

Coda: Editorial Remarks

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When you write a book, you spend day after day scanning and identifying the trees. When you're done, you have to step back and look at the forest" (King 201). Stephen King's metaphor for the writing process might as well illustrate the experience of editing. In our first semester in the American Studies MA program at Leipzig University, we were assigned the challenging and immensely enriching task of preparing the eighth issue of *aspeers* for publication. The double-blind review process involved a substantial amount of (re-)reading, analyzing arguments, discussing strengths and overall academic value of each submission, weighing its potential contribution to the final issue, selecting, writing back to authors, and editing their resubmissions. All this work cultivated a set of valuable skills for the editors' academic lives; for the authors, it provided an opportunity to have their articles critically examined, receive constructive peer feedback, and finally see their work published in a journal of increasing reputation and international reach. Following an intense period of almost "day after day scanning and identifying" the roots and core ideas of this year's contributions as well as pruning sentences for more fruitful results, we now "step back" to look at the diversity of perspectives offered in the present edition and to explore some of those areas where our papers intersect and where they speak to each other.

One such area of overlap lies in the arena of method. Although the contributions to this issue of *aspeers* display a broad range of themes and research methods, at least half of our authors have directly or indirectly drawn on the work of French theorists. Foucault's concept of the medical gaze and its normalizing authority informs the close reading of the *House, M.D.* episode "Skin Deep" by Simon Daniel Whybrew. Similarly, Foucauldian ideas on panopticism and the internalization of pervasive surveillance were an important reference point for Felix Haase's analysis of spatial dynamics in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Finally, Derrida's concept of carnophallogocentrism influenced Michaela Beck's interpretation of Jonathan Foer's *Eating Animals*. Together, these three articles exemplify how the work of French theorists

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continues to be a prominent source for emerging voices in American studies.¹ Moreover, these papers demonstrate that theory, when it intersects with literature and popular culture, does not only serve as a method of inquiry but also as an inspiration for shaping graduate scholarship in the field. More implicitly, a concern for ‘method’ also casts a spotlight on another similarity among several of our contributions, namely one of subject matter: Back in 1957, when Henry Nash Smith published his famous essay “Can ‘American Studies’ Develop a Method?”, he relegated popular culture to a subordinate position in relation to “the serious work” of art (204). He argued, for example, that popular works contain “stereotyped ideas and attitudes” whose relative cultural value “lends itself to the quantitative methods of content analysis,” in contrast to “serious art” (204), which required a different approach. This perspective has long been challenged, and one could indeed argue that challenging this position and interrogating it continuously has become one of the defining features of American studies. Two contributions featured in our eighth issue delve into popular culture and offer valuable insights into American life. Simon Daniel Whybrew’s take on *House, M.D.* shows how the series might affect the audience’s attitudes toward health issues as well as the implications of medical authority. Sören Schoppmeier’s investigation of Nicki Minaj’s lyrics and music videos unveils extant markers of race in US music and society in general. Overall, these articles illustrate the central role of popular culture in current American studies scholarship.

More indirectly related to matters of method, a shared interest in ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ in inclusion and exclusion and its implications and consequences ties together many of our contributions, and this interest seems to resonate with the theories our authors chose, but it also seems to speak of a genuine interest our contributions share. In particular, many of our authors chose to look at representations of socially marginalized groups and tried to tease out both the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion and the ambivalence that these processes often entail. Such a notion of inside and outside is examined most clearly—and most literally—in Felix Haase’s contribution on the different (spatial) circles that structure Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*. Interrogating slavery as an ‘outside’ to American society, Haase’s article reads Douglass’s response to the oppressive power of surveillance and positions his struggle against slavery as a form of maneuvering various insides and outsides, spatially but also aesthetically. Similarly interested in the intersection of space and identity, albeit in a very different context, Mareike Ahrens’s case study on ethnic gentrification in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, delineates the inside and outside of neoliberal capitalism: Despite efforts of creating change from within the Latino community, she argues, the

1 This influence has not escaped its own share of criticism. For example, Barry Shank addresses some of the objections in the context of cultural studies in the epilogue to his essay “The Continuing Embarrassment to Culture.” Frederick Crews and Tony Hilfer also provide critical assessments of postmodernist and poststructuralist theories.

processes of gentefication push poor members of the Latino community outside of the increasingly wealthy district, thus making it difficult to clearly distinguish between ethnic empowerment and top-down real estate development. Also working on questions of ethnicity, Sören Schoppmeier scrutinizes Nicki Minaj's simultaneous evoking of rap and pop genres, of both black and white cultural markers, to argue that this constitutes a selling of 'whiteness.' This, in turn, reinforces dominant patterns of inclusion and exclusion in the same moment as it constitutes a transgression of ethnic binaries. Less focused on moments of ambivalence, Simon D. Whybrew's contribution is still interested in how social positions get assigned. The TV show *House, M.D.*, he argues, moves intersex people to an outside position by way of a validation of the medical gaze, an enforcement of heteronormativity and a 'punishment' of gender 'deviation.' Lastly, even Carolin Benack's paper, far removed from questions of minority position, can be seen as working along related lines. In her analysis of Melville's *Bartleby* she shows how the scrivener fits into neither a conceptualized inside nor a corresponding outside of the economic logic, a position that negates inside and outside and that positions him outside of established representational systems. Thus, in all our papers this interest in the social and textual creation of insides and outsides proved to be a dynamic and fascinating subject for our authors.

Considering that this year's topic of "American Health" seemed to be particularly hospitable to social science methodologies, the dominance of cultural studies methodologies seems to confirm a preference in graduate scholarship aspeers consistently witnessed over the last issues. The topic would have invited papers on the recent US health care reform, on fast food, or on other health risks such as smoking, papers that would use statistics, interviews, and empirical research to argue their point. The submissions we received, however, used health first and foremost as a critical tool to add a new angle to familiar primary texts and social dynamics. Frequently, they speak about culture and interrogate and criticize certain social conditions, not least by reading health metaphorically. The primacy of cultural studies work thus seems to say a lot about how American studies is being taught and how students capitalize on its possibilities: While American studies' penchant for cultural studies methodologies and for methodological mixing might have discouraged contributions from exploring health within more rigid disciplinary frameworks, it has yielded fascinating interdisciplinary vistas.

Thus, taking a step back brings into focus how the current issue of *aspeers* truly gives a snapshot of the current moment of graduate scholarship in American studies in Europe. It not only maps the academic interests and research foci of European students of the field but it also opens up a venue for dialog, be it implicit—as such dialog takes place in any reading and intellectual engagement with any of our contributors' papers—or explicit via the *aspeers* web page. As editors, preparing this issue and entering into a dialog with our authors was an integral part of graduate

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school professional life. As we “look at the forest,” it is this dialog, spanning several months and resulting in the current issue, that becomes visible most clearly.

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