

Digital Futures in Research and American Studies: The 2018 Postgraduate Forum

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From November 08-10, 2018, the annual Postgraduate Forum returned to the Ruhr area after a hiatus of thirteen years. This time around, instead of one university organizing the event, a group of Ph.D. candidates from all member universities of the University Alliance Ruhr (Ruhr-University Bochum, TU Dortmund University, University Duisburg-Essen) worked together to plan and host the 2018 edition of the PGF's conference for early career scholars at the university campus in Essen. Since 2010, our three universities have been collaborating closely in the field of American Studies as the "RuhrCenter of American Studies." It was from these almost ten years of collaboration that the idea developed to jointly organize the conference to showcase the Ruhr area and its rich academic landscape to fellow doctoral candidates from other German universities.

During the three conference days, twenty-six young scholars used the opportunity to present aspects of their ongoing or future Ph.D. dissertations as well as other research projects with a general focus on the United States or North America. Over sixty participants from more than a dozen German universities came to Essen to listen to the presentations, engage in discussions, and establish connections with their peers.

The topic of the conference was "Digital Futures in Research and American Studies." Accordingly, many of the presentations were dedicated to discussing questions, issues, and phenomena of digital media and the digitization of society. The topics ranged from questioning the use of digitization as a transitional tool in the post-industrial Appalachian region and a comparison of digital archives of political speeches in the United States and Germany to various approaches to examining video games and other digital media. The thematic focus of the conference was further accentuated by an expert panel with two established scholars presenting on different aspects of the digital in American Studies and a workshop demonstrating the benefits of social media and digital communication to emerging scholars. On the expert panel, Prof. Randi Gunzenhäuser (TU Dortmund University) gave her perspective on the status of topics related to digital and visual media in the field of American Studies. She particularly highlighted some of the historical challenges scholars interested in those subjects have faced. Her talk was followed by Prof. Marc Prieue (University of Stuttgart), who reported on the work of the "Digital American Studies Initiative" (DASI). Prieue further provided an

example of the benefits and opportunities of digital humanities methods by introducing the audience to the international research project “Oceanic Exchanges.” This project examines historical information networks and how they functioned on a global scale. Focusing on the period between 1840 and 1914, the project traces these networks through the computational analysis of large-scale digital collections of historical newspapers. On Friday morning, the communications expert Susanne Geu once again addressed the effects of digital technology on scholarly work, but shifted the focus. Her workshop on “Digital Communication and Social Media for Scholars” offered suggestions on how young scholars can use contemporary media such as blogs and various social networks to gain visibility for their research and to reach an audience that extends beyond the traditional limits of the academic readership.

The PGF 2018 topical focus on “Digital Futures in Research and American Studies” provided a well-received point of departure for many of the conference’s presentations: While some speakers explored the vast range of subjects that fall under the umbrella term of the ‘digital,’ others facilitated meta-discussion about the benefits and drawbacks of digitization in our societies, from new publishing models in academia, the current state of archival research in our digital age, to the oftentimes unreflected discourse around digitization as a harbinger of progress. Several talks also offered explorations of North American ‘futures’ beyond the digital nexus. We are pleased that this issue of *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies (COPAS)* reflects a cross section of the wide range of excellent presentations given at the conference.

COPAS 20.1 at a Glance

In his article “Playing to Make America Great Again: *Far Cry 5* and the Politics of Videogames in the Age of Trumpism,” **Sören Schoppmeier** offers a critical reading of Ubisoft’s *Far Cry 5* (2018). He argues that the game echoes central tenets of the Trumpian rhetoric, most prominently in how it employs tropes and narratives steeped in American colonialism and expresses a yearning for an allegedly better past and its lost way of life. This reading is contextualized by an analysis of the politics of mainstream videogames in the current political climate, which the author labels a “moment of Trumpism.” By looking at the ‘GamerGate’ harassment campaign, Schoppmeier argues that videogames and gamer culture are deeply entangled in an anti-progressive backlash in the age of Trump and that the industry’s claim to be apolitical and neutral is both misleading and irresponsible.

In “The Future of the Enhanced Self and Contemporary Science Fiction: TED Talks and Dave Eggers’s *The Circle*,” **Loredana Filip** investigates cultural and literary texts’ influence on the discourse on human enhancement. To do so she first examines TED talks dealing with transhumanism and identifies a “sense of wonder” (Sawyer) in them. Filip finds this ‘sense of

wonder' not only in the talks' themes but also on a formal level. In a second step, she locates a critical perspective, challenging the notion of a 'post-bodied future' in Dave Eggers's science-fiction novel *The Circle* (2013), which evokes an 'affect of aliveness' that challenges the transhumanist sense of wonder. Rather than just outlining the dystopian plot, however, Filip's paper aims to uncover the socio-political relevance of 'literary synesthesia' in the novel.

Verena Baier's article "'Whose Tomorrow is Tomorrow?': Remembering (Past) Futures in Autobiographical Writings of the US-Nicaragua Solidarity Movement and Contra War, 1979-1991" focuses on the life writing of two US-Americans who experienced the Nicaraguan conflict in different ways. John Brentlinger's *The Best of What We Are: Reflections on the Nicaraguan Revolution* evokes the experience of an American who sided with the Sandinistas, whereas William R. Meara's memoir *Contra Cross: Insurgency and Tyranny in Central America, 1979-1989* describes the author's involvement as a supporter of the US policies under Reagan. The article examines the narrative construction of future visions from the perspective of the narrated past. As Baier shows, these "past futures" comment on US society, either by challenging fundamental myths or by affirming American exceptionalism.

In "Between *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Camp X-Ray: The War on Terror and the Change in Gender Dynamics of American War Film*," **Ali Yasar Tuscu** scrutinizes gender representation in two contemporary movies, released in 2012 and 2014, respectively. He prepares his comparative analysis of the two war films centering on female military members by outlining the political and cultural shifts that have diversified the make-up of the US military since the end of conscription in the late 1970s. The article highlights the crucial role war films play in furthering identification of the spectators with individual military members, and how this identification process can serve as a mechanism to rally support for military institutions and their endeavors. Tuscu argues that the struggle of women for recognition within US military structures, as observed in the films, is in line second wave feminism and suggests a parallel with a neoliberal transformation of the military. The protagonists in the movies, according to the author, perform neoliberal womanhood in different ways to gain recognition within the entrenched patriarchal structures of the US military.

Rafael Alves Azevedo's article "'Here They Come to Save the Day' – The New Sincerity in 1990s American Superhero Comics" argues that mid-1990s comics experienced a resurgence in unabashedly heroic narratives which coincided with the emergence of the New Sincerity, a post-postmodern trend that aims to break with cynicism. The article outlines how these superhero comics are inherently nostalgic and draw on tropes, storylines, and characters from the Silver Age comics of the 1950s and 60s. Discussing this dispute between postmodern cynicism and the New Sincerity trend, a lens through which also the current political and cultural landscape can be analyzed and dissected, allows Azevedo to shed light on the origin

and nature of two opposing narrative trends that have been increasingly shaping American culture, society, and politics.

The article “Mobility and Literature, an Analysis of *The Names* and *Americana* by Don DeLillo” by **Naghmeh Esmailpour** examines the topic of mobility in late-twentieth-century American literature. The author engages in a comparative analysis of the literary works *The Names* and *Americana* by Don DeLillo. The focus of the analysis is placed on how the novels accentuate the mobility of people and represent their experiences from their travels and intercultural encounters not only thematically but also through shifts in narrative perspective. Esmailpour furthermore argues that through intertextual references to various well-known literary and filmic works, DeLillo’s texts act as a medium that links different genres.

Sarah Sporys inquires how the post-war Euro-American transatlantic alliance has historically been constructed and continues to be cultivated. In her article, “Memory, Identity and Political Communities – The Discursive Construction of the Transatlantic Alliance,” she scrutinizes a body of theoretical work on (collective) memory and nationalism to develop the concept of a “transatlantic memory community,” which she claims has been fundamental to shaping this alliance. Analyzing German, French, and US-American responses to the atrocities of the 1990s Bosnian War side by side, she fleshes out how, despite apparent differences, a common understanding of Europe’s history and present as well as a shared vision for its future emerge. Hence, Sporys argues, the set of beliefs and values at the heart of the transatlantic community are reestablished, renegotiated, and reaffirmed in this historical discursive context.

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Yours,

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