

Introduction

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There are certain days that remind me why I ran for this office. [...] Then there are moments like this when I pardon a turkey and send it to Disneyland,” President Barack Obama jested during the 2009 turkey pardoning ceremony (qtd. in Montopoli).¹ A modern addition to the traditional Thanksgiving festivities, the ceremony occurs within the context of an American holiday inextricably tied to food practices and notions of community: Perceived as the biggest family event of the year, when family members and friends come together from across the country (Gomes ix), Thanksgiving thus combines ritualized preparations of food—stuffing, cooking, and finally eating the Thanksgiving turkey en famille—with declarations of national unity.

As such, Thanksgiving serves as an example of the interpretive potential of viewing food as a cultural artifact, the central premise of this issue of *aspeers* devoted to American Food Cultures. The annual spectacle of ‘pardoning’ a domestic turkey speaks to the lasting importance of Thanksgiving in twenty-first-century America. In addition, the pardoning of the turkey is a symbolically powerful act, a superficially innocuous performance which, however fleetingly, aims at uniting the nation behind a benevolent commander in chief, even as the president may express his own mixed feelings about the sincerity of this gesture in his self-deprecating remark. Hence, Thanksgiving, from its beginnings to its contemporary performances, is a powerful example of the link between culture, food, national identity, and politics (cf. Montanari 12). The celebration of Thanksgiving, however, is only one end of a wide spectrum of culturally significant uses of food in a country in which food metaphors such as ‘ethnic stew’ and the ‘salad bowl’ are commonly used to describe the nation and its citizenry (cf. Gloor).

The twenty-first century also provides other, less ‘wholesome,’ examples of food’s cultural significance: Winning an MTV Video Music Award in 2010, American pop star

¹ A few days before the Thanksgiving holiday, the current president rings in Thanksgiving with the pardoning of a turkey: A living turkey is presented in front of the White House by the president of the United States and saved from the oven (cf. Hesse; Judkis).

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Lady Gaga wore a dress fashioned out of cuts of raw flank steak (Topping). The dress, the matching accessories (such as the corresponding hair ornament), and the shoes were designed by Franc Fernandez, a California-based Argentinean artist and fashion designer (“Lady Gaga Meat Dress”). Lady Gaga made a memorable statement with a dress criticized by several animal rights organizations, admired and cheered by numerous fans, and observed suspiciously by many others (Topping). Beyond its novelty or shock value, the dress provokes a variety of distinct interpretations: It might be read as connecting the music and food industries as marketplaces that commercialize bodies—peddle flesh, one metaphorically and one literally—and that simultaneously depend on and create consumers’ needs and desires; as a blatant comment on equating women with meat; as a powerful statement on the importance of animal rights; and in a number of other ways. Along these lines, food creates cultural and political meaning and shows the variety of representing, interpreting, and understanding food cultures.

The highly dissimilar nature of these two extreme instances particularly points to the manifold significance of food. Whereas food and/or eating are objects of analysis in a variety of academic disciplines—ranging from biochemistry and psychology to medicine, food science, agricultural economics, sports science, and political science, to name just a few—food and its practices yield particularly productive insights when approached from a cultural studies perspective. In such readings, food is more than physical sustenance; it functions as a signifier and performs cultural acts, as “[f]ood choices and eating habits reveal distinctions of age, sex, status, culture, and even occupation” (Mintz 3; cf. Counihan and Van Esterik 2; Parasecoli 2).

Food communicates meaning and specific associations through its ingredients, colors, forms, and ways of (re)presentation and eating. As Donna R. Gabaccia argues, “food and language are the cultural traits humans learn first, and the ones that they change with the greatest reluctance” (6). As “[f]ood categories [...] encode social events” (Douglas 61), American culture, like all cultures, has developed ways to worship, give thanks, or celebrate certain occasions that centrally involve food. In this context, food does not just sate guests—it is a contributive, if not a constitutive, and meaning-producing part of the event, perfectly exemplified by the cakes in this issue’s art section. Thus, “[a]round the Communion table, bread and wine become a connection to God. In the social hall, coffee becomes community. In the soup kitchen, rice and beans become hospitality” (Sack 2). These examples express how the semantics of food also reflect the dialectics of abundance and scarcity. Consequently, food is not simply associated with special occasions; it also provides a potent analytical prism reflecting and refracting manifold cultures, countries, traditions, peoples, and seasons, which all have their distinct varieties of food practices in terms of, for

instance, preparation, presentation, and consumption (cf. Gabaccia 5; Counihan 55-56; Nabhan 1).

From the Thanksgiving turkey to clam chowder, from Tex Mex cooking and Cajun jambalaya to chop suey, mac and cheese, and rib-eye steak, American culinary practices are defined by their very variety (cf. Kittler and Sucher 1). Indeed, the rather clichéd reduction of American cuisine to fast food has been carefully rethought in the contributions of the fifth issue of *aspeers*. While two of the art contributions address fast food as one of several dimensions of American ways of eating, the professorial voice reads short stories by Raymond Carver to discover the diner counter as performative space in American culture.

Likewise, our MA-level academic contribution that focuses on American food cultures can serve to illustrate two important points about the field of food studies. First and foremost, the innovative article demonstrates the scholarly productivity of a food-based approach and the tremendous potential of further research: Making food a central object of its analysis, the piece reevaluates the role of food scarcity as a reason for emigration to the United States. Second, by virtue of its solitary status in the issue, it attests to the fledgling state of food studies as a field in Europe. Whereas food studies is a recently established and steadily growing discipline in the humanities and social sciences in the United States, it is only beginning to emerge in European American studies. Only few programs here dedicate courses to the social, economic, and cultural importance of food in their curricula. Nevertheless, their number is growing. It is, then, the perfect time to publish an issue of *aspeers* which, in providing a forum for the existing work of scholars and artists in this field, seeks to inspire further scholarly engagement.

ART CONTRIBUTIONS ON AMERICAN FOOD CULTURES

When the thirty-two canvases of Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans*, an icon of American art, were first exhibited in 1962, each "hung from the wall, like a painting, and stood on a shelf, like groceries in a store" (Museum of Modern Art 260), stirring controversy for flaunting such ubiquitous and mundane consumer goods. This bold statement as to the artistic and cultural value of everyday products of consumption can serve as a springboard for this issue's collection of artwork addressing American food cultures. Connecting with a tradition of American food art, which includes but is certainly not limited to Warhol's canonical piece, this issue of *aspeers* is based on the conviction that everyday consumer products are highly fertile objects for scholarly

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analysis in the humanities and that food in particular holds immense cultural significance.

The artworks collected here interact with the topical academic contribution and the professorial voice, thus exploring additional dimensions of the meaning of food. We believe that including art in the journal contributes to the principal objective of *aspeers*—fostering academic exchange in American studies graduate scholarship throughout Europe—by allowing for a variety of creative voices unbound by the imperatives of scholarship. The art section facilitates both the transgression of boundaries between academia and art and a cross-fertilization between the two domains.

The diversity of formats of this year’s artistic contributions highlights the stimulative power of the issue’s topical focus. The artworks present a variety of individual ideas, reveal new perspectives on the topic of American Food Cultures, and inspire a multiplicity of interpretations. The fifth issue of *aspeers* is enriched by a quartet of graphic drawings entitled *American Food Cultures* by Benjamin Bauer; a nonfiction essay with photographs by Porochista Khakpour called “Born-Again Carnivorism”; images of cake art created by Kaelyn Weestrand—thou art what thou eat, indeed, to borrow a pun from Linda Weintraub; and the short story “The Food Is Great” by Simone Wessels.

Speaking to the variety of US food cultures, the series of graphics *American Food Cultures* by Benjamin Bauer presents different facets of American cuisine and positions them in critical contrast to one another. *Eat Responsibly* and *LA Cuisine*, for example, depict two poles of American eating culture, both exhibiting certain obsessive qualities. Whereas *Eat Responsibly* speaks of an America that overindulges in junk food and suffers from obesity, *LA Cuisine* comments on the obsession with image and style, on a culture striving for health and the ‘perfect body.’ The drawings gesture toward different ways of food consumption being a matter of social class, with food as a necessity on the one hand and as a marker of lifestyle on the other.

The creative nonfiction piece “Born-Again Carnivorism” by Porochista Khakpour, along with the accompanying photographs, documents particular experiences with food throughout the author’s years living as an Iranian immigrant in the United States. It emphasizes the close connection of food and identity formation by showing how food choices can be a tool for imitation and/or resistance and how specific foods serve as a marker for cultural identity. Furthermore, certain types of food function as an indicator for gender identification (meat as a “macho thing”[64]) or as a signifier for beauty and health (“*Meat makes you beautiful*”[64]).

Cake Art, contributed by Kaelyn Weestrand, incorporates edibles as media; food is the material basis for a work of art. As the photographs show, her cakes go far beyond

merely being ‘baked goods.’ An elaborate cake is more than sustenance; it is a pivotal element to be enjoyed—not only for its taste but also visually—in everyday life and during festive occasions, to the point that it can become an object of great social significance or even fetish—as the intricate *Wedding Cake* demonstrates. The lavish *Barbie Cake* provides an ironic comment on American food cultures as it makes the iconic doll that has, over generations, propagated an idealized ‘perfect body’ its centerpiece. The *Lost Cake* highlights the fascination with the popular TV series by doubling as a quirky 3-D model of the show’s setting in dough, frosting, and spun sugar.

The final art contribution takes the form of an epistolary short story. Simone Wessels’s “The Food Is Great” discovers food as the site of psychological struggle for its traveling narrator. The piece explores food as a possible remedy for loss and loneliness amid the crowds of New York City: It conveys a transformation of emotional states through food vocabulary from “corn syrupy streams of friendliness” to “no more [...] ‘Honey!’s for me” (112) and projects this transformation onto the city’s hot dog scene. In the process, Wessels explores the intersections of psyche, travel, and food.

aspeers principally posits the existence of a beneficent and mutually informative relationship between the academy and art, particularly when the eyes of both are trained on the same object(s) and yet produce different insights. The art contributions in the 2012 issue of *aspeers* showcase the power of this juxtaposition. They deal with food across different modes and formats of representation and hold the potential of generating productive dynamics in a transdisciplinary dialogue with the issue’s academic contribution and professorial voice.

PROFESSORIAL VOICE

The editors of *aspeers* are delighted to introduce Andrew Warnes, Assistant Professor in American Studies at the University of Leeds, as this year’s professorial voice. Carrying on the tradition of featuring distinguished European professors of American studies, we are honored to present the voice of a scholar who has demonstrated a passionate and highly productive commitment to American studies scholarship and has enriched the emerging field of food studies with a broad variety of sophisticated publications. Furthermore, we are excited to extend our journal’s tradition of internationality by featuring an outstanding scholar of American studies from the United Kingdom.

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Warnes's diverse academic profile makes his contribution immensely valuable to the current issue. His books, *Hunger Overcome: Food and Resistance in Twentieth-Century African American Literature* (2004), *Richard Wright's Native Son: A Critical Guide* (2006), and *Savage Barbecue: Race, Culture and the Invention of America's First Food* (2008), have received copious praise both in the media and by his academic peers. They provide a glimpse into his manifold academic interests, ranging from African American studies to the promotion of indie music. Warnes is a peer reviewer for numerous academic publications, such as the journal *Food, Culture and Society*. He has published widely on issues relating to American food cultures, and his work has often been situated at the intersection of food studies and African American studies. Particularly owing to his special interest in this year's topical section, Warnes is a perfect match for an issue revolving around the topic of American Food Cultures.

Warnes contributes a professorial voice entitled "‘Anything Else?': Food, Fatness, and Frustration in the Short Stories of Raymond Carver." By taking advantage of the nature of the professorial voice section as a creative space, Warnes not only lets us look in on the early stages of his next major scholarly project, he also elaborates upon food as a fascinating yet often overlooked theme in (American) literature. He proceeds from the claim that even when literary figurations of food and eating "appear marginal," they do, in fact, "often turn out to be central" (50). His contribution stands as a powerful example of the ever-growing importance of American food cultures in European American studies.

In his highly self-reflexive piece, written at a coffeehouse very much akin to Starbucks, Warnes provides several examples of the cultural significance of food in the context of both large-scale transnational phenomena and the local communities in Carver's texts. Starting with a consideration of the complexly interlaced causality of Americanization and globalization, he asks to what degree these two are responsible for the worldwide rise in obesity. In reference to the concrete primary texts of his analysis, Warnes discusses, among many other issues, the diner counter as an American institution that "theatricalises space, ranging a small audience around what is at once a kitchen and a stage: a place where some bodies watch others, to be sure, but also where the former might catch the latter unawares, in moments of accidental exposure, in awkward poses ordained by the exigencies of cooking and other tasks" (53). It is, hence, Warnes's combination of some of the larger concerns of food in (European) American studies with an analysis of literary texts that provides a tremendously enriching contribution to the fifth issue of *aspeers*.

ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

In keeping with the format established in the fourth issue, *aspeers* pairs a topical section about American Food Cultures with a non-topical section, featuring the best in MA-level European American studies scholarship without any thematic restrictions. We are pleased to offer insightful scholarly analyses of different issues related to American culture: Dealing with literature, history, and audiovisual media, the fifth issue showcases the disciplinary multiplicity of American studies. The range of material covered in this issue demonstrates the wide scope of what is being defined as a ‘text’ worthy of analysis in our field. This width, along with the conviction that different routes of analysis lead to new ways of understanding, makes American studies a continuously innovative field that fosters emerging voices creating diverse and sophisticated graduate work.

As a case in point, this issue’s topical academic contribution, Linda Richter’s “‘Could You Not Turn Your Back on This Hunger Country?’: Food in the Migration Process of German Emigrants, 1816-1856,” is based on the premise that focusing on food and reading it as a text is a stimulating approach that can produce unforeseen insights. Going beyond the cliché of soda, burgers, and French fries as the all-American diet, Richter turns her attention to food and its importance in the formation of cultural identity. Moreover, Richter’s text adds a critical dimension to many of the other topical contributions in this issue. Whereas the latter speak, in their respective ways, to different notions of abundance, Richter specifically includes scarcity and hunger as motivations for migration in her historiographic project. Discussing the American experience of German immigrants in the nineteenth century, the article demonstrates ways in which European American studies conceptualizes the United States as an ethnically diverse nation, and it testifies to the fact that food provides a prism through which it is possible to examine a variety of American identities.

In her analysis, Richter draws on emigrants’ journals, memoirs, and letters collected in the *Nordamerika-Briefsammlung*. She traces German emigrants’ concerns about food and the significance it held during all stages of the migration process—at home, during the perilous sailboat voyage, and upon arrival in the United States, where “the worst bread that they eat [...] is better than the finest cake at home,” as one immigrant wrote (qtd. in Helbich, Kamphoefner, and Sommer 356; Richter’s translation). The article calls for a qualification of the significance of political and religious motivations for German migration to the United States: Shifting the focus to economic and agricultural considerations, Richter draws attention to the crucial, but often overlooked, role that food scarcity in Germany played in the decision to emigrate to the United States. Her argument also addresses the importance of food during the transatlantic voyage, which has previously been neglected by food scholars. In addition,

she points out that food took on a powerful symbolic role in the migrants' correspondence with friends and families who stayed behind; it served as a point of divide between the land of plenty and the immigrants' home country. Her thorough and innovative analysis thus contributes significantly to migration historiography.

The non-topical section of this issue showcases studies that deal with a diverse body of primary texts. First, the section offers an innovative reading of one of the most canonized texts of American literature, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900). The second contribution looks at the conspiratorial narrative structure of contemporary American television shows. Third, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* book series (2005-2008) is contextualized within current debates about the state of feminism.

Koen Potgieter proves that a previously untested approach can produce surprising and innovative readings of a canonical text: In "‘This Disintegrating Force’: Reading Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* as a Narrative of Black Upward Mobility," he argues that the novel speaks to white Americans' racial and class anxieties at the turn of the century. His reading reveals that the figure of Carrie contains striking echoes of the period's stereotypes about African Americans. Potgieter detects a subtext in the novel that suggests that Dreiser's protagonist, who becomes a famous Broadway actress, can be read as an embodiment of black upward mobility. Combining Carrie's rise with the concomitant downfall of Hurstwood, Potgieter argues, *Sister Carrie* articulates deep-seated anxieties over black upward mobility and the decline of the white middle class. His insightful analysis thereby invigorates the critical discussion of Dreiser's classic—which has so far largely ignored issues of race in the novel (Gair 164)—by probing the ways in which concerns about race, while not dealt with explicitly, are a significant undercurrent of the text.

In "Hidden Agendas, Endless Investigations, and the Dynamics of Complexity: The Conspiratorial Mode of Storytelling in Contemporary American Television Series," Felix Brinker connects conspiracy as a narrative mode, employed by popular TV series such as *Lost*, *Fringe*, or *The X-Files*, to the economic demands of the twenty-first-century television landscape. He argues that such complex narratives that revolve around a central mystery are ideally suited for meeting the challenges that post-network television faces. The recent interest in conspiracy has produced a number of works that mainly link it to post-9/11 'paranoia' in American society and provide diagnoses of the nation's current state of mind. Brinker synthesizes scholarly writings on conspiracy, genre theory, and television narratology in order to shift the focus toward the media marketplace and its power in fostering conspiratorial modes of storytelling. He argues that conspiracy narratives' distinctive structural capacity to almost endlessly defer closure plays directly into the (financial) interest of television networks to sustain the engagement of a committed viewership for as long as possible and is generally well suited to serve the demands of the post-network television era. The article thus

critically adds a materialist dimension to current theoretical discussions about contemporary fascinations with conspiracy.

Sophie Spieler's "Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Series and the 'Post(-)ing' of Feminism" situates Meyer's popular book series in a cultural landscape in which feminism has repeatedly been pronounced 'dead.' The article provides an in-depth theoretical discussion of the alleged end of feminism and the various versions of 'post(-)ing' the feminist project. Spieler points out the necessity of drawing a distinction between postfeminism (indicating a theoretical shift) and post-feminism (marking a historical break/backlash) in its various guises and argues that the series's protagonists Bella and Edward live in a universe that is strikingly conservative in regard to gender roles and norms. Spieler makes the case that while Bella, for example, conforms to the image of the 'true woman' in most ways, Meyer's novels also present "an allegorical tale about the dangers of unregulated female sexuality" (Siering 51) and is very much informed by only superficially modernized nineteenth-century notions of gender norms. Thus, her contribution contradicts the stance that feminism has succeeded and has become obsolete. In fact, Spieler posits the need to continuously interrogate texts like *Twilight* about their conservative tendencies and to utilize their potential to serve as instigators of critical discussion about the state of feminism. Combining a discussion of one of the most passionately debated political issues of contemporary theory with a reading of a tremendously successful text of popular culture, the article demonstrates the cultural productivity and social relevance of the field of American studies.

With its fifth issue, *aspeers* visits a fledgling field of American studies graduate scholarship: food studies. The current issue showcases a variety of contributions that choose food as their central topic. The multitude of formats of this issue's contributions underscores the productivity of the dialogue between academia, art, (popular) culture, and everyday life. Our topical academic contribution, our professorial voice, and our collection of food art all encourage our readers to discover the diversity of approaches to food and challenge them to ask themselves, in the words of Gabaccia: "If we are what we eat, who are we?" (9). Our non-topical academic contributions further enrich this issue by shining scholarly light on both a classic of American literature and influential texts of popular culture. As the editors of *aspeers*, we thus invite our readers to explore its fifth issue.

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