Introduction: American (Anti-)Heroes

Lara Dawurske, James Z. Dresig, Johanna Friedrichsen, Serëzha Goncharov, Robert Hayes II, Erna J. Herzmann, Jana Luckhardt, Lilian Viktoria Obermann, Charlyn Rachner, Corwin K. M. Sandiford, Cosima Stief, Vince Thiemicke, Joanna Xerinda
Leipzig, Germany

There goes my hero / watch him as he goes," the speakers blasted, "there goes my hero / he's ordinary" (Foo Fighters). During an Arizona rally on the 2024 campaign trail, Donald Trump takes the stage to the (unlicensed) song "My Hero" by the American rock band Foo Fighters (Suarez Sang). In contrast, in the same year, the alleged shooter of United Healthcare's CEO Brian Thompson, Luigi Mangione, is valorized as an anti-hero of the working class by large swaths of the Internet (Suciu). Between these two polarizing and public (anti-)heroes sits a more mundane example of the hero figure: With a healthcare system on the verge of collapse during the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare workers fight tirelessly as 'everyday heroes' to combat the devastating effects of the virus—to little more than collective acknowledgment without any systemic change (Hoffman).

The breadth of examples on the political stage and in the mundanely interpersonal alike invites the question: How can we make sense of (anti-)heroism? To answer this question laden with ambivalence, a plethora of viewpoints has to be considered, since to whom we assign or deny valor, exemplary and aspirational qualities, and protective and regenerative power is in the eye of the beholder. Ultimately, who is *celebrated* and who is *condemned* is far from fixed.

While there are various ways to theorize (anti-)heroism, it is Kristian Frisk's sociological approach to the topic that offers a particularly intriguing perspective. He proposes that the study of heroism could be divided into four distinct categories: "great men; hero stories; heroic actions and hero institutions" (89). Taking a closer look at Frisk's work, it becomes apparent that these four categories of study not only come with certain ideals of heroism attached to them but they also overlap, flow, and build on one another. Frisk, citing Thomas Carlyle and Max Weber, evaluates that 'great men' are heroes who have a transformative effect on societies while acknowledging that there is a gendered perspective to heroism (91). 'Hero stories,' Frisk suggests, conceptualize heroes as "mythological beings," individuals with

"unique talents," "charisma," or "willpower" (93). In contrast, sociologist Orrin E. Klapp theorizes that the anti-hero subverts these characteristics by displaying traits such as "weakness," "treachery," or playing the role of the "clown or fool" (140). He recognizes the ongoing process of constructing social and cultural figures as heroes and acknowledges that their appearance as heroic can be put into crisis if they demonstrate these traits. Klapp's perspective supports Frisk's understanding that there is a "link between the public recognition of the hero and the wider webs of cultural meaning, identity and power structures" (94). Both scholars' works attest to the plurality and fluidity of (anti-)heroisms in American society.

(Un)Limiting (Anti-)Heroism

The cultural and social construction of (anti-)heroism in the United States operates as a framework for the foundational myths on which the country was built. Heroism in America is and always has been used to forge ideological agendas in narratives that appeal to the understanding of American exceptionalism. It thus continues to shape the collective identity of Americans. This sets particular standards for individuals to adhere to the norms represented by "heroes [that] were nation builders and presidents, generals, and soldiers (usually of the Second World War and earlier conflicts), and residents of America's frontier past" (Graebner 528). However, the heroes in these romanticized narratives are limited in that they are predominantly represented by white men.

The role of the hero has been constructed in opposition to clear-cut evil, depicting the hero as showing the willingness for self-sacrifice for the 'greater good.' As can be seen in military heroism, the image of the hero is malleable; Lundberg suggests that "the hero of World War I air warfare was the solitary fighter pilot, in World War II it was the bomber crew" (384). In other words, the idea of the hero has evolved from individual to collective hero figures. The Vietnam War was another major junction in the American conceptualization of heroes, as even propaganda of heroic deeds could not hide the blurring of lines between good and evil. Therefore, "[t]he war not only failed to produce heroic warriors, it produced new situations which prohibited many from viewing sacrifice as redemptive" (Linenthal 85-86).

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the US experienced a recent turn towards the 'superheroic.' After Americans had long struggled with traditional heroic self-understandings, this tragedy reshaped narratives of heroism and brought forth a need for new portrayals of heroism in popular culture, such as in comic books, movies, and video games. Hagley and Harrison suggest that the "post-September 11 resurrection of the superhero genre, particularly in film, is a direct response to the feelings of helplessness and terror that Americans experienced in the

days and years following the attack" (120). This also led to a noticeable militarization of popular superheroes in movies, such as in Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy, with cultural-studies scholars, such as Justine Toh, considering "Batman's Batsuit and the Batmobile as emblems of the military-industrial-entertainment complex" (128). The resurgence of the superheroic expanded the expression of heroism in the US, further diversifying how the heroic is understood and applied.

Both social reality and fiction are littered with the concept of the hero and—especially in more contemporary settings—the anti-hero. These (anti-)heroes abound in current discourse, negotiating self, society, the personal, and the collective. Amplified by the outreach of different social-media platforms in the digital age, processes of 'heroization'—the construction of acts or people as heroic (Hoff et al. 10)—enter the cultural consciousness at unprecedented speeds. As such, these figures are also of interest to scholars in various academic disciplines. Situated at the crossroads of cultural studies, history, and social science, American studies is uniquely qualified to address the many facets of (anti-)heroism. The interdisciplinary ubiquity of (anti-)heroes invites the questions: *Why* are (anti-)heroes such a productive concept, and *how* are they represented within the American cultural space?

Holding Out for an (Anti-)Hero

While there are various ways to theorize (anti-)heroes in the field of American studies, the construction and mobilization of (anti-)heroic figures in politics offer an opportunity to observe how these constructions are negotiated. Viewing politics as "the social exercise of power" (Jackson and Tansey 6), (anti-)heroes as symbols of cultural values can offer insight into how groups understand themselves and others. In the context of politics, '(anti-)heroization' is manifold: from the idea that "the earliest figures of heroes offered a prominent and everlasting guiding model of conduct and morality" to the notion that "the anti-hero is imperfect, limited, confined to a view of life and environment from which he [or she] tries to escape" (Suciu and Culea 169-73). Who is considered an (anti-)hero—as well as the moral and social power dynamics underlying these constructions for political use—is of interest to cultural studies.

A suggested path that could be taken to understand politics and (anti-)heroism in terms of social power is Foucault's idea of 'governability,' which divides politics into "the macro-level of state politics and the micro-level of everyday social life" (Jackson and Tansey 30). The macro, in this case, is understood as dealing with practices such as nation-building and policy-making, whereas the micro can be linked to more individual interactions with social power involving identity

constructions, such as class, gender, sexuality, race, and disability. By offering the opportunity to see the (anti-)hero as a site of negotiating social power, these levels allow a complex understanding of constructions of (anti-)heroism. The macro and the micro are inadvertently linked, mutually constitutive, and unveil differing modes of oppression and power. Moreover, by pointing out the two-sidedness of politics, varying vantage points and different theoretical and methodological approaches can be applied to deconstructing (anti-)heroes. By analyzing these constructions in a plethora of texts, cultural phenomena and societal issues can be examined in consideration of the interplay between the macro and the micro. It could, for example, be asked how (anti-)heroism is performed, staged, instrumentalized, and remembered.

A growing body of cultural-studies scholarship highlights how cultural memory can serve as an alternative avenue to examine (anti-)heroism, as it reflects persisting and evolving understandings of (anti-)heroes. On the one hand, traditional heroic archetypes of the twentieth century were preserved through commemorative practices like the retelling of mythic narratives as well as through numerous representations in media, particularly in film, television, and literature. On the other hand, contemporary cultural productions increasingly reshape traditional notions of heroism, challenging dominant cultural memories. Nevertheless, a broader consensus remains that heroic figures "act as symbols of contemporary values and ideals of the particular society and culture in which they are created" (Hohenstein).

As symbols, values, and ideals, different representations of heroes have also been used as forms of propaganda, reflecting shifting collective values and serving as extensions of state ideology. Examples range from patriotic heroes who defended liberty and justice like Captain America—a product of wartime culture in the 1940s —to anti-heroes who emerged amid the cultural upheaval of the early twenty-first century (Wright 36; Neimneh 76). Historically, popular culture has played an integral role in using the concept of (anti-)heroes for propagandist purposes. Bradford W. Wright, for instance, explains that comic-book authors deployed these archetypes by positioning them in 'real-world' contexts, thus serving national identity formation and the shaping of public perception in moments of war and crisis (35). He further remarks that the "comic book war effort, much like the real one, left no room for ambiguity or debate on most issues" (44). Similarly, the (anti-)hero figure in propagandist war movies set in the Middle East found increased popularity due "to the post 9/11 war on terror" (Liddy-Judge 17). According to scholar Elizabeth Goren, this phenomenon can be attributed to how traumatic events "intensify the need for symbols, especially for heroes" (41). This insight also explains why post-9/11 scholarship saw an immediate diversion from 'traditional' heroism toward the heroization of the public sphere, i.e., heroism that valorized

first responders such as firefighters (37-38). Overall, the nature of heroism is still evolving in the twenty-first century, in which contemporary representations of (anti-)heroes in popular culture adapt to address present-day complexities and are increasingly diverse. As Albarrán-Torres and Burke have poignantly stated, *Black Panther* exemplifies how modern heroes can push the boundaries of representation and inclusivity while fostering "offscreen discussions about race, cultural identity, and geopolitics" (20).

As representations of (anti-)heroes reflect contemporary concerns, when analyzing cultural artifacts, it can be a challenge to maintain a distinction between the 'real' world, i.e., the world the artifact is produced in, and the 'fictional' world, i.e., the world the artifact produces. These two spheres, fiction and social reality, rarely are the binary opposites they often appear to be, especially when analyzing characters in fictional works (Newman)—be they (anti-)heroic figures or not. Interpreters of texts can make "paradigmatic use of fictional characters" in that they apply the frameworks provided by people in the 'real' world to fictional characters (79). However, the opposite can be done as well, since the liminality of fiction and reality allows for the attribution of characteristics of a fictional work's (anti-)hero to people in the 'real' world. Ultimately, this can result in the construction of a 'real-world' person as a hero or an anti-hero.

In this eighteenth issue of *aspeers* on American (Anti-)Heroes, our topical contributions offer intriguing insights into the multidimensionality of (anti-)heroism. Applying theories and methods in an interdisciplinary fashion, this issue's topical contributors demonstrate the scholarly relevance of the theme as well as the diversity of fields in which (anti-)heroisms can be found. Providing further analyses of US culture in relation to dynamics of power, our general contributions explore issues of spatial control and the construction of class and gender on social media.

Topical Academic Contributions: Constructing (Anti-)Heroes in Odd Places

Maximilian Pott's "Cooking in Crisis: Everyday Heroism in Blanche Armwood Perkins's Cookbook *Food Conservation in the Home*" analyzes everyday heroism in wartime foodways. Heroes, in the American context, have a longstanding history of being used for state propaganda. Especially in times of crisis, the US habitually created heroic figures to foster patriotism and unity. While these ideals are most commonly associated with traditional male images of heroism, in his article, Pott uses Blanche Armwood Perkins's *Food Conservation in the Home* (1918) to analyze how everyday heroism was instrumentalized during WWI to convey to women the importance of helping to strengthen national unity through food-rationing efforts. By analyzing one of the rare examples of cookbooks written by Black women of the

time, Pott puts Armwood Perkins's book into a broader context of African American culinary expression. He thereby argues that the book challenged the assumed authority of white women in this realm. This argument is expanded through a critical discussion of how Armwood Perkins, as a skilled domestic scientist, subverted prevailing stereotypes of Black women and lent legitimacy to African American culinary traditions. In doing so, she also ensured that Black women were included in the historical discourse on everyday heroism. The analysis of Blanche Armwood Perkins's *Food Conservation in the Home* accentuates how domestic spaces can become sites of ideological contestation.

Sequana Birkel's "Heroic Leadership and Populism in the Twenty-First Century: The Populist Superhero Persona of Donald Trump" critically examines the construction of the 'populist superhero.' This subject is relevant and timely, as populism currently permeates the political landscape in multiple countries, manifesting through radicalization and nationalist tendencies (Singh 250-51). Beyond analyzing Trump's polarizing encouragement of narratives built on falsities and racist ideologies, the article discusses how Trump's superheroism is a populist cultural construct that caters to broad US audiences. Against the historical backdrop of American superhero culture, the article contextualizes the ways in which both Trump and his supporters construct his superhero persona. Specifically, Birkel draws on theory by Andrea Schneiker, who has analyzed the connection between populist leadership strategies and superhero personifications. Birkel further ties this to a cultural-studies perspective by Michael Butter, who has critically analyzed the apparent heroization of Donald Trump. The article uses contemporary cultural artifacts for its analysis, focusing on the interaction between media culture and audience support for a populist leader. It emphasizes and critically explores the relevance of political heroization, shining light on further opportunities for the intersection between political reality and its relationship with popular culture through Internet-based means.

Our final topical contribution, "Sympathy for the Witch: The Transformation from Villain to Anti-Heroine in Disney's *Maleficent* (2014)" by Lisa Buchegger, approaches the concept of the American (anti-)hero as a character trope in film. Buchegger analyzes the construction of the titular character as a complex anti-heroine in Disney's live-action movie *Maleficent* by combining scholarship from different theoretical fields, most prominently film and literary studies, psychology, and feminism. The article first establishes an outline of Maleficent's construction as the one-dimensional character trope of the 'wicked witch' in the animated Disney film *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) to then trace the subversion of this trope in the live-action film by focusing on themes of patriarchal oppression as well as the defiance and resistance thereof. Buchegger argues that the construction of Maleficent as an anti-heroine is ultimately accomplished through a presentation of her character

that evokes empathy. The overcoming of her portrayal as a wicked witch is achieved by constructing her as a victim of the patriarchy, presenting her as loving, caring, and motherly and by contextualizing her 'evil acts.' Applying Carl Plantinga's theory of 'scenes of empathy' to the audiovisual medium of film, the analysis makes critical use of the film's use of cinematography to scaffold its argument.

General Academic Contributions: Religious Surveillance and Influence(rs)

Leonie M. J. Kratzenstein's article "Queer Confinement and the Rural American Camp in *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*" analyzes the interplay between space and control. The author examines this intersection within a distinct social and spatial context: the ideological entrapment experienced by queer individuals through conversion-camp structures in rural Montana. Defined as mechanisms of biopolitical control, these camp structures embed confinement within rural environments and are specifically strengthened through religious fundamentalism and communal surveillance. Kratzenstein interprets spaces in *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, such as the public pool, the cinema, and the protagonist's home, as extensions of the camp's oppressive apparatus. It is Christian moral judgment in particular that confines the protagonist, Cameron Post, and prevents her from embracing her queerness. Drawing on Agamben's theory of the camp, Foucault's concept of the panopticon, and Barton's theory of the Bible Belt panopticon, the article situates the novel's setting in rural Montana as a site of control that mirrors the mechanisms of institutionalized conversion camps. By framing places outside of the camp as an extension of its oppressive mechanisms, the article argues that queer identities in the novel are policed and disciplined within seemingly mundane US American spaces.

In Natalie Warremann's contribution "Gel Manicures, a Thirty-Thousand Dollar Stove, and Gender Oppression: The Lives of Mormon Influencers," the author explores the intricacies of curated images of Mormonism on social media. Through a close reading of TikToks by content creators Nara Smith and Hannah Neeleman, the article proposes that these influencers construct glamorized portrayals of the lives of stay-at-home mothers. Thereby, they frame traditional Mormon gender roles as aspirational while acknowledging neither the wealth required to sustain their lifestyle nor the reinforcement of harmful gender oppression. Applying Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption, Warremann argues that this refined and wholesome portrayal of the life of Mormon stay-at-home mothers disguises aspects of religious patriarchy and class. Additionally, the author asserts that the content creators utilize portrayals of leisure to demonstrate their financial standing and comfort to sell an image of domesticity and virtuous womanhood in line with Barbara Welter's conceptualization of the "Cult of True

Womanhood." The article thus combines themes of gender, class, domesticity, and social media to offer insights into carefully curated online portrayals of Mormon stay-at-home mothers.

Professorial Voice

For this year's issue of *aspeers*, we are honored to include an original piece of writing by Professor Carmen Birkle from the Department of English and American Studies at Philipps-Universität Marburg, Germany. A leading figure in the field of American studies, Professor Birkle served as president of the German Association of American Studies (DGfA/GAAS) from 2014 to 2017 and is currently a general co-editor of the quarterly journal *Amerikastudien/American Studies*. With research interests in gender, literature, culture, and medicine, she has published over seventy works, including her two monographs *Women's Stories of the Looking Glass: Autobiographical Reflections and Self-Representations in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde* (1996) and *Migration—Miscegenation—Transculturation: Writing Multicultural America into the Twentieth Century* (2004).

In her contribution, "Women Who Rocked the World: Heroines of Medicine in Nineteenth-Century US America," Professor Birkle examines the lived experiences of women in the medical profession in the nineteenth century and the systemic barriers relating to gender and race they heroically challenged. While acknowledging the contributions of many women during this time, Professor Birkle focuses on the experiences of three women who were the first, or among the first, to receive medical degrees at a time when biological, sociopolitical, and religious ideologies of gender and race sought to actively bar women and particularly women of color from practicing medicine. Through her analysis of the lived experiences of Elizabeth Blackwell, Marie E. Zakrzewska, and Rebecca Lee Crumpler, Professor Birkle explores transnational, gendered, and intersectional aspects of American culture, particularly in medical education and practice. The essay highlights the heroism of their efforts to create countercultural narratives on multiple levels and concludes by exploring how the systemic barriers they faced have evolved and still affect women in American society at large. Overall, Professor Birkle provides a multifaceted perspective on nineteenth-century heroines and invites readers to embrace their contemporary counterparts in their continued struggles against intersectional forms of gendered oppression.

Artistic Contributions

(Anti-)Heroes thrive in American visual art spaces, appearing across various media —examples include Hollywood's interpretations of heroic journeys, hyperbolic superheroes of comic books, wartime photography, and historic monuments dedicated to American foundational myths. Such artworks explore (anti-)heroisms from varying perspectives of "great men" and "hero stories," as defined by Frisk (89). Symbolic elements and historical narratives are often utilized to reinforce the cultural significance of these portrayals to depict 'traditional' heroic figures. However, the notion of the American (anti-)hero is being constantly reexamined by artists inside and far beyond the country's borders. In this eighteenth issue of *aspeers*, our contributing artists address, critique, and redefine the topic of (anti-)heroization in their own unique ways. By interrogating the interplay between the aesthetic and the heroic, these contributions bridge academic reflections on (anti-)heroism with visual commentary through the means of creative expression.

Visualizing and questioning the (anti-)heroic is a unifying motif of this issue's art pieces. Saed Tajibaev's illustration "The American Dream" reflects on the contradictory nature of one of America's nation-building myths. It portrays the Statue of Liberty with a bleeding torch in one hand and a Native American war bonnet in the other. By merging elements of violence and symbols of (in)equality with the elegant aesthetics of art deco, the artwork questions the nature of American heroization.

Maya Obermann's photography collage "Fences" reinterprets historical symbols in its own way. "Fences" focuses on the nature of borders, which can be viewed as heroic safeguards by some and become oppressive barriers to others. One of the photographs depicts the possible end of the fence, thereby inviting the audience to reflect on whether such an end could become a reality.

Eliah Brockhaus's artwork revolves around an unexpected anti-heroic figure: the rat. Brockhaus's etching titled "Winged Rat" depicts the symbolically controversial animal with dragonfly-like wings, commenting on the duality of the image of this peculiar anti-hero. Associated with urban life in megalopolises such as New York City, the rat serves as the epitome of both adaptability and undesirability.

This perspective on (anti-)heroization in visual art also reverberates in Marv Späth's painting "Who Sold the World," which portrays a person who, perhaps, can be imagined to be a wartime (anti-)heroic figure, kneeling on one knee. The leg they kneel on appears to be severed from the shin down. The text above this person, "WHO SOLD THE WORLD," with its absence of punctuation, highlights the multiplicity of meaning of the artwork and invites to reflect on the potential tragedy of heroism. Thus, the question of what defines an (anti-)hero echoes through all this year's art contributions.

Acknowledging Heroes

At this point, we would like to thank our (anti-)heroes: first, our contributors who have challenged us profoundly, made us better academics, and forced us to step beyond our comfort zones in many ways. It has been a humbling experience to discuss topical and non-topical submissions alike, to accept and acknowledge varying perspectives, and to find a middle ground. With that being said, we want to wish our contributors all the best in their future endeavors. Second, we want to thank our mentors, whose insight, patience, and wit were indispensable in putting this issue together. It was the expertise of Dr. Stefan Schubert, Peter Hintz, and Josefine C. Bernhofer that helped us to keep our cool, strengthened our collaborative process, and offered guidance in creating this eighteenth issue of *aspeers*.

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