

Crisis and Resilience in American Literature, Culture, History, and Politics: The 2025 Postgraduate Forum

Ella Ernst, Leonie Kratzenstein, Milo Miller, Laura Pröger, Samir Taher

KEYWORDS: PGF; American Studies; Crisis; Resilience; Cultural Productions

A Crisis of Terminology

The term “crisis” has become so pervasive in contemporary discourse that it now encompasses disruptions that differ fundamentally in scale, mechanism, and impact. Events as varied as the 2008 financial market collapse, the COVID-19 pandemic, the acceleration of global warming, and the erosion of a shared epistemology through the rise of post-truth politics are routinely subsumed under the same designation. Against this horizon of proliferating and overlapping crises, the concepts of *permacrisis* and *polycrisis* have emerged as attempts to theorize the phenomenon. In 2022, the *Collins Dictionary* declared the term *permacrisis* its word of the year, defining it as “an extended period of instability and insecurity, esp one resulting from a series of catastrophic events” (“Permacrisis”). Polycrisis, a term popularized by the historian Adam Tooze in 2022, seeks to capture the quality of mutual entanglement and the convergence of disruptions across many sectors (Tooze). Yet in a 2025 reassessment, Tooze questions whether the concept remains adequate, noting that although crises have not diminished, the dominant drivers of disruption have shifted. While systemic shocks such as pandemics are forces that happen to structures, the impersonal register that abstains from determining agency sits uneasily alongside phenomena defined precisely by their intentionality (Tooze).

If crisis language is to retain its analytical usefulness, it must therefore be evaluated not only in terms of structural instability but also with respect to questions of political agency. Furthermore, if the concept of crisis requires such re-evaluation, so too does its “traditional” dialectical counterpart. Resilience, long paired with crisis as its corrective, is commonly understood as the cultural and social capacity to absorb shock, adapt, and overcome. Similar to the concept of crisis, the central question here is whether the common understanding of resilience is able to contain the techniques necessary to deal with crisis, as it shifts in technique and understanding. In the following, we seek to come to a working definition of these terms to establish a frame of reference for how this issue engages with the concepts. This issue is the product of the 2025 PGF conference in Leipzig entitled “Crisis and Resilience in American Literature, Culture, History, and Politics.”

Defining Crisis

Crises do not arrive as neutral events affecting all members of a society symmetrically. The financial collapse of 2008 showed how losses can be socialized while gains remain private. The climate crisis continues to affect most severely those communities least responsible for carbon emissions. The erosion of digital infrastructures of information and communication—what Phillips and Milner term the “network crisis” (2021)—has intensified political polarization and disrupted shared epistemic frameworks, while simultaneously generating profit for platform owners. Crisis is therefore inseparable from questions of class, capital, and privilege: some endure the costs of systemic breakdown while others remain insulated or are actively positioned to exploit them. Naomi Klein theorizes this as “disaster capitalism”: a pattern by which political and economic actors exploit these states of crisis to implement unpopular restructuring policies that would be politically impossible under ordinary conditions (Klein).

If disaster capitalism describes the exploitation of discrete crisis events, the more recent political conjuncture suggests something more far-reaching: crisis is no longer perceived as a disruption but has instead become the medium through which ordinary political and social life is structured. Notably, the post-9/11 expansion of emergency powers in the United States offers an early paradigmatic case: measures that were justified by the exceptional circumstances steadily sedimented into an ordinary administrative practice. The current situation amplifies this trend, as the deliberate cultivation of uncertainty and affective destabilization becomes a recognizable feature of authoritarian governments. Moreover, in her book *Cruel Optimism*, cultural theorist Lauren Berlant theorizes this shift through the concept of “crisis ordinariness” (Berlant 10). Central to this concept is the idea that crisis is no longer what interrupts the everyday but the medium through which the everyday is lived. Mark Fisher extends this argument, observing that crisis ordinariness transforms emergency measures into permanent structures: “The normalization of crisis produces a situation in which the repealing of measures brought in to deal with an emergency becomes unimaginable” (Fisher 7). Together, these accounts suggest that the ideological function of crisis ordinariness is not simply to justify particular policies but to foreclose the conditions under which systemic alternatives can be conceived.

Defining Resilience

In response to an abundance of crises, resilience has emerged as a prevalent but much-contested term in crisis discourse. Resilience, on its own, refers to traits that enable bouncing back quickly and foster an unshakable sense of self. However, critics of the term “resilience,” such as Mark Neocleous in “Resisting Resilience,” argue that resilience functions as a distinctly neoliberal mode of governance that does not account for systemic injustices and historical oppression (5). It seems that across mental health institutions, resilience is increasingly thought of as a “fashionable buzzword,” disregarding the individual’s social and economic

structures (Fisher and Jones 185). In short, these introductory examples provide a glimpse of the evolving and increasingly contested understanding of resilience.

Resilience originated in engineering and quickly expanded to ecological thought, where the term was used to denote “the structure of materials” and their ability to retain their shape despite or after an impression (Fisher and Jones; Neocleous 3). Through semantic reinterpretation, the word has gained traction “in ecology, social sciences, politics and more recently psychology,” (Fisher and Jones 185) and furthermore, is used in everyday language more or less productively. Timm argues that sometimes “when mental health services adopt words and phrases, their meaning starts to dissolve,” calling these words “weasel words,” which may “carry covert meanings, or overtones of meaning intended to confuse” (qtd. in Fisher and Jones 185). Fisher and Jones suggest that they are “used because of their novelty and lack of clear definition,” causing harm to staff as well as patients in the demands they entail (185). However, the discourse around “resilience” has long left the realm of mental health counseling and is omnipresent in social and political science as well.

The growing unease around the term reflects several concerns about how it may be employed to damage rather than support communities. For one, resilience “both engages and encourages a culture of preparedness” (Neocleous 4), shifting the responsibility for responding to crises away from the government and onto the individual. This, so Neocleous, would entail “a constant re-imagining of multiple ways in which the threat might be realized” (4). Not only does the anticipation of threat require resources that may be outside a community’s reach, but it also creates a dystopian outlook on the future. He further states that it assumes “a future imagined as disaster and then, more importantly, recovery from the disaster” (4). In this way, resilience shifts responsibility for perpetually anticipating crises onto the individual and generates a pervasive sense of unease through its emphasis on preempting rather than responding to crises.

Instead of asking how crises can be prevented, or structural conditions can be improved, the focus on resilience demands that individuals and communities “absorb” recurring shocks. This risks normalizing crises as inevitable and depoliticizing demands for systemic change. Additionally to refracting the blame of a crisis from the structure to the individual, resilience directs responsibility away from political stakeholders and onto those who may suffer from the consequences the most. This tendency to look for individual responses to structural crises, in turn, also suffocates protest. Calling for more resilience enables those in power to stifle political uprisings or protests against politics that oppress and harm crisis-affected groups.

How then, in light of this semantic charge, do we deal with such a burdened term as part of our conceptual interest? While we are interested in more productive ways of framing responses to crises, we decided to evoke the injustices that attach to the term “resilience” anyway. Instead of understanding resilience as mere absorption of the shock, we are interested in how communities have productively dealt with injustices, crises, and catastrophes. Thus, for this issue of *COPAS* as well as the preceding conference, we have



invited our contributors to develop an alternative vocabulary that foregrounds resistance, perhaps in light of collective action, and that focuses on the structures of solidarity that run through them. We hope to enrich the discourse around resistance and resilience in a way that centers systemic injustice and may thereby highlight successful and struggling efforts that we seek to celebrate and to learn from.

COPAS 27.1 at a Glance

Anne Bertram’s “On Sentimental Sisterly Bonds and Poisonous Motherly Care: Negotiations of Southern White Female Victimhood in Jean-Marc Vallée’s *Sharp Objects* (2018)” examines the resurgence of a Southern Gothic aesthetic in the HBO miniseries. Developing the concept of a “sentimental Southern Gothic,” Bertram argues that this visual culture provides a productive framework to understand the ideologies surrounding conceptions of white Southern femininity. Using the series, Bertram interrogates the weaponization of white womanhood and its associations with innocence to critically analyze the sentimentalization of sisterly bonds and motherhood, and thereby reimagine the cultural role of Southern white femininity.

Catherine Faith Gastin’s article “Toward a Trans Rural Imaginary: Representation, Counterpublics, and Space in *National Anthem*” explores Luke Gilford’s *National Anthem* (2023) as a challenge to conventional representations of trans identity, rural life, and American belonging. By drawing on Michael Warner’s concept of publics and counterpublics, it examines how these ideas also shape understandings of space. The film is shown to create a trans counterpublic through the visual language and cultural imagery of the American West. Gastin argues that by placing trans bodies within familiar rural settings and aesthetics, *National Anthem* presents the countryside as a space of queer belonging, questioning assumptions that trans existence, rurality, and American identity are inherently incompatible.

Tina Pahnke’s “The Subject of Love, on a Very Cultural Level: Responding to Crises in the Hollywood Romantic Comedy” traces Hollywood cinema’s resilience as both an industry and a generic form across moments of historical rupture. Through a comparative reading of Ernst Lubitsch’s *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940) and Nora Ephron’s *You’ve Got Mail* (1998), Pahnke argues that the practice of “remaking” allows audiences both the familiarity of established narratives and a version of those narratives more closely attuned to their immediate historical reality.

Katharina Röder’s “‘We are the others // The change we need // The change we demand’: Resistance and Queer Kinship in Catherine Hernandez’s *Crosshairs* (2021)” reads Hernandez’s dystopian novel as a text in which queerness functions not as vulnerability but as a resource for survival and resistance. Drawing on José Esteban Muñoz’s theorization of queer futurity and Donna Haraway’s call to “make kin,” Röder argues that non-biological kinship operates in

the novel as a strategy for community formation and resistance, ultimately linking the protagonists' survival to a vision of queer utopia.

Yining Zhang's "Post-COVID Hollywood in China: Market Decline, Shifting Policies, and Audience Critiques" analyzes the transformed dynamics between Hollywood and the Chinese film industry in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on audience data and cultural policy analysis, Zhang argues that Chinese audiences understand themselves primarily as consumers of entertainment rather than nationally interpellated subjects. The article demonstrates that consumers' shifting attitudes toward Hollywood nonetheless reflect and correlate with broader geopolitical and cultural developments at the macro level.

Acknowledgments

This issue builds on an inspiring three-day conference in November 2025, where we had the pleasure and honor of hosting more than 50 emerging scholars from across Germany at the Postgraduate Forum (PGF) of the German Association for American Studies (DGfA/GAAS) in Leipzig to discuss questions of crisis and resilience in current American Studies. First and foremost, we want to thank everyone who attended the forum and contributed through their participation, presence, thoughtful questions, and insightful comments. In particular, we would like to thank Dr. Martin Lütke from the Freie Universität Berlin for his engaging keynote speech on "Crisis Ordinarity or Crisis Pervasiveness? American Studies and/as 21st-Century Pop," to kick-off the conference.

Additionally, we are grateful to the previous group of organizers of Team Erlangen, especially for the documents they passed on to us as well as the many meetings held and questions answered. This also and especially holds for the team of Postgraduate Representatives, Lea Espinoza Garrido, and up until recently, Jiann-Chyng Tu, for the emotional support before and during the conference, and the continuous availability to our many questions. Thank you for enabling these conferences in the first place and for providing constant support for the community in and beyond the PGF.

To make the conference happen, the administrative staff of Leipzig University and the Institute for American Studies Leipzig granted us resources as well as financial aid that were as invaluable as their encouragement and support. Additionally, we want to thank the Graduiertenakademie Leipzig, whose beautiful Villa Tillmanns proved to be the perfect space for the conference, and who supported us in financial as well as organizational terms. We are thankful to the following sponsors who made the event possible: The GAAS/DGfA, Deutsches Amerika Institut Sachsen (DAI Sachsen), aspeers e.V., Graduate Academy Leipzig, and Institute for American Studies Leipzig. Thank you for enabling these inspiring three days and for the possibility of opening the keynote to the public. We could not have hosted the forum without a group of student volunteers who made the conference run smoothly. Thank you for your time and care with which you supported us.



Finally, we would like to extend our gratitude to the COPAS editorial team, who helped guide us through the publication process and provided expertise as well as organizational support throughout the stages of editorial work: Gulsin Ciftci, Can Aydın, Corina Wieser-Cox, Alexandra Dempe, Anna Köhler, Krutika Patri, Mareike Spsychala, and Florian Wagner.

We are excited to now hand over the Postgraduate Forum to the next group of organizers, Team Bayreuth, and we look forward to another year of enriching talks from November 12-14, 2026, where we will reconvene to discuss *Planetary Precarities: Perspectives of/on the Age of Post-Truth*, and we hope to see everybody there again.

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