

Introduction: American Anxieties

Florian Bast, Linda Esch, Wiebke Kartheus, Paul Lück, Anna Richter, Annalisa Schmidt, Sören Schoppmeier, Patricia Isabella Schumacher, Paul Simon, Silane Vatonne

No ship of all that under sail or steam
Have gathered people to us more and more
But, Pilgrim-manned, the *Mayflower* in a dream
Has been her anxious convoy in to shore.

Robert Frost, "Immigrants"

Pregnant, Pill-Free, and Panicked" (Nutting), "Nothing to Do but Embrace the Dread" (Smith), and "You Are Going to Die" (Kreider). These titles are taken from a popular *Opinionator* series on the *New York Times* web presence that ran from 2011 to 2013 and responded to the public's desire to read about and comment on personal anxieties.¹ More than seventy related articles create the impression that any aspect of life, from unemployment (Anderson) to body images (Stanley) and household appliances (Rutkowski), can be a source of anxiety and that anxiety, while also being a symptom of clinical disorders, is a common and widespread part of American life. Not only does the extent of individual anxieties indicated by the web series's presence show that people find plenty of reasons to be anxious but the popularity of the series reveals anxiety to be a mass cultural phenomenon. Hence, *aspeers* has decided to devote its seventh issue to an exploration of the cultural dynamics at the heart of the interconnections between Americanness and considering oneself anxious.

In fact, American anxieties are a particularly productive field of research for an American studies journal because, in addition to having individual anxieties, people can also share collective anxieties. Both are often manifestations of cultural dynamics very much at the center of US society: from the omnipresent threat of terrorism to the heated debates about gun ownership, from quarrels about global warming to "American workers [...] living with unprecedented economic anxiety" (Tankersley and

¹ Tim Kreider's essay "You Are Going to Die," for example, has generated 555 comments.

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Clement). Even the pressure to be happy has become its own source of anxiety, as Ruth Whippman's phrase "the great national happiness rat race" signifies.

The ubiquity of anxiety that these examples illustrate has led cultural commentators such as journalists and academics to conclude that widespread anxiety is something specific to the present and that the contemporary moment in the United States is particularly prone to producing anxiety. Perhaps most recently, Elaine Showalter has dedicated her article "Our Age of Anxiety" to the growing field of publications and emerging scholarship concerned with American anxiety, which she believes to be "created by, yes, social and economic problems, and by personal crises, but also by media attention." So should one believe the anxious suspicion that especially Americans are particularly anxious in the present age?

As even a brief look at other eras uncovers, the label 'anxious' has been applied to many historical periods both during these periods and retrospectively. In all of these contexts, it has typically been used to make statements about different aspects of Americanness such as Westernness, capitalism, and modernity. Daniel Smith—in his essay "It's Still the 'Age of Anxiety.' Or Is It?"—exemplifies both the transhistorical productivity of the label and its ties to notions of Westernness when he poignantly writes that "[a]s a sticker on the bumper of the Western world, 'the age of anxiety' has been ubiquitous for more than six decades now."²

In fact, in *Imperial Ambitions* (2005), Noam Chomsky concisely diagnoses anxiety to be connected to notions of present intensity and, particularly by way of its Americanness, to roots in the past. Commenting on the 2003 Iraq War, he argues that

for whatever reasons, the United States happens to be a very frightened country by comparative standards. Levels of fear here on almost every issue—crime, immigration, you pick it—are just off the spectrum. [...] [American culture] is more susceptible to fear. The United States is a frightened country. And the reasons for this—frankly, I don't understand them—probably go way back in American history. (Chomsky and Barsamian 28-29)

The topic "American Anxieties," then, becomes uniquely intriguing for a journal of American studies, precisely when considered not primarily as a recent phenomenon but as a series of chapters in the history of this "frightened country" (29).

In an earlier one of these chapters, before the beginning of the Cold War, Arthur Meier Schlesinger commences his influential manifesto of postwar liberalism, *The Vital Center* (1949), with a declaration along similar lines. He states that "Western man in the middle of the twentieth century is tense, uncertain, adrift. We look upon our

2 As Smith points out, W. H. Auden's 1947 poem by the same name was essential in popularizing the use of the phrase.

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epoch as a time of troubles, an age of anxiety” (1). According to Schlesinger, the interchangeability of the ideologies of capitalism and communism, rooted in their respective dehumanizing tendencies, is symptomatic of the rapid industrial development of modern society, which has left humanity lagging behind (4). For Schlesinger, then, characterizing his contemporaries as particularly anxious provides the opportunity to negotiate the cultural consequences of the ideologies of his time.

Going back even further, scholars have repeatedly applied the label ‘anxious’ to other periods in US history and the latter’s shifting reactions to the drastic changes of modernity. Michael E. Parrish, who titles his history of the 1920s and ’30s in the United States *Anxious Decades* (1994), suggests that even before the social dislocations of the Great Depression, the rapid social changes of the Jazz Age caused significant levels of “collective anxiety” (x). For him, the label serves to delineate two decades with unprecedented levels of cultural variety along a unifying feature. The phenomenon of labeling a period as ‘anxious’ clearly extends back to the nineteenth century. Similarly arguing for a transhistoric perspective on anxiety in the professorial voice in this issue, Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet points to “that great cultural epidemic of the time, nervousness or neurasthenia. It was commonly believed that modernity itself was straining Americans’ nerves and making them anxious and depressed” (69).

In fact, the label ‘anxious’ has been applied to American cultural dynamics as far back as the earliest European settlements on the North American continent. Not only did Robert Frost famously characterize the *Mayflower’s* voyage itself as “anxious” (262) but Sacvan Bercovitch, in his *The American Jeremiad* (1978), proposes anxiety to have been an essential element of American society since the days of the Puritans. He observes that the American jeremiad has “made anxiety its end as well as its means. Crisis was the social norm it sought to inculcate” (23). In an effort to address the discrepancy between the founding ideals of society and its decline, the jeremiad, according to Bercovitch, has always used anxiety as a unifying force. He concludes that anxiety has been influential not only in the American jeremiad but also in the development of American policies since the early seventeenth century. Consequently, then, there is a long-lasting and uniquely impactful connection between the United States and notions of anxiety, which opens up a vast field of explorative possibilities for scholars of American studies.

In terms of their definition, anxiety, and especially anxiety disorder, are originally terms of clinical psychology that denote disorders causing distress and negative life experiences. In *The Encyclopedia of Phobias, Fears, and Anxieties* (2008), psychologists Ronald M. Doctor, Ada P. Kahn, and Christine Adamec describe anxiety as deriving “from a Greek root meaning ‘to press tight’ or ‘to strangle’” and define it as

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an unpleasant feeling of generalized fear and apprehension, often of unknown origin, accompanied by physiological symptoms. This feeling may be triggered by the anticipation of danger, either from thoughts (internal) or from one's environment (external). (50)

Doctor, Kahn, and Adamec furthermore state that anxiety disorders, or disorders in which anxiety is predominant, are differentiated from anxiety by way of intensity as well as duration (52) and are “among the most common mental health problems” in the United States and that phobias constitute the most frequent form of anxiety (55).

In common usage, the meaning of the term ‘anxiety’ has been significantly broadened to refer to various kinds of fear, angst, panic, crisis, and phobia, a development that a number of scholars in the humanities in general, and in cultural studies in particular, have programmatically embraced to study collective cultural anxieties. The combination of the historically persistent American propensity toward applying the ‘anxious’ label with widely different argumentative agendas and the enormous analytical potential of the cultural category has resulted in a broad corpus of research concerned with anxiety and the United States, which ranges from A, as in antiterrorism, to Z, as in zombies. To give just a few examples that illustrate the breadth of anxiety-related scholarship: While Leonie Huddy et al. use anxiety to explain antiterrorism policies, Corey Robin theorizes the role of anxiety and fear in American political life and criticizes what he calls “our contemporary liberalism of anxiety” (138), Vincent John Cheng connects anxiety to questions of authentic identity and cultural heritage, and Todd Platts tries to come to an understanding of how zombie movies “have offered bureaucratically managed representations of cultural anxiety for more than 80 years” (548-49). Aside from indicating the field's variety, this list of anxiety-related studies also hints at the productivity of using anxiety as an analytical category. Connecting vastly different foci by regarding them all as expressions of anxieties holds significant potential: It can illuminate and interrogate interrelations between the foci since they address social conflicts, political discord, and cultural tensions based on the culturally constructed criteria of differentiation from an Other with which the humanities frequently engage, such as race, class, gender, and ability, all core categories for American studies.

ARTICLES

Providing critical engagements with both popular culture and a canonical text of American literature, the topical contributions to this seventh issue of *aspeers* constitute valuable additions to and interventions into this polyvocal chorus of scholarly engagements with anxiety. Since *aspeers* is conceptualized, in part, to reflect the work

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currently done on a graduate level in American studies in Europe, it is important to take note of the fact that both the majority of the topical submissions sent to as well as the topical articles published in *aspeers* address “American Anxieties” by engaging with issues of race in American culture. This clear emphasis showcases the prevalence of the category of race in current debates in American studies, and the texts as a corpus argue for the continued importance of this issue in American society. Indubitably, the cultural construct of race continues to figure prominently as a source of anxiety in American society as theoretical endeavors like critical whiteness studies and the different theorizations of intersectionality evidence.

In her contribution “Poems as Specters: *Revenant* Longing for Roots in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*,” Daniella Gáti investigates the desire for an idealized African American land of origin and identity in the text. Using Jacques Derrida’s concept of the specter in her reading of the poems within *Cane*, Gáti looks at them as a unit rather than separate works to detect common themes. Reading the recurring images evoked by the poems as constructing a sensation between mourning and longing for an unproblematic past, Gáti argues that the anxiety provoked by the poems is caused by the contradiction between a yearning for a harmonious African American ancestral experience and the haunting remains of a violent past. Discussing the poems’ content, the function of their formal contrast to *Cane*’s prose pieces, and the poems’ placement in relation to them, she shows how the poems communicate a feeling of anxiety about the history of African Americans in the South. Her approach to the poems as a unit is especially innovative as previous scholarship has tended to either separate them into smaller groups or focus on the prose parts of *Cane* while neglecting the poems. As she argues, this oversight by critics is itself a result of the poems’ nature as specters since the effect of spectrality functions to transform the reading of *Cane* as a whole. Gáti thus notably enriches the existing scholarship on a canonical text of American literature by offering an argument as to the central function of the poems in Toomer’s novel and emphasizing their importance.

In “The Portrayal of White Anxiety in *South Park*’s ‘With Apologies to Jesse Jackson,’” Nicole Binder analyzes the way questions of race are discussed in the popular TV series. Her article situates itself within the scholarly debate over the merits of *South Park*’s play with ethnic stereotypes, often deemed offensive and regressive, and identifies a more positive potential of the show by utilizing a critical whiteness approach. Ultimately, she argues, the episode—satirically presenting white anger, white guilt, and the propensity of white characters to see themselves as victimized—is critical of these roadblocks to an open discourse on the topic of racism. Instead of discussing the portrayal of ethnic minorities in the series, her reading of the episode “With Apologies to Jesse Jackson” focuses on the way its white characters navigate the fraught territory of racial discourse, demonstrating how feelings of white anxiety are

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portrayed as dysfunctional and misguided reactions to the complexities of America's racist past and present. This article adds a vital perspective to anxiety scholarship by embedding the value of satire in the ever-present discussion of race issues and related anxieties within American studies.

aspeers' seventh issue also carries on the editorial tradition of showcasing distinguished nontopical articles. The first of these is "Crisis-Ridden Heteronormativity and Homonormativity in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*" by Simon Daniel Whybrew, in which the author discusses heteronormativity and introduces homonormativity as explanations for the failure of the relationships of the novel's protagonist, Robin. Employing Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Whybrew emphasizes the prevalence of ascribed gender roles and the catastrophic consequences of their enforcement in both relationships. He argues that the heteronormative matrix influences both Robin's straight and her lesbian relationship and that a nonheterosexual relationship as such does not overcome gender binaries and other heteronormative boundaries. Whybrew's introduction of heteronormativity and homonormativity consequently enables him to shed light on previously overlooked facets of a canonical novel in queer literary criticism.

In "Novel Realities and Simulated Structures: The Posthuman Fusion of Forms and Simulacra in Richard Powers's *Plowing the Dark*," Katherine Szadziejewicz interprets Richard Powers's novel, in which the stories of an artist joining a team of programmers to create virtual realities and an Iranian American held in solitary confinement by terrorists in Beirut are interconnected, in terms of the text's negotiation of notions of reality. Her central analytical concern lies in delineating how *Plowing the Dark*, engaging with Plato's theory of the form and Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum within its intertwined narratives, blurs the boundaries between reality, virtual reality, and imagination. Based on N. Katherine Hayles's definition of the posthuman, Szadziejewicz's analysis of this narratively complex novel reaches beyond a close reading of the novel's plot and form in order to expose Powers's book itself as a technology of representation that makes it and its readers enter the realm of the posthuman. Her article constitutes a significant contribution to existing scholarship on *Plowing the Dark* and showcases the immense analytical productivity of a posthuman approach to literary studies.

PROFESSORIAL VOICE

The editors of *aspeers* are proud to introduce Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, Professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, as this

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year's professorial voice. *aspeers's* tradition of featuring outstanding European professors of American studies continues with Professor Soltysik Monnet, whose research foci on representations of war as well as the gothic have allowed her to provide expert insights into this issue's topic of "American Anxieties." Furthermore, we are delighted to extend our journal's tradition of internationality by featuring a distinguished American studies professor from Switzerland.

Professor Soltysik Monnet has written elaborately on the American Gothic; among her publications in various international venues are the monograph *The Poetics and Politics of the American Gothic: Gender and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2010) and the edited volume *The Gothic in Contemporary Literature and Popular Culture* (2012). She argues that the American Gothic is not primarily about fear but "concerned with the ethical and political functions of the specific kind of unease created by the gothic" (*Poetics* 3). Whether Professor Soltysik Monnet writes about a pop-cultural icon like Batman ("I'll Be") or a writer as inextricably linked with the gothic as Poe ("Poe's Aesthetics"), she reveals their stories to be saturated by matters of judgment, which she explicitly calls "a site of intense anxiety" (*Poetics* 20). She argues that this site serves as "a central feature of how the gothic functions" (*Poetics* 24), and, therefore, her work significantly enhances the traditional interpretations of gothic stories by shifting the focus from fear to "anxieties about judgment" ("Research").

While her extensive list of publications includes articles concerning feminism, queer theory, and race, her current research discusses the representation of soldiers and war in American literature and popular culture. These foci reflect modern sites of anxiety prevalent in US culture, with several of her conference presentations paying particularly close attention to the representation of race in media portrayals of the recent wars ("Race and Conflict"; "All Brothers Now"). Publications such as "War and National Renewal: Civil Religion and Blood Sacrifice in American Culture" certainly address anxieties of contemporary American society, where the topic of self-sacrifice, she argues, especially provokes unease among scholars as it is closely linked to and difficult to separate from religious fanaticism (2). Professor Soltysik Monnet's diverse and fascinating research concerning American anxieties thus showcases the importance of anxiety as a subject in scholarship currently done in the field of American studies and makes her the perfect choice for the professorial voice of this issue on the topic of "American Anxieties."

Professor Soltysik Monnet contributes "Anxiety Now" to the seventh issue of *aspeers*, using the creative space of the professorial voice section to enrich the journal with a thought-provoking exploration of anxiety in terms of both its relation to her personal and professional experience and its immense potential as an analytical category in American studies. After addressing anxiety in the context of graduate

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studies, she adds her transnational perspective, reminiscing about her life in California during the 1970s and '80s and her subsequent move to Switzerland. Professor Soltysik Monnet furthermore draws from a variety of disciplines and theoretical approaches to anxiety in order to highlight the manifold cultural and scholarly implications of American anxieties: Not only does she offer her insights as a scholar specializing in the nineteenth century and the gothic, she also discusses the influence of American anxieties on the recent success of apocalyptic cinema. Moreover, connecting several horror movies and the aesthetics they utilize, she argues that the films, reflecting images evocative of reports of 9/11 and of the footage depicting US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, speak to particularly contemporary American anxieties. In its diversity of approaches and topics, in its emphasis on showcasing the multitude of culturally significant negotiations of notions of anxiety, and in its call to explore and utilize the immense social potency of 'anxious' both as a state and as a label, Professor Soltysik Monnet's essay constitutes a powerful and inspiring contribution to the topical section of *aspeers* 7 (2014).

With its seventh issue, *aspeers* investigates the topic of "American Anxieties" and its relevance to negotiating issues related to notions of Americanness. The omnipresent American propensity to label oneself or a variety of periods in the country's history as 'anxious' speaks to the diversity of cultural negotiations at play. Core issues of American studies—ranging from race to gender, class, Westernness, modernity, and beyond—are revealed to be interrelated by the invariably anxious quality of the social phenomena and expressions they engender. All of these dynamics combine to make "American Anxieties" a fruitful focus for a journal of American studies. As the editors, we thus invite you to explore the 2014 issue of *aspeers*.

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