

## Introduction: American Bodies

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To say that the ‘American body’ is a highly contested space within contemporary American society is perhaps an understatement. With attention to recent history and ongoing events, the body is seen, now more than ever, as an open battleground that underpins some of contemporary America’s most divisive and impactful issues. The polarizing debate within the American public regarding how to stem the effects of a still ongoing global pandemic seems to be at an impasse. Discourses on vaccinations, on individual and collective health, as well as on restrictions to both day-to-day and civil activities all directly tackle both the personal and the collective body.

Notions concerning the body can be as confusing as they are liberating within academic fields. In our call for papers for this year’s issue of *aspeers*, we asked for thematic contributions about (representations of) American bodies. The corporeal is present in almost all angles of cultural and literary studies, from race to gender and sexuality and from class to issues of immigration. The lines of conflict surrounding the American body, long considered by many to be settled, have recently given way to increasingly visible forms of erosion: The bodily autonomy of women appears threatened by a Supreme Court with an uncertain future, and the racialization of the American body—an issue as old as the nation itself—has continued to be a normalized space of violent conflict. Images of such racial violence have come to occupy a near-omnipresent space on social media, propelling Black Lives Matter from a domestic US American cause to an international movement.

For better readability, we have structured the following parts of the introduction into subsections, each one placing the corresponding contributions into a larger context and highlighting intersections. The articles and other contributions in this fifteenth issue of *aspeers* find themselves centered around the—not entirely novel, but evidently especially relevant—topic of the contestation of the American body. This topic is intentionally open to broad interpretation, as it acknowledges not only

the vast variety of connected issues tied to the realm of the physical body but the discourses that have been built around it.

#### **DEFINING THE BODY: CROSSINGS AND BOUNDARIES**

Christoph Friedrich Nostitz begins this issue with a focus on bodies in a context that has been particularly visible in recent years and reverberates with prominent political discussions in recent US culture: crossings at the US-Mexican border. Specifically, in “The Metalanguage of Border Crossing,” he examines the Yuri Herrera novel *Signs Preceding the End of the World* and argues that Herrera offers a subversive take on hegemonic border-crossing discourse, understanding immigration to the United States as being a rite of passage through the underworld. The author investigates how this narrative, with references to Aztec mythology, can be further analyzed with Roland Barthes’s concept of metalanguage to describe and expose hegemonic myths that signify border-crossing, such as those invoked by various US presidents. Furthermore, the article takes up the work of Victor Turner on liminality and argues that bodies permanently crossing the border into US territory are in an institutionalized liminal state themselves, being stripped of their previous individual life and permanently viewed as Other. However, as Nostitz emphasizes, *Signs* subverts the othering of undocumented immigrants in US society; as Herrera’s novel is told through *their* eyes, *their* individuality and subjective experience are highlighted and preserved.

#### **NONCONFORMITY TO BODY NORMS: QUEERNESS, THE KITCHEN, AND THE BALLROOM**

Beyond physical borders, bodies are also seen to pass other kinds of boundaries that are similarly constructed through cultural discourse. In “Cooking as *Mestizaje* in Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s ‘Making Tortillas’: Reconciling Chicana Lesbian Identity through the Space of the Kitchen,” Carolina Faller Moura explores the power of queering the space of the kitchen as an act of reclaiming both Chicana heritage and lesbian sexuality. Drawing from Chicana and food studies, the author analyzes how Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s poem “Making Tortillas” challenges the heteropatriarchy of the kitchen by using images, sounds, smells, and flavors of Mexican cuisine as metaphors for sex and intimacy between women. Faller Moura argues that cooking serves to bridge cultural and sexual identities, moving away from dichotomies while linking it to the work of *mestizaje*—a theory by Monica Torres based on Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*. The concept of *mestizaje* rejects Western binary notions of culture and instead allows contradictions to coexist and interact. By exploring these intersections between the cultures and identities of Chicana lesbians in Alba’s poetry, the paper shows how the kitchen becomes a space of liberation.

Such intersections and boundary-crossings have been a constant concern for LGBTQ+ bodies, which have always been contested in the history of the United States. So-called queer bodies exist in a paradigm that contradicts dominant heteropatriarchal notions of the (straight and cisgender) American body. A system that favors this conventional image of the body leads to frequent instances of marginalization on the part of state, religious, and medical institutions (Morris). Discourses on queerness and its intersection with other cultural concepts continuously change and develop. While queer, gender, and sexuality theories first received notable academic attention in the 1970s, it was not until the 1980s and '90s that scholars and artists such as Judith Butler, Gloria Anzaldúa, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and others began to provide new understandings on gender and sexuality, with a particular focus on performativity, constructivism, and intersectionality.

Although queer bodies have appeared to become more visible after the *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court decision brought marriage equality to the US, the ongoing pandemic appears to have “disproportionately negatively affected the LGBTQ community” in unique ways (Gonzalez et al. 133), with queer youth in particular left to struggle, quarantining in intolerant homes. As Salerno et al. point out, “research suggests that heteronormativity and cisnormativity in practice and policy-level response to large-scale disasters systematically ignores the needs of LGBTQ populations” (721). While the apparent progress that has been made requires recognition, it is necessary to acknowledge continuing inequalities persistent in the US and the dangers they present to the community.

Solveig Kloss picks up on these persisting inequalities in “‘I Look Too Good Not To Be Seen’: Bodily Capital and ‘Realness’ in *Pose*,” exploring the diverse and vibrant world of 1980s New York ballroom culture portrayed in the pilot episode of the television series *Pose*. The show follows the life and struggles of a marginalized set of characters as they encounter issues such as racism, AIDS, and transphobia. Kloss analyzes the complex ballroom culture presented within *Pose* by drawing on an adaptation of Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory in the form of ‘bodily capital’ while contrasting it to ‘realness’ as a significant concept within the ballroom scene that acts as the subject of her analysis, as well as within broader LGBTQ+ culture. Stemming from a fundamental desire to belong and to avoid discrimination, realness acts to contextualize the performance of both gender and racial norms, while bodily capital is more concerned with questions of a body’s position within different fields. The paper thus argues that while the pilot of *Pose* establishes both bodily capital and realness, the ballroom culture within the show can be interpreted as being structured by bodily capital, while realness remains unavailable to those lacking the ‘right’ kind of said (bodily) capital.

THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER

Contestations over bodily capital have also fueled discussions on the power that authorities hold over decisions of the private and the public when it comes to the individual's body—a dynamic that has gained renewed visibility through the health crises that have plagued the world over the past two years. These discussions can be seen in discourses surrounding reproductive rights as well as other issues concerning inclusive and accessible healthcare that have flared up during the COVID-19 pandemic, where race, class, and gender prominently intersect.

As an instance of these intersections, the impending attempt to overturn *Roe v. Wade* almost fifty years later has again renewed a threat to people's personal liberties, making the uterus a site to be decided upon and ruled over by those in power. That public health injustice is not restricted to gender but is deeply rooted in intersectional discrimination, which includes class, is once again palpable with this topic. Though abortion is immensely gendered, the reopening of the case shows that imbalances of opportunity found elsewhere are also apparent in reproduction laws. An abortion ban in more than twenty-six states would result in a further class divide based on accessibility: abortion would likely “safely [remain] accessible by those who can afford it,” but not to those who might be closer to the poverty line already (Flowers). Overall, both the COVID-19 crisis and the reopening of *Roe v. Wade* are concurrent to discussions surrounding freedom of choice and are brought up in public spaces, channeling confusion over what is in the personal and what is in the public interest.

Similarly, gendered power imbalances in healthcare are not restricted to reproductive politics: we find them also in a system that favors research of diseases frequently occurring in men, excluding other sexes that require different treatments or doses; we find them in seat belts that are fitted specifically to a prescriptively ‘male’ body, resulting in more deaths of people who have other body types in car accidents (Criado Perez). Although the sexes are equal before the law, gendered violence persists, and injustices continue to be found in all areas, not only those concerning the body. More than anything, public health decisions render obvious that those in power still seem to be straight, white, cisgender, and male.

The relationship which exists between the body and capital, first outlined by Marx over a century and a half ago, has been brought into a new focus by the ways in which workers have been expected to risk their health for their work over the past two years. At no time during the pandemic was this clearer than in December 2021, when the Center for Disease Control cut the mandatory quarantine for those exposed to COVID in half, to a medically dubious five days, urging Americans—who would likely still be highly contagious at that point—to return to in-person work (US Department of Health and Human Services). Furthermore, the pandemic has also exposed a new fault line within the working class that goes beyond the

Marxist definition, between those required to be physically present at their workplaces and those able to perform their tasks remotely, safe from COVID exposure—the former group predominantly receiving less compensation for their work under more dangerous conditions. While the pandemic has been devastating on this group—the embodied working class—with logistics, industrial production, and healthcare workers making up a disproportionate share of the total working-age death toll (Chen et al.), it has also provided new avenues for class consciousness. From this, one can see a potential reversal of the deterioration of the American labor movement witnessed over the past forty years.

From the push for unionization at an Amazon facility in Bessemer, Alabama, to the successful unionizations of Starbucks franchises that started in Buffalo, New York (Logan), to a wave of industrial actions in factories across the country (Bisaha), the American labor movement is arguably at its most powerful position in half a century, brought about in part by the new economic arrangements resulting from the pandemic. Moreover, beyond formal organizing efforts, the United States is currently experiencing what has been dubbed “the Great Resignation” (Kamal), where workers, now aware of the risk they put their bodies in by going into work during a pandemic, have been leaving jobs en masse. These two phenomena, in conjunction, highlight how broad economic trends are often driven by basic bodily needs such as health as well as how labor and work are inseparably tied to the health of one’s body. Furthermore, the pandemic has provided the embodied working class with a new vocabulary to describe how their health and bodies are all intertwined with each others’. In this vein, the so-called affective turn in American studies, highlighted by the final academic contribution to this issue, provides new insights into the developments in the way capitalism functions during this time.

George Rainov ties together notions of class and race in his contribution “Racial Capitalism and Black Affect in Walter Rodney’s ‘The Groundings with My Brothers,’” which approaches this issue’s topic of “American Bodies” through the work of affect theory, drawing from the Black radical tradition. This article invokes an affective reading of bodies within Walter Rodney’s 1969 classic text “The Groundings with My Brothers.” While the practice of ‘grounding’ is often looked at from a pedagogical perspective, Rainov’s essay sees grounding as representing a new relational mode of being. Furthermore, the article looks at the ways Rodney argues for radical empathy to initiate convergences of Black bodies based on respect, conversation, and a new understanding of Blackness. This practice of grounding therefore represents a threat to the affective barriers of racial capitalism. Rainov’s affective reading highlights Rodney’s awareness of bodily relations in the maintenance and accumulation mechanisms within racial capitalism. The essay concludes by reflecting on subsequent Black feminist responses to “Groundings,”

informing the limits of Rodney's analysis and suggesting an intersectional approach to the practice moving forward.

Other recent scholarship that engages with categories of race and the body—shaped by postcolonial thought, critical race theory, Afro-pessimism, and other race-conscious academic frameworks—discusses the effects of ongoing challenges that people of color, and specifically Black people, face in inherently racist systems. Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo and Carmen K. Lugo-Lugo illustrate how, after 9/11, “racialized and sexualized bodies were positioned as threats to the security of the nation,” and “how particular bodies were constructed as American, while others [especially non-white bodies] were constructed to be un- or anti-American” (xiii). Reflected by the Black Lives Matter movement, the non-white American body—marked by ongoing objectification, discrimination, exclusion, and violence—“cr[ies] out for the political and existential urgency for immediate undoing of the oppressive operations of whiteness” (Yancy 229).

The fact that there is no biological foundation for categories of race shows that the racialization of bodies has always been a meaning-making process, insofar that “white” and “non-white” are constructed identities (Ahmed 46). Said racial identities, of course, carry ongoing and tangible consequences, in addition to consequences which are a legacy of earlier conflicts within previous constructions of racial identities: forced westward migration, contamination of resources, redlining and voter suppression, police violence, and other forms of structural racism. The (American) body is therefore essential to “understand[ing] the production of race” (Ahmed 46) and consequently necessary for understanding the origins of racism. Race exemplifies how pressing the dismantling of bodily categories and their resulting systems of oppression is. Within this discourse, it is important to acknowledge that it is the American imagination that influences what we think the American body means.

#### **‘DEVIANCE’ AND SOCIAL CATEGORIZATION**

In order to establish a social hierarchy, American society seems predisposed to define norms, aiming to answer questions of what is ‘normal’ and what constitutes a normative body. Yet again, the framing of what or who is considered normal comes to life by defining what lies outside the norm, what is considered different or even ‘abnormal.’ Bodies that have been labeled as different become the subject of exclusion and discrimination and are oftentimes confronted with feelings of fear and anxiety from those who fit the norm. The body remains the focus of categorizations, defining categories such as race, gender, or sexuality that impact both the individual's identity and social standing.

Whether through laws that exclude disabled people, representation in mainstream media, or the general perception non-disabled people have of disability, the disabled body remains a prominent issue in the study of American bodies. The ability to conform to norms, to have an average, ‘normal’ body becomes a defining factor in constructing one’s identity, affecting how one is treated by society at large. Being disabled—just like the question of race, gender, or sexuality—becomes a category in itself, through which the individual is not only defined but also regulated.

This development is based on the eugenics movement, which has historically expressed itself, among other acts, in the forced sterilization of those deemed ‘unfit’ or simply undesirable, stripping individuals of control over their bodies and their reproductive rights. The concept of national fitness within the eugenics movement further built on feelings of anxiety towards the nonnormative body by emphasizing that if individuals within a nation are ‘unfit,’ “the national body will not be fit” (Davis 6).

However, as the body remains the subject of numerous categorizations and regulations, it is fundamental to remember that just like one’s identity can be fluid, the body itself undergoes various changes. Disability, therefore, has the quality of being “a category anyone might enter [...] challenging lifelong assumptions of stable identities and normativity” (Ginsburg and Rapp 55). In this sense, for the vast majority of society, disability remains a constant companion throughout life. Whether it is experienced firsthand or by those close to us, disability and the disabled body will remain a “significant human experience” (Garland-Thomson 524) and, therefore, a fundamental part of American life.

One artist who especially focuses on these connections between (dis)ability and the body throughout his work is US author Kenny Fries, with whom we conducted an interview. We are very thankful for the opportunity of including his crucial thoughts and insights on the body and its representation into this year’s issue of *aspeers*. The written interview follows the tradition of professorial and artistic voices that have been included in previous issues, which often add an important view, and sometimes a broader perspective, on the specific topic. Kenny Fries has written numerous books, including *Body, Remember: A Memoir* (1997), *The History of My Shoes and the Evolution of Darwin’s Theory* (2007), and *In the Province of the Gods* (2017), and his work has appeared in multiple (inter)national newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, as well as other publications and anthologies. His intersectional approach on disability, queerness, and memory (among the many other topics that he touches on) is visible in a variety of multimodal and cross-genre works.

In the interview with Kenny Fries, the American poet and memoirist provides insight into his work, which delves into explorations of interdependence,

intersectionality, the evolution of eugenics, and other topics deeply intertwined with images and visions of the body. He further comments on the understanding of disability and the individual's relationship with the outside world. His responses also seek to question what is stated as 'normal,' and what is constituted as 'American,' eventually underlining the importance of interdependence and its understanding.

In order to further supplement these academic perspectives, this year's issue of *aspeers* also includes original artwork by Kate Whitney, selected from our open call for artistic submissions. Whitney tackles "American Bodies" from both a deeply personal and creative way of making sense of the effects that nature and culture, time and space, and presence and absence have on human and animal bodies. *Mutant Ecologies* is a series of two sculptures: one depicting a monarch butterfly, the other depicting two tarantula hawk wasps; both placed on a piece of wood as if resting from flight. Closer inspection reveals these creatures as being composed of a mix of organic and artificial matter. The wings of one of the wasps have been replaced by pieces from an old bicycle pedal, and the butterfly appears to be adorned with pieces of plastic litter. While discussions on the American body throughout this issue have been primarily concerned with the organic, these two pieces serve to remind us how integrated our bodies are with the inorganic. Not only have plastic products made their way into all aspects of our lives—from the clothes we wear to the cars we drive—but microplastics have also polluted lakes, rivers, and oceans; making their way into the food chain, into the bodies of the animals we eat, and ultimately into our own bodies themselves. Contemporary industrial production methods have left a stain on not only the human American body but the natural bodies of American fauna as well. This pollution has not yet killed these creatures but has fused with them, leaving behind a new, mutant ecology.

In her artwork *Stitched in the Past*, Kate Whitney comments on the passing of time by blending the traditional art of embroidery with the more contemporary technique of the collage. The embroidered face of the woman emphasizes the multimodality of memory by incorporating diverse materials, soft textures, and haptic components. The patches invoke the layered quality of identity by playing with the stitchedness of the individual features and remind us of the personhood and history of those that we might only know in a later stage in life—hereby conflating the creator and the created in this ambiguous play with a traditionally female-connoted craft.

## CONCLUSION

Finally, we want to acknowledge those who have made this impressive body of work possible. We thank all the contributors for the time and effort they have put into their work. A journal can only be as good as its content; therefore, we appreciate the

collaborative spirit and open-mindedness afforded to our suggestions. We strongly believe that every contribution in this issue significantly adds to the current discourse on “American Bodies” and beyond. In a time where the body finds itself once again foregrounded in global discourse, this year’s contributions help expand the meaning of ‘bodies’ and contest our ideas of their meaning, as our editorial discussions have shown.

While the pandemic definitely had an impact on our path to finalize this issue, it also influenced the submissions themselves; all of the papers we selected are from German universities. This journal seeks to give a platform to European American studies holistically, being that it is the only graduate-level American studies print journal in Europe. However, the pandemic has slowed down academic output among students in general. For us, this observation is both unsurprising and understandable and reemphasizes the importance of networking *aspeers* throughout Europe, inviting cross-border collaboration. Furthermore, we hope that next year’s editorial team, as well as the contributors, will not have the burden of working under the conditions of a pandemic. With a hint of optimism in mind, we want to conclude this introduction to, again, thank everyone involved and invite you to explore this year’s issue of *aspeers*.

Lastly, this issue of *aspeers* would not have been possible without the great help from Peter Hintz, Annika M. Schadewaldt, and Stefan Schubert, who gave us the best support we could have wished for, throughout various COVID-related disruptions, short-notice Zoom meetings, and flexibility of teaching formats. We would also like to thank Sebastian M. Herrmann, Laura Michelle Pröger, Katja Schmieder, as well as Kenny Fries for his insightful interview, Kate Whitney for her art contributions, and finally, everybody who answered the 2021 call for papers and call for artistic submissions. Thank you all for your patience, your support, and your appreciation.

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