

Guest Editors' Editorial

This third issue of *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* is a special issue in more ways than one. The idea at its core was to highlight contributions by emerging scholars in American studies at Austrian universities, compiled and arranged by a team of guest editors who are members of Austria's Young Americanists (AYA)—the graduate student network that is affiliated with the Austrian Association for American Studies. Beyond that, the journal itself is young—at the time we began our work, it had just been founded and was still in its conceptual stages. As such, the editing process presented a number of unique challenges in the ambitious process of putting together a special issue. While most jobs in academia are tenuous, as 78 percent of all academic jobs at universities are limited-term employments,¹ coordinating long-term projects presents an exciting but sometimes unpredictable endeavor, especially at the early career level. This is reflected in both the composition of the issue's editorial team and the remarkable flexibility demonstrated by all contributors throughout the process.

While the work on the issue was initiated by Roberta Hofer and Christian Stenico at the University of Innsbruck, Elisabeth Kriebler and Christoph Straub (University of Salzburg) joined the editorial team to ensure continuity when Roberta left academia to work at the Austrian broadcasting service ORF. Soon afterwards, Christian received a scholarship at the University of New Orleans, turning the editorial process into a transatlantic venture. Likewise, the final list of contributions looks a lot different now compared to when we started our work on the issue—in some cases due to the unique situation of early career researchers, in part linked to the demanding and dynamic process of establishing a new journal. On top of all these existing challenges, the final stages of the issue's publication overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic, which added its own difficulties. Despite all these obstacles and challenges, the issue you have before you now brings together a number of exceptional contributions by early career researchers.

This AYA special issue opens with a contribution that could not address a timelier subject. In “The World Called Him a Thug?: Police Brutality and the Perception of the Black Body in Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*,” Barbara Gföllner (University of Vienna) illustrates how literary works can become instrumental in making room for neglected perspectives. *The Hate U Give* (2017), as she shows, seeks to reveal the United States' long history of dehumanizing black bodies, and it points to the relevance for alternative visions: “Counternarratives to dominant discourses oppose the derealization of marginalized people by, for instance, challenging prevalent images of black people

as criminals or thugs.” Gföllner embeds her discussion of Angie Thomas’s young adult novel in the long history of policing black bodies, the rise of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and the hypervisibility of the brutal murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020. Informed by Judith Butler’s notion of grievability, she illustrates how the adolescent Khalil—the best friend of the novel’s protagonist who gets killed at the hands of the police—stands for a public discourse on life that has “derealized” black bodies and thus rendered them external to Western notions of “humanity.” In doing so, Gföllner shows why *The Hate U Give* “exemplifies [an] emerging type of black YA fiction, in which fiction often mirrors reality”: the book not only reveals the dehumanization of black bodies, but subversively manages to demonstrate “that the derealization of a certain group of people makes it easier to justify violence inflicted upon them, as their deaths seemingly leave no marks.”

The impact of racial discourses is also at the center of the second contribution. In her article “The Dissolution of Racial Boundaries,” Juliann Knaus (University of Graz) provides a close reading of former two-term U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey’s 2012 poetry collection *Thrall*—Trethewey’s most explicit attempt at examining race as a category through poetry by focusing on discourses about mixed-race identities. In her analysis, Knaus skillfully explores the ways in which Trethewey draws upon colonial diction and etymology to reveal the hegemonic power of language, paying particular attention to the transnational and transtemporal qualities of racial classification. Engaging with colonial Mexican and U.S.-American discourses on mixed-race identity, their foundations in Enlightenment thought, and their permutations over time, Knaus shows how *Thrall* “creates a layered form, where intersections between racial ideologies become visible, while the shortcomings of such ideologies are emphasized.” Trethewey, a mixed-race U.S.-American and Southern poet, uses her work to investigate and deconstruct the entanglements of racial ideologies. In her conclusion, Knaus points to the significance of Trethewey’s work: “through embracing the fluidity of mixed-race identities and by shedding light on the language that has been used to bind mixed-race individuals throughout history, the confines that this language imposes can begin to dissolve.”

Johannes Vith (University of Innsbruck) then focuses on the medium of film to investigate the representation of cultural trauma. His article “Remaking Columbine” examines Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant* (2003) and the movie’s unique portrayal of the Columbine high school shooting. He provides insight into Van Sant’s artistic background and oeuvre, exploring the director’s creative inspirations and cinematic techniques. In his detailed review of *Elephant*’s representation of a taboo topic, Vith outlines how the film’s fragmented and non-linear plot structure, its flat characters, and its mundane and distanced portrayal of high school life confront the viewers with the horrifying randomness of school shootings. Stylistically and thematically inspired by Alan

Clarke's *Elephant* (1989), the movie focuses on acts of gun violence without offering its viewers much narrative guidance. Moreover, Vith highlights Van Sant's remediation techniques to engage with the public discourse which blames video games for inciting mass shootings. His analysis thus convincingly outlines how *Elephant's* narrative and aesthetic choices and the film's casual attitude towards violence refuse to propagate a specific ideological position. As Vith concludes, instead of leading the audience toward an explanation for the shooting, Van Sant's movie encourages reflection on public violence and personal biases and thus provokes a unique confrontation with cultural trauma.

Finally, Alekszandra Rokvity (University of Graz) delves even deeper into signification processes and their cultural impact as she examines punk fashion and its journey from subversive, anti-establishment statement to its reintegration into "the mainstream popular culture that punk once sought to undermine." Her contribution "The Sign as Battlefield: Punk, Gender, and the Power to Rebel" illustrates how punk subculture has claimed mainstream fashion items as "signifiers of rebellion" and deconstructed "the restrictive prescription of gender roles" in the process. Moreover, Rokvity's insightful analysis exposes the fashion industry's underlying gender bias, as markers of femininity and masculinity for clothing items and their subversive appropriation are connoted differently depending on the wearer's gender. She argues that the category of femininity exhibits a greater degree of flexibility, since the entire fashion industry predominantly caters to women and "profits most from constantly re-defining femininity." During the reintegration of punk aesthetic into the mainstream, this accepted flexibility regarding performances of femininity has led to the transformation of punk women's initially subversive appropriation of masculine fashion items into a profitable fashion trend. This "mainstreamification" effectively removed women's power "to rebel through fashion," whereas male cross-dressing still retains its subversive quality. While Rokvity also lists contemporary examples of performances by Lady Gaga and Ruby Rose which "promote a punk legacy" through their gender-bending aesthetics, she concludes that punk fashion has "come full circle" at the expense of female agency.

The variety of topics and approaches presented in this AYA special issue highlights the diversity and significance of ongoing research projects by early career Americanists in Austria. By focusing on subversive young adult literature that contextualizes the need for movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, by showing how poetry can help to deconstruct the legacies of racial boundaries, by emphasizing the socio-critical potential of film, and by dis-entangling the social semiotics of punk fashion, they all address relevant cultural and political issues. As editors, we are proud to present their outstanding work, which allows us to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of American culture and society.

Moreover, as no publication emerges from thin air, the editing process of this journal issue, too, depended on the support of a number of colleagues and friends. Accordingly, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to several people. First and foremost, we need to say “Thank you!” to the JAAAS board for trusting and supporting us throughout the entire editing process. We are especially grateful to the managing editor, Michael Fuchs, who helped us navigate the intricacies of the journal’s online system, and to Christian Quendler, who guided us through the editorial process. Furthermore, we would like to thank all of our reviewers, not only for lending us their expertise and helping the contributors improve their manuscripts, but also for their patience in working with first-time editors. Our special thanks go to Joshua Parker for taking another close look at all the submissions in a final round of proof-reading. Finally, and most importantly, our biggest “Thank you!” goes out to the four contributors to this issue: Alekszandra, Barbara, Johannes, and Juliann! We are grateful for your patience in this truly extraordinary publishing process—and we are sure that our readers will appreciate your work as much as we do.

Elisabeth Kriebler, Christian Stenico, Christoph Straub, and Roberta Hofer

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Note

- 1 Selina Thaler, “Kettenverträge an Unis: Halten oder sprengen?” *Der Standard*, March 29, 2019, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000100381493/kettenvertraege-an-unis-halten-oder-sprengen>.