

# Of Monsters, Frontiers, and Apocalypses: Ten Years of American Studies Graduate Scholarship

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In his 2013 monograph on media theory and climate change, *Hyperobjects*, Timothy Morton claims that “[t]he end of the world has already occurred” (7). Although Morton’s specific object of inquiry is environmental destruction, many cultural commentators echoed a similar feeling when looking back at 2016. In recent media discourses, the world has been presented not only as radically changed by war, populist politics, and global terrorism but also as most graspable in a postapocalyptic rhetoric. One of the defining moments of last year—and one that, for many, certainly fueled anxieties of ‘the end of the world’—was the candidacy and eventual election of Donald J. Trump as the forty-fifth President of the United States of America. A particularly persistent narrative around his election has been the idea that it marks a watershed moment signaling that we live in ‘post-truth’ or ‘post-factual’ times, in a world either “without facts” or “where facts do not matter” (Sullivan). Writing in *The New York Times* about “The Post-Truth Presidency,” Timothy Egan similarly notes that, unlike earlier tendencies to “choose to believe what we want,” this time, these issues regarding the credibility of US presidential candidates did not concern subjective matters of “character” but “existential facts.”<sup>1</sup>

In academia, in turn, the idea that we live in post-truth times, i.e., that there is no unitary ‘truth,’ not just one ‘reality’ to which we can objectively refer to, is nothing

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1 For more on the specific connection between the American presidency and questions of truth, knowledge, and, in particular, ‘unreality,’ cf. Herrmann, who argues that “the motif of presidential unreality establishes an arena in which American culture interrogates the role of signifiatory practices, of textuality in a wider sense, of the relationship between representation and reality, and where it casts this question as a matter of profound and pressing public concern” (14).

revolutionary, already having been proclaimed by a range of post-structuralist and postmodern thinkers. The kind of post-truth world hailed by cultural commentators through the election of Trump, however, seems like a distortion of such postmodern thoughts. When, in the light of this realization about the possible nonexistence of objective truth, discourses advocate the absence of any kind of (factual) knowledge or evidence, they instead underline emotions, feelings, or opinions as a barometer of ‘truthful’ knowledge. For academia, then—and especially American studies—these proclamations should be a call to action, offering a renewed sense of purpose in educating the public that while ‘truth,’ ‘fact,’ or ‘reality’ are indeed elusive concepts, this merely suggests that the world is more complicated, more ambivalent, and less binary than some might have thought or claimed it to be.

Pointing to a possible cultural backlash against post-factuality, apocalypticism, and a Hobbesian worldview, Daniel W. Drezner suggests in a recently published article on the shifting US American TV landscape “that if politics really drives viewership, the apocalypse narrative will find a rival in the Trump years, which is some variation of a resistance narrative.” Nevertheless, the election of Donald Trump highlights the continuing relevance and reality-creating power of (American) mythical thinking, in which he has been constructed as a prime example of the self-made man. This importance is mirrored in the return of American studies scholarship to founding myths and symbols, such as the Promised Land, the Founding Fathers, and the frontier (cf. Paul). These recent developments in American politics and culture, then, also prompt a reflection on the genesis of this year’s issue of *aspeers* as a glimpse into the landscape of contemporary American graduate scholarship.

When the 2016 editorial team of *aspeers* issued their call for papers, monsters seemed to be experiencing a heyday in American studies, sparked by a surge of vampire and zombie narratives in popular culture. Simultaneously, there was a growing awareness in the humanities, social sciences, and even the natural sciences that the monster—and the zombie in particular—is a productive lens through which to examine pressing contemporary issues such as terrorism, globalization, natural disasters, and pandemics.<sup>2</sup> As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen points out in his seminal piece on the cultural work of monsters: “The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place.” In this, “[t]he monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence” (4). To our surprise, however, young European scholars of American studies appear to be less interested in the monster in its common forms—witches, aliens, werewolves—

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2 For an example of the use of the zombie figure in the humanities, cf. Bishop; in the social sciences, cf. Blanton; and in the natural sciences, cf. Munz et al.

but rather look at monstrosity in its broadest definition. They use it as an “ever adaptive metaphor” (Picart and Browning xii), for example, in their exploration of changing perspectives on sexuality, thus suggesting that “monsterland is [still] a place that helps us process and examine the nagging contradictions of modernity” (xiii).

Likewise, the myth of the frontier still seems to hold value for American popular culture, which becomes apparent when looking at recent popular movies such as *The Revenant* (2015), *The Hateful Eight* (2015), and *Django Unchained* (2012) and TV shows such as *Frontier* (2016) and *Hell on Wheels* (2011). Therefore, maybe less surprisingly, the frontier as a topic found its way into a number of this year’s submissions to *aspeers* and this issue, underlining the current resurgence of interest in the frontier in American studies.<sup>3</sup>

While Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 frontier thesis heavily informed the academic movement of the Myth and Symbol school from the 1950s onward, it has also influenced the essence of what it means to be American until today. A will to push into and explore the unknown is still at the center of the US national narrative. Just last December, Theodore Melfi’s film *Hidden Figures* (2016) reminded viewers of the enormous undertaking that was the most exhilarating frontier expedition of the twentieth century: space travel. In closely portraying the impact three female African American NASA employees in 1960s Virginia had on John Glenn’s orbiting the Earth, *Hidden Figures* foregrounds a forgotten, or perhaps purposefully excluded, facet of what has become known as both the new and the final frontier. Simultaneously, this critically acclaimed film highlights that this final frontier was, and continues to be, not so final after all.

Strikingly, space was also an important topic in the race for the 2016 US presidency. Shortly before his election, President Donald Trump promised that “[u]nder a Trump Administration, Florida and America will lead the way into the stars” (Smith). Whether Trump considers the “space program as one of [the] symbols of American greatness” (Billings) or not, how he will evoke the narrative of the frontier will merit attention. As Ray A. Williamson put it in an essay on outer space as frontier back in the 1980s, space narratives, “many of them couched in the terms of the lore of the western frontier, are of particular importance today because they amount to a

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3 This continued relevance—and seemingly perpetual resurgence—of the frontier as an important myth and narrative in American (graduate) studies also becomes visible in the engagement of previous issues of *aspeers* with the frontier: The introduction to the third issue highlighted the relevance of the frontier in conceptualizations of crime in America, arguing that “by discussing the myth of the frontier as a crucial factor in the construction of American identity, scholars linked ‘crime’ directly to the notion of national identity” (Herrmann et al. xiii), whereas the fourth issue focused on “the role of the frontier for American national identity” in the context of nature and technology (Betker et al. xv).

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political rhetoric justifying an expanded US presence in space. They succeed rhetorically precisely because they appeal to basic human hopes and aspirations” (258). In the age of ‘rocket boom’ and post-truth, his cautioning observations ring truer than ever.

In these times of turmoil, *aspeers* is nevertheless delighted to commemorate its tenth anniversary this year. Over the past years, *aspeers* has responded to the latest issues in American studies while in turn also shaping the landscape of the field. Publishing ‘emerging voices in American studies,’ the journal has touched upon a wide range of themes, from American mobility to crime, from food cultures to technology, from memories to health. Its tenth issue features scholarly work engaging not only with this year’s call for paper’s topic of ‘American Monsters’ but also with the frontier, which has emerged as a central theme of the anniversary issue, and with analytic engagements beyond these topical foci. We are thrilled to feature four very different articles from scholars studying in four different countries. One of them analyzes the changing perspectives on monstrosity in relation to gender performance in the original *Psycho* (1960) and Gus Van Sant’s remake (1998), while two other submissions discuss notions of the frontier and nature in *Hell on Wheels* (2011) and *The Revenant* (2016), respectively. A fourth article, in contrast, examines counterfactuality and genre conventions in the context of Civil War alternate history as social criticism. The topic of the frontier has also been taken up by Prof. Dr. Anne Koenen’s Professorial Voice, investigating dystopian fictions of self-sufficiency in an exploratory essay. In addition, an interview with the renowned American author Paul La Farge on creative writing, science fiction, and teaching allows for invaluable insights into the current state of fiction writing in American culture. Finally, *aspeers* is honored to feature a greeting from the President of the German Association for American Studies, Prof. Dr. Carmen Birkle, in celebration of the anniversary, as well as a collection of memories from previous *aspeers* editors, who share their experiences of the journal’s editing process.

Particularly if these are, indeed, post-truth times, then critically analyzing and discussing how notions of truth and knowledge are created and disseminated in (American) culture becomes an all the more important task in a continuing effort to understand a possibly changing American nation. Hopefully, this issue of *aspeers*, as the only graduate journal for American studies in Europe, can add one small piece to that effort by featuring contributions that discuss different notions of monstrosity, the frontier, the postapocalypse, and post-truth tendencies, coming together as a prism of current American studies graduate scholarship.

## PROFESSORIAL VOICE

A tradition of *aspeers* is to invite one European professor of American studies to contribute to each issue. This being *aspeers*'s tenth anniversary, we deemed it fitting for the occasion to ask one of the cofounders of the journal to pen the Professorial Voice. The editors are thus honored that Prof. Dr. Anne Koenen, Professor Emeritus for American Literature at Leipzig University, has written an essay for this anniversary issue. Given Professor Koenen's extensive work for the journal and her fascinating scholarly career as someone who transformed the field of American studies in Germany, it seems highly appropriate to have her contribute to the anniversary issue of *aspeers* beyond the foreword she usually coauthors. Her wit, honesty, and her unmistakably unique quest for answers through the world of (popular) culture make her essay about her "Little Maison on the Prairie" an invaluable addition to this issue of *aspeers*.

Teaching and researching for decades in the field of American (popular) culture and literature, Professor Koenen can be credited with having transformed the Institute for American Studies at Leipzig University from 1994 to 2015 into a renowned site for scholarship, research, and education. Her study of African American women's literature was the first of its kind in Germany; her claim to fame, as she herself states, is an interview with future Nobel Prize-winning writer Toni Morrison in 1981. Interested in particular in the mode of the fantastic, women's and African American fiction, as well as mail-order catalogs as an early American mass medium, Professor Koenen has widely published and spoken on these topics. Among her significant and widely received works are monographs such as *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power: The Fantastic in Anglo-American Women's Literature* (1999) and *Zeitgenössische Afro-amerikanische Frauenliteratur: Selbstbild und Identität bei Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara und Gayl Jones* (1985) as well as articles like "What Do You Keep Cows For?": Mail-Order Catalogs and Consumerism in Rural Areas of the US, 1900-1930" (2004) and "The (Black) Lady Vanishes: Postfeminism, Poststructuralism, and Theorizing in Narratives by Black Women" (1999).

Before having been appointed professor for American literature at Leipzig University in 1993, Professor Koenen taught at Goethe University Frankfurt and conducted research for her *Habilitation* (postdoctoral thesis) at UC Berkeley. During her first decade at Leipzig University, she was the first female president of the German Association for American Studies from 1999 to 2002 (after having served as its vice president the previous term) as well as the first female dean of the *Philologische Fakultät* at Leipzig University from 1996 to 1999. Additionally, she served on the senate of the university and in countless other administrative positions and committee

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appointments for many years. Throughout her whole career, she has always been an ardent supporter of young scholars, visible, for instance, in the fact that the four female scholars who wrote their *Habilitation* with her have all subsequently been appointed as full-time professors for American studies.

Now living in the southwest of France, from where she shares with this issue's readers her insightful thoughts on (dystopian) frontier fictions and her own life in a secluded French village, Professor Koenen continues to be a passionate supporter of academic exchange beyond national borders. Giving European graduate-level students a platform for their research and interests reflects values at the core of her career. Her and cofounder Dr. Sebastian M. Herrmann's hopes for the journal transpired in their foreword to the first issue of *aspeers* in 2008: "Ideally, *aspeers* will not only give graduate students a chance to prepare for publishing in post-graduate journals later on—ideally, it will become a forum for students across Europe to network and to exchange on their professional and research interests" (Koenen and Herrmann v). As the editors of the current issue of *aspeers*, we strive to continue to realize their vision for the future of young European American studies.

## **ARTISTIC VOICE**

Balancing the academic contributions, we decided to revive an older *aspeers* tradition of including an artistic voice in the journal, enriching this issue by featuring yet another perspective on contemporary American culture. Every semester, the Picador Professorship for Literature at Leipzig University invites writers to participate in a unique project that combines a writer-in-residence program with teaching creative writing and literature. In the winter semester of 2016/17, American Studies Leipzig faculty and students were happy to welcome author Paul La Farge, who has published four books and numerous short stories and essays, as the Picador Professor. After graduating from Yale University, and a short stint at graduate studies in comparative literature at Stanford University, La Farge sat down to write a short story and, twenty-one days later, unexpectedly ended up with a draft of his first novel, *The Artist of the Missing*. After two years of revising the manuscript and thirty-four (self-counted) rejections, his book was published in 1999 and won a California Book Award the same year.

La Farge is fascinated by all things French: He claims to have found inspiration for his subsequent novel, *Hausmann, or the Distinction*, after meeting an allegedly French girl on BART, San Francisco's subway system. This fascination is also mirrored in the novel's claim that Paul La Farge is merely its humble translator and that its true

author is an obscure French writer named Paul Poissel. This postmodern playfulness and the incorporation of hypertextual elements (at the time of publishing, *Hausmann* was supplemented by a website providing archive materials on the imaginary author) signify a tendency in La Farge's work to conflate fact and fiction. His approach, called so "imaginative" that it becomes "hallucinatory" by author Edmund White, "transform[s] his supremely practical subject [...] into an elegant and sometimes grotesque fairy-tale hero." His two following novels—*The Facts of Winter* (2005) and *Luminous Airplanes* (2011)—operate in similar ways.

In the mid 2000s, Paul La Farge started to teach creative writing at Bard College and Columbia University and, last winter, brought his expertise to Leipzig University, where he taught courses on short-story writing and science fiction. During his time in Leipzig, he also produced a *Twitter* short story called "Hum." Ahead of the publication of his new novel *The Night Ocean*, a study of the unlikely friendship between H. P. Lovecraft and his young fan Robert Barlow, *aspeers* has seized the opportunity to talk to Paul La Farge about his enduring interest in apocalyptic narratives, the roads not taken, the joys of teaching, and the lack of contemporary monsters.

### ASPEERS'S TENTH ANNIVERSARY

In the introduction to the very first issue of *aspeers*, the editorial team commented on the relationship between the name of the journal and the mission at its core. As the editors of the anniversary issue, we would like to underline the continuing relevance of this message for the journal's work by quoting our predecessors directly and at length:

Our mission manifests itself in the title *aspeers*. The "as" naturally stands for "American Studies," but it also refers to the role [that] we take in the editing process. As a noun, the word "peer" refers to us as we look at other students' work—as people of an equal standing, as colleagues who know about many of the specific challenges of graduate work, as well as of publishing our research—"as peers" per se. As a verb, "peer" means "to look searchingly at something difficult to discern," which applies beautifully to the landscape of graduate scholarship that is becoming more and more discernible, which we in fact seek to make more discernible through *aspeers*. Along with the subtitle, "*aspeers: emerging voices in American Studies*," the title represents what the journal means to us and what we hope it will come to mean for others. (Carmody et al. ix)

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These words highlight the collegiality that makes *aspeers* an important endeavor not just as a platform for what is often the first publication of young American studies scholars but also as an opportunity for dialogue between graduate students. With *aspeers* having been a collaborative project from the beginning and its success very much depending on not only the current editorial team but former editors, contributors, staff, readers, artists, and professors in all of Europe, we saw it fitting to also include some of the voices of people who have moved this project forward.

Accordingly, we want to provide a snapshot of how the process of making this journal has developed throughout the years, and what this experience has meant for its editors. We have thus collected a number of anecdotes, memories, and impressions of the editing process from a swathe of former *aspeers* editorial teams and general editors. While the two former general editors, Dr. Sebastian M. Herrmann and Dr. Florian Bast, shared key insights into the making of a journal from a broader diachronic perspective, the former editorial teams allowed us to assemble some of the many peculiar moments that make this process so memorable. Taken together, these snippets mirror the unique experience of what it means to be part of the *aspeers* family. Although they differ in focus and form, the contributions come together to map the divergent paths a group may follow in pursuit of a shared goal, the publication of an academic journal.

## **ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS**

The contributions to the tenth issues provide an array of significant interventions to both the field of American studies in general and some of its keywords in particular, such as the monstrous and the frontier. Mapping the landscape of current American studies voices, the four articles show a variety of interrogations into questions at the core of the American experience(s): changing anxieties tied to gender identities, two different reevaluations of the myth of the frontier, and counterfactual accounts of the decisive war in American history. Engaging with texts ranging from the canonical to the obscure, from old to contemporary, and from the popular to the disregarded, this issue's academic articles once again prove the vitality, the breadth, and the diversity of graduate-level scholarship in European American studies.

Engaging with the notion of the frontier in his article "Every New Land Demands Blood?: 'Nature' and the Justification of Frontier Violence in *Hell on Wheels*," Carlo Becker (Leipzig, Germany) investigates how the television series *Hell on Wheels* (2011) legitimizes violence in frontier narratives. As Becker suggests, while the myth of the frontier continues to play a prominent role in US culture, the role of



nature in justifying the forceful exploitation of the land and the expulsion of native peoples in the name of Manifest Destiny remains largely unexplored. To illustrate the link between the ideological force of nature and frontier violence, Becker productively employs the concepts of social Darwinism, biological and environmental determinism, and scientism, thereby suggesting the independence of Manifest Destiny from divine providence. Alluding to famous frontier imagery, depicted, for instance, in John Gast's painting *American Progress* (1872), while simultaneously highlighting the dark underbelly of westward expansion, the TV show subverts the mythical force of the frontier. Nature in *Hell on Wheels* is imbued with ideological power, rendering exploitative human actions as 'natural' and thereby unassailable, thus relieving humans of the responsibilities for such actions. Becker's analysis enriches the contemporary discussion of the American frontier myth by proving not only the continuing relevance of its symbolism for American national imaginary but also the immense flexibility of its justificatory and ideological force. In addition, his article demonstrates that nature—and, by extension, science—is in no way a neutral term but instead can serve a variety of purposes that call for a closer investigation in the context of American studies.

With a piece that fits neatly into the call for paper's initial theme of 'American Monsters,' David Klein Martins's (Lisbon, Portugal) "'We All Go a Little Mad Sometimes. Haven't You?': *Psycho* and the Postmodern Rise of Gender Queerness" highlights the different ways in which two versions of the same film can subvert expectations of gender. In comparing Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) with Gus Van Sant's nearly shot-for-shot remake (1998), Martins demonstrates how the rise of queer theory shapes the construction and understanding of the film's constellation of characters. His engagement with Judith Butler's ideas regarding the performativity of gender and the subversive power of drag situates this essay firmly within existing scholarship on *Psycho*'s famously macabre villain, Norman Bates, and its unconventional heroine, Lila Crane. Martins wrestles with the uncomfortable truth that, while Hitchcock's version is widely considered to be part of the vanguard of postmodern horror films that destabilize traditional gender roles, it sometimes lapses into stereotyping the queer as monstrous. In his analysis, Martins offers a new perspective on Van Sant's critically maligned and undervalued work. The article, thus, illuminates how Van Sant's painstaking replication of the original *Psycho*—decried as "pointless" by film critic Roger Ebert—magnifies the impact of the film's small but crucial changes in characterization on perceptions of gender and queer identities. Queerness hence ceases to be monstrous and instead becomes a source of strength, exposing the constructedness of heteronormativity.

In her article “What If the Pen Was Mightier Than the Sword? Civil War Alternate History as Social Criticism,” Renee de Groot (Amsterdam, Netherlands) analyzes the genre of Civil War alternate history (CWAH). Usually, alternate history provides writers with a means to reinforce and thereby legitimize the status quo by creating a dystopian version of the world after a differing outcome of a key historical event. Within this genre, CWAH by and large serves either to lament the ‘Lost Cause’ or to provide readers with a pleasantly eerie account of an alternate world. De Groot’s article, however, examines two texts that deviate from this pattern. The novel *Hallie Marshall* (1900) and the mockumentary *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America* (2004) both envision a US in which the South has won the war. Yet, remarkably, both texts engage with the genre of CWAH to criticize contemporary society, thus subverting the genre’s presumed conventions. The texts highlight the continuing productivity of alternate history yet serve a progressive means—criticizing labor conditions during industrialism and ongoing racism, respectively—thereby proving wrong a necessary link between the genre and its texts’ affirmative message. De Groot provides a succinct overview of the scholarly work done in the field and simultaneously a sharp intervention therein. The article’s readings of *Hallie Marshall* and *C.S.A.* show that the role of social criticism in CWAH needs to be understood in a more multifaceted and sometimes seemingly paradoxical way. De Groot’s article, thus, implies a need for and shows a possible way into a rereading of the genre and its many texts.

Finally, offering a second perspective on the frontier in her article “Environment and Emotion in *The Revenant*: A Cognitive Approach,” Marijana Mikić (Klagenfurt, Austria) presents an innovative analysis of the connection between the natural environment depicted in Alejandro G. Iñárritu’s film *The Revenant* (2015) and the viewer’s affective responses. Employing a cognitive approach that draws on the works of, among others, Alexa Weik von Mossner and Carl Plantinga on empathy and emotional engagement in film, Mikić argues that the environment plays a vital role in determining how the viewer’s emotional reactions are evoked. Reading the film through the lens of cognitive film theory, Mikić analyzes key scenes to unearth the paradoxical function of the environment in the movie. When identifying with the main character, Hugh Glass, the audience experiences the wilderness as threatening and antagonistic. However, awe-inducing cinematic techniques allow the viewer to observe and to affectively react to the environment’s beauty as well. Mikić’s close reading of the film, thereby, reveals a significant subtext of environmentalism in *The Revenant*, namely the advocacy of the preservation and protection of nature. Although the film specifically addresses the depletion of natural resources in the name of Manifest Destiny, Mikić’s inquiry traces issues of environmental rights from the nineteenth

century to current debates about the significance of environmentalism in a contemporary American context. The article, thus, suggests the importance of emotions in shaping (political) action and underlines the role of fictional narratives in influencing real-world behavior, pointing toward the necessity of taking seriously the impact of popular texts.

Although this year's issue of *aspeers* was originally dedicated to one topical section, we are excited that it presents a diverse set of academic articles and other contributions, which all speak to ongoing negotiations of 'Americanness.' On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the journal, we welcome readers to reflect back with contributions from former *aspeers* editors, to engage in current debates in academia and creative writing, and to follow new American studies scholarship enriching the future of the field. Hereby, *aspeers* not only traces the dynamics of graduate scholarship but also outlines the ever-expanding potential of the field that is American studies. With this in mind, we are delighted to invite our readers to explore this anniversary issue of *aspeers*.

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