

Starting Off a New Decade: On Alternatives, Contestations, and an Infinity of Possibility

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When Mark Twain stated “that there is but a single specialty with us, only one thing that can be called by the wide name ‘American,’ [and that] is the national devotion to ice-water” (Twain 56), he mocked the French novelist and critic Paul Bourget, who had attempted to capture what “can be safely labeled ‘American’” (52). Twain knew that every such attempt would be doomed to fail since the variety of voices, perspectives, and regions within the national borders of the United States would never allow for such a brave undertaking. While there of course exist versions of what it means to be ‘American,’ there remains an imminent danger in declaring “your vision [to be] [...] the decisive, definitive version” (Pease 130). Kirsten Silva Gruesz points out that “any single [attempt] to define ‘America’ [...] tends to imply that this larger idea [of democratic equality] has remained essentially unchanged over time, transcending ethnic and racial differences” (4). To publish a journal on ‘Alternative Americas,’ then, runs the risk of affirming a commonly accepted, presumably unchanging version of ‘America’ against which alternatives are constructed. This, however, is not what we attempt to do. Rather, our approach to the topic acknowledges that every version, depiction, description, and analysis of ‘America’ is an alternative to the multitude of competing visions and that there is great value in exploring this. In this year’s issue, Donald E. Pease emphasizes that examining a particular perspective on the US and—more broadly—‘America’ in a “space of critical comparison with other versions of what the United States was, is, or should be, [can be] very [...] animating” (130). As this year’s editors of *aspeers*, we fully agree.

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Another concern with the term ‘alternative’ lies in its recent appropriation by regressive forces in both Europe and the United States.¹ Groups that position themselves as alternatives to a mainstream they deem dangerous often rely on concepts associated with the very foundations of hegemonic power. Among those concepts are white supremacy, patriarchal order, and nationalism. According to Ta-Nehisi Coates, it is significant to highlight that despite the attention these movements and their proponents currently generate, they are not new phenomena but tendencies that have shaped former generations and that always came at the cost of the marginalized and the disenfranchised. Uncovering layers of deep-seated myths, fears, and injustices, then, demands that we pay attention not only to their current forms but to their evolution over time.

To counter hegemonic discourse and the voices propelling a solidified version of ‘America’ has always been an integral motivation for both scholarly inquiry and grassroots activism. Within American studies, scholars emphasize a “return of sociopolitical questions, counternational discourses, and minority perspectives” to the field (“Overview”). Fortunately, the endeavor to further cultural and political debates in the US and beyond is not limited to academia. It is also championed by movements like Black Lives Matter and comes to the fore in the opposition of Native American activists and environmental activists to the Keystone pipeline, the Women’s Marches in January 2017 and 2018, in debates surrounding the portrayal of Confederate history, and countless others. While vastly different, these movements and debates all pose challenges to a heteropatriarchal, settler-colonialist² version of ‘America’ that still appeals to many. Promoting graduate-level scholarship that highlights voices of difference, dissent, and disruption contributes to our aim of “[h]elping to create a livable future” for as many people as possible (Pease 131).

In the eleventh edition of *aspeers*, the first and only European graduate-level journal of American studies, we are excited to publish five contributions on a variety of ‘Alternative Americas.’ The quality and quantity of the submissions we received illustrate impressively how *aspeers* has established itself as a wide-reaching space for diverse and innovative scholarly approaches. This year’s articles reflect the ongoing

1 Here, the alt-right in the US and the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany come to mind. While there are other regressive movements that position themselves as an ‘alternative’ to the mainstream position, the two mentioned above explicitly apply the term.

2 We are referring to Corey Snelgrove et al.’s understanding of settler-colonialism as “shaped by and shaping interactive relations of coloniality, racism, gender, class, sexuality and desire, capitalism, and ableism” (2).

significance of rereading canonical texts; engaging with pressing questions of public discourse; highlighting the role of women in both the workforce and the home; grappling with literature's extension through new media; and opening up American studies to analyses that transcend national borders. In light of recent activism, it is no surprise that our contributions engage with questions of gender and identity formation, their potential for liberation, and the threats they pose to social norms. Both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Americanah* challenge normativity, albeit with entirely different outcomes. While the first text, according to Léa Pitschmann, shies away from its own liberatory potential, the second, in Caroline Lyle's view, embraces the significance of gender and sexuality in the protagonist's journey across the Atlantic and back. Another discussion on gender norms and ways to subvert them is part of Annabel Friedrichs's article on the role of sewing in connection to domesticity, industrialization, and the public sphere. Adding to this, the enormous spaces opened up by new media are explored in the articles discussing modernist notions of truth in political satire and teenage suicide with its immediacy that is effectively displayed when audiovisual approaches add a new layer to written text.

For the first time in the history of *aspeers*, our issue includes a Professorial Voice from the US. We were thrilled to learn from and talk with Donald E. Pease in person as we had previously read his works, which are ubiquitous in American studies. To include his thoughts on the current state of affairs in the US, the possibility for alternative visions, and literature's role in enabling them, advances transatlantic scholarship. This builds on one of the founding principles of *aspeers*: to "[foster] transnational discourse" (Carmody et al. xi).

As this year's editors, we seek to emphasize an 'America' that is neither defined by nor limited to surface-level punchlines, elaborate conspiracy theories, or furious tweets. Thus, we are indebted to previous cohorts and the general editors who set a standard for scholarly excellence and rigorous inquiry on multiple levels. When the journal was founded, the political and scholarly landscape in American studies looked vastly different than it does today. The interest in the study of 'America,' however, has not decreased. Eleven years after the first issue of *aspeers*, journalists, politicians, and others around the world have been trying to analyze and comprehend the rapid changes in US policy and (political) culture since the last presidential election. Our task as graduate students and editors, however, is to think ahead while not succumbing to either apocalyptic pessimism or cynical apathy. Our submissions and the overall topic of this year's issue reflect the complexity that accompanies attempts to talk about 'America.' This endeavor, while impossible to

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‘complete,’ proved fruitful once again in the publishing history of *aspeers* and will continue to do so in the future. While we are keenly aware and reminded daily of our specific positionality in this process, the greater goal of advancing multiple complex debates transcends national borders, decades, and mindsets.

ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

In line with this issue’s topic of ‘Alternative Americas,’ the following contributions open up paths toward new questions, revisit canonical texts highlighting unusual perspectives, and detail the intersection of industrialization and emancipation. This year’s articles contribute to the emerging scholarship surrounding intermediality studies and Afropolitanism, as well as to more established areas of inquiry such as gender studies and postmodernism. The time frame, spatial dimensions, and objects of analysis that range from the mundane—the sewing machine—to the ungraspable—the taboo—impressively illustrate that American studies lends itself to a multitude of perspectives and foci. *aspeers* offers the possibility to make decisive contributions to the field and therefore reflect its depth and contradictions, making it an exciting space for scholarly exchange and growth.

Tackling unsettling questions the taboo raises in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Léa Pitschmann’s article sets out to provide an alternative reading of this American classic. Investigating the pathways the text offers—and blocks—hints at the larger structures of racism and sexism in the slave economy. Looking closely at the taboos created and sustained by those structures offers a glimpse at the alternative worlds hinted at in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s work. However, as Pitschmann points out, these worlds are never realized. They remain an ‘alternative,’ an Other that stays in the realm of the imaginary, of the utopian. Employing Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s concepts of reterritorialization and deterritorialization, the article illustrates how the deviant characters are eventually reconstituted within the frameworks provided for them by the heterosexual economy, as coined by Monique Wittig. The particular sociocultural circumstances in the nineteenth century and their greater implications for (self-)expression or lack thereof provide the boundaries that only become visible when individuals and groups embark on new courses. Thus, this contemporary look at *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* simultaneously offers and denies hope, since it highlights possible transgressions while also emphasizing

that the text (and the world) will always attempt to render the transgressor harmless by either exclusion or reterritorialization to traditionally affirmed positions.

Moving from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, the next article grapples with the discourse on notions of truth and ‘fake news’ during and after the 2016 presidential election. Its approach combines both discourse analysis and a close reading of an interview in *The Daily Show* to establish a striking connection between the argumentation techniques employed by ‘fake news’ distributors and the popular TV program. In “‘Now Fact Has Become Opinion’: The Search for Truth in *The Daily Show*,” Katharina Szkarlat analyzes how both *The Daily Show* and distributors of ‘fake news’ make themselves almost invulnerable to criticism due to their postmodern rhetoric. This point has been repeatedly raised in discussions on the topic and adds to frustration in the attempt to counter ‘fake news.’ However, Szkarlat’s article points out that *The Daily Show* deviates from a classically postmodern format and emphasizes the show’s modernist understanding of a discernible truth building upon Jürgen Habermas’s concept of communicative speech. This concept, concerned with mutual understanding and debate within a shared frame of reference, promises a culture of communication alternative to much of current discourse.

Traveling back in time to the beginning of the twentieth century, the next article analyzes feminism’s and modernity’s parallel rise due to the advent of the sewing machine. Annabel Friedrichs discusses the means through which personal creativity and mass fashion consumption acted as a sociopolitical motor for progress and change for American women. Her piece begins with an overview of Rita Felski’s deconstruction of the separate-spheres ideology, which gendered the concepts of modernity and tradition: Modernity, being associated with masculinity, innovation, technology, and progress, was imagined in opposition to tradition aligned with feminized domesticity. This article positions the sewing machine as an enabler of social change and political advancement for women while cautioning the reader not to forget that this device also added yet another task to women’s unpaid domestic labor. While the sewing machine improved women’s situation on the labor market, upward mobility was reliably met with a fixation of women in the domestic sphere. By taking a closer look at the cultural framing of the sewing machine, Friedrichs’s analysis contextualizes a consumer good that changed the social, cultural, and economic landscape of the United States.

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Continuing with explorations on the radical impact technology has on every aspect of life—and death—Marie Dücker’s article “Coming of Age in the Context of Hyperemotional Listening and Cognitive Mapping: Navigating the Emotional Landscape in Jay Asher’s *Thirteen Reasons Why*” adds to discussions about new ways of meaning-making by focusing on intermediality. The young adult novel and its 2017 Netflix adaptation were both controversial in the public discussion of teenage suicide. The novel follows the protagonist Clay as he attempts to understand his friend Hannah’s suicide using a map and tapes that she left for him. The visual and typographic portrayal of these materials adds additional layers to the text and constitutes the intermedial aspect of Asher’s novel. Dücker’s analysis examines how these features establish the protagonist’s emotional landscape and illustrates the dynamic of a media-emotion nexus. As Clay follows the map and attempts to adopt Hannah’s point of view, his version of life in their shared hometown is drastically altered and the multimodal levels of narration enable the envisioning of an alternative reality that goes beyond his experience in perception.

Capping our section of topical articles, Caroline Lyle’s “Afropolitanism for Black Women: Sexual Identity and Coming to Voice in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*” combines and scrutinizes not only one but several alternative Americas. Analyzing the development and change of *Americanah*’s main character Ifemelu, Lyle’s essay adds the category of sexual identity to the concept of Afropolitanism, coined by Taiye Selasi. This addition brings a new layer to this productive and hegemony-questioning concept. Adichie’s novel carefully questions the meaning(s) of and the narrative surrounding race and sexual identity in a US and Nigerian American context. Thus, the article’s analysis also sheds light on dynamics that should be considered in a transnational approach to American culture. Lyle justifies her suggestion by taking a closer look at Ifemelu’s process of coming to voice after experiencing sexual abuse. Addressing the migrant experience, sexual exploitation of women of color, and the meanings of blackness in different contexts stresses the significance of intersectional analysis in the field of American studies.

PROFESSORIAL VOICE

On his lecture tour through Germany, we had the honor of attending two lectures held by Donald E. Pease and interviewing him for the eleventh issue of *aspeers*. His

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thoughts on the current administration, literature as a realm of the ‘alternative,’ and notions of hope versus notions of despair provide compelling insights informed by decades of groundbreaking research in American studies. A professor of English at Dartmouth College since 1989, he has also taught as a visiting professor at the Free University in Berlin, been a visiting fellow at University of Oxford, lived in Rome as a visiting scholar at University of Rome Tor Vergata, and he has been awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Uppsala in 2011. His teaching and writing are thus informed by different academic communities and cover subjects across disciplines. In December 2017, Pease held two lectures for students and faculty members at American Studies Leipzig. Under the title “The President That Is Not One,” he analyzed the ‘state of exception’ the current US administration claims for itself and how that affects both domestic and foreign policy through normalizing and establishing a racist, sexist alternative to formerly agreed-upon notions of acceptance and diversity.

Alongside other New Americanists, Pease shifted the field’s focus toward an analysis shaped by critical inquiry rather than an affirmation of American exceptionalism, and he continues to challenge established patterns of thought in American studies. At a time of renewed focus on ‘exceptionalism’ and discussions surrounding identity formation and national(ist) frameworks, Pease’s work on *Cultures of US Imperialism* (1992), *National Identities and Postnational Narratives* (1994), as well as *New American Exceptionalism* (2009) moves to the center of debates within American studies and the whole world once again. As a founding editor of the *New Americanists* series, he launched a format that encompasses more than ninety publications and continues to grow. His extensive editing and advisory work has shaped, extended, and promoted American studies research in the United States and beyond.

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Even though this issue of *aspeers* offers several versions of what ‘America’ means for different people at different times, we want to point to the fact that it can never encompass all versions or ‘the right’ version. The call for papers for this year’s issue, for example, called attention to the geographical spaces that do not belong to the contiguous continental United States but that are still very much part of a greater

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‘America.’³ Working on this year’s topic with its focus on alternativity has also made us acutely aware of the need to further diversify European American studies. Such a diversification would crucially contribute to an academic dialogue that does not restrict itself to one coherent narrative. Rather, the ensuing academic debate would more fully acknowledge the variety and complexity of the field itself and its objects of study.

Starting off a new decade of *aspeers*, we are grateful for the submissions we received, the multitude of voices involved in the process of making this journal possible, and the ongoing excitement graduate scholarship generates within American studies. Hoping to pass on this excitement, we are very happy to invite our readers to explore the eleventh issue of *aspeers*.

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3 See the call for “[s]potlights on the US beyond the mainland, towards its ‘alternate’ fringes—the border zones of the US with other countries, [and] inter-American relations” (“Alternative Americas”).

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