

Call for Papers

**“North American Astrocultures”**

Special Issue of Zeitschrift Amerikastudien / American Studies

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In US-America and beyond, the exploration of outer space currently experiences a renaissance. With state-led, international and—increasingly so over the last two decades—private enterprises vying to explore, exploit, own, and sometimes even settle extraterrestrial spaces like the Moon and planet Mars, scholars are debating whether these renewed and intensified space exploration activities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century warrant the conceptualization of a “Second Space Age” (sometimes also called “NewSpace”) that can be distinguished from a state-led “First Space Age” centering around the Cold War “Space Race” for the Moon. While space exploration retains its traditional role as a linchpin of US modernity, it is also noticeable how, in this Second Space Age, outer-space exploration and colonization are being reframed as not only progressive and desirable, but also as inevitable to ensure the survival of an often ill-defined ‘humanity’ in face of the anthropogenic polycrisis.

Our Special Issue takes its cue from this contemporary reinvigoration of space exploration and its currency within debates surrounding environmental issues such as destructive scenarios of global warming, resource scarcity, global pandemics, nuclear war, or so-called overpopulation. Within this “astrofuturist” framework (cf. Ganser; Kilgore), which pervades contemporary American cultural expression as much as scientific and legal discourses in this context, any manifestation of the anthropogenic polycrisis is met with the idea of an astrotheological “new New World” exodus to outer space (Pak 3). Beyond being a guide to mere human survival, astrofuturist narratives evoke utopian visions of space colonization as a transformative posthuman experience of breaking with humanity’s terrestrial history, at times even promoting its potential immortality. Evidence of the powerful impact of this narrative are the global attention and excessive funding which its agents and pundits, from Elon Musk’s SpaceX and Jeff Bezos’ Blue Origin to the U.S. Space Force as a new military branch, are receiving.

The fact that the hegemonic scripts on which these discourses rest, at least in the western hemisphere, are distinctly US-American, is reflected in the dominance of frontier and settler-colonial discourses and tropes of human renewal and territorial expansion in visions of humanity’s future in space. These tropes are habitually spurred by solutionist technoliberal imaginaries emerging out of unequal structures of a specifically gendered and racialized capitalist colonialism—with its most influential incarnation being a technooptimist Silicon Valley “broligarchy”.

This discursive dominance is challenged by practices and theories of Afrofuturism and Indigenous Futures (among others), which engage with outer space “otherwise” (Daniel Heath Justice) i.e., in ways that run counter to or completely circumvent settler colonial discourses. In addition to being engagements with outer space in their own right, these discourses offer essential critical pedagogies that, for example, consider a

human engagement with outer space beyond technoliberal determinism, or which point to the perpetuation of settler colonialism via space exploration as “settler sciences“ (Lempert, Shorter and TallBear).

All of this underlines that space exploration as a subject is literally not out there but relates to core discourses in American studies such as posthumanism, ecocriticism, the production of place and space, settler colonialism, planetarity, gender, race-critical and disability studies, to name just a few. In other words, space exploration, for better or worse, has not only become an important cultural lens for gauging the Anthropocene, but has (re)gained momentum as cultural currency very generally.

Following Alexander Geppert’s definition of “astroculture” as a “heterogeneous array of images and artifacts, media and practices that all aim to ascribe meaning to outer space while stirring both the individual and the collective imagination” (221), our Special Issue aims to provide a critical intervention in the (re)production and negotiation of outer space in astrocultural texts and practices ranging from speculative fiction and scientific paratexts to simulated Mars habitation and Lunar conservation initiatives as well as rocket aesthetics and space tourism.

Possible topics for contributions (essays of ca. 6.000-8.000 words) include (but are not limited to):

- analyses of related SF literature, film, music, or visual culture
- explorations of how the 'players' of the Second Space Age are represented (autofiction, websites, Social Media, journalism, photography, etc.)
- theoretical interventions through concepts and approaches such as planetarity (Gayatri Spivak), mobility justice (Mimi Sheller), posthuman (Braidotti), or archipelagic American Studies (Brian Russell Roberts et al.)
- critical readings of mainstream and popular science related to the present and future of space exploration
- the production of outer space & place and their impact on conceptions of nature, ecology, place
- discursive overlaps between astrofuturism and Silicon Valley solutionism
- discussions of Afrofuturist, Indigenous-futurist, LatinX-futurist, feminist and queer-futurist interventions

Please send proposals of ca. 300 words, along with a short bio statement (ca. 150 words), until Dec. 1, 2024, to **both**:

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