

Challenges of the Post-Truth Era in American Studies: The 2019 Postgraduate Forum Introduction to COPAS 21.1

Alexandra Hauke, Bettina Huber, Thomas Stelzl

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From December 5-7, 2019, the University of Passau hosted the 30th annual conference of the Postgraduate Forum (PGF) of the German Association for American Studies (GAAS/DGfA), entitled “Challenges of the Post-Truth Era in American Studies.”¹ Since its inception in 1989, the PGF has been a platform for early career researchers in American Studies to present their current work and engage in critical conversations with scholars working in similar fields.

In honor of the 30th meeting and to continue fostering the diversity of work-in-progress projects by postgraduates, we expanded the regular conference format by including a poster session and two thematic workshops. The conference started with a public panel discussion entitled “Fake News? Europa und die USA im Desinformationszeitalter” and featured four discussants from the fields of politics, journalism, social science, and American Studies. In four regular panels, which represented the breadth of the conference topic and the PGF’s multidisciplinary composition, fourteen speakers were grouped according to the themes “Identity, Sexuality, and Narratology”; “Transnational Dimensions of American Studies”; “Negotiating Violence, Memory, and Heroism”; and “Broadcasting (in) the Post-Truth Era.” Additionally, the poster session entitled “The Many Faces of American Studies” gave five scholars the opportunity to present their PhD projects in a less conventional form and in a more condensed as well as informal manner. In a workshop on “Teaching American Studies,” led by Dr. Viola Huang of the University of Passau’s interdisciplinary teacher training program for innovative education,² conference participants were able to engage in exercises geared towards developing advanced skills in information and media literacy as well as knowledge and information systems management. Furthermore, they were introduced to strategies on how to impart these competences to students. The closing workshop “New Challenges of American Studies” addressed the concept of intersectionality as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which, like the PGF, also celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2019. After an

¹ For more details about and select photos of the conference, please see <https://pgf2019.wordpress.com/>. The website has since its release been supplemented with a public statement entitled “In Solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter: An Open Letter.” This text, written by the 2019/20 PGF teams Passau/Stuttgart, was drafted in support of the increasing civil rights protests following a long list of violent, anti-black assaults and killings in the United States, and thus with a clear anti-racist message and a denouncement of systemic disparities as well as racist ideologies in mind.

² More information on this program can be found on the *SKILL (Strategien zur Kompetenzentwicklung: Innovative Lehrformate in der Lehrerbildung)* website www.skill.uni-passau.de/was-macht-skillde/.

introduction to the origins, significances, and criticisms of this theoretical framework by the conference organizers, workshop participants were asked to engage with the role intersectionality plays across academic disciplines, political populism, transcultural transfer, and activist initiatives to work towards methods of integrating intersectional perspectives in their everyday lives as teachers and scholars.

As such, the closing workshop as the final section of the PGF specifically brought the conference theme full circle by addressing the ways processes of fact- and truth-making in times of misinformation, propaganda, filter bubbles, and a lack of media literacy as well as their aftermaths have caused turmoil in all spheres of social, cultural, and economic life. The meanings and uses of such controversial terms as ‘truthiness,’ ‘fake news,’ and ‘post-truth’ (voted as words of the year by Merriam-Webster in 2006, Macquarie Dictionary Australia in 2016, and the American Dialect Society in 2017, respectively) continue to shape current discourses in the media and on social networks around political elections, information policies, and sensationalism. Thereby, the historic and contemporary circumstances of democratic processes as well as their literary representations are highlighted in a diachronic manner.

The conference “Challenges of the Post-Truth Era” ultimately testified to the importance of bringing together different perspectives on these developments across all areas, media, genres, and disciplines of American Studies from early career scholars who strive to examine post-factual trends rather than succumb to them. However, our work as scholars is continuously challenged in an era only supposedly run by facts. Brexit advocate Michael Gove famously stated in 2016 that people in the UK “have had enough of experts” (qtd. in Mance), contributing to a climate in which evidence is discredited and a mood of nationalism proliferates. Claims like Gove’s were met with both endorsement and resistance, as the 52/48-percent result of the Brexit referendum illustrates. Similar denials of expertise and skepticism towards academic research can be seen on the rise around the globe during the current COVID-19 pandemic, a catalyst for widespread protests featuring parties alarmed by the restriction of their civil liberties, on the one hand, as well as groups who outright deny the existence of the virus and reject experts’ containment recommendations, on the other.

The same holds true for the United States: despite the fact that, as a 2019 report by the Pew Research Center found, confidence in scientists to act in the public’s interest ranks at 86 percent and even increased by 10 percent since 2016, there is significant disagreement between political camps with regard to those experts’ roles and participation in policy debates (Funk et. al. 5, 7). It is equally noteworthy that more than a third of US Americans believe the scientific method “[c]an be used to produce any conclusion the researcher wants” (10), a perspective seemingly fueled by various political actors and facilitated by the sensationalism and polarization of a diversified media system. Indeed, it is not easy to distinguish news from fake news, facts from opinion, and academic consensus from the lore of self-proclaimed ‘experts.’ From this follows, according to Barack Obama, that in the media landscape of the twenty-first century

everything is true and nothing is true. [...] An explanation of climate change from a Nobel Prize-winning physicist looks exactly the same on your Facebook page as the denial of

climate change by somebody on the Koch brothers' payroll. And the capacity to disseminate misinformation, wild conspiracy theories, to paint the opposition in wildly negative light without any rebuttal—that has accelerated in ways that much more sharply polarize the electorate and make it very difficult to have a common conversation. (qtd. in Remnick)

In an article in the *Independent* from March 2019, which takes up Gove's statement on experts, Joel Dimmock argues that "[a]t a time when global events appear to be driven more by ideology than evidence, the work of academics is more important than ever." The many excellent presentations and invigorating discussions during the Passau PGF conference as well as the articles included in this volume testify to the critical work of uncovering and scrutinizing ideologies that continue to define the twenty-first century both in the United States and across the Atlantic. Whether explicitly or implicitly, the contributions to the 2019 PGF conference included in this issue speak to the post-truth era in various ways. They expose the necessity for discussions of topics dedicated to the interdisciplinarity of American Studies but also to the role of academia in times of uncertainty, when the gap between scholarship and politics seems, on the one hand, broader than ever, and, on the other, the two are sometimes mistaken as one and the same.

COPAS 21.1 at a Glance

In her article "Heroes in Body Bags: Renegotiating Heroism in Rebecca Roanhorse's *Trail of Lightning*," **Lorena Bickert** (University of Bamberg) discusses the necessity for a reassessment of Western concepts of heroism. She reads Roanhorse's debut novel, wherein Navajo protagonist Maggie Hoskie and her people are confronted with the aftermaths of an ecological disaster that threatens the Sixth World, through the lenses of Indigenous futurism and ecofeminism. In doing so, Bickert challenges dualisms such as nature/culture, male/female, or native/non-native that continue to define Western patriarchal orders as well as essentialist understandings of Native American peoples and their environments. She moves from uncovering the characteristics of the unidimensional Western monomyth of heroism to a discussion of an alternative concept of heroism that allows for more nuanced understandings of identity, gender, and community across Indigenous realms of time and space. Thereby, Bickert draws out the specifics of Navajo mythology at the center of the novel's and the protagonist's worldviews and highlights the necessity of scrutinizing the colonial processes of othering and socio-cultural as well as ecological erasures that have led the Navajo Fifth World to collapse prior to *Trail of Lightning*'s events. Ultimately, this article calls attention to a "new 'eco-heroic' vision" (23) that, through Indigenous futuristic and ecofeminist theorizations, counters destructive ideologies at the core of the Anthropocene.

In "Creative Openings and World-Making: Postcritique, Reparative Readings, and Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*," **Selina Foltinek** (University of Bayreuth) engages with current understandings of "suspicious" reading strategies as well as their shortcomings in the context of literary studies and points to the possibilities the field of queer studies offers to diversify (academic) reading practices. By questioning prominent framings of LGBTQ+ characters, especially the so-

called “impossible woman,” and by challenging the general focus on suspicious readings of f/f-narratives, Foltinek presents a “postcritical reading of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) to show how the text can creatively open a world of queer imagination departing from, but thoroughly framed by, a deconstructive position” (27). She builds on reparative reading practices to present an approach toward f/f-narratives focused on the hopeful visions presented in these texts. As Foltinek concludes, her case study expresses “a both/and approach” (32) that deconstructs sexual discrimination and creates a hopeful renegotiation of the past and the imagined future.

Chris Katzenberg’s (Ruhr University Bochum) article “Elijah Anderson’s ‘Iconic Ghetto’ as Transatlantic Template? Problematic Traveling Imaginaries, Future Scripts, and Postindustrial Ruhr Cities” takes up Anderson’s ghetto template, which was significantly shaped by American Rust Belt cities, and traces its transnational journey into urban development narratives about the German Ruhr area. Looking at social media, regional news media, scholarly reports, studies for a wider public, and his own fieldwork as an intern at the non-profit *RuhrFutur*, Katzenberg investigates the problematic, negative imaginaries this “iconic ghetto” template produces with regard to the Ruhr area. His article also scrutinizes how local social-educational reform initiatives respond—either by trying to omit the imaginary altogether or by explicitly embracing it. This leads Katzenberg to the conclusion that the “iconic ghetto” becomes “a symbolic shorthand [that] provides highly concentrated, highly emotionalized imaginative fuel for those who want to actively employ it to disparage, or readily accept such Othering as long as it helps further their own, different ideological goals” (63).

Florian Zitzelsberger (University of Passau) challenges current practices in the field of narratology by focusing on the importance of metalepsis and queer desires to open up spaces for rethinking institutionalized, normalized processes of reading in his article “Metalepsis and/as Queer Desire: Queer Narratology and the ‘Unnatural.’” He explicates the use of the term ‘unnatural’ in narratology as part of paranoid readings and builds on the practice of reparative readings through the lens of affect studies to reframe metalepses as representations of inclusive queer desires. In his case studies, the video game *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017) and the movie *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), Zitzelsberger shows that “metalepsis is not only related to desires of belonging, togetherness, and unity; it is also inherently queer in its approach to establish contact between that which is usually considered mutually exclusive” (71).

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As guest co-editors of this issue, we would like to thank the current editors of COPAS—Cedric Essi, Paula von Gleich, Stephen Koetzing, Samira Spatzek, and Gesine Wegner—whose diligence, expertise, and guidance contributed immensely to the successful completion of this multifaceted volume. Last but not least, we are grateful to all our contributors for their meticulous work. We look forward to the 2021 Postgraduate Forum in Stuttgart and hope that the PGF can remain a space for encounter, exchange, and multidirectional support for early career scholars.

Alexandra Hauke, Bettina Huber, Thomas Stelzl

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