

## Professorial Voice

**Prof. Monica Michlin**  
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**aspeers:** Good afternoon, Professor Michlin. We would like to start by asking why you decided to work in the field of American studies. What were the reasons or maybe even specific experiences that influenced your choice?<sup>1</sup>

**Michlin:** Well, to put it simply, what led me was a mix of personal biography and excellent professors. My father is an American, and we traveled to the United States every two years, so of course I have this personal connection because of my dual citizenship. I loved my classes in fields like French literature, American literature, history, or philosophy. Professors like my mentor Pierre-Yves Pétillon really got me hooked on American studies. Eventually, when I had to decide which path to follow, I chose American literature.

**aspeers:** What fascinates you about literature, particularly about fiction?

**Michlin:** There are two basic things that I have always loved about fiction. One of them is that it gives you access to somebody's most intimate thoughts and feelings. The issue of voice plays an important role here since a story can be told from different perspectives. Another feature I feel strongly about is commitment. Sometimes literature is aimed at trying to change the world. Much of the fiction I work on tries to fill the gaps that history books do not or cannot fill and often calls upon readers to question the current state of things and to confront and combat forms of injustice *today*. Whether it succeeds or not is another issue, of course.

**aspeers:** Looking at your career so far, what would you say was the most influential academic experience you have had?



*Rural or urban?*

**Michlin:** Urban.

*Fiction or nonfiction?*

**Michlin:** Fiction.

*Lecture or seminar?*

**Michlin:** Seminar.

*Summer or winter?*

**Michlin:** Summer.

*Train or plane?*

**Michlin:** Plane.

*Book or movie?*

**Michlin:** Both. Reading the book and watching the movie forces you to think about what makes you prefer one or the other and why.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about Professor Monica Michlin, her career, and her publications, please see xvii-xviii in our introduction.

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**Michlin:** One could say that the year I spent at Princeton changed my life because that's where I met Toni Morrison. She asked me what I was working on, and—having been influenced by my advisor—I was writing my *DEA* thesis [eds.: *diplôme d'études approfondies*, a French degree between MA and PhD] on Saul Bellow at the time. However, when I went deeper into his work I was struck by the bigoted aspects of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, which Ms. Morrison also criticized. But I had to finish my thesis. So she suggested, “Why don't you write your doctoral dissertation on my work?” It was an intense moment because she has this incredible presence. It was as if she had invited me and authorized me to write about her work, work that I found extraordinary. That moment was an epiphany.

**aspeers:** That certainly is a unique way of finding a research topic. What advice would you give students who are struggling to find their own research topic or even their own academic path?

**Michlin:** I would tell them to follow what truly matters to them. They should not pay too much attention to what they are told is going to be a sector with lots of jobs or opportunities. In fact, no one knows what the future will look like. I also think that it's very important to have a task that reflects your inner landscape when you're working on something as life-consuming as writing a doctoral thesis. Otherwise it's too hard to put that much effort into it. I believe that one of the reasons why people sometimes do not go through with a piece of research is that it wasn't really their choice.

**aspeers:** You have been part of American studies for some time and have seen its changes and turns. Keeping in mind your advice about not giving too much credence to predictions of the future, we would nevertheless like to ask you what you imagine the foreseeable future of the field to look like. Where do you think we are going?

**Michlin:** I think that the term ‘foreseeable future’ is an oxymoron because nobody can foresee the future. In the 1990s, for example, there was this great fear that people would stop reading. This, however, bypasses the fact that all new technology requires you to read. Additionally, in one of my recent articles, I speak of the idea that filmic adaptation brings a number of readers back to books because people see the movie and eventually want to read the book. In fact, much has been made of this issue. Twenty years ago, if your doctorate was in American literature, you were not expected to speak about film. With the advent of cultural studies and adaptation studies, in terms of remediation, intermediality, or transmedia, a lot of different influences have broadened the field. I think that a number of people who perhaps do not think that they are going to be working on trans- and intermedia will find that they eventually are. Because that is one of the places we are going. The economic reality, changes in technology, the social and economic struggles that we have known and those we are about to know will continue to shape fields that already exist but will also bring new

ones into existence. This has become obvious with branches like ecocriticism, which is of course connected to the catastrophic situation that we are living in now—with climate change being talked about for decades without real action being taken—or gender studies, which developed after the feminist movement and eventually brought about queer studies. All in all, I think American studies has a bright future.

**aspeers:** Despite their growing relevance, American studies as well as other fields in the humanities are often the first to feel the impact of cuts in education budgets. Why would you argue for a continued investment in the humanities?

**Michlin:** My deep feeling about the whole issue of investment is that universities are not corporations. You cannot think of fundamental research in terms of profitability although funding for certain forms of research is a priority for obvious reasons, like in medical research. But at the same time, you always have to bear in mind that nobody can predict what will happen a hundred years from now, let alone in five years. I am convinced that the humanities are precisely what they say they are. They transmit knowledge and ask fundamental questions: What is our human heritage? Where does humanity come from and where can it go? Where should it perhaps try not to go? What are the risks? I believe that this is priceless. Nobody can weigh the value of history or of having philosophers, specialists in ethics, and people who study fiction and storytelling. In fact, if you have governments that consider these departments useless, claiming that we don't need them, they are being hypocritical. Every single political cabinet is full of people whose job it is to tell stories: spin doctors and people who have specialized in narratives, in media images, and in the analysis of visual images and speeches. And I believe that this is one of the things you see when you study series like *The West Wing*, for which screenwriters consulted with former advisers to President Clinton.

**aspeers:** Earlier, you talked about the influence of feminism in the creation of a new field, namely gender studies. You have repeatedly worked on questions of gender identity and gender-based oppression yourself. In recent years, however, a number of scholars have declared this a 'postfeminist' era. Would you agree with that?

**Michlin:** I personally do not like this term. To me, 'postfeminist' is like 'postracial': It's mistaking our desires for realities in which sex- or ethnicity-based inequality is no longer an issue. Such fundamentally sex-based forms of discrimination as the gender pay gap, issues such as the right and the access to free contraception and to abortion, and forms of widespread sexual violence like rape are all still very present in US society as we saw again in the 2012 elections, during which scandalously sexist declarations on part of various Republicans contributed to Barack Obama's reelection. I do understand that some postfeminists use that term to make it clear that they do not just defend white middle-class heterosexual women. I of course fully agree with the

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most inclusive definition of the fight for equality, but I would use the term Alice Walker made famous in her day to emphasize that class, race, and gender issues are all intertwined and call myself a ‘womanist’ rather than ‘postfeminist’ in an American context. I believe that as long as there are power relations based on the same old mechanisms of exploitation, as you have it, for instance, with prostitution, feminism is still of crucial significance. I believe all struggles must be *intersectional*: You cannot fight separately on issues of gender, race, class, or sexual orientation. First, because these various aspects of identity are embodied in each of us. Second, because as long as certain forms of discrimination remain in each struggle—blind spots in feminism concerning class, blind spots in antiracist struggles concerning sexual orientation, blind spots in LGBT struggles concerning racism, and so forth—there can be no real equality.

**aspeers:** Identity politics obviously play a prominent role in the United States. This is particularly true when it comes to the issue of which topics one is able to talk about with authority. As a white scholar of African American studies, have you ever encountered any opposition in this respect?

**Michlin:** I can’t say that I have experienced any such problem overtly. But I would completely understand if somebody said, “Who are you to speak of these things?” In contrast to many African American scholars, I cannot say that I have lived through any form of racial oppression myself. I do believe, however, that empathy, not turning a blind eye to any form of oppression, allows you to be a witness. So I can only testify as someone who is not completely the insider but not completely the outsider either. I would see myself perhaps as a ‘sister,’ to use one of my favorite terms in 1970s black feminist thought, which cultivated the idea of brotherhood and sisterhood in a strong political sense. Moreover, if each of us were only allowed to study what we are, wouldn’t we have an extremely limited insight into the world? Isn’t it precisely because we study what we are not, or some of the experiences we have not lived ourselves, that we can in fact create more connections? That way, we can prevent the world from becoming a place in which each person lives in their own separate community. I cannot *be* black, but at the same time, I and those of my students who are white should *feel* black as we read and study these texts. That is what literary focalization and voice allow and hopefully allow us to sustain once the book itself has been closed: this identification. I think people like me have a place in African American studies precisely in that sense of mediation and bridging gaps. The Collegium for African American Research is a very good example for the productivity of these dynamics.

**aspeers:** Speaking of CAAR, you were in fact asked to be one of the keynote speakers of this year’s CAAR conference in Atlanta. Why do you think conferences play such a significant role in the field of American studies and for individual scholars?

**Michlin:** Going to conferences is like being reunited with a form of intellectual family, a community of minds. Sometimes you learn fabulous things through somebody's paper, which opens up entire areas of thought that can take you places where you didn't think you could go. Sometimes you get different insights into books you've already read, as if you were being brought to another dimension of something that you thought you knew. The most precious thing about conferences, however, is the discussion time. People take off what you might call the 'conference mask' or 'formal persona' and suddenly give references they didn't give in the paper, opening up another form of complexity in what they just said. It's like going to the spa in order to change one's skin completely. Conferences are almost like having that in your brain: a brain makeover! *[laughs]*

**aspeers:** This year's issue of *aspeers* focuses on the topic of American memories. As someone who has both American and French citizenship, what would you consider your favorite American memory? Would you like to share an anecdote with our readers?

**Michlin:** The one that I really remember with a great deal of emotion is when I realized on November 5, 2008, in the early hours of the morning, that Barack Obama was elected to be our first black president. First I wept for joy, and then I cried for all the time it had taken for us to reach this moment, historically as well as the eight years we had just lived through, in particular. And then, I was receiving emails—at 3 a.m.!—from my students, some black, some white, who were writing, "Yes We Did," and who were also crying for joy, as if Barack Obama were their president too—it was a once-in-a-lifetime moment.

**aspeers:** Both in your book *Jean Toomer: Cane* and in your essay on Sapphire's *Push*, you use Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s Signifying, one of the most prominent theoretical concepts in African American studies. Would you consider Signifying a theorization of American memories?

**Michlin:** In a way, yes. Most of the time when I use the term 'Signifying,' I either think of specific intertextuality within, for instance, African American work or think of speech that has a double meaning. There is this idea of messages that are deliberately coded but easy to decode for other insiders. For example, Obama's victory speech on that morning in 2008—when he said, "It's been a long time coming"—was an instance of Signifying. On one level, it meant that it had been a very long eight years, but on another level, it spoke to anybody who had doubted that in their lifetime they would see the first black president. It conveyed that it's been such a long time coming that there is this symbol as another landmark in history after the abolition of slavery and after the Civil Rights Act. Signifying is an essential part of African American speech and of African American literature. To take just one example, in the

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“I am Beloved and she is mine” passage in *Beloved*, Toni Morrison is playing on the many meanings of “mine”: possession as in haunting, possession as in love, possession as in property and the trauma that slavery makes this “mine” impossible. I would say that playing with different meanings of “mine” in this particular context perfectly fits into the concept of Signifying. These are both forms of encoded speech that exemplify Gates’s concept. I believe this would certainly also work as a theorization of memory because that is what memory does. As psychoanalysis shows us, there is a part of our memory that is only accessible through encoded forms, such as dreams or Freudian slips, and these might, in fact, be instances of Signifying as well.

**aspeers:** Why do you think theories of memory have found their way from psychology into cultural and literary studies and thus entered the realm of American studies?

**Michlin:** To me, in this case it somehow went from fiction to theorization rather than the other way round. Personal trauma, as a particular form of memory, for example, had been a recurring motif in African American literature years before the work of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra. Besides, the personal form of pain arises within a specific social and political context, which is that of collective forms of trauma. Scenes of whipping and other forms of barbaric treatment, although they are inflicted on individuals, quickly become one of the recognizable forms of repeated, collective trauma to readers. Furthermore, novels like *Beloved* tremendously stress the idea of inventing those voices that no history book has kept for us. That’s where you see why the writing of trauma in forms of fiction is absolutely necessary because otherwise that entire part of history would have been wiped out. I think that the idea that trauma in fiction and in other forms of writing is a way of preserving memories of certain issues is fundamental.

**aspeers:** You have not only repeatedly worked on African American literature but also on LGBT literature. It seems as if the current debate about same-sex marriage resembles the debate about mixed-race relationships in the last century. How would you comment on this aspect of American memories?

**Michlin:** That’s a very interesting connection. I must say that until Barack Obama became the first president speaking out for same-sex marriage while still in office, I really had doubts as to how comfortable the African American community felt with the comparisons, especially older members or more conservative religious black people in the Deep South. The same-sex marriage movement, and more broadly, the gay rights movement, makes equality a civil rights issue and makes an explicit parallel between gay rights today and black rights during the Civil Rights Movement. But then, it’s a question of how literal we make that parallel. Some gay and lesbian activists believe they can make a stronger case by saying, “Like black people, we were born this

way.” I personally have trouble with this essentialist argument. It makes more sense for the proponents of same-sex marriage to seek argumentative parallels via the use of the Fourteenth Amendment. This way you could make it indeed more like the intermarriage issue because nobody who was, for example, a white person falling in love with a black person would have said, “I was born to marry a black person, I can’t love anybody else.” They said, “If I fall in love with someone who’s black, it’s my right to marry them because the Fourteenth Amendment gives us equal rights.” If the Constitution does not say that marriage is simply between one man and one woman, then, in this case, it is discrimination to allow certain couples to marry and to refuse that right to others.

**aspeers:** Much of your research is also concerned with television formats. Which contemporary series do you think deals with American memories in a particularly productive or revealing way?

**Michlin:** I have been watching *Mad Men* and I realize that older male white viewers could perfectly well watch the series as a sort of retro macho chic. I know that because some of them have said, “I love this series because I can watch it with nostalgia.” [laughs] I am wondering how that is possible because nearly every episode ends with a heartbreaking betrayal. You can see how *Mad Men* is a revisionist series in the sense that it takes up the myth of the Sixties as a period of liberation. In fact, when you’re thinking of the Sixties as liberation, you’re thinking of ’68. Yet, they start the series at the very shift between ’59 and ’60 when women had neither contraception nor the right to abortion; they were lucky when they were secretaries, but becoming a copywriter was almost impossible. And of course, these were the years of segregation, and you see no black characters in *Mad Men*, except in janitorial or domestic jobs, until the series gets to 1964. But even then, what the series shows is the resistance to change—and to progress—on white people’s part. From that perspective, the series is very interesting because it manages to displace and shake off a tacitly held truth about a certain period of time. It forces the viewers to realize that there is, in fact, a chronological break and that ‘the Sixties’ is perhaps not the right way of categorizing things.

**aspeers:** Now moving from TV series to cinema, how do you think Hollywood movies exemplify American memories?

**Michlin:** Although some of my most brilliant colleagues have a mainly aesthetic approach to films, I find it impossible not to read them from a cultural studies perspective. I think that a number of old Western movies or musical dramas or any other genre can be read like open books on sexism and different forms of Othering. But they’re interesting precisely because they are unabashed and unembarrassed; you actually see the codes playing themselves out. You see how the Western is the



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American epic, the official story of the colonization of the West. Simultaneously, there have been films in every period that subverted the codes and made strong political statements, from *High Noon* to *Little Big Man*, which were perceived as ‘anti-Westerns’ in their own time and which are perceived today as ‘classics’ of the Western genre as much as they are seen as subverting the genre’s codes. Overall, I think that history always leaves contextual ‘footprints’ in movies, which can, thus, be seen as a form of cinematographic memories.

**aspeers:** In your paper on Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, you examine a novel that was widely celebrated upon publication and quickly turned into a cult piece of the counterculture but, in recent decades, was heavily criticized by scholars for its ideological flaws and blind spots. How would you assess this change in reception with regard to American memories?

**Michlin:** I think that what I said about necessary revision with regard to *Mad Men* applies here as well—not in the sense that it is condemned but in the sense of not taking official history for granted. We have to realize that every text is caught in its own historical context with its own ideological bias and/or constraints. From that point of view, it is interesting to see how *On the Road* was received as a hugely subversive, even inspiring book when it was first published in 1957. Of course, when you read it today, especially as a woman, an African American, or a Latino, it is impossible not to see those blind spots. It’s a bit like when you reread *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, having first read it as a child: You can see what made it a progressive work at the time, but you can also see that it is paternalistic, written by a white abolitionist for white readers; and you of course understand why now it also needs to be reread and revised from a black perspective.

**aspeers:** We would like to conclude with our final question that has become a kind of tradition in *aspeers*: If you were to pick a theme song for American studies, what would be the song of your choice?

**Michlin:** The problem with the theme song is, would it be a song to advance American studies, looking toward a bright future? I am very fond of every kind of protest song, whether it’s “We Shall Overcome,” “Which Side Are You On?,” or anything that Nina Simone sings. I’m also thinking of some of the Stevie Wonder songs that can be read as looking toward a brighter future. Maybe I would include spirituals as well, even if I would use them in a secular sense, which doesn’t detract from their beauty at all. The problem is that I really can’t decide which song I would choose in the end. You know, one of my little secrets is that I am a walking jukebox. It’s almost sad that too much brain space is used up because when I listen to songs several times, I learn them by heart: They all make up my personal American memory. [laughs]



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**aspeers:** Professor Michlin, thank you very much for sharing your thoughts and experiences with us. It was a pleasure talking to you.

**Michlin:** Thank *you*.