

Introduction

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Defining the decisive moment, photographer John Szarkowski stated that it is “decisive not because of the exterior event [...], but because in that moment the flux of changing forms and patterns was sensed to have achieved balance, clarity and order—because the image became, for an instant, a *picture*” (100). With Szarkowski’s remarks in mind, we, the editors of the ninth issue of *aspeers*, consider this issue to be situated at a particular juncture of a number of discussions in American studies. In reference to last year’s “Coda” that saw *aspeers* as providing “a snapshot of the current moment of graduate scholarship in American studies in Europe” and as “map[ping] the academic interests and research foci of European students of the field” (Bozkurt et al. 137), we can state that this year we are looking at a different picture. The snapshot of this year’s issue of *aspeers* exhibits a certain “flux of [change]” in methods and theories, a flux that tells its own story and is most productively engaged by revisiting once more the matter of interdisciplinarity and its place in European American studies at the graduate level.

It is perhaps a cliché to return to the obsessive self-reflection with method and interdisciplinarity that has for so long been a hallmark of American studies. It is a cliché, however, for good reasons: interdisciplinarity continues to be a precarious site, a project perpetually deferred and never (quite) achieved, an intersection at which American studies’ disciplinary coherence is always suspended in the danger of dissolution. Ever since its founding, American studies has aimed to expand or supersede the borders of academic disciplines. Since the early 1950s, American studies scholars have been determined to “examine the unexamined spaces between literature and history to develop a more integrated understanding of American society” (Jacobs 153). This project specifically sought to assert US cultural independence by defining American studies as independent from English studies departments. In the 1970s, the effort to combine scholarship on literature and history was ongoing, but now a vast array of themes and topics was being discussed, and the definition of what constitutes a text was being broadened to include, for example, film (162). More to the point, it

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was not until the 1980s that American studies began to find a number of disciplinary interfaces to the social sciences. With the emergence of multiculturalism as a concept and an area of research, both academic fields shared an interest in the concepts of race, ethnicity, and gender, which, until today, remain the fields' most common points of contact (177). However, despite its interdisciplinary openness, American studies has, as of yet, not sufficiently embraced the social sciences: anthropology, sociology, political science, media and communication studies, economics, among others.

In the past eight issues of *aspeers*, social science methodologies have likewise struggled to find a foothold among the more dominant literary and cultural studies approaches. This can be observed particularly in last year's "Coda," in which the editors noted that the issue's topic, "American Health," had the potential to invite papers that integrated social science methodologies and theories, and yet "the dominance of cultural studies methodologies seem[ed] to confirm a preference in graduate scholarship" (Bozkurt et al. 137). In this regard, the previous issue can indeed be assessed as a snapshot, one which showed a foregrounding of cultural and literary studies and only very little interdisciplinary work engaged with the social sciences. However, with this year's issue, we present a different picture, as all contributions implement a mixture of social science and cultural studies methodologies. This year's contributions differ in their methodologies and themes from the majority of those published before, and while we have no intention of announcing a 'turn' in *aspeers*, we instead consider this an opportunity to revisit the discussion of interdisciplinarity. This issue's papers draw from anthropology, political science, and communication studies, employ statistical analysis, argue within a social constructivist framework, and work at the intersection between social sciences, literary studies, and cultural studies.

Lastly, Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean's question, "[w]hat is American studies?" (4) points toward the unattainability of genuine academic interdisciplinarity: its status as a precarious site, a project perpetually deferred and never (quite) achieved. Here, Campbell and Kean focus on the increasing difficulty of defining American studies within an interdisciplinary framework. If disciplines are no longer strictly separated, what (or who) decides in which discipline to place scholars and their work? And what, then, qualifies the three papers in this year's issue as American studies? In the following paragraphs, we will discuss some of the markers that pervade these articles and firmly situate them within the field of American studies: a reliance on the unit of the nation-state, critical engagement with inherent power structures, and the concept of 'usable past.'

The first marker that this issue's articles share may, at first glance, seem self-evident for the field of American studies: They are all primarily situated within a US national framework. Over the past few decades, however, scholars across the field have voiced

their reservations against research that features an exclusive emphasis on the level of the nation-state. Based on notions of an unprecedented mobility of ideas, goods, and people across increasingly permeable borders on a globalized planet, the nation-state has come to be regarded by some as an insufficient, even outdated, research object. As evident in publications such as Ian Tyrrell's *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective Since 1789*, this much debated transnational turn has productively ambiguated the rigid national boundaries of the United States, at least in American studies scholarship.¹ This issue's articles interrogate specific topics within the boundaries of the United States; however, these topics matter on scales that are both greater and smaller than the national. Additionally, Tyrrell's title makes clear that the turn has not led to the complete obliteration of the nation as an analytical unit, and indeed the nation, as an 'imagined community' (Anderson), continues to matter for individual lives as well as world politics. Through this lens, the articles can also be placed within a larger transnational agenda.

Furthermore, American studies scholarship has always been situated within a contested political space. While the seminal Myth and Symbol School of the 1950s and 1960s has the reputation of having fostered the interests of American exceptionalism and of the country's white, male elites, subsequent approaches have been driven by the desire to challenge this conservative liaison between academia and national politics. Moving beyond the goal merely to explicate the status quo by studying history, literature, and society, much of American studies has, since the late 1960s, sought to reveal and oppose issues of oppression, misrepresentation, and injustice in contemporary US society and culture. Particularly since the late 1980s, when minority studies gained prominence in academia, Americanists have concentrated on questioning the diversity of the field, and have thus focused on race, ethnicity, and gender, to name a few of the most thoroughly investigated concepts. In this pursuit, revealing and opposing underlying power structures has become a major defining characteristic of American studies. As this issue's three articles indicate, this political commitment can also be found among European American studies scholarship at the graduate level.

Finally, the three contributions engage the concept of a "usable past" (Brooks 339), which has a long and prolific tradition within American studies. Envisioning a more productive future for the field is very much based on a specific understanding of the past and present of American studies: one that considers trends like the transnational turn to be transformative (Fishkin 20-21), developing new approaches

1 The case for the field's commitment to the transnational turn is most prominently made in Shelley Fisher Fishkin's 2004 presidential address to the American Studies Association, "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies."

that require the employment and understanding of social-scientific theories and methodologies. This understanding of academic trends is very much an attempt to construct a usable past, a narrative of recent history in academia, thereby explaining and justifying the present trend of, for example, the transnational. The papers in this issue employ this usable past concept, thereby further plotting a trajectory using the past and the present to posit likely futures, both positive and negative. Indeed, for the ninth issue of *aspeers*, this self-reflection and course-plotting is essential to meaning-making on a number of levels. As already described, it is both present in terms of interdisciplinary ambitions and, also, in the argumentative trajectories of the individual contributions. Thus, the notion of a usable past is one of the aspects that grounds this year's contributions within the field of American studies. The authors incorporate the individual themes of their papers into the overarching usable past framework by employing anthropological and historiographic theories of memory formation, exposing hegemonic power in past humanitarian discourses and their contemporary implications, and drawing on past accounts of biased journalism and its impacts on future public policies.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The contributions of the ninth issue of *aspeers* constitute a snapshot of the diverse methodologies, theories, and concepts that compose the field of American studies. As the variety of research interests at the graduate level demonstrates, American studies continues to be a dynamic field with an increasing number of new topics and discussions. We are pleased to continue the *aspeers* tradition of publishing some of the best work of emerging scholars from various European universities.

In "White Nostalgia: The Absence of Slavery and the Commodification of White Plantation Nostalgia," Ewa A. Adamkiewicz (Graz, Austria) offers an engaging and compelling analysis of the intersection between collective constructions of memory, representations of slavery, and capitalist motivations. Adamkiewicz examines seven plantation websites and argues that these websites promulgate a specific type of recollection she defines as 'white nostalgia.' Accordingly, these websites—and by extension, the associated plantations—deny slavery in order to assuage white persons' guilt, thereby creating a more manageable and, more importantly, profitable version of history, one sellable to the plantations' visitors (i.e. consumers). Some plantations, Adamkiewicz claims, acknowledge slavery in their presentations of the past, but only in a way that deceives visitors into a superficial, objectified, and commodified narrative of slavery in the plantation's history. Other plantations, however, deny slavery

altogether, whitewashing their history to serve not only a capitalist purpose but also a racist one. Adamkiewicz concludes by stating that scholars and plantation visitors need to investigate critically the portrayal of race and slavery in order to arrive at a better informed and more historically accurate understanding of these issues. Selecting the internet as her paper's analytic focus affords the readers the opportunity to visit the websites and experience Adamkiewicz's conclusions firsthand. Furthermore, by engaging with a painful, often difficult-to-address, and ongoing discussion of race relations in the South and the United States in general, Adamkiewicz's paper contributes to the contemporary discussions on the concept of race and race relations.

In her article "Playing in the Name of Life: Biopolitics and the American Play Movement," Lea Brandes (Bonn, Germany) analyzes the play movement, one of the turn-of-the-century Progressive Era movements, through the lens of Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics. The play movement's aim was to provide lower-class, mostly immigrant neighborhoods with playgrounds to keep children from playing in the streets. In her historical analysis, Brandes applies Foucault's theory in order to expose the play movement's activism as reactionary. Through the framework of biopolitics, she analyzes historical documents written by contemporaries of the play movement, especially the statements made by the Playground Association of America. Brandes proposes that the movement's actions emerged from white, middle-class concerns regarding perceived social changes caused by immigration and rapid urbanization. Furthermore, she discusses the emergence of the play movement, how the playground was used as a tool for the movement's exertion of biopolitical power, and how the movement used pseudo-scientific rhetoric about the connection of mind and body in order to legitimize its cause. Her in-depth analysis exposes the deeply reactionary politics of a movement that presented itself as altruistic and progressive. By discussing the play movement's notions of 'proper' play for children, of what is 'natural,' and of what would lead the children to develop into 'good citizens,' Brandes exposes the movement's racism and disdain for the lower class's purportedly insufficient ways of raising children. More fundamentally, Brandes's analysis also problematizes the notion of the playground as an innocent, unpolitical space for child play. This exploration of the play movement's agenda to structure and control child development adds to our volume by offering new perspectives not only on the conceptualization of childhood, but also on the political discourse that enables public policy to exert the dominance of white middle-class values.

In "Apologies or Evasions: A Critical Look at the *New York Times*'s and the *Washington Post*'s Self Critique," Ruurt Wiegant (Utrecht, Netherlands) provides a novel perspective on the much-discussed topic of media bias by combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies. His mixed methods research on the reporting of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* exposes the extent of the

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newspapers' bias over a specific time period preceding the US invasion of Iraq. Using the data he collects, Wiegant analyzes the self-critical articles featured in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and assesses the accuracy of each newspaper's respective admissions against the compiled data. Placing these data into the context of the self-critical articles, Wiegant is able to further the discussion of bias by problematizing the self-reflexivity of the two newspapers. Furthermore, with the methodology he develops throughout the paper, he equips the reader with a solid basis to see the ways these newspapers soft-pedal their unbalanced reporting. Interested most notably in the presence of bias in journalism, he also touches upon its potential presence in supposedly cut-and-dried quantitative research and the more interpretive efforts of qualitative analysis. In response to these concerns, Wiegant acknowledges that there is no immediate way to quantify the language and underlying attitudes of journalists and hybridizes his methodology, performing an analytical reading that sorts the more complex data into a number of categories for statistical analysis. This type of mixed methods research is not uncommon in many social science fields, but is somewhat rare among Americanists. While media coverage of conflicts and wars remains highly relevant not only for the contemporary political agenda but also for a number of research areas, including those of American studies, the role of employing different methodologies, as Wiegant does in his paper, acquires even more significance.

POSTGRADUATE VOICE

As a journal geared toward a graduate audience of readers, *aspeers* is happy to seize the opportunity to foster a conversation among three emerging scholars. In a variation on what has been the professorial voice in past issues, we decided to conduct an interview with previous *aspeers* contributors to talk about life in contemporary American studies as a young scholar and potential future professor in the field. This interview will hopefully provide our graduate readership with a helpful, realistic, and encouraging perspective on life in American studies after the MA.

After earning an MA in American studies, Klara Stephanie Szlezák completed her PhD at the Universität Regensburg in 2013, focusing on the representation of American literature in museums. She is currently employed as an adjunct faculty member at the University of Passau and has begun a new research project dealing with intermediality and Jewish American literature. Szlezák appeared in the second issue of *aspeers* in 2009. Upon completing his Magister Artium in American studies and Iberian studies at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Stephen Koetzing stayed in the field of American studies and is currently in the final stages of his PhD

on aging and hegemonic masculinity in contemporary US literature at the same university. Koetzing appeared in the fourth issue of *aspeers* in 2011. Kasia Mika completed her MA in Literature in a World Context at the University of Aberdeen and successfully defended her PhD on narrative responses to the 2010 Haitian earthquake at the University of Leeds this past semester. She is teaching in Leeds until the end of the current Spring term and will graduate in July. Mika appeared in the sixth issue of *aspeers* in 2013.

We are excited to share these three scholars' experiences as a part of the dialogue in and about the dynamic field of American studies. The interview covers questions ranging from the reasons these scholars chose to stay in American studies to their experiences in their respective doctoral programs and their outlook on entering the academic job market.

Returning to Szarkowski's observations on the decisive moment and the momentary balance of changing factors, we view this issue's contributions as composing an image different from what we are used to seeing in *aspeers*. This diversion could be traced to the dynamic nature of the field, it could be considered a momentary response to the academic discussions on interdisciplinarity, methodology, and usable past, or it could be neither. In any case, we invite our readers to explore this decisive moment as it unfolds over the following pages.

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