

## General Introduction to Issue 74

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The centerpiece of this issue is a set of exchanges on the topic of women's service in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In keeping with this journal's aim to provide a forum for dialogue, the Intercontinental Cross-Currents Network is pleased to share a collection of essays and responses reflecting long-distance academic conversations that took place during the pandemic. The service provided by many women during the pandemic inspired the theme.

As Julia Nitz, Esther Wetzel, Sandra H. Petrulionis, Laura-Isabella Heitz, and Khristeena Lute point out in the detailed account that follows, service was originally bound up with religious devotion. From pious beginnings, it evolved into a custom for securing women's unremunerated labor in the household and status outside it. Though service is cognate with servant and servitude, it could be liberating for certain volunteers. White women who had the time and resources to devote themselves to civic and moral causes, did so in part because altruism was a mark of distinction, offering opportunities to act in a public sphere otherwise dominated by men. Nitz et al. also point out that what counted as a virtue for some was a compulsion for others. Poorer women, and women of color, had no time for public service if they were busy serving other masters. The contributions show that service was required of women in the nineteenth century, but what it entailed varied widely according to class, ethnicity, and location. This special issue is meant to open a new field of research that must be expanded to include a diverse range of women's experiences.

A solicited short story by Leanne Philipps points the way by evoking the perspective of Native Californians compelled to serve in white settlers' homes. Creative contributions like this one are a regular feature of the *New American Studies Journal: A Forum* because they contribute to the conversation signaled by the second part of our title. Poems by Jessica Bundschuh and Ellen Rachlin engage in their own conversation about an antique iron nail their authors found near a church door in Regensburg. The tandem pieces reflect on what counts as work, why some forms of work are invisible while others are displayed as art, and how the black-

smith's wife, more invisible than even her anonymous husband, might have helped forge a world whose infrastructure gets taken for granted. An additional poem by Bundschuh, "Flirting through Summer Jobs," traces the experiences of an American High School student seeking seasonal employment in Arizona and Alaska. The teenager is taught how to fake a kiss by advertisers filming a commercial for chewing gum; subsequent jobs, involving other sorts of flirtation, evoke the demands placed on women in the service industry for unpaid emotional labor.

In keeping with the new format of the NASJ, this issue also features interviews and occasional papers that branch out from the theme of service and take the conversation in new directions. Gulsin Ciftci and Silvia Schultermandl interviewed the writer, activist, and performer Deborah D. E. P. Mouton after she read from *Black Chameleon* at the University of Münster. In this new memoir, Mouton turns to mythopoesis to recount her life experiences, casting racist encounters, for instance, in deliberately bombastic language meant to convey emotional intensity while containing its impact. She also talks about the importance of telling—and staging—stories that preserve the insights gained by Black women through generations of struggle, but in a way that leaves space for self-empowerment and personal perspective.

Catrin Gersdorf interviewed Allegra Hyde in connection with a course on Literature and the Anthropocene at the University of Würzburg. The author of the novel *Eleutheria* (2022) and two collections of short stories, Hyde is fascinated by utopias-gone-awry. Her characters, zealots of political or environmental reform, build communities that wind up contradicting their founding principles. This contradiction generates the narrative conflict of her stories but also their moral: as Gersdorf and Hyde point out, utopianism can transform the American Dream into a nightmare. Nevertheless, Hyde, a chastened utopian, maintains the importance of fantasy and optimism for writing and changing the world.

HannahGrace Lanneau Reeves's occasional paper juxtaposes *The Great Gatsby* (1926) with the initially more popular but now forgotten *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925) to reconsider the relation of modernism to middlebrow literature. Gender plays an obvious role in distinguishing the two categories, as *Blondes* was written by a woman and serialized in a popular women's magazine. Nevertheless, a close comparison shows that the novels share something that transcends differences in gender: both are preoccupied with *things*. In this reading, the famous scene of Daisy tearfully embracing Gatsby's expensive shirts

becomes a key moment in the formation of a modernist-middlebrow aesthetic. *Blondes*, like *Gatsby*, is in love with commodities—it merely takes its affection a step further. When read in *Harper's Bazar*, where it was originally serialized, the novel offers an early example of product placement, extolling the virtues of consumer goods in columns of print framed by advertisements for the same products. Americans have always forged their identities through their relations with things, Lanneau Reeves contends, and recognizing the role played by things in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature reveals that middlebrow and modernism are two sides of the same coin.

Johannes Voelz reads Mary McCarthy's 1963 bestseller *The Group* as an allegory of postwar liberalism. The novel, based on McCarthy's own experiences as a college student, is about a group of women who graduate from Vassar in the 1930s and then struggle to maintain their youthful ideals. They all begin as do-gooders, devoted to some idea of service, but their disappointments and compromises cause them to drift apart. Voelz argues that the loss of social cohesion marks stations in McCarthy's own artistic and political development away from New Deal liberalism towards an attitude characteristic of the Cold War. McCarthy's midcentury reckoning with liberalism and its discontents thus motivates an innovative plot device, which allows her to represent developments in time as diminishments in affection. Implicit in Voelz's analysis of this device is the question of novelistic foresight. Perhaps the dissolution of McCarthy's group can be taken as an early diagnosis of our own polarized era, when the center no longer seems to hold.

This issue concludes with Heinz Ickstadt's reflections on his many decades as a student and professor of American studies in Germany. Ickstadt is a member of that generation whose fathers returned from World War II broken and bankrupt—in more than one sense. He originally went to university to study German literature, but he was unhappy in the German department, partly because the classes were overcrowded, and partly because they were taught by professors whose authoritarian demeanor reflected their wartime experiences and the animosities that led to the Holocaust.

A course on Herman Melville, offered by an American guest professor, gave Ickstadt the glimpse of an alternative: democracy and pluralism as opposed to a political and cultural tradition tainted by Germany's recent past. He early on identified with Ishmael in his quest for meaning and companionship. The authoritarian Ahab, on the other hand, seemed to anticipate many of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's catastrophes (*Faces* 55).

It is worth dwelling on Ickstadt's career because it demonstrates how service to an ideal offers one answer to the dissolution chronicled by McCarthy. From Melville's sinking ship, Ickstadt turned to a concrete metaphor that seemed, improbably, to stay afloat: Hart Crane's Brooklyn Bridge. His dissertation on Crane explores how a single, lyrical voice can be divided in the same way Melville's characters were divided between opposing viewpoints. It is the job of poetic language to bridge that divide with unifying images (*Faces* 179). Crane's poetic quest to bring together contradictory American views would become one of Ickstadt's recurrent themes (180). It would also become his scholarly mission in a career devoted to showing how democratic culture and pluralism can serve as unifying rather than dividing forces. Ickstadt's service to the profession is grounded in the belief that the center can hold.

## Work Cited

Ickstadt, Heinz. *Faces of Fiction: Essays on American Literature and Culture from the Jacksonian Period to Postmodernity*. Universitätsverlag Winter, 2001.

## About the Author

Andrew S. Gross is executive editor of NASJ.



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