

## Editorial

The articles in this issue are extended and revised versions of papers delivered at the 2013 conference of the Postgraduate Forum (PGF). The conference is the annual ‘highlight’ of post-graduate American Studies in Germany and welcomes contributions from the various disciplines affiliated with the field. During the three-day conference, young scholars present their current research – such as dissertation, essay, or post-doc projects – as work in progress. There is no topical limitation and the format of the talks is open as well. This setting offers participants a space to discuss diverse projects in a sympathetic atmosphere among peers.

The PGF 2013 took place at the FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg’s American Studies Department from October 25-27. Twenty-five papers, reflecting the broad thematic and theoretical scope of post-graduate American Studies in Germany, were arranged into nine panels ranging from “Trauma & Affect” to “Masculinities,” and “Knowledge & Containment.” We felt that, once again, this format proved to be remarkably productive for the individual projects as the lively discussions in Erlangen provided extensive feedback and inspired thirteen speakers to submit substantially revised versions of their talks for this issue.

Verena Adamik offers a critical approach to the notion of ‘counterculture.’ Drawing on Stuart Hall’s study of US-American hippie culture, her close reading of T.C. Boyle’s novel *Drop City* analyzes the depiction of dropout communities as a (re-)iteration of US-American frontier mythology. In particular, she focuses on how the novel portrays “the cleansing power of hardship and violence” as a way to imagine a national narrative of rebirth.

Debarhana Baruah introduces the term ‘retro representations’ to refer to the contemporary proliferation of films and TV series set in 1950s and 1960s US-America. She understands them as televisual memorials that tap into and (re-)construct a cultural memory. Focusing on the TV series *Mad Men* she argues that these ‘retros’ cannot simply be dismissed as televisual nostalgia and instead exemplifies how they critically engage with the represented era.

Ina Batzke zooms in on the controversy surrounding the so-called DREAM Act, which was proposed as a means to ‘legalize’ qualifying immigrant youth. In her analysis, she points out

two distinct phases of activism: while in the early years, DREAM Act activists mainly stressed the idea of merit, they reverted to more radical tactics from 2007 onward. Batzke understands this second phase as a departure from a neoliberal approach to a strategy that is deeply informed by other civil rights movements.

For Stefan Brasse, trauma is a central trope in contemporary (pop-)cultural productions. Drawing on insights from both psychology and cultural studies, he shows that while there seems to be an overall agreement on the definition of trauma, (the possibility of) its representation is heavily disputed. Against this backdrop, Brasse analyzes the film *Inception* and the computer game *Alan Wake* and shows that for both 'texts' trauma is not only the driving theme of the story but also the underlying concept constructing the narrative.

Michel Büch interrogates the politics of improv comedy, which are conventionally framed as a liberatory and democratic project. His article is organized around the motif of the doppelgänger as "the shadow of enlightenment thought" to unfold a critique that reveals the implicit and longstanding racial ideologies that govern the space of improv comedy in particular and Western modernity at large.

Thorsten Burkhardt focuses on what he terms 'gothic remembering' in order to point to the ways in which hauntings in a small-town setting deny symbolic closure. Adopting theories of communal identity and Othering, he concentrates on the abjection of women. His close reading of Stephen King's short story "It Grows on You" demonstrates how the gothic reminiscence of Cora's body is intimately connected to hauntings as well as a disturbed sense of communal place and identity.

Caroline Heller analyzes political appropriations of Thomas Jefferson in US-American congressional debates of the 1930s. On the one hand, her discourse analysis reveals how 'Jefferson' functioned as a civil-religious "icon" affirming notions of national exceptionalism and historical coherence. On the other hand, it shows how diverging negotiations of 'Jefferson' were used as a means to give legitimacy to New Deal policies as well as to express party political distinctions and dissent.

Mahmoud Refaat Mahmoud investigates the function of the ancestor figure in African American literature and culture as an entry point to analyze John Edgar Wideman's

*Homewood* trilogy. Retracing how transatlantic slavery created a condition of rootlessness, Mahmoud argues that Wideman's trilogy constructs an empowering sense of community and masculinity in the present through fictions of black male forebears.

Antonia Purk positions the concept of historiopoiesis to reframe Jamaica Kincaid's writing from autobiographical fiction to "writing the collective Caribbean experience." In this way, Purk examines how narrative strategies of repetition and revision inscribe a multiplicity of voices, past and present, into Kincaid's texts and thus uncover the ways in which Caribbean diasporic experiences are shaped by an ongoing legacy of slavery and colonialism.

Janina Rojek examines debates on 'quality' surrounding nineteenth-century periodicals and contemporary television. Focusing on the cultural space of such discussions and their underlying mechanisms of hierarchization, her critical comparison of 'quality' points to ideological implications of serial culture in its respective historical as well as medial specificity. In addition, she stresses the importance of understanding the cultural practice of serializing as a "trans-epochal phenomenon."

Nina Schnieder uses the film *Rocky Balboa* as a lens to read the Rocky series as a succession of six age narratives. She examines Rocky's identity at the intersection of age, race, class, and gender and argues that the hexalogy consequently and increasingly constructs its protagonist as an aging/aged man. Focusing on the idea of retirement and the showcasing of Sylvester Stallone's aged body, Schnieder investigates the cultural function of what she calls 'heroic male aging.'

In her analysis of United States elite education, Sophie Spieler makes out (the old boy) network and merit as two mutually exclusive topoi which dominate the discourse in the social sciences as well as academic and scholarly (self-)descriptions. Against this backdrop, she pits her readings of Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons* and Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep*. Using the two campus novels as examples, Spieler claims that literary texts manage to break up the rigid discursive framework and offer a place of resistance and an alternative in-between dominant meanings.

Katharina Thalmann investigates discourses on conspiracy theory in the early Cold War period. She argues that this historical phase is crucial to understand how the status of

conspiracy theory significantly changed from legitimate to illegitimate knowledge in US-American political discourse. Introducing three phases of delegitimization, she traces how academics, journalists, and intellectuals put these conspiratorial modes of knowledge into a Cold War binary play of “true and false, rational and irrational, political and anti-political.”

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Cedric Essi, Stephen Koetzing, and Monika Sauter

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