

Foreword

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It is not an exaggeration to say that 2020 was a year full of fundamental global challenges and periods of disruption—certainly also impacting the way that we think about (and practically do) university teaching and learning. As such, *aspeers*, too, was not exempt from these changes and developments, being both a scholarly and a didactic project. As the COVID-19 pandemic led to online teaching proliferating in universities around the world, and while we slowly grew more accustomed to seeing each other only on Zoom calls, there was uncertainty whether such remote-teaching formats were also possible for a project like *aspeers*. Would it even *be* a project—or rather, *feel* like one—if the graduate editors never sat in a room together, physically interacting with one another while they discussed and debated the submissions they received? Could a schedule be conceived and timelines be kept when everything might feel slightly less ‘real’ due to the format’s purely digital nature? Would collaborative tasks and communication within the group work out over email, in Zoom, or via other tools—and all this in a considerably shorter semester? Several months later, we can now answer these and many related questions squarely in the affirmative: Even in the midst of all these changes and challenges, a new issue of *aspeers* once again lies before us, largely the result of the hard work of this year’s graduate editors.

In fact, the situation during this semester once more encapsulated the *aspeers* mantra of “continuity and change” that already characterized previous cycles (Koenen and Herrmann iii). That the entire process of accompanying students on the way to editing a journal had to be shifted to a digital setting certainly altered the vast majority of how exactly things were done in the past: how to didactically envision a particular workshop or other session, how to actually meet as a group, to communicate with each other, to exchange thoughts and let everybody participate,

to vote on and make decisions, but also how to get to know each other and become a group, a team, and a cohort in the process. Yet throughout the last few months, while the new online format unfortunately kept the team from meeting in person, from experiencing the intense situations a class setting usually provides, they still managed to compensate many of the shortcomings of editing a journal exclusively via online meetings and found new ways to uphold some of the core principles of *aspeers*. As such, the present issue once more spotlights the excellent scholarship done in American studies already on the MA level, and it was produced in a collaborative effort that builds on the students taking ownership of the process. Almost single-handedly, this year's editors thus wrestled with moments of adaptation, compromise, and new strategies of communication to create a markedly different process that still appeared to be more an evolution of, rather than a sharp break with, previous iterations.

These experiences, in turn, may prompt us to ask the stereotypical question whether such a crisis can also be seen as an opportunity: Did some parts of the process, upon reflection, perhaps work better this year than they did in previous ones? Much of the team effort that editing an issue of *aspeers* involves always already rested on online communication and collaboration tools that proved just as useful during this editing cycle's restrictions. Perhaps the same might be true for some of this semester's new experiences, like the ease with which meetings can be held online or how smaller groups can get together without the need for separate physical spaces. At least once we are not forced anymore into this format of online teaching by a pandemic, it might be appropriate to assess if more online and digital teaching tools are particularly well suited to a project like *aspeers* in 'normal' years as well. In this sense, 2020 might be considered a year not just of crisis but also of acceleration, fast-tracking some lingering developments out of necessity.

Overall, we are certainly happy to see that even during such unexpected circumstances, interest in submitting work to an MA-level journal that caters exclusively to American studies scholarship produced at European universities has been as high as ever, perhaps also pointing to the continuously growing importance of open-access scholarship and digital publishing, even or especially on the graduate level. Accordingly, the current issue once more showcases some of the exciting research done within American studies graduate scholarship, with the particularly timely topic of "Narratives of American Colonization and Imperialism." In addition to, of course most centrally, the authors of the articles included in this

issue, a number of people were involved ‘behind the scenes’ in making this feat possible, and we especially want to thank Daniele Puccio, who supervised many of this year’s sessions as editorial assistant; Anne Bertram, who facilitated all the communication tasks in the backoffice; and Sebastian M. Herrmann, who offered his knowledge in a workshop to the students.

Above all, however, we congratulate this year’s graduate editors—also the largest group of editors in *aspeers* history—for the stellar jobs they did. While they had to contend with attending classes from the (semi-)privacy of their homes, the occasional connection failures or microphone issues during Zoom calls, simultaneously juggling a variety of communication and collaboration platforms, and the particular hardships that the pandemic might have put on everybody, they nevertheless managed to maintain high spirits and an outstanding work ethic. Like the groups before them, they discussed and reviewed all of the submissions, made difficult decisions, conceptualized and penned feedback letters, researched and wrote an introduction, carefully line edited all the contributions, and in between did an extraordinary amount of communicating, organizing, and scheduling. Thanks to their hard work, their team spirit, their respect for each other, their patience with each other (and with us, their mentors), and their spirit of cooperation, they succeeded in making this virtual reality a great actual experience for all of us. We hope that the following pages will be an equally insightful read for everybody else as well.

WORKS CITED

Koenen, Anne, and Sebastian M. Herrmann. Foreword. *aspeers: emerging voices in american studies*, vol. 9, 2016, pp. iii-iv. www.aspeers.com/2016/foreword.