, but I think this is something that just happens when you are supposed to speak in front of people. I guess you are always nervous and especially when you are called to be a keynote, you want to do a good job. But it was fun, I really enjoyed my time yesterday.

Interviewers: *What are you most passionate about in your research area? What has inspired you?*

Anne Potjans: That is a good question. I think that there are several things. For me sometimes the teaching can be very inspiring, to be in touch with people who are learning – that helps me to be okay with me still learning. So, when I am in the class I usually do not understand myself as much as the authority there, because that also puts a lot of pressure on you. I try to think of myself more as a facilitator or as somebody who is leading the discussion and usually a lot of fruitful things come out of that. So, that can be inspiring! Then I guess I take a lot of inspiration from all sorts of Black cultural productions because that is something I have become passionate about, Black academic contributions, cultural items. Also, thinking about how race works in the German context and the American context, what do we have to learn from both these contexts. I am also very interested in all things queer-related, and definitely also in things that are not necessary always so clear in their message. So, I like to dig around. I also really like to dig around in things that may not be so pretty. I'm interested in negative affect; I'm very interested in things that are maybe not necessarily very nice to look at. In my current project, I am also looking a little bit into BDSM culture and those things. I like gothic stuff; I like horror movies. Those are the kinds of things I am interested in!

Interviewers: *As a researcher in this field, how do you hope your work will contribute to a broader understanding of the emotional impact of literature on readers? Perhaps also regarding your keynote and Black anger.*

Anne Potjans: I think that there is a lot of knowledge out there about Black cultural productions, and a lot of people are working on it, and it is important. It is also important whether the persons themselves are black or white or whatever. At the same time, we do not have a lot of contributions in general from the people of color in the university space and we also do not have a lot of knowledge available from people who are in this field here in Germany, who are themselves black and who work on these topics. I think what I want to do with my work is to contribute a little bit to showing what changes when you approach these things from a specific subject position – in terms of experiential knowledge and maybe also in terms of an affinity to the materials through your lived experience. I am also really interested in thinking about how these things can contribute to a framework of knowledge production. So, last semester, I taught a class on Introduction to Black Studies, and I had a room of mostly white students. I want to be able to give them something to work with when they approach these topics, something that helps them understand their own positionality in relation to the topic, but then also for them to have some tools to work with. I try to introduce them to Black Studies as an analytic rather than something that is done by Black people and is defining for Blackness in an academic context. So, I want to really say: “What changes when we look at this material, from the vantage point of Black Studies theories?”

Interviewers: *What importance do you attribute to the representation of Black anger in various forms of media, in particular music?*

Anne Potjans: I think in recent years especially, we have seen that anger has become a driving political force that has been mobilized by several political parties in the US, but not just in the US. I think it has become important. People express a lot of discontent, a lot of anger about a lot of things. And what also became very apparent for me was that certain people get to do it and others do not. Anger is perceived in the public space very differently. It is funny because I am looking at this poster and it shows Hillary Clinton in a very sort of angry position, and it shows Trump in this one setting that he has, which is anger all the time! I am thinking about the way these two were perceived in the public sphere differently. But add Obama to that image, and I think you would probably have to look very hard to find an image of him being that angry in a public space. I mean stern and authoritative, yes, but not angry. That is for a reason! For black people, anger is a very difficult thing to approach. I think white people often fear people of color's anger because they know that their anger has a reason. They do not actively know it, but I think they do know it in some form, and that this anger can potentially be dangerous to the white supremacist worldview, and so it becomes suppressed. Or it is very actively being suppressed. Talking about anger in the first place was for me important to highlight that this is something that we must be able to attribute and give to the Black people, that they can be angry, that they can be humans. At the same time with music, I just love music, that is really just an interest. I grew up on hip hop, it is still my favorite kind of music. It was very interesting to me the whole time to touch that, but then I was thinking I do not really know how to talk about music, because you also do not get taught how to do it. Usually, we are not musicologists so there is a limit to what we can do other than just looking at the lyrics which are like poetry. I just wanted to try it out, I guess it was just an attempt to see how I can approach this. And after yesterday I think I want to do more of it.

Interviewers: *How do you feel about working in academia? What do you enjoy most about it? What are the challenges (even when writing your dissertation)?*

Anne Potjans: I think one of the challenges is actually both a challenge and the part that I enjoy most. I still get to structure my time relatively freely. I have things, of course, throughout the week and I am now on the post-doc-level. I work in a research group, which means that we have weekly meetings, we have administrative responsibilities in the group. I also teach, I have two research projects that I am doing, I am working on something for the projects. Then I have to think about putting together *habil* and only saying it makes me exasperate! I can still think about when a good time is to do my reading, when a good time is for me to do my writing, how much time do I want to invest in teaching. I can do a lot of organizing by myself. At the same time that can also be the downside because I am somebody who works a lot with outside motivation. When somebody looks at me and says, “I am going to be really disappointed if you are not doing that”, you can be very sure I am going to sit down and do it. However, when people tell me, “Oh no! Take your time,” that is really my “death sentence.” Then I am going to be on my couch. I think while writing my dissertation, it was also a problem that I started writing a little late in the process. I thought about it, and I read, and I went to conferences, and did all the things. There are things that always feel a bit more immediate. Teaching is always immediate, because you have to do it every week, so you are going to be more inclined to put preparation into that. Then you will think about your dissertation and tell yourself “I have six years to do this so maybe not this week.” I think this is a bit of a challenge when you are like me and work a lot by being given motivation from outside influences; then it is not always so easy to structure yourself. I think you can learn it; I think I have also gotten better at it. I have also accepted my own inclination to always cut it really close and I

have my peace with that. I mean this is something I am still working on; how do I use my time most efficiently also so I can rest? When you have a lot to do and you are not doing it, then it interferes very much with your feeling of having downtime.

Interviewers: *How organized are you in your research? What is your working method?*

Anne Potjans: I know there are a lot of people who have ideas and then they write them out, and they already start structuring them. I am not like that. I always need information to get to that point. The first thing that I do is research and reading. Then, ideally, I have a little bit of time to let it simmer to formulate my own thoughts. Then I get to this point where I feel I can write and I cannot waste time. I have realized that this point will come when I do certain things, when I read, when I think about it, and then when I start making notes. I always have to print everything, as I am a very haptic person; and at some point, there is writing. There is a bit of overlap between reading more and writing, and I am not sure if this is really a method. These are the steps I have been able to trace in my process, these things always occur and mostly in that order.

Interviewers: *How do you maintain your motivation and enthusiasm while working in the academic field?*

Anne Potjans: I think very realistically speaking, it is impossible to maintain it the whole time. You also need to be okay with sometimes not feeling motivated, and I think it is very normal. I mean at the end of the day it is a job! It is a job that is not unimportant on many levels, you can do important things with it, but it is a job. It is what pays your bills. So, it is also okay to lose a bit of that enthusiasm when you are tired, when you are not feeling well, or when you have problems or issues on the private level that take over for a long time. Then you probably won't feel as inspired. What usually does get me out of a period of not feeling motivated or even asking myself, "Why am I even doing this? Is anybody ever going to give me a job?" Or not a job, I have a job, but a job that I can keep until I am retiring. It is a lot of work. And you know you have all these questions, and sometimes they creep up on you because it is reality. What usually gets me out of that is to have people around me that I can talk to, not only people from the academic setting. I talk to my parents who have nothing to do with academia whatsoever, I play with their cat, I talk to friends who are also not in academia, and we talk about something completely unrelated. I do sports, I go to the gym, I go swimming and those things also help keep me sane ... sleeping as well; and the mindset "Well then, I'm just going to be on my couch and watch Netflix" on a Saturday. You need to be rested; you cannot do this when you are constantly tired. Then you will get frustrated. So, when that point comes, you just have to think, "Okay! I'm tired and I am motivated". This is what it is for now, and now I am maybe going to do 70% and another time 100%, and at another point in time I would do 150% when it is asked of me or when I feel good, but right now this is all I can give. It usually also changes again!

Interviewers: *What job outside of academia would you consider if you had the opportunity?*

Anne Potjans: I was always very interested in psychology, and I would really like to do something with that. I had thought about pursuing a second career if my job constellation now would have been different. Now it is not, so I am not doing that, but I think that would have been something that would have interested me, becoming a therapist. Maybe as a side note: I have done therapy myself and I was always really interested in seeing how, aside from the fact that I was happy that people were helping me, this process works and what it is doing to me. I think psychologists also are a big part of literary analysis, they are a big part of cultural analysis. This, [i.e., the concepts of]

affect and feeling are all partially rooted in psychology. So, I think this is very related; that is the other thing I could see myself doing.

Interviewers: *What advice do you have for aspiring scholars and researchers who are interested in pursuing a career focused on the emotional dimensions of the literary space?*

Anne Potjans: I think you have to be realistic about what is coming your way, in the sense that academia, at a point in time, and where it is right now, does not necessarily provide many situations where you would have a good funding situation. If you want to pursue this, you have to be certain that you want to do this for an extended period of time. It can also be very different; I had a lot of luck; I have always had a good funding situation and I think it has also become much better. Contracts have been given out that are no longer only a year or two – they are usually longer than that. However, you have to be very conscious of the fact that for a longer time, you will not be unprecarioously employed. That is definitely one thing, and you also have to be able to find some joy in the writing process. If you feel like you are somebody who does not like writing, then you probably would have a hard time with this. This is not to discourage anyone; it is just to say these are the realities of it. I think you also have to be a little pragmatic about your writing, so you have to be very conscious about the fact that when you are writing a book, especially when you are writing a dissertation, it has to be recognizable as a work of scholarship and follow certain parameters – you cannot write a novel. You have to follow scholarly guidelines. Perfectionism is always the killer of everything, which I can see in practice and theory, but I know that my practice is sometimes also different. I have become a little more pragmatic throughout writing my dissertation because, as I keep saying, I cut it really close. I had to make many pragmatic decisions to get it done. That has been helpful for me, because right now I know I can make these pragmatic decisions and I do not have to go back and forth – as in cutting out pages, for example. I think these are tips I can give. Also, I cannot say this enough, but make sure that your physical and psychological wellbeing remain intact. Choose your battle, choose the things that you are passionate about, and make sure you do not abandon the things in your private life that make you happy because you will need that to lean on sometimes.

## Author Biographies

**Holly Fischer** is in the final stages of pursuing her master’s degree in North American Studies at Leibniz Universität Hannover. She graduated from Rheinische-Friedrich-Wilhelms Universität in Bonn with a bachelor’s degree in English Studies. At Leibniz Universität, she is currently a member of the *In Progress* editorial board.

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**Ioana-Marina Pantelici** is currently pursuing a dual master's degree in North American Studies and Education. She holds an interdisciplinary bachelor's degree in English and History with a specialization in Education. Her research interests are varied and cover graphic novels, immigrant literature, and short stories. She is currently involved with *In Progress* through the Independent Studies module and plans to join the editorial board in the coming semester. Through her contributions, she aims to engage readers with varied perspectives while gaining a deeper understanding of the editorial process of an academic journal.