An Interview with Dr. Ewa Adamkiewicz

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***aspeers*:** To start, what sparked your interest in American studies? What is it like to be a young scholar in American (Cultural) Studies. Have you noticed any changes or developments in the field?

Dr. Ewa Adamkiewicz: Before I start, I would like to thank the editors of this year's issue for this opportunity and reaching out to me in a moment that was special to me in so many ways as it not only marked the peak of my academic career but also its end—at least for now. A few days before I received the request, I defended my dissertation at the University of Graz. Shortly after, I moved to Leipzig to start a non-academic position at the university. To write this essay as a young scholar in this phase of transitioning away from academia presented itself as a wonderful way to reflect on my personal experiences and scholarly interests.

I would argue that my interest in American studies underwent several "sparks." Initially, my time as an Au-Pair in a suburb of Atlanta, GA shaped and informed my critical perspective on the social and cultural contradictions I found in the South. In my essay "White Nostalgia," published in *aspeers* issue 9, I describe such encounter: A family member of my host family at that time tried to explain to me that enslaved people had actually, as she phrased it, a "good life" as they were taken care of in terms of food, housing, and clothing. This argument not only struck me as incomprehensible and whitewashed—at that time I did not have the language to describe it in this way though—but it stuck with me and made me eager to learn more about US history and particularly the social, cultural, and political implications of racism.

Another crucial moment occurred during the early stages of working on my dissertation, when I started reading more about critical whiteness studies. In 2016 I stumbled over a book edited by Maureen Eggers et al., published in 2005 in

Germany, Mythen, Masken und Subjekte: Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland. How was it possible that I had not heard of the book during my time as BA or MA student in American studies in Germany, particularly as my scholarly interests in racism, racialized politics, and culture in the US obviously overlapped with whiteness? Delving into critical readings about racism, Blackness, and whiteness, I realized that most of the seminars I took at the university did not necessarily reflect a critical approach to whiteness; it was always assumed that whiteness was the status quo. For example, while some seminars or courses focused on stories, representations, or histories other than that of white people, a critical discourse on whiteness as racialized identity concept was almost always entirely missing. Critically reflecting on my own work thus became a crucial part of my work as a young scholar in American studies.

This practice also involved critically reflecting the academic field of American studies in Germany and the ways in which I have experienced it as a student. It is here where I have perceived some changes in the past few years: the critical approaches particularly to identity-related subjects such as gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity have become stronger in the field of American Studies in Germany (and in Austria). There is, however, the possibility that the changes I perceived are more related to the academic communities I have encountered and that, indeed, those changes are reflections of my own growing awareness as I read more works by Black female scholars and came across discourses that had actually been around for decades, critically engaging with themes such as whiteness, racism, Eurocentrism, colonialism, sexism, etc., including texts by scholars such as Sylvia Wynter, Saidiya Hartman, Angela Davis, Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin, and others.

aspeers: What has been your career development from aspeers until now? How did aspeers influence your scholarly path?

Adamkiewicz: When I was part of the editorial team of *aspeers* in 2012/13, I not only learned a lot about the process of publishing an academic journal but also about working together with other young scholars, collectively doing research and working on a topic, in our case memory and nostalgia. The ways in which we gained, shared, and created knowledge by bouncing ideas, questions, and arguments back and forth—including, of course, reading and discussing scholarly works—proved to be a fruitful but at times also quite an exhausting task. Through the editing process I began to see texts from a different angle, which taught me a valuable lesson about writing and reading for my own work. I am convinced that

having had the chance of being part of this project provided me with a diverse set of experiences that proved to be beneficial for my career and that also had an impact on my scholarly interests. For instance, my article on white nostalgia helped root part of the theoretical framework for our issue on "American Memories." Furthermore, I taught a seminar with the title "Whitewashing: Constructing and Representing the Past and Present" years later when I worked at the University of Graz. In that course we looked at whitewashing as a cultural and political practice and discussed, for instance, artefacts of public memory such as statues and monuments and the power of media in shaping public discourses.

aspeers: How have your experiences in America influenced your scholarship?

Adamkiewicz: My research stays and personal trips to the United States have certainly shaped my scholarship with respect to my perspectives and approaches to certain topics and issues. To give one example, for my dissertation about the Black Lives Matter movement I spent all in all about ten months in Columbia, South Carolina, between 2017-2019. In the beginning of my first research stay, I went to meetings and different events of the local Black Lives Matter chapter and other progressive anti-racist organizations. I was initially convinced that being on the ground and being able to go to meetings and protests, talk to activists and organizers, and delve into the role of an observer would be helpful for my dissertation. I initially even considered conducting interviews with activists; an idea that my supervisor at the University of South Carolina supported. However, I quickly realized that my efforts forced me into a phase of critical self-exploration: Who was I as a white European woman to do this research and ask these questions? While I did not meet anyone critically questioning me and my research directly, I felt not only the need to justify my work but, at times, my sole existence as young scholar who, for the longest time, felt like I did not truly belong into academia—coming from a working-class family who migrated to Germany and being the first person in my family to go to university certainly influenced how I experienced university settings.

Luckily, the countless conversations with my advisor at UofSC—but also with my advisors at the University of Graz—as well as other scholars, PhD students, and activists I had met during that time helped me make use of that critical self-reflection and productively re-use and apply it to my work. After all, my time in Columbia had a significant impact on my dissertation.

***aspeers*:** For *aspeers* 9 (2016), you wrote about white nostalgia for the plantation in the rural south. Could you speak to how nostalgia and pride relate to each other on the cultural landscape of the contemporary United States, particularly for whites?

Adamkiewicz: This year's topic "Pride and Shame in America" touches on complex notions that relate to personal and collective identities and that are certainly of relevance to white nostalgia as I address it in my essay about plantation museums. Both pride and shame play a role when we think about the ways in which, still to this day, the antebellum, Confederate South is legitimized. While there are white people who claim to feel proud when they think about the Confederacy and their ancestors who fought for the right to maintain the system of slavery, there are also those white people who feel a certain amount of shame and guilt about the past.

I would like to elaborate on this by drawing on the Confederate battle flag as an example. During a study tour to South Carolina in 2011, I saw the flag raised on a flagpole in front of the State House in Columbia—until 2000 it was even flying on top of the State House and it was only taken down in 2015 after the Charleston church shooting. The Confederate battle flag has symbolic power that reflects a romanticized idea of the so-called 'Lost Cause' of the Confederacy. The myth of the Lost Cause was created during Reconstruction and depicts the antebellum South and white Southerners as noble, while it downplays the violence and inhumanity of slavery. The myth has not only survived until today, but, indeed, has thrived in certain periods since Reconstruction, for instance, during the 1960s when Black liberation movements pushed for freedom and human rights. It was in that period that South Carolina's politicians voted in favor of hoisting the Confederate battle flag on its State House. The flag as well as the myth of the Lost Cause it symbolically encapsulates are representations of whitewashing the painful and racist past of slavery. Deciding to keep the flag on State House grounds is a significant public expression—and political statement really—of recognition and affirmation regarding the Confederacy. This decision speaks to the dangerous entanglement of nostalgia and pride. When a central institution, such as a state government, displays the Confederate battle flag as a representative historical artefact, it justifies remembering what it symbolizes as something grand and respectful, and thereby fuels a sense of pride over a whitewashed past. As a concept nostalgia is significant here because it speaks to the longing for a past—space and time—that is constructed and not 'real' in that sense. Svetlana Boym describes this as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (xiii). Nostalgia thus allows us

in this case to think about the sense of longing and sense of pride for a constructed history of the antebellum South.

aspeers: You have also been recently writing about the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States. Do you notice any discourses on pride and/or shame in this movement?

Adamkiewicz: Indeed, there are diverse discourses on shame and pride to be found throughout the movement. When I reflect on the notion of pride in that context, for instance, I immediately think about the idea of "being unapologetically Black," which is a concept that has been re-popularized with the emergence of the movement. It describes a counter-approach to respectability politics and thus represents the opposition to assimilating and adjusting to white "normative" expectations or rules. In a similar vein, the ways in which some activists and organizations in the movement affirm the lives of all Black people—emphasizing, among others, the experiences of Black women and trans and queer people—creates and perpetuates confidence, love, and self-respect in Blackness.

Thinking about shame in the context of the movement brings me to an interesting chapter in Christopher Lebron's book *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea*. In the chapter "American Shame and Real Freedom" he addresses the notion of "American shame" and discusses the hypocrisy of US democracy and freedom by tracing how Black intellectuals such as Frederick Douglass used the concept of shame to speak to the conscience of white people. Lebron draws on Douglass as an example to demonstrate the power of shame to move people into action. In this case, Douglass was specifically addressing abolitionists and white people who he hoped to convince of the evil of slavery and racism. The power of shame to persuade and move people into action continues to play a role in the Black liberation struggle of today. Merely the slogan "Black Lives Matter" has received so much attention, because it disrupts colorblind or post-racial narratives by pointing to the specific vulnerabilities of Black lives. The slogan points to the harsh truth of systemic racism and anti-Blackness that continue to impact the lives of many African Americans in the United States—and, for that matter, in various regions throughout the world. Thereby, the slogan also plays with a notion of shame as it triggers the big "why" questions.

Other ways in which shame is used as a rhetorical method can be found in texts addressing particularly white people. There is a variety of articles, essays, and videos

—often also not directly related to the movement, but that open up the enormous question of who is and who isn't the Black Lives Matter movement—that describe, for example, how to be a good ally or accomplice. Some of these texts work with rhetoric that provokes a confrontation with the reader's or viewer's own consciousness. Those confrontations can be directed at certain behaviors or actions and serve to correct them. In several cases this is connected with feelings of failure or shortcoming, and, thus, with feelings of shame for one's own behavior, action, and/or knowledge.

However, shame is also played out against the movement. The emergence of the counter slogan "all lives matter" represents such a case. The counter-slogan appeared in response to the Black Lives Matter movement as if to demonstrate that the original message that Black lives matter was too limiting or divisive—thus, one could argue, shameful. However, the proclamation that "all lives matter" is not simply the expression of an ontological assertion, its emergence in the face of police brutality and inhumane treatment of African Americans proves how necessary the work and demands of the Black Lives Matter movement are. Calling "all lives matter" either in response to, critique of, or "addition" to Black Lives Matter, not only discredits the latter, but it ignores the long history of anti-Black racism out of which the phrase emerged. After all, the counter-slogan was not launched in response to the two seconds it took for two police officers in Cleveland, Ohio, to shoot twelve-year-old Tamir Rice who was playing at a playground by himself with a toy gun. The officers claimed they thought Rice was an adult with a weapon in an open-carry state. The phrase "all lives matter" was also not a response to the fact that these police officers, as Keeanga-Yamattha Taylor writes, "stood idly, refusing aid, while Tamir bled to death" (14). Instead, the phrase was a response to a perceived "threat" ensuing precisely from the attempts by Black Lives Matter activists to dismantle the dangerous faulty logic inherent in claims of colorblindness and to point out that systemic racism is still very much alive and well. The counter slogan alludes to a hypocritical self-nourishing of white privilege within the centuries-old status quo.

I think this last part of my response itself could be read as a way to fuel shame among those who might feel more comfortable with articulating "all lives matter" and less comfortable with pronouncing with the same forcefulness about "Black lives matter."

Works Cited

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