American Studies Insights: Three Former *aspeers* Authors Discuss Postgraduate American Studies

For the current issue, we, the editors of *aspeers* 9, interviewed three young scholars whose first publications appeared in *aspeers*. Interested in the postgraduate career track and their broader perspectives of Americanist scholarship, we decided to ask Stephen Koetzing, Kasia Mika, and Klara Stephanie Szlezák to share their insights with our readers.[1]

aspeers: What made you want to pursue a PhD?

Kasia Mika: I wanted to do a PhD because I thought, even on a very basic level, that I still wanted to learn. I didn't start out with the idea that I'd stay in academia. I just wanted to keep learning and interacting in an academic setting. On the pragmatic side of things, I knew I had to get a scholarship to do it—as opposed to people who are partially funded, or self-funded. My personal motivations varied, but I definitely thought I could do something productive. I wanted to work on Haiti and I wanted to explore that more. I thought a PhD would be a good avenue, but it wasn't the only one I was considering after my Master's degree. I think having the scholarship really helped make that decision.

Stephen Koetzing: The part with the scholarship is similar to my personal experience. I knew that to continue with a PhD in American studies, I had to get a scholarship. I wouldn't have been able to self-fund a PhD. If I hadn't gotten a scholarship, I probably wouldn't have gone through with it.

Mika: For a moment, I was considering doing a PhD in the US. The US is very particular; most of the readers will probably be familiar with that. One example is the GRE system. Anyway, I looked into that, but the technicalities of it and the time span

1 For more on their biographical background and academic interests, see this issue's introduction (10).

were too much for me to take care of. In the UK, I approached finding a PhD program in terms of themes and people I wanted to work with. So when I first contacted a number of universities and confirmed that they were working on global diaspora or black diaspora, I then contacted specific people within the university. I'd done my homework, researched different universities, contacted professors with a proposal, and just took it from there, seeing if there was any interest on their part. And parallel to that, I was searching on specific universities' websites for scholarship opportunities.

Koetzing: I was mostly looking for scholarships because the job market for American studies in Germany is not very good. But there are plenty of scholarships at the PhD level, so I was looking at several options; for example, every political party has some kind of a scholarship program. But, politically, I disqualified from most of them. You have to check whether you fit their requirements in so many ways and part of my personal problem was that, having previously studied medicine for a rather long time, I was too old for some of the scholarship programs. So, I was also lucky that right at the time that I was looking for a scholarship, this doctoral program was being set up at my university, which is funded by the German Research Foundation. And to add to that coincidence, my supervisor, Heike Paul, became the coordinator of this doctoral program. So I was lucky to be at the right place at the right time. This also allowed me to stay in Nuremberg which is a nice extra.

Klara Stephanie Szlezák: I decided to do a PhD because I loved pursuing research questions. I loved doing archival work, reading, and writing. So at that point, if the opportunity to start a PhD hadn't come up directly at the same university where I did my Master's, I probably would have actively tried to do it elsewhere, for example at a graduate school that offers scholarships. I finished my PhD about two years ago. The book just came out, so it's finally over and done with. That doesn't mean I didn't love it, but the publication process is somewhat lengthy and annoying, and I'm happy that's over.

aspeers: Can you talk about the job market a little more specifically? Stephen you even said the job market for American studies in Germany is not all that great at the moment and yet you still chose to do a PhD. And, Kasia, could you talk about what it's like in the UK?

Mika: In the UK, there is a nice phrase: The current funding landscape is a rather 'challenging' one. And it is increasingly challenging because we have global competition now. It's fantastic that all these positions are advertised broadly, but it also means that for each position—even small positions, temporary jobs, and teaching fellowships—there are hundreds of applications. A PhD is not a ticket to the job market, and academia is not necessarily a job as such; as I see it, it's more of a lifestyle. It definitely

is difficult to get a job, to put it bluntly. But it's not impossible, for example if you're willing to relocate. What's increasingly popular are temporary contracts: nine-month contracts, substitute contracts, or even hourly paid contracts. Universities are cutting down on expenses, and you don't have the same security as a worker if you're not on a permanent contract. I think it's good to do a PhD for the passion of your subject and for the opportunities and privileges it offers, but I think it's good to be realistic from day one in that it will not necessarily mean a job straight away. Or it might require you to do something different or diversify your qualifications. A lot of jobs in the UK, for example, are not research-only jobs; they also require teaching and public engagement, all within one role. I think that a realistic and open approach is essential. Unfortunately, after their PhD, many people have to wait a year or a couple of years before landing their first proper contract.

Szlezák: From what I could gather, I think I'm from a slightly different background, because when I finished my Master's degree and then did my first state board exam to get a teaching license, the opportunity for a half-time teaching position came up. So I was teaching from day one, and I think that gives you a different background, in the sense of getting a feel for the job market. Even now that I am working on a postdoctoral project, I had my record amount of teaching this winter term. I honestly have not gotten a whole lot of research done. I feel like all I did was either prepare class, teach class, or sort out my stuff after class. It's difficult, and you can't easily do research on the side. Not if you take teaching seriously, which I do, and I think everyone should. You might be able to research meaningfully if you put your life on hold, but for me it was really a struggle this semester. I tried to squeeze out a few hours on the weekend to continue researching, but with that teaching load, it was tough. I don't know, I've never been very optimistic about the job market, and I really liked Kasia's observation that academia really seems to be becoming more of a lifestyle than an actual job description.

Mika: A lot of people do some kind of patch-up teaching at a couple of universities at the same time; or hold temporary positions; or a fellowship here, a fellowship there. I'm just entering the job market myself: I sent out applications and I had my first job interview a couple of weeks ago, for a temporary position, to be honest. It's not unusual to have to wait. That's not to be pessimistic, it's just the status quo. Perseverance is more important than ever because, I think, getting those rejection letters is so disheartening. And it's so easy to think, "you know what? I think I'm gonna leave it because it's just too difficult." It *is* very difficult, but I would really encourage and nurture perseverance. I think there are so many things about the job market that need to change, but I would like to encourage whoever is going the

MA/PhD route, or thinking about research later on in their life, and tell them that perseverance is essential. Hold on and keep at it!

aspeers: What expectations did you have when you started pursuing your PhD? And now that you have finished your PhD—or have almost finished in your case Stephen—what expectations do you now have at the beginning of your career?

Szlezák: My expectations when I started my PhD were entirely undefined. They only revolved around the research, and I wasn't actually thinking much about what would happen afterwards. I was very much focused on what I was doing and not so much on where it would take me, where I would end up. So my expectation was that I would have the affiliation—and in my case the teaching position—that would allow me to sustain myself and do the PhD. I didn't actually look much beyond that to be honest. Maybe that's shortsighted, but I was just so into what I was doing that I didn't think about the future quite that much.

Mika: To pick up on some of that: When I was starting, I was quite excited. It was this kind of scary excitement, like when you go onto a roller coaster—you know you'll hate it but then you know you'll love it. So I do remember, almost physically, the day we started, when I had a moment of thinking, "wow, something big is going to happen here." I had a really big sense of privilege because I had managed to secure a full scholarship, and didn't have to work a job anymore. I was happy to have time to read and write, so I really cherished that. At really difficult times in my PhD, I thought, "okay, but this is still a great privilege." I may have been thinking about the job market a bit. I come from quite an academic family. I have people in my family who work at a university, so it's not an absent world for me, but I wasn't doing a timeline for my career or anything. It was just exciting to be able to do something very 'mine.' It's scary, that sense of ownership, to realize that it's your baby now.

Koetzing: I can relate to most of what's been said. I mean, I also didn't think too much about what would happen after the PhD. I knew that I was going to work on my dissertation for several years. I also cherished having gotten a scholarship that would give me some sort of security for a longer period of time, which is also something that's kind of missing from the job market in academia, at least on the level that I am on at the moment. Right now, if you have more than a half-year contract you can consider yourself lucky.

aspeers: What made you choose to stay in American studies despite the difficulties of the job market?

Szlezák: Honestly, the passion for the subject matter. I was originally studying English and French for my teaching license, and during the course of my studies, I realized that American studies, out of all the subjects I was studying, was the most fascinating. So I

decided to do a Master's degree in American studies as well because I just wanted to have the chance to keep doing it, and when the opportunity to do a PhD came up, I was convinced that that's what I wanted to do for the next three or four years, simply based on the fact that I loved the material.

Mika: Well I'm not sure if I can answer the question of why I stayed in American studies, because I kind of merged and morphed. I did my MA thesis on poetry, 9/11, and poetic responses to 9/11. However, that was part of a bigger inquiry into the relationship between aesthetics and violence, and I think I was more loyal to that line of inquiry rather than to the location of it. So when I started my PhD, I was thinking of working with the Haitian American writer Edwidge Danticat and her works, in the context of aesthetics and representations of different dictatorial regimes. But I actually got sidetracked by the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. My research took me away from the Haitian American context and the more diasporic context, to the Haiti-specific context, to earthquakes, and to the study of the disaster. Am I still in the American studies field? I don't know. At this stage, I would probably more easily tick the boxes of the postcolonial and the diasporic for my research.

Koetzing: I would consider myself to be an American studies person. Absolutely. And I can totally relate to what Stephanie said earlier: If you're not passionate about it, you probably are not going to last very long. I believe that the kind of work that we're doing—even though it is not valued enough—is really important work in terms of actually educating people.

aspeers: Could you elaborate on that a little bit? In which way does your work change things?

Koetzing: I don't know whether it truly changes anything, but I think it's very important that there actually are people who reflect on all kinds of issues, on all kinds of cultural products; people who, for example, do not simply think that Hollywood movies are there for entertainment and that's all there is to know about them. And it's important to educate people in a way which allows them to see much more in those cultural products. I mean, it is basically your everyday life that is affected by the kinds of studies done in this field: You learn to listen to songs in a different way, you learn to watch the news in a different way—you basically learn to read the world in a much more reflective way. And that's what is important to me.

Mika: Agreed. And I think that's something that I've also been trying to teach. As a teaching assistant or tutor in a university setting, you don't get to choose the kinds of courses you teach, so you have to be open to do that. I think that's kind of the key to literary or cultural studies in this day and age, this kind of entering the 'real' through a text or a cultural object, be it film, be it visual arts, to try to comprehend what is real, to imagine alternatives to it and act upon it. I think we can stretch our students to read

differently, to go beyond the obvious surface. And if there is any sort of task or mission that I would see for teaching American studies or diaspora studies, it is the intersection of the aesthetic, the sociopolitical, and the material. It's recognizing that what we're doing—analyzing a piece of text, a piece of literature—is not disconnected from the world out there. And we can understand better and we can act better—better maybe isn't the right word—but we can act in a critical manner, and make certain interventions thanks to the moments of reflection and contemplation we have in a classroom or in a tutorial setting.

Szlezák: I entirely agree. This question about the benefit of what we're doing, about the benefit for ourselves, and for other people as well, really brings back to mind an interview I had a couple of years ago for a scholarship, and what the committee asked me. I was explaining my PhD topic to them—and I have to admit back then I was young and dumb and inexperienced—but I remember the question: "What does humankind need your PhD for?" I was entirely put off by this question, so my answer wasn't very good. I don't even remember what I answered. But it did keep me thinking for a long time because, on the one hand, it was such a dumb question but, on the other hand, such a legitimate one, right? And I think if you just look at American studies or the humanities as such from a purely pragmatic perspective, then it's a very limited way of thinking and a very limited way of addressing issues. I think the benefit that we and others draw from our work is not necessarily limited to the topics that we're researching, but extends to the kind of skills that we develop by doing so—skills like raising a certain consciousness, as Stephen and Kasia mentioned, thinking critically, thinking beneath the surface, and so on. And ideally we pass it on to our students.

Mika: Yes, and I think what's important to add here, and I don't know how much of that is applicable to the German context, but in the UK the word 'impact' has become a sort of buzzword. Everything needs to make an impact: Your research has to be impactful; 'impact' is the big agenda. It can be intimidating, of course, and there is a very specific economic and governmental vision behind that, but we can think about it more holistically, on a relational level. The bigger the impact we want to make, the smaller the scale has to be. It will be those one-to-one relationships—for example that one professor telling you to go do a PhD—that will make the biggest impact on someone else's life. Sometimes we might get intimidated and think, "oh, I didn't find a cure to Alzheimer's in my research, so what impact am I making?" But we are making an impact. Teaching is an impactful job, particularly in the humanities, where class sizes may be smaller and where we have more space to nurture those very important conversations. When you can say to yourself, "that student is now a PhD student," or "that student completed her degree even though she is a single mom, and I helped her or him," that's satisfying.

aspeers: What role do conferences, research colloquia, forums, and publishing play in your academic, professional lives?

Szlezák: I think they're a very seminal part. They are definitely things that I enjoy—and that I think you need to enjoy—in order to stay sane in this field. If you're not really attending conferences, presenting at conferences, writing articles, and so on and so forth, then academia just becomes a drag. In my opinion, these things should always be connected to enjoyment and fun and excitement. It's work, of course, but there's a very thin line between work being annoying and it being fun, and it's easy to step from one into the other.

Mika: To build on what Stephanie said, of course there are different forms of engaging with the wider community, and I think that they're fantastic. Conferences can generally be stressful if you're presenting, but they're fantastic fora for dialogue, for getting to know people, getting to know people's work. 'Networking' has a corporate, business sound to it, but we can think about it as extending our dialogue or taking our dialogue to other people from different institutions. Conferences bring people together from different countries. Personally, I really enjoy conferences, even though I recognize that organizing conferences on a weekend or hosting conferences that are really expensive can be exclusive. We have to be careful about how we organize conferences to avoid excluding anyone. Publishing is, I don't know, I think it's difficult. In the UK, we have this "publish or perish" motto. It's difficult, but if you think about engaging in a dialogue or making your research more accessible to a wider public, you can kill the beast of it. You don't have to think, "I need to publish because I need to," but rather, "I publish because I enjoy it." One thing I want to add is the importance of outreach and scholarly activism. I think conferences and journals are fantastic and fabulous and they inform our teaching, but I don't think we should undermine the importance of us being in the community. Whether it's us being involved in a local reading group or working in evening classes. Maybe we'll be at a point someday when extracurricular activities, whether they're advocacy work or charity work, will also be recognized as forms of knowledge production.

Koetzing: Yeah, conferences. Talk about academic lifestyle. You actually have to [*laughs*] sacrifice weekends. Kasia, you really got to the point; some conferences are simply expensive in terms of accommodations and travel expenses. It can, at some point, get really insane. But of course, if you want to stay in the field, you have to get yourself out there, and you have to show your research and present your stuff somewhere. And of course, you have to establish some kind of network, otherwise you simply won't make it. "Publish or perish" also holds true in Germany. It's something you hear all the time. I don't think that it should matter as much, though. It should matter so much more *what* you actually publish. There's so much being

published these days, and for some publications you read as a scholar, you sometimes wish they had taken a little more time to revisit what they were writing. What is important for me is that the kind of publishing being done is quality publishing; therefore, I'm very much a fan of peer-reviewing processes. I think it's very much the way to go.

Mika: We can also think about conferences collegially. When you meet someone on paper, you may think, "this paper, this article, is just awful," but when you meet them in person, you think, "okay, now I understand where you're coming from." I had that one encounter with someone. I had read his book and thought exactly what you said, Stephen, "could you have revisited your work before publishing?" But when we actually talked about it, I realized, I probably could have had a better, more nuanced understanding and approach to his writing.

aspeers: So what comes next? Kasia, you just finished your PhD, so you're looking to break into the job market now, is that correct?

Mika: Yes. The way the UK system works, we have a break between the oral exams and corrections. I've submitted corrections, so I've got that ticked off. Now I just need to print the hardbound copy. I graduate in July, but I'm teaching until the end of May. I've applied for a couple of things, and I will be applying for more. Basically, I'm diving into the capital and all the relationships of it.

aspeers: Stephanie, you've already finished your PhD. Are you looking to do a second one, a *Habilitation*, since you're in Germany?

Szlezák: Yeah, that's pretty much the path that I'm on now. Logistically speaking, it's a challenge because I'm affiliated with Passau University, but there's not really a job there, so while I slowly keep my project going, I also need to find a way to support myself. We'll see how that pans out.

aspeers: Stephen, you're still working on your PhD, but you're also teaching. Is that correct?

Koetzing: Yes, I am teaching, and I will be teaching next semester as well, so half a year more of job security. Yay! [*laughs*] Hopefully, I'll finish my dissertation in the meantime. I want to be finished some time in April, at best before the next semester starts. I hope that it works out.

aspeers: As a final question: What are you reading now? It can be something you're reading academically, but it could also be something you're reading for fun. What's on your mind or your nightstand?

Koetzing: I just finished reading *Super Sad True Love Story* by Gary Shteyngart. It had been sitting somewhere in the pile of books I had wanted to read for more than a

year, and it was kind of coincidental that there was a group of academics meeting at my university in Erlangen to discuss the book this past week. So, I took the opportunity to read it, which I probably wouldn't have done if that meeting hadn't happened. What I'm reading right now in terms of fun is Meg Wolitzer's *The Interestings*, but that has been taking a while. I actually started reading a year ago and I still haven't finished. I'm about three-fourths of the way through the book, and I really am enjoying it, but it's hard to find the time to read for fun right now. That's probably also due to the fact that I have been watching a lot of television shows lately. [*laughs*] I just watched the first seasons of *The Knick* and *Alpha House*. I've looked into *Master of None*, and I finished watching the third and last season of *Newsroom*; and there are so many more I can't think of right now. Oh, I also started watching the British version of *House of Cards* and the *Netflix* adaptation, too.

Mika: I have an equally eclectic series of texts. For class, I'm reading *Oedipus Rex* alongside Aristotle and Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*. I want to read—and it was given to me by a Haitian friend—*Empire's Crossroads* by Carrie Gibson, which is a history of the Caribbean from Columbus to the present day, so that's coming up. Since I work on disasters and violence and all that, someone gave me a box of *Treme*, the show about post-Katrina New Orleans. I have mixed feelings about it.

Szlezák: Fortunately, the reading for my classwork and my own research overlap to some extent. I'm starting to read on intermediality. That wasn't really a focus in my research until about a year ago. That's what a lot of my reading currently revolves around. I'm also reading Jewish American literature, or rather, research on Jewish American literature. As for my pleasure reads, I very much sympathize with Stephen on that, I have a pile of books sitting on my desk that I've been meaning to read for I don't know how long, but honestly, sometimes I'm just too tired at night and I don't read that much. The one book that I've been trying to read for over a year now and in which I'm making very slow progress is David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. I know it's a classic and I know it's great, but I'm really struggling with it. [*laughs*] I also recently read—for the first time—a book by Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Enemies, A Love Story*, which is about Jewish post-Holocaust immigrants to the US and how they start a new life in New York. It was a really, really intriguing, haunting story, and I also very much like Singer's style, so the next book on my pile is a collection of short stories by him. I'll see how much I like them.

aspeers: Thank you all very much for your time. We wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors.