Weaving Together: Reading (in) American Studies

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> There's a built-in gracelessness to the expectation that *any* essay will end with an explanation of exactly what it is that the writer is "calling for." […] That gracelessness can only be amplified when the essay in question is an introduction to other essays by other writers: as if any one person either had all along anticipated, or were now in a position to sum up and adjudicate, so rich a diversity of projects.
>
> (Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading" 23)

Introduction

Reading weaves through the many strings attached to American Studies: Students often turn toward the American Studies department because they like to read and think through readings of other people, and they are expected to have read certain works over the course of their studies. Scholars spend a large amount of their time reading (for) their papers and presentations; they present readings, they write about readings, they are inspired by readings. Reading for pleasure, assigned readings, expected readings, long lists of readings to be completed in the future, joint reading sessions, challenging readings—reading has many faces in and around American Studies departments.

This special issue seeks to contribute to a broader discussion surrounding methodology in American Studies by attending to 'reading' as an interpretive practice. Reading takes different forms and means different things to different people. What brings the varied approaches to reading in the humanities together, and what serves as the basis for the discussions offered by the contributions to this special issue, is the relationality inherent to reading. Whether understood as a "hermeneutic practice," a "reader-text transaction," or a "social practice" (Fuller and Sedo 37), reading fosters relationships between those who read and what or who they read (for). Reading allows us to imagine or establish contact between authors and readers, past and present, the critic and their object of study, and between teachers and students. In the sense that reading leaves at times lasting impressions on us, it blurs the lines that separate subject and object. Weaving together, reading (in) American Studies may thus be considered a project that asks how different readings—both lay and academic, close and wide, to name but a few examples—can mutually enrich each other. As the contributions to this special issue show, this dialogue between reading practices is productive and generative; it can be surprising and moving; it builds bridges, provides us with different perspectives and

a fuller picture, all while recognizing that reading ultimately always remains incomplete. This incompleteness does not necessarily limit our readings as much as it allows them to expand and allows new practices to form, challenging the hierarchies that structure academic reading experiences. Importantly, this openness also allows us to come back to a reading and continue experiencing reading differently. We hope that the contributions to follow can offer such a shift in perspective to you, the reader of this special issue, just as they did to us—making reading matter (again), re-igniting discussion, and allowing reading to keep on weaving in new and perhaps unexpected ways.

Woven Together: The People behind this Issue

The three of us first met in December of 2019 for the conference "Challenges of the Post-Truth Era in American Studies" at the University of Passau. It was the 30th annual conference for early-career researchers organized by the Postgraduate Forum of the German Association for American Studies, which gathers researchers from all disciplines affiliated with the field of American Studies in Germany. This meeting took place in pre-pandemic times, which seems so far away now, yet so close because all three of us remember our joint panel vividly. Assembled under the topic "Identity, Sexuality, and Narratology," we presented research stemming from our (then recently begun) dissertations and, as it would turn out, research that already prefigured the discussion we are continuing in this special issue. In some way or another, all of our contributions were concerned with ways of reading, or reading practices, be it in terms of *what* we (can and do) read as emerging scholars in American Studies—from literature to film and even theory itself—or *how* we read and to what ends—in our cases, critically, postcritically, queerly. It was a coincidence that we met, which we have cherished ever since. After having published articles with *COPAS* after the conference, we returned to this journal with our idea for a special issue at the end of 2021.

We are more than delighted to see this issue being published with a diverse list of contributions and contributors from various disciplines and stages in their careers looking at the practice of reading from different angles. Throughout the process of assembling the special issue, our contributors have continuously shown us how different readings can be fruitfully combined. We hope that other researchers will build on these contributions to become aware, once again, of how they read and what for, to build networks of different reading practices on their own, expand the reading practices proposed here, and start a conversation with the scholars around them to focus on what is often taken for granted in the field of American Studies: reading.

Weaving Together: Gathering Reading Practices

As guest editors of this special issue, we are also readers. We may understand the editing process as reading on different levels: on the one hand, it calls for a reading of the individual contributions by the editors and the authors themselves, focused on both content and form;

an open-ended cycle of readings through which the contributions eventually took the shape in which we present them here. On the other hand, we did not only read the work of our authors, but we were invited to read with them, to join them in their readings of diverse primary texts and apply their unique lenses to our own reading experiences. Because of this layered reading process as well as the diversity of reading practices exemplified by the contributions themselves, this editorial does not necessarily outline a shared or common goal of the contributions in an attempt to identify what exactly they "call for," to adopt the phrasing of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who we quote in the epigraph above. Rather, the editorial is meant to provide orientation by first outlining *how* we "called for" the contributions to this issue, based on some preliminary observations about reading practices in academic discourse. These preliminaries at the same time allow us to address why more work on reading may very much be "called for," especially in the field of American Studies. Additionally, we extend an invitation to (more) reading by listening to those who responded to this call and providing an overview of their contributions.

Reading is "both one of the most frequently discussed and the least agreed on procedures in the literary disciplines" (Rubery 1)—a conundrum at the heart of American Studies well beyond the field of literature. Frustrated by the diffuse uses of reading (and the phrase "doing a reading") in literary and cultural studies, Rita Felski suggests replacing the term reading with interpretation since, as she rightly points out, reading "has a faux-amateurish cast that glosses over its status as a tightly scripted form of academic writing that has very little to do with reading a book on the subway" (*Hooked* 122). Felski's contrasting of amateur and academic reading in her plea for interpretation is indicative of how scholarly discussions of reading practices frequently fall back on a dialectic mode with binary logics of *either/or* and *us/them*. This dialectic both limits their potential of engaging in productive exchange with other reading practices and implies a hierarchical structure that ostensibly elevates one practice and one practitioner over the other. Numerous attempts to conceptualize reading attest to the pervasiveness of such dichotomies: close vs. distant reading (Moretti); hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricœur) vs. postcritical reading (Felski); paranoid vs. reparative reading (Sedgwick); good vs. bad reading (Bradway, Emre); critical vs. uncritical reading (Warner); deep vs. surface reading (Best and Marcus); or a close but not deep reading (Love). Yet, this plenitude of discussions on reading also illustrates academics' "attachment to a method" (Felski, *Hooked* 133), even though this investment is hardly ever explicitly addressed in scholarly works.

This binary logic may be the result of how academic disciplines like literary or cultural studies work: Scholars are supposed to excel each other, to surpass others, to constantly 'step up their game' and move beyond their initial approaches, a desire for originality and an incessant search for gaps—a lack—in existing research. In postcolonial and queer studies, Julietta Singh envisions this pressure in academia as searching for "the right archive, the secrets that no one else had yet discovered" (22). Singh outlines the ever-lasting struggle to find and read (in a broad sense, not only limited to written texts) the "right stash of materials […] sexy enough to sell ourselves" (22). Similarly, and long before Singh, Audre Lorde determined that

"[s]ometimes we drug ourselves with dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free" (38). Yet, if we believe Lorde, these dreams of perpetual reinvention will only lead to disappointment: "there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings […]. There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves—along with the renewed courage to try them out" (38). We understand Lorde's assertion as an intervention in both reading and writing, theory and practice; it is a call against binary thinking and for a playful approach to both the production and reception of texts which opens up new paths to knowledge. So, what if, instead of following a capitalist logic of competition and constant progress, we understand the base of our academic occupation—reading—not as a race to determine the one, best way to 'do' American Studies? What if, like Lorde, we shift the focus from a perceived lack in the here and now to the potentials of finding new ways forward, or even the potentials of going back and revisiting the very approaches on whose grounds this supposed lack is ascertained?

When reading becomes the center of attention in an essay, scholars often prove their point in contrast to other ways of reading. Felski used the now well-known "martial metaphor" of the so-called "method wars" to characterize the recent era of methodology, which she contextualizes within broader debates about the state of the humanities ("Introduction" v). Instead of contributing to this framing that determines method as an a priori contested matter of irreconcilable positions, this issue seeks to examine "tools and techniques for nondualistic thought" to envision the critic as "the one who *assembles*" different reading practices (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 246; emphasis added). Rather than pursuing the *either/or* and *us/them* logic, then, this issue encourages an *and-and* approach (Braidotti). And-and can be understood as an approach that sustains not just one reading over another, but promotes an assemblage in a network of multiple readings; which does not mean a denial of tension or differences, it just does not necessitate dialectic opposition. What if we did not have to decide on one (master) reading and instead allowed ourselves to be surprised by the endless possibilities of literary imagination? What if we forced ourselves to endure the instability and openness of readings? At the same time, what if we humbled ourselves to acknowledge that individual readings will (and must) always remain limited? What if we joined reading practices and attitudes toward texts that are often deemed contrary to one another? What if we allowed ourselves to be affected by texts in different ways, without ruling out ways of thinking and feeling based on our acculturated ways of reading, which we deem appropriate or legitimate? What if we also did not rule out texts according to whether they are 'worth' reading or not? What if we decided to listen to the text, letting the text be(come) the key to understanding its meaning, instead of imposing a reading, or a diagnosis, from without?

This issue's contributors, early-career researchers from different disciplines in American Studies in Germany, attend to the question of how the multifaceted reading practices that are already in use can be put into conversation with each other, how they can be productively combined to gain new insights, to unsettle, or modify, the notion that "some reading practices are more valuable than others as the objectified expression of a particular professional

identity: that of the academic literary critic" (Loeffler 5). After all, "method should be understood as something that is constantly in flux, something that evolves, that sometimes reconsiders and hardly remains constant" (Brasch and Starre 6). As such, the readings in this issue offer a glimpse into the myriad ways of combining different reading practices.

Contributions: Reading (in) American Studies

Gulsin Ciftci's "The Affects of Reading" is inspired by postcritique's and (queer of color) feminist calls to shift attention to affects in and of texts and readers. Reading Ottessa Moshfegh's novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), Ciftci provides an affective close reading, attending to the different layers and uses of the concept of sleep. Illustrating her approach with a focus on how sleep structures the novel, she reads for affects in the text and sketches the ways in which readers may be affected by the text. Ciftci brings together surface and deep reading as well as form and affects, as she demonstrates how form(s) can generate affects, as one example. The contribution's line of argumentation employs Eugenie Brinkema's approach to reading, focusing on affect as arising from and being interwoven with form. Ciftci specifically situates her theoretical framework within a landscape of binary approaches in literary theory, in which she seeks to combine reading practices that are often envisioned as being opposed to one another: readings in affect studies and close reading as in what is called 'critical reading.' As such, the first paper paves the way for the following contributions in this issue, contextualizing the reading within a broader debate. Taking the act of reading as a form of speculation, the author draws attention to the multitude of potential interpretations that a text opens up, on the different layers of texts that can be identified. Ciftci focuses on the potentialities (and creativity) of texts and reading practices, and the surprises inherent to reading as an interpretive practice. Reading for the entanglements of forms and affects, the contribution establishes an arena in which readings can gather to mutually enrich one another.

In "Reading (with) Bateman: Mapping Potentiality of/in Reading," **Alexander Rüter** and **Maria Wiegel** turn to Bret Easton Ellis's 1991 novel *American Psycho*, a text that has received several canonical readings in the past, ostensibly limiting the ways in which the text is commonly read today. For example, the text's visceral representations of violence have led to genre ascriptions, such as horror, black comedy, or transgressive fiction, that evoke specific expectations, if not prefigured responses. Rejecting such universalizing readings, Rüter and Wiegel offer two reading experiments to foreground the potentiality of reading *American Psycho* in ways that stray from such well-trodden paths. Drawing on theoretical approaches to reading and affect by Sedgwick, Roland Barthes, and Brinkema, they argue that texts can and do surprise their readers, albeit in different ways: Asking what happens if we let ourselves be surprised by a text like *American Psycho*, Rüter and Wiegel first map different relationalities in the way the text affects its readers, looking at boredom and disgust, respectively. The affective landscape of the text, as it takes shape on the textual surface through syntactic

variability, has the potential to move the reader in and out of different aesthetic or affective modes and responses. In a second experiment, the authors turn the question of "what if" into "as if" by applying formal restrictions to their reading, latching onto moments of satire in the novel to read it as though it was a comedy, which similarly opens up *American Psycho* to surprising affects. These two readings do and *can* exist beside one another, as parallel readings that call into question the possibility, as well as the legitimacy and necessity, of a singular 'master reading' of the text. In this sense, Rüter and Wiegel argue that the potentialities of reading are open-ended and additive, rather than closed off or entirely predetermined.

Teresa Teklić's "Listening Closely: Narrative Sensitivity and Thematic Apperception in Ben Lerner's *The Topeka School*" regards form as an entry point for discussing the politics of Lerner's 2019 novel. Teklić situates Lerner and his three novels in a tradition of writers and texts that display (an awareness of their) influences by different theories and schools of thought, which turns a text like *The Topeka School* into an example of a 'theory novel,' and asks whether texts so invested in theory—with characters and narrators taking on roles commonly associated with the literary critic, as readers or interpreters, sometimes with a rather diagnostic stance—actually 'read themselves' and offer their own interpretation. Teklić sees the text's occupation of the position of the critic or reader as an opening for a different engagement with the text, one that does not apply a diagnostic (or paranoid) lens and instead *listens to* what and how the novel tells. To read *The Topeka School* by listening to its voice(s), Teklić adopts an attitude of narrative sensitivity she derives from the psychological Thematic Apperception Test that also structures the narrative. From this perspective, *The Topeka School* does not interpret itself as much as it invites, if not requires, an active reader to derive meaning from form. Centering her analysis on aspects of narrative perspective, voice, and style, Teklić suggests that *The Topeka School* constructs male violence in the United States as a structural and systemic issue, which in the novel is linked to the construction of a collective (narrative) voice through which the voices of liberals and Trump supporters, as well as Donald Trump himself, reverberate.

Turning away from books and to the medium of podcasts, **Sonka Hinders**'s article on "(Pod)casting a Bridge: *Lolita Podcast* and Its Reading Practices" reads Jamie Loftus's *Lolita Podcast* (2020-21) as an example of how, specifically, the affordances of the podcast enable the medium to project connections, or "bridges," between and among speakers and audiences, between different media and forms. Hinders's analysis reveals that *Lolita Podcast* is able to assemble a number of different reading practices under one unifying umbrella, which is the perception of Vladimir Nabokov's controversial novel *Lolita* (1955) by readers as varied (and sometimes seemingly self-contradictory) as possible; from "Nabokov superfans with credentials," to feminist critics, to 'lay' readers who engage with the original text only superficially but nonetheless meaningfully. Notably, Hinders's contribution is not only interested in reading practices *in* the podcast but also *of* the podcast itself. *In* the podcast, a close reading of Nabokov's novel is combined with critical, hermeneutic, and new historicist readings as well as not-reading and adaptation (as a form of revising reading). A closer look at

the audience's reading *of* the podcast reveals that, overall, it encourages a postcritical reading. From a more pessimistic standpoint, the postcritical reading offered by the podcast could, however, also be considered a digested reading. Lastly, Hinders proposes to understand *Lolita Podcast* in terms of an aural reading. Thus, the article presents the podcast as a medium that bridges readings, readers, media, and forms and illustrates how the specific example of *Lolita Podcast* challenges dichotomous understandings of reading.

In her article "Indigenous Readings: Ethics, Politics, and Method in Indigenous Studies on Turtle Island and Beyond," **Angela Benkhadda** centers political and ethical questions of reading. Benkhadda's contribution presents emerging researchers in Indigenous Studies (in Germany and beyond) with a praxis-oriented toolbox of approaches to reading Indigenous texts, including critical questions and exemplary readings. Benkhadda begins with questions surrounding the validity of her own work (as a white European scholar reading Indigenous literature) and continues with a discussion of the objects read under the rubric of Native American literature—at best an ambiguous category. For Benkhadda, reading Indigenous texts as a non-Indigenous scholar schooled in a Euro-American academic framework necessitates a consideration of five factors: positionality, relationality, ethics, context, and incompleteness. In the pursuit of a decolonial reading of the opening poem in Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*, Benkhadda convincingly combines scholarly perspectives on ethics, politics, and method. To illustrate the importance of a positioned, relational, ethical, contextualized, and incomplete reading, Benkhadda approaches the poem in several close readings that point out the pitfalls but also the potentials of white European scholars reading Indigenous texts. Importantly, according to Benkhadda, such an endeavor will (and should) always remain open and closed at the same time, for "not all knowledge can and should be accessible"—an insight which can be applied to reading Indigenous literature, like Benkhadda does in her article, but which we, as the editors of this issue, think extends to reading more generally, and which readers of Benkhadda's contribution, and this issue as a whole, may use as an inspiration to read humbly, but nonetheless joyously, and widely, in the never-ending journey of reading as communication.

Teaching (and) Reading: Beyond this Special Issue

Understanding reading as communication emphasizes the situatedness and relationality of reading. One of the contexts in which reading comes to life in American Studies and beyond—where reading forges new relations between individuals, between fiction and reality—is the classroom. Having come to American Studies via teacher training degrees, the three of us guest editors share a passion for teaching, and teaching reading in particular. We have repeatedly seen ourselves confronted with the question of how we can teach (both academic and non-academic) reading. Evidently, there is no single answer to this question, and to address the question adequately would go far beyond the scope of this editorial. Nonetheless, in an attempt to expand the content of this issue beyond individual scholarly reading practices

and into the classroom, we would like to encourage our readers who teach to also reflect on their practices of teaching reading. This means to carefully question distinctions such as Michael Warner's critical and uncritical reader, and instead to earnestly consider and appreciate (like Warner does) the myriad ways in which students are not "supposed to" read but do read all the same (13).

We therefore hope that this issue inspires readers to shift attention to the reading practices we often take for granted. We would love to see teachers encouraged to read texts differently from what they are used to, to combine different reading practices, to actively think through them together with their students, and to build on the readings and toolboxes included in this issue. Bearing in mind that reading practices are always in flux, particularly in a time that sees the catalyzed production of diverse and novel forms of text online (such as podcasts, as discussed in Hinders's contribution) that demand novel practices of reading. The reading practices brought to a text can, and should, always be thought anew. Yet, our call for thinking readings anew should not be understood as a prerogative of 'expert' readers. Instead, we hope to inspire dialogic exchanges not only among researchers and with readings but also with supposedly 'lay' readers in the classroom, allowing them to emerge as (literary) scholars in their own right.

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