

SEBASTIAN M. HERRMANN, CAROLIN ALICE HOFMANN, KATJA KANZLER, and FRANK USBECK, eds., *Participating Audiences, Imagined Public Spheres: The Cultural Work of Contemporary American(ized) Narratives* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2012), 172 pp.

The volume under review synthesizes two highly productive research paradigms that have informed much work in American Studies and, more generally, literary, cultural, and media studies: (1) the awareness that audiences engage actively with texts and other forms of fictional and factual representation; and (2) the awareness that the texts that elicit such participation are now less than ever confined to the borders of the nation state but circulate transnationally and in some cases even globally. Accordingly, the contributions to the volume explore how contemporary American narratives call into being virtual and other kinds of imagined communities—the “transnational public spheres” that form around these narratives, as the editors put it in their introduction (7). As such, four articles focus on fictional narratives, four on factual ones, all of which are well-written and thought-provoking. Unfortunately, a few articles do not seem to go beyond their origins as conference papers, as they are rather short and do not thoroughly develop parts of their arguments. While brevity is not a problem for papers followed by a live discussion, it is unfortunate for written articles where no immediate dialogue can ensue. Nevertheless, I take many valuable insights from the volume, and the occasional suggestions that I make in this review are a sign of the active engagement it generates on my part.

The first article following the introduction is Rüdiger Heinze’s “‘Authentic’ Narratives and the Rhetoric of Cultural Identity.” Heinze makes the excellent point that literary and nonliterary texts about marked cultural practices, that is, “ethnic” literature, are frequently read too simplistically by literary critics who see them either as providing authentic insights into the minority community in which they are situated or as helping to construct such a community. Heinze, by contrast, suggests that the “audience interpellation” (19) of such narratives is far more complicated and demonstrates this by exemplarily interpreting Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*. Interestingly, though, Heinze decides not to

explore a central irony. He is certainly right that audiences are usually rather elusive and that a discourse analysis of the discussion a book generates can therefore only be conducted when it is so successful that there is a certain amount of reader responses available. But he does not mention that the texts he discusses would allow for such an analysis, as there is, as he points out, a large body of interpretations that reduce them to their ethnic dimension. Thus, it would have been fascinating had he explored how academic audiences appropriate the texts. Moreover, his contribution would then have been linked even closer to the one by Carolin Alice Hofmann.

Hofmann’s “Seeking Greener Pastures: The Cultural Work of Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood*” not only convincingly argues that the novel seeks to interpellate its readers as a “‘green’ audience” (33) but also explores how the novel’s publication was accompanied by a variety of cultural practices that encouraged audiences worldwide to appropriate and transform the text. This, for example, occurred by way of staged readings all over the world during which Atwood performed the function of the narrator while members of the city in which the reading took place interpreted the characters in often radically different ways. Thus, Hofmann discusses a truly active and transnational audience. The same goes for Leonhard Schmieding’s “Taking *Beat Street* to the Streets in Socialist East Germany” that investigates why the GDR authorities allowed the 1984 hip-hop movie *Beat Street* to be shown in East German movie theaters and why it became such a success. Schmieding meticulously reconstructs the Ministry of Culture’s decision-making process and shows that the authorities liked the film because it exposed the racism inherent in the capitalist American society. Young audiences, by contrast, loved the film because it allowed GDR hip-hoppers to get as close as possible to their American idols and enabled them to imagine “themselves living in the transnational community of hip-hop culture” (58).

Katja Kanzler’s article “Of Legal Roulette and Eccentric Clients: Contemporary TV Legal Drama as (Post-)Postmodern Public Sphere” shows how the courtroom dramas *Boston Legal* and *The Good Wife* invite their audiences to continue the important social and political debates the fictional cases frequently revolve around and, at the same time, self-reflexively negotiate the strategies by which they stage these issues and extend this invitation.

She makes a convincing case that she shows construct their viewers not only as consumers but also as citizens. Yet I would appreciate a discussion as to why TV series are particularly apt to generate public conversations of social and political issues, as they occur in online discussion boards dedicated to the series; in other words, I wonder how seriality contributes to activating the audience, as it seems online discussions of civic issues are often side effects of fans' sustained engagement with the central characters. Kanzler's most important contribution to the volume as a whole, however, is the theorization of the concept of the "public sphere," which is mentioned but never as thoroughly explored in various other contributions as its prominent position in the volume's title would merit. She argues that both TV shows project a public sphere where "the constructedness and construction of 'issues' [by way of representational strategies] need to be as much part of their public discussion as their social and political contents" (65).

While Kanzler stresses the notion of the public sphere, Frank Usbeck primarily employs the concept of community in his article on the cultural work of milblogs, that is, blogs by U.S. soldiers deployed in the 'war on terror.' In "'Don't Forget about Us, Because We Can't Forget You': A Narrative Approach to the Concept of 'Community' in American Soldier Blogs" he demonstrates how these blogs are collectively produced and consumed by the soldiers abroad and parts of the American public at home and how they project "a master narrative of the civil society supporting the troops" (101). The transnational dimension returns to the center of attention, then, in Leopold Lippert's "Transnational Imagined Communities? Retelling the Stonewall Myth in Vienna." Lippert aptly demonstrates how American historians have integrated the Stonewall riots into a distinctly national narrative, before he turns to the 2009 brochure *Stonewall in Wien*, which, he suggests, "compellingly incites its readers to 'feel transnational'" (126). This reading, however, is not entirely convincing. Based on the material from the brochure that Lippert quotes—mostly interviews with veteran activists of the Austrian LGBTQ movement—it seems that while the makers of the brochure invite *both* their interviewees and readers to feel transnational by connecting to

the Stonewall riots, the interviewees actually *decline* this invitation.

The final scholarly contribution to the volume is Sebastian M. Herrmann's "'Something New and Undefined': Campaign Narration, Anti-Advertising Discourse, and the Public Sphere," which eschews the traditional reading of Joe McGinniss's 1969 bestseller *The Selling of the President* as a documentary account of the Nixon campaign; instead, he reads McGinniss as part of a broader discourse on the dangers of advertising. More specifically, Herrmann shows that the book tries to work against "the image-based signification of television" and attempts to define "the public sphere as a textual space" (133). However, as Herrmann demonstrates, this agenda creates certain ambivalences, especially since the ad men that McGinniss quotes in order to express his positions are, on the one hand, severely criticized for creating deceiving images and, on the other, "elevate[d] [...] to trustworthy voices in assessing the status of contemporary society" (150).

The volume closes with a short piece by journalist Detlef Kuhlbrodt on the lengthy manifesto *2083 – A European Declaration of Independence* by Anders Behring Breivik, the perpetrator of the Oslo bombing and the massacre on the island of Utøya in 2011. Kuhlbrodt stresses that Breivik's manifesto feels strangely familiar because it "read[s] like a postmodern novel with different layers" (158). Yet I found Kuhlbrodt's article especially interesting because of its peculiar doubling with Breivik's manifesto regarding resistance: while Breivik attempts to resist the multicultural ideology promoted through American TV series, Kuhlbrodt attempts to resist the at times humanizing pull of Breivik's narrative. Accordingly, the piece makes for a beautiful final contribution, as it draws attention to the fact that no matter how much rhetorical effort narratives of all kinds may make to activate an audience in a specific way, the audience is never passive and can always attempt to resist a specific interpellation. All said, the volume is an important contribution to our understanding of the transnational flow of American narratives and the manifold ways in which they do cultural work and are received both inside and outside the United States.

Tübingen

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