

## Introduction: American Apocalypses

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**F**rom the American Revolution through the Great Depression and the atomic threats of the Cold War period, fear of the apocalypse and the end of the world have shaped the US-American experience. Thus, American daily life has come to be governed by an omnipresence of multifaceted ideas about the day of reckoning which renders “*America and Apocalypse* [to] become two sides of the same coin” (Hay 4). It is this close relationship between the two which leads American society to imagine the doomsday in many different ways, including the climate crisis, pandemics, and the perpetual threat of nuclear warfare.

One of the first instances of human-induced mass destruction reified right after the US dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The same year the former Manhattan Project biophysicist Eugene Rabinowitch founded the *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, which “proposed and urged solutions which reflected their passionate hope that the atomic djinn they had released could somehow be controlled, if not reconfined in its bottle” (Berle 341). To “warn the public about how close we are to destroying our world,” *The Bulletin*, two years later, utilized the imagery of the apocalypse as midnight and the clock as the countdown, accentuating the pace at which humanity and the world is approaching the reality of doom and destruction (“Doomsday Clock”). Since the implementation of the Doomsday Clock in 1947, it has moved back and forth in time, reflecting particularly threatening events in history. As of January 24, 2023, the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* declared that “[t]he Clock now stands at 90 seconds to midnight—the closest to global catastrophe it has ever been.” This ultimately shows the ongoing importance and timeliness of coming to terms with humanity’s relationship to (a hypothetical) apocalypse.

Despite the fact that seventy years have passed since the first nuclear threats of the Cold War and the hands of the Doomsday Clock moving ever more forward, it

appears that humanity is tangled in a web of doomsday scenarios that are equally pressing and may perhaps seem even more complex than the threat of atomic annihilation. As the effects of such imaginations are being felt in every aspect of our lives from media to academia, these depictions of the apocalypse are more complicated and relevant than ever.

In a time when the remains of a global pandemic are not yet eradicated, with the climate crisis and other catastrophes represented in media, in our environment, and in our minds, we ourselves felt very connected to this year's topical issue of 'apocalypse.' Despite our life in a rather sheltered space in the comfort of Leipzig's American Studies department, we all are, nevertheless, aware of our surroundings and the anxieties that ensue.

However, the ways in which an American apocalypse, and a US cataclysm in particular, can manifest itself are much more diverse. A closer look at the events following the murder of George Floyd, the January 6 attack on the US Capitol, and the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in June of 2022 alone would suffice to offer multitudes of such interpretations. Thus, our selection of articles has taken a more elusive approach. Focusing on topics that, while not as openly or drastically apocalyptic, nevertheless proved very much substantial to us, this issue replicates the complexity of attitudes and feelings towards the ever-present impending sense of doom surrounding the US and its place in the world. These academic contributions—while unfolding a variety of issues that US-American society in particular is facing—highlight two key elements: the complex emotional landscape related to the climate crisis and the prevalence of community. Whether it is the analysis of Craig Santos Perez's ecopoetry, torn between denial and despair, or the close readings searching threshold between hope and collaboration in Paul Schrader's 2017 film *First Reformed*, in the affective cult of Ari Aster's 2019 motion picture *Midsommar*, or in the historical revision of female relationships in the face of oppression in Tiya Miles' 2015 novel *The Cherokee Rose*—this issue of *aspeers* seeks to navigate what an American apocalypse can entail and how it can be imagined.

Following up on the previously mentioned contemporary 'apocalyptic' events of the US political landscape, especially in relation to the murder of George Floyd showcasing the ongoing struggle for Black people against structural racism, one of the key institutions in American history cannot go unnamed, that is, the enslavement of African and African-American people. The inhuman horrors that enslaved individuals had to endure is nothing short of what we would now consider a form of a personal apocalypse.

In "Diversifying the Oppressor: Native American Participation in the History of Enslavement," Poppy Williams aims at complicating and deepening conversations about slaveholding in the US. While reading Tiya Miles' *The Cherokee Rose: A Novel of Gardens and Ghosts* against an interdisciplinary backdrop intertwining

literary concepts and historical propositions, the author argues that a particular cultural setting tied Indigenous and enslaved people to each other. Without ascribing blame, the novel manages to draw a more complex picture of the oppressor's role by diversifying the relationships of enslaved women and their (Indigenous) enslavers. Enabling a historical revisionist perspective of female relationships in the face of oppression and framing them as a source of power and change, Williams illustrates what healing and hope can look like in the face of, and following, a personal apocalypse.

Yet, before we further dive into this year's academic contributions, we want to provide a selected framework of topical impulses in which the notion of apocalypse in general and the idea of 'American Apocalypses' in particular can be understood.

### CLIMATE CRISIS – AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE APOCALYPSE

The issue of climate crisis has been channeled into different forms of cultural expressions, such as film, literature, and other forms of art throughout the past decades and even centuries. The strong emotions connected to this as a particular variant of apocalyptic imaginaries served as an inspiration to artists like Edgar Allan Poe. One can see the close and unique connections “between the American literary imagination and apocalypse” (May 83), for example, in Poe's short story “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842) which reflects on the repercussions of a society faced with a pandemic and the ensuing state of emotional turmoil of paranoia and terror that this ultimately provides. Such haunting literary images relating back to catastrophic events and descriptions of such, however, can also depict, as Douglas Robinson states, “the historical transformation of space and time from old to new, from corruption to new innocence, from death to rebirth” (3). More than being concerned with the idea of renewal, linearity, and irreversibility of traumatic events, apocalyptic fictions can also be set to investigate “the nature of community [...] and [...] the constitution of the self” (Robinson xiii).

One of our contributions that deals with this community aspect of the apocalypse is Michalina Czerwońska's “Collaborative Survival in Paul Schrader's *First Reformed*,” which analyzes the intricate connection between hope and collaboration in a state of environmental anxiety. Guided by Donna Haraway's and Ann Cvetkovich's work, Czerwońska employs a variety of scholarly approaches to analyze *First Reformed*'s power to present strategies for survival in the climate crisis. Following the story of Ernst Toller, a pastor who increasingly loses his faith in humanity due to the destructive effects of the climate crisis, Michalina Czerwońska rebuffs eco-theological and preservationist perspectives stating that “nature does not exist in a vacuum and no longer is a sublime” (89). By rejecting Western

individualistic philosophies, she argues that collaboration, both among ourselves and with nature, is the necessary approach to survive the climate crisis.

Moving away from this particular article, the potential ramifications of the apocalypse are usually accompanied by a fatalistic undertone implicating that things must and will eventually come to an end. However, scholars such as Janet Fiskio also argue that in two narratives of apocalypse, namely “the lifeboat” and “the collective,” the collapse of civilization following the apocalypse caused by the climate crisis allows for the rebirth of society as a utopian community even though those two diverge fundamentally (14). She, therefore, highlights the need for a sense of purpose and community in collective narratives when faced with catastrophe (22). Similar to Fiskio, Robinson states that American imaginations of the apocalypse in particular share certain elements that offer the possibility of creating “value out of loss” (50).

However, these longings for human connection and the need for self-reflection in the face of the apocalypse can also be instrumentalized by those in power. In the work *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (2014), Matthew Avery Sutton examines how charismatic religious leaders of the evangelical right used apocalyptic imagery to regulate US-American society. According to Sutton, “[a]pocalypticism provided radical evangelicals with a framework through which to interpret their lives, their communities, and the future, which in turn often inspired, influenced, and justified the choices they made” (4). White American radical evangelists made use of catastrophic imagery to create conformity and doom everything that would challenge their conservative ideals, for example, by condemning non-heteronormativity, restricting birth control, portraying abortion as a sin, or promoting the American nuclear family.

Next to a more theological reading of the Armageddon from a Christian viewpoint, the apocalypse has been envisioned differently throughout American cultures. Native Americans, for instance, had already recorded the end of humanity through the “Fire of the Cosmic Conflagration” (Clark 15). In modern imaginations, this cataclysm is regularly accompanied by a “fading sun, a desolate world, empty cities, plague and famine everywhere,” presenting visions of finite and irreversible catastrophes (19). Yet, as our other topical contribution by Michael Meister on Craig Santos Perez’s ecopoetry highlights, this can also be done in a much more subtle and personal way through exploring the emotional landscape and turmoil of the individual upon being faced with the oppressive reality of climate crisis.

Michael Meister’s article “Between Despair and Denial: Coming to Terms with the Climate Crisis and Environmental Injustice in the Ecopoetry of Craig Santos Perez” thus begins this year’s issue of *aspeers* with a comparative close reading of the poems “Halloween in the Anthropocene (*a necropastoral*)” (2020) and “New Year’s

Eve and Day in the Chthulucene” (2020). Touching on key themes in the realm of the apocalyptic—resentment, despair, and denial, in the frames of the Chthulucene and the Anthropocene—Michael Meister draws on a variety of scholarship to showcase the way ecopoetry, and the prosaic poems of Santos Perez in particular, prove to be an exceptionally fruitful and productive playing ground to work through the anxieties that living in the age of ongoing climate crisis and catastrophes ultimately entails. Through Meister’s comparison of “Halloween” and “New Year’s,” this article further analyzes the diverse concepts of TimeSpace and slow violence by showcasing the way Santos Perez utilizes them to convey his speakers’ messages of disillusionment and crisis fatigue. “Despair and Denial” moves across discourses on environmentalism and methodological approaches to argue for a complex and multifaceted image of experiences in the age of the Anthro- and Chthulucene, and ultimately concludes in presenting poetry as a promising and so far seldom acknowledged medium to convey the messages of environmental justice writer-activism.

### FEELING THE APOCALYPSE

This year’s issue also reflects upon how the destruction entailed by apocalypses forced an inward movement in search of answers pertaining to human experiences. While not occupying themselves with traditional comprehensions of the world’s end, essays such as “Between Despair and Denial” pose questions about how ordinary occurrences can also be seen as annihilating, and, in the face of catastrophic events, imagine ways to salvage and reconstruct oneself. It comes as no surprise, then, that theories of affect have become highly productive and somewhat approximable to the idea of apocalypse. This movement can be seen as an attempt to comprehend human experiences to their full extent. Writing as a precursor of the affective turn of the 1970s, in *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*, Silvan Tomkins positions affects as physical or neurological answers to internal or external events—a concept which was then, among others, later on expanded by the seminal works of Ann Cvetkovich and Sara Ahmed. Besides acknowledging the central role of emotions and posing further explanations about how the world is experienced, affect theories can also be made productive in the context of the bodily, as the contribution of “Community Building” in this issue seeks to explore.

In “Community Building through Bodily Affect in Ari Aster’s *Midsommar*,” Leonie M. J. Kratzenstein discusses the way in which social coercion and manipulation is portrayed in the 2019 film. Examining the manners by which a cult in rural Sweden, the Hårga, draws in the American student Dani, Kratzenstein correlates the parallel outcomes of the protagonist’s emotional vulnerability with her new-found stability in a presumably caring, but in fact shockingly brutal,

community. Dani experiences her very own apocalypse when her sister kills herself and their parents. The Hårga arguably take advantage of her loss and emotional instability. By expanding Barbara Rosenwein's and Angelos Chaniotis's concept of an 'emotional community,' Leonie M. J. Kratzenstein demonstrates the supporting power of community to overcome personal struggles and abysses next to the hypocritical characteristics of the Hårga cult as an 'affective community.' She closely engages with scenes from the film and shows how this cult's sense of community is based on affective, meaning bodily, compassion on top of the usual emotional connection founding these societies. As apocalyptic anxiety is an individual as much as a collective problem, the paper illustrates the dangerous potential of community-building practices in times of emotional turmoil.

### POST-APOCALYPSE?

The question now remains: What follows in the face of the apocalypse? Michalina Czerwońska's "Collaborative Survival" offers the interpretation of finding hope again in interpersonal connection to combat the emotional turmoil caused by dealing with the looming consequences of the climate crisis. Michael Meister's "Between Despair and Denial" operates along similar lines in seeking to give a voice to people's 'mundane' concerns through Craig Santos Perez's ecopoetry and an analysis thereof. Leonie M. J. Kratzenstein's "Community Building" offers a take on a less environmentalist but more personal, collective catastrophe through a closer look at the affective strategies that the Hårga cult employs to sway its new members. Poppy William's "Diversifying the Oppressor" showcases how hope and healing can be navigated following a traumatic history such as the practices of Cherokee slaveholding which Tiya Miles seeks to reframe in her 2015 novel *The Cherokee Rose*. Thus, we hope that this sixteenth issue of *aspeers* provides a nuanced depiction of the complex experiences and occurrences which an American apocalypse can entail and how it can be understood. Hence, while our introduction approaches its end, the apocalypse continues and the ways in which we can collectively reinterpret it through collaboration and hope ensue.

To conclude, we, the editors, want to use this as an opportunity to thank everyone who has made this year's issue of *aspeers* possible. We could not have done it without the tremendous help and quintessential guidance provided by Katja Schmieder and Annika M. Schadewaldt, as well as the valuable input given by Peter Hintz, Stefan Schubert, and Sebastian M. Hermann throughout the course of the semester. We also want to express our gratitude to the backoffice for their meticulous assistance during this period of time and to our professorial voice Prof. Paweł Frelik for joining us on this eventful journey and providing us with an exceptionally fitting, original contribution for our edition of *aspeers*. And finally,

we want to thank everybody who answered the 2022 call for papers and artistic contributions—this issue could not have been made possible without your great work. Thank you for your time, your energy, and the trust that you have put into us.

### PROFESSORIAL VOICE

On the topic of ‘American Apocalypses’ for this year’s issue of *aspeers*, we are thrilled to include an original piece of writing by associate professor Paweł Frelik from the American Studies Center at the University of Warsaw, Poland. Frelik can be considered a true expert in the field as his teaching and research interests center heavily around science fiction and audiovisual media. He has published widely in these areas and has created an impressive résumé over the course of his career. From 2013-2014, he was President of the Science Fiction Research Association (USA), the first from outside North America in the organization’s history, and now serves as President of the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts (USA). Furthermore, Frelik is also the first non-Anglophone recipient of the Thomas D. Claeson Award (2017) and serves on the boards of Science Fiction Studies (USA), Extrapolation (USA/UK), and Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds (UK).

In “American Apocalypses Galore,” Paweł Frelik gives an overview of how an ‘American Apocalypse’ can and has been understood throughout time. Relating back to the overall complexity that this subject matter ultimately entails, he touches on events in US history—such as the genocide and borderline extinction of the indigenous population—as well as on various cultural products and prevalent pop cultural trends in the media landscape of the past and the present which are and have been envisioned to be apocalyptic. Frelik thereby highlights the multitudes of formats and ways in which an American apocalypse can be imagined and manifests itself, thus, making it the perfect addition for our journal.

### ART CONTRIBUTIONS

The prevalent images of ‘American Apocalypses’ have also been channeled and reflected in various artworks submitted in our open call for arts. Seeking to engage a dialogue between academic and artistic interpretations of the apocalypse, this issue features literary and visual artifacts that observe and process contemporary notions of apocalypses in US society. In her woodblock print on muslin entitled *Your Death, My Life (Mors Tua, Vita Mea)*, Klaire Smith employs apocalyptic imagery to address the social challenges of people living in the Appalachian region. She illustrates a skeleton as the embodiment of death in a bleak landscape to express the influence of poverty, opioids, and corruption on every aspect of daily life in this area.

Klaire Smith's print eventually raises the questions 'whose life? whose death?' and serves as a constant reminder of the proximity of disaster.

As we observe a rising polarization and use of harsh rhetoric within the US social, cultural, and political discourse, two of our artworks discuss the divisions that run through the nation. Firstly, Julian Töller's drawing *Käpt'n Amerika* comments on the current state of US-American society and politics. Looking beyond the shining facade of patriotism, Töller depicts a shattered hero representing a country deeply divided by cultural wars and unable to find common ground between rigorous political fronts. Secondly, Georgio Lorio's sculpture *Trumped-Up: Ugly American*, originally constructed during the Trump presidency, further elaborates on these disputes. In order to reflect opposing views of values, the image flips the contours of the US north/south rather than east/west and uses complementary colors as a contrast to the patriotic red, white, and blue. Georgio Lorio carefully distorts this portrait of an American demagogue with a carved wooden heart collaged with the strips of shredded US currency, thereby demonstrating their pretentious love of money and greed for power.

These alarming scenarios culminate in Filip Julian Miszuk's poem "I Wave High The Flag of My Unmaking" that portrays the US as a nation torn in the middle of an identity crisis. Touching on various apocalyptic themes, such as conspiracy theories, violence, and religiosity, Miszuk aims to dissect particular dilemmas at the heart of US-American society. His poem processes trauma, grief, and unfulfilled promises and concludes by depicting a broken and disillusioned man who—after being exploited by the industrial-military complex—recounts the apocalypse outside his window. Ultimately, "I Wave High The Flag of My Unmaking" envisions a dystopian scenario based on contemporary observations and tackles the effects of an apocalypse on a deeply personal level.

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