Call for Papers

Reading (in) American Studies

Guest Editors: Selina Foltinek (Bayreuth), Mascha Lange (Leipzig), Florian Zitzelsberger (Passau)

This special issue seeks to contribute to a broader discussion on method in American Studies by attending to reading as an interpretive practice. Reading may be defined as a “hermeneutic practice,” a “reader-text transaction,” or a “social practice,” for instance, one characterized by various modes and moods of interpreting a wide range of texts and genres. Whether the focus is on literature, audiovisual media like film or television, digital media, hypertexts, visual art, architecture, or cultural and theatrical performances, reading practices are a way of making sense of cultural productions of the past and present. How, then, can the manifold reading activities that are so central to American Studies be characterized or conceptualized? What does it mean to ‘read’ in American Studies? How can one understand reading as both a scholarly and creative practice?

Rather than finding a common denominator that delineates a specific way of reading, we are interested in how the multifaceted reading practices that are already in use (or are yet to come) can be put into conversation with each other. Likewise, we ask how the ways in which we read and the things we read—if considered as depending on and informing one another—can provide a productive site of dialogic exchange that enhances our understanding of both. In other words, how do investigations and a recognition of diversified reading practices (also in combination with the objects we study) impact our research, and how can we carve out a space for myriad, equally respected reading practices that also productively engage with one another? How does the (changing) practice of reading in American Studies contribute to a reformation of the discipline itself? That is, how does reading redefine what constitutes “American Studies”—and perhaps also what counts as “American” in American Studies?

Scholarly discussions of reading practices frequently fall back on a binary logic, which both limits their potential of engaging in productive exchange with other reading practices and implies a hierarchical structure that ostensibly elevates one practice over the other. Numerous attempts to conceptualize reading attest to the pervasiveness of such dichotomies: close vs. distant reading (Moretti); hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur) 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). This issue asks how current debates and sense-making practices in American Studies unsettle, reinforce, 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.” How can we envision “new ways of thinking about the act of reading, and better metaphors for the kinds of things we are up to as critics”?

In particular, this issue will examine “tools and techniques for nondualistic thought” and envision the critic as “the one who assembles” different reading practices. It thus seeks to gather contributions—scholarly essays, creative approaches, or a combination of both—to add to, renew, and re-describe the contested arena of reading practices. We invite readings of individual texts that highlight the potentials of a specific reading practice or pluralistic ways of reading as well as theoretical discussions of reading as method. Because we consider reading as the methodological glue binding much of American Studies together, we are looking for discussions of a wide range of texts and media from varied historical contexts to demonstrate the usefulness and necessity of a diversified set of reading practices in and for interdisciplinary fields of study. In this, the thematic issue not only contributes to “both one of the most frequently discussed and the least agreed on procedures in the literary disciplines,” but also promotes a conversation among disciplines that allows us to reflect on reading as an interpretive practice in its various contexts that frequently remains unquestioned and taken for granted.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to, the following questions:

- What is the use of binaries in reading practices? What relations does a prefix like ‘post’ in postcritical reading imply, and how does it affect dualistic thinking?
- What are non-dualistic practices of reading or interpretation that thrive on assemblage, and what are their potentials and effects?
- What is the relation between literary and non-literary forms of reading (e.g., film, TV, video games, visual art, performance etc.) in American Studies? How does the format of the reading object (e.g., genre, medium, modality) influence our reading practices or open up different practices of reading?
- How do reading practices change in the digital era? What challenges do we encounter reading ‘new’ media with ‘old’ methods, and how do we productively face them? What is the role of social media in today’s reading practices? This could include analyses of digital literature, electronic reading, the use of hypertext, new media phenomena such as ‘bookstagram’ and ‘booktube,’ and more.
- What is the role of reader and critic (or reader-as-critic) in contemporary American Studies and what alternative positionalities can we imagine? What is the role of chance, skimming, intentionality, possibility, participation (co-constitution), and (e.g., research) community in our work?
- What reading subjects are, or can be, imagined in current American Studies? Along the lines of Merve Emre’s concept of paraliterary reader(s), how are traditional modalities of reading subjects destabilized or reframed, and what new reading subjects emerge?
- What is the role of archives in American Studies? How do we curate texts as part of our reading practices? What other roles do/can archives play in academic research?

---


projects (cf. the ideas of “mixtapes,” “archives of feelings,” and/or “killjoy survival kits”)?

- How does reading figure in the curricula of (higher) education? How can reading (both academic and non-academic) be taught? What kinds of readings are taught, what kinds of readings are not taught, and why? What are measurements educators can take to diversify students’ reading practices (alternative curricula, reading lists, etc.)?

If you would like to contribute to this thematic issue, please send a 300-500 word abstract, along with a title for your paper and a brief bio-note, as an email attachment, to copas@dgfa.de and selina.foltinek@uni-bayreuth.de by March 18, 2022. Members of the editorial team will review all proposals and notify applicants by the decision date of April 1, 2022. Upon acceptance, full papers of 5,000-8,000 words will be due by August 12, 2022. The articles will be peer-reviewed.

Next to academic submissions, we also welcome creative submissions (illustrations, paintings, photography, poetry, creative writing, reflective pieces that confront formative reading experiences, and more). We kindly ask contributors of creative submissions to send us their work, together with a brief artist’s statement (1,000-1,500 words), by July 15, 2022.

The special issue is scheduled for open-access publication in early 2023.

---