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(Re)Imagining Flyover: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

This introduction to the special issue titled "(Re)Imagining Flyover Fictions" theorizes the flyover trope (as in "flyover country/state") as a critical concept in cultural studies in order to make it an abstract tool to explore, among others, the historical continuities and present facets of polarization in the United States. In addition to these theoretical and methodological elaborations, we will also provide a specific and particularly topical example by analyzing flyover fictions in the context of the 2024 US presidential election.

KEYWORDS

Flyover fictions, US-American politics, presidential election, heartland, conservatism, Republican Party

At a 2023 fundraiser, Joni Ernst, Republican senator from Iowa, commented on the Democratic Party's decision to change the primary election schedule and not start with Iowa, which had kicked off the primary season for both parties for decades:

> We know Republicans are keeping the caucuses here in Iowa in 2024. But what did the Democrats do? The Democrats ditched Iowa. They went to the coasts, right? They think of us as flyover country. So, they have ditched Iowa. They have given middle America the middle finger. (qtd. in "Republican Presidential Hopefuls" 00:08:13–43)

This statement is remarkable for two reasons. For one, Ernst's definition of "coasts" is curious. While the Democrats did start with South Carolina (on the East Coast) in an attempt to choose a more racially diverse state that thus better reflects the country and the Democratic base, South Carolina was followed by Nevada and Michigan,

neither of which are located on the coasts. The first state on the West Coast was scheduled at the same time as Iowa, along with many other states as part of so-called "Super Tuesday." Perhaps more importantly, though, the fact that not coming first for once is equated with somebody giving you the middle finger is telling – as is the evocation of "flyover country" in this context as well as the manner thereof: "*they* think of *us*."

But it was not just Republicans who were (or acted) offended. Iowa Democrat Scott Brennan, too, lamented: "You've turned the Mountain and Central time zones into Flyover country for purposes of a presidential nominating calendar, and that's just wrong" (qtd. in Glueck). Brennan's use of time zones is only another creative way of vaguely referencing "the middle" of the US without resorting to actual regional definitions that would be too specific to serve the rhetorical purposes at hand. Like Ernst's talk of "the coasts," he uses the language of geography to evoke as material reality what is actually a fiction. These tropes pretend to be denotative, but they are all about connotation, and they draw their rhetorical power in political speech precisely from the fact that they do not reference any particular place at all while potentially referencing just about *any* place.

In fact, these tropes are best understood as variations of one single complex trope, and this is, in a nutshell, what we are interested in here – in this introduction, in this special issue, and in our larger collaborative research project as a whole. This is the trope of *flyover*, which has a rich discursive history and over time grew to accumulate an even richer assortment of meanings, connotations, and usages. This density makes the term highly and perhaps irreducibly ambiguous, and at the same time this very vagueness also helped shift the trope from a mild form of banter to a weaponized piece of political rhetoric. As such, it is arguably the most condensed emblem of what marks political, social, and cultural discourse in the contemporary United States: polarization. It captures like no other trope the sense of a binary split that increasingly calls into question the doctrines of compromise and multiculturalism that were sustained by a US-American nationalism that sufficiently provided the imaginative foundation of *e pluribus unum*, at the cost of imposing a hegemonic mainstream onto this diversity in order to manage it. Yet "flyover" is more than a trope that is being deployed in polarizing discourse; it can also be a critical concept in cultural studies to analyze, understand, and explain this polarization in its historical continuities and present facets. Our project is dedicated to theorizing this concept in order to make it such a critical tool while providing practical examples of how it might be productively put to use.

The present special issue is a complementary companion piece to a book project: a collection of essays titled *Flyover Fictions: Polarization in US-American Culture,*

Media, and Politics, which will be published by University of Nebraska Press in 2025. Our introduction in this book focuses largely on the theorization mentioned above, and we refer readers to this extensive conceptualization as we offer a condensed summary here. This introduction and the special issue as a whole focus more on the application of these concepts and thus a more practical methodology, with the aim of showing what can be done with the tools we made elsewhere. Directly juxtaposed as companion pieces, some overlaps and redundancies between the respective introductions are unavoidable, but to keep these minimal beyond necessary cross-references, we will focus on more contemporary aspects here while we also included historical precedents and abstract patterns there.

Of course, the most contemporary thing to do in 2024 is to ask ChatGPT for its "opinion," and so we did just that to see how the discursive network we identified around the flyover trope has seeped into the texts on which the Large Language Model is being trained. Taking a cue from the politicians mentioned above, we 'asked' ChatGPT who uses the term "flyover country," and it gave us the following response:

> The term "flyover country" is often used by people living on the East and West coasts of the United States to refer to the vast expanse of states in the middle of the country that are often overlooked or flown over when traveling between the coasts. It is typically used in a derogatory or dismissive manner to describe these states as less significant or important than coastal regions. ("Who uses the term")

Having researched this concept for some time now, it came not exactly as a surprise to us that an AI chatbot would give that response. The claim that "flyover country" (or its most common variant, "flyover state") is generally used by people living on the coasts to denigrate a never clearly defined part of the United States has been made over and over again with impunity – but without any evidence. For example, analyzing the use of "flyover" in *The New York Times*, the ultimate metropolitan coastal newspaper, we found many instances of people claiming just that (e.g., Apple Jr.; Draper; Marchese; Smarsh, "Chronicling a Community"; Sorkin; Takenaga; Waxman and Kennedy). Very recently, Sarah Smarsh professed so again in a guest essay on Kamala Harris's pick for vice president, Tim Walz: "In conveying the dignity and reality of what is casually derided on the coasts as 'flyover country,' Mr. Walz speaks plainly yet eloquently in the parlance of my [Smarsh's] place and thereby fills a decades-long geographic messaging gap for Democrats" (Smarsh, "Democrats"). However, examples of people from the coasts actually using the term were hard to find.

Searching the extensive *C-SPAN* online video library, the home of almost 280,000 hours of political programming, delivered similar results. Just like Joni Ernst in the example above, it is always politicians who do *not* represent states on the coasts who use the term "flyover" by way of claiming that *others* use it to denigrate the state or

region they represent. For instance, Ted Cruz, Republican senator from Texas, maintained that "rural America" is what "elites on both coasts" deem "flyover country" (qtd. in "Federalist Society" 00:31:19–33), and, according to Mitch McConnell, Republican senator from Kentucky, "there are a lot of people . . . in Washington who think of Appalachia as flyover country" (qtd. in "Senate Session" [2015] 00:16:49–57). Interestingly, even some Democrats started to buy into this myth. Ohio senator Sherrod Brown defended a presidential nominee during a Senate hearing by explaining that "she doesn't come from the coast. She comes from what some people on the coast would call 'flyover country' . . ." (qtd. in "Senate Session, Part 2" 03:55:21–28). Claire McCaskill, then-senator from Missouri, bemoaned that "[s]ome people have the nerve to call our part of the world 'flyover country'" (qtd. in "Senate Session" [2015] 05:18:27–38) but she, at least, did not specify who these people were or where they were from.

Despite the popular belief such claims exemplify, the term is primarily used by people who believe themselves that they live in, are from, or at least speak for flyover country. Yet it cannot be overemphasized that flyover is not a clearly defined region or location, other than that it is definitely *not* New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. The term originated in the Midwest and expanded to the much vaguer "middle America" as a way of imagining what people in the cultural centers on the coasts probably thought about these regions. Nonetheless, the most salient aspect about this is not the location but the imaginary constellation. One of the defining abstract features of flyover is that we imagine others imagining us, and that we construct both us and them in the process (while the "we" is compared to the "us" for how the latter misrepresents the former). We call this movement of self-identification through projection onto others a triangular imagination. This has clear conceptual correlates in Du Bois's double-consciousness and Said's Orientalism, and the abstraction shows that such patterns of imagining self and other – especially that vague "they" of both political rhetoric and paranoid fantasy – may originate in specific local and historical conditions but rather quickly exceed these and can be adapted to other contexts. In this case, the connection of the flyover trope to "middle America" (in the context of the US and not the Americas) has always been as vague as the regional definition of "middle America" itself. By now, flyover is used in ways that are entirely detached from any concrete geographical location as it imagines what Anthony Harkins[1] aptly describes as "meta-regions defined almost exclusively

[1] Harkins' 2016 essay "The Midwest and the Evolution of 'Flyover Country" is the first cultural-historical assessment of the term and concept, and the time of publication attests to the shift in meaning and relevance we describe: While there are earlier essays that comment on the term, they mainly do so in terms of light-hearted regional banter. Harkins' essay, on the other hand, marks a point where the serious polarization underneath that playfulness has broken through.

in cultural terms" (99). No longer tied to but at the same time potentially applicable to any location, the term is pure connotation without denotation – and therefore an affective, malleable, and deeply ambiguous category.

This clearly shows that even though the examples we quoted above stem from political discourse, flyover is not a political category but a cultural trope that is being deployed for political purposes, and it is a trope of perceived disregard and neglect (and perceived means that it may or may not actually be so). The shortest definition we can offer as a condensation of our analyses of various discursive formations is this: Flyover is the feeling that culture is elsewhere. "Culture" here really includes the full range of meanings of the term, especially the aesthetic categories of high and popular culture and the social categories of subcultures and, most generally, culture as a way of life. In flyover discourse, culture is perceived to be elsewhere, to be produced elsewhere and for elsewhere, whether it is cultural artefacts or cultural norms. Even more importantly, flyover refers to the sense that cultural *values* come from there and are imposed on here: The hegemonic mainstream of what is normal is defined elsewhere, and a different part gets to define the whole.

This is the center of the conceptual ambiguity of flyover: On the one hand, the opposition between the dominant, visible cultural center(s) and the neglected, invisible margin(s) can be enlisted for a valid critique of disadvantage and neglect, a metaphorical way of addressing justified grievances and breaking down their complexities to a simplified but effective way of communicating troublesome hierarchies. For example, flyover can be a way of talking about economic inequality without explicitly talking about class, as Sarah Kendzior does in *The View from Flyover Country: Dispatches from the Forgotten America* (2015). It can also be a way of talking about queerness beyond the stereotypes of metronormativity, as Melissa Faliveno does in *Tomboyland* (2020). In both cases, it is employed to demand recognition in Axel Honneth's sense of "social 'validity'" (115).

Yet on the other hand, flyover can also be weaponized to deny others this social validity in order to obtain or maintain cultural hegemony. This has become the dominant and most effective use of the trope in recent years, especially in the service of right-wing populism, as exemplified by Dana Loesch's *Flyover Nation: You Can't Run a Country You've Never Been To* (2016). In this usage, flyover describes a constant, paradoxical tension between feeling passed over while at the same time feeling encroached upon. Whether it is Hollywood and its films, Washington and its policies, or New York and its news media – they are all epicenters of cultural production and thus power. They either ignore or even look down on the rest of the country while flooding it with their morals and beliefs, regardless of whether the rest of the country wants them or not. As a consequence, "flyover country" feels completely powerless and in

constant need to defend their way of life – and at the same time it elevates this way of life to be the tacit yet proper norm of national identity, a more authentic version of Americanness than the dominant impositions. Flyover here describes a synecdochical contest over which part gets to represent the whole, over the normativity of one way of life instead of another. Granted, such struggles are routinely part of any culture; in fact, they may well be what culture *is*, given how Raymond Williams describes it in terms of a tension between dominant, emergent, and residual forces (121–27). Yet the struggle for hegemony and recognition in this play of cultural forces is always at the risk of turning into a full-fledged culture war, especially when polarization and populism reduce the complexities of these tensions to clear-cut binaries – and the flyover trope perfectly fits their respective us-versus-them logic.

These are the theoretical cornerstones of what we call flyover fictions, and yet the trope itself matters just as much in its metaphorical and connotative richness. Flying over suggests mobility, transcendence, and hierarchy. It is a three-dimensional shortcut to avoid the two-dimensional surface below, and one that assumes perspectives that are literally aloof, detached, and indeed have people looking down on others (who are consequentially more "down-to-earth"). This is a technological metaphor that finds its correlate in other technologies of mobility, in the speed of cars and trains and in the infrastructure of interstates and cross-continental railways that turn places into space and eradicate the specificity of location in a blur of movement. As such, these means of transport are also metaphors of class privilege since access to these technologies and the transcendence they promise is a matter of wealth. In general, as flyover fictions deal in connotations rather than denotation, their stylistic, affective, and semantic qualities are not merely vehicles of communicating a more crucial meaning; their form matters as much as their content.

Taken together, these various aspects provide the methodological blueprints for analyses of cultural artefacts, political rhetoric, and various other discursive phenomena that relate to polarization in the US and elsewhere. It is crucial to note that the category of the nation is a central reference point of the struggle for hegemony and recognition, but it is not at all a given, and cultural, social, and political polarization may well be contested in different terms and frameworks. The nation should neither be taken as a tacitly normal framework nor neglected in its immense relevance; instead, it must be critically considered as an integral part of the flyover imaginary. (One way of transcending this national category is to consider "the nation" as *any* nation, as such fictions of hierarchies, neglect, and identity are not at all limited to the US-American context from which the particular flyover trope emerged.)

So what can you *do* with flyover, and what does this conceptual lens enlarge, make visible, and focus on? An analysis of flyover fiction looks specifically for the tri–

angular imagination and the synecdochical contest outlined above, and it also looks for instances where cultural difference is recoded as geographical difference in order to lend it the material gravity of "actual reality" instead of fictional reality. It asks who is doing the imagining, who gets to participate in the creation of these fictions, and who in contrast is only subjected to them in a passive role. It considers the reduction of complexity, whether it is in the interest of economic critique or populism, especially when it approaches a binary simplicity – metaregional generalization instead of the diversity of fine-grained particularity. It also takes the trope seriously as such: the metaphorical richness of flying over a place in the third dimension, escaping the ground-level reality below, literally looking down on those below your station, while being mindful of the connotations of class difference when it comes to access to mobility. It also historicizes this imagination, inquiring into the manifold genealogy of flyover fictions across time and media that cannot be reduced to a single discursive origin, and it identifies patterns, family resemblances, and correlations. It matches this historical scope in spatial and cultural terms, not only in looking beyond the US for parallels but also in not taking US-American culture to be monolithic. In fact, flyover fictions undermine this fantasy in the very act of catering to its hegemonic impulses. Finally, an analysis of flyover fiction keeps track of flyover as a highly ambiguous, flexible, and slippery concept, asking how its meanings, connotations, and effects change as different actors engage in the discourse – and how this reveals new genealogical strands, new histories to include, and new positions to consider. The one thing an analysis of flyover fictions must not do is try to fix the meaning of that term. Instead, it should understand, describe, and question its ambiguities as such in order to cultivate it as a critical tool while at the same time critiquing the tool itself. Granted, the concept of flyover has been so thoroughly coopted by right-wing discourse that one may well consider it to be burnt as such a critical tool. And yet the very vagueness that allowed for the prominent right-wing co-optation of flyover in the 2010s also prevents it from being fully controlled: It is an unruly concept, perhaps like populism itself, and its weaponization always creates a double-edged sword that may well hurt the one who thought he had a good grip on it. For now, the critical potential of the concept is still present despite this co-optation, and in fact the co-optation is all the more reason why a critical engagement with the concept must continue and intensify, as the polarization and populism it serves show no signs of abating.

In this spirit of a critical history of the present – of how, where, and why flyover fictions are and have been deployed – we will shift gears at this point and move from theoretical and methodological considerations to the analysis of the particularly salient and topical use of a flyover fiction with which we started this introduction:

flyover in recent (primarily) conservative political discourse. The perceived cultural as well as political powerlessness of "flyover country" that candidates and elected officials like to evoke as a rhetoric as well as strategic tool is considerably undermined by two – strongly intertwined – aspects: The long history of 'heartland' rhetoric and the actual distribution of electoral power. Since we write this in an election year, let us start with the latter. As readers of this journal will know, in the United States, the presidential election is not decided by the popular vote but the electoral college. Let us briefly revisit, though, how these electors are distributed to see how this affects the flyover dynamic.

Every state receives as many electors (and thus votes in the electoral college) as they have members in the United States Congress. While the number of representatives in the House is proportionate to the population, every state also has two senators regardless of how many people live in that state. This means that, on the one end of the spectrum, California with almost 40 million inhabitants receives 52 electors (they have 50 House representative and two senators) and, on the other end of the spectrum, Wyoming with less than 600,000 inhabitants gets three electors (they have one House representative and also two senators). Therefore, a single Californian elector represents almost 770,000 people while one elector from Wyoming represents fewer than 200,000. Consequently, a vote cast in Wyoming would actually be equal to almost four in California, which would, in turn, need approximately 200 electors for its population to be represented equally to that of Wyoming. Clearly, one of the most basic democratic principles – one person, one vote – is not the governing standard in this system. Less populated states have disproportionate power in the federal government – and not just when it comes to choosing the next president. As we mentioned above, every state gets two senators regardless of its population. The math here is even simpler: One Californian senator represents almost 20 million people, a senator from Wyoming not even 300,000. And since the president nominates and the Senate confirms (or rejects) federal judges – including the very powerful Supreme Court justices – less populated states have a much 'louder' voice in who serves on the federal benches, too.

Of course, that "[t]he Senate of the Unites States shall be composed of two Senators from each State" and "[e]ach State shall appoint . . . a Number of Electors, equal to the whole Number of Senators and Representatives to which the State may be entitled in the Congress . . ." is enshrined in the US Constitution (Article I, Section 3, Clause 1 and Article II, Section 1, Clause 2, respectively). It has thus given small and/or low population states disproportionate power since the country's founding. But, as Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt explain in their *Tyranny of the Minority*, the dynamics of who this system favors have changed drastically over time. According to them, two

developments were decisive. For one, the gap between low- and high-population states widened considerably over time, which, therefore, also increased the disparity of power. For another, by 1920, the United States became a majority urbanized country, which led to the most populous also being the most urbanized states. Consequently, "[w]hat began as a strictly small-state bias had become a *rural*-state bias" (169–70, original emphasis). As Levitsky and Ziblatt are quick to point out, though, this changed make-up of the country still did not favor one political party over another. For much of the twentieth century, the split between the Republican and Democratic Parties was not based on the rural-urban divide – both had supporters in both camps (170). But this eventually changed, as Levitsky and Ziblatt write:

> With the rise of the postindustrial knowledge economy, urban centers have become engines of economic dynamism and good jobs, while rural areas and older manufacturing centers have stagnated. At the same time, immigration has increased the ethnic and cultural diversity of many of these dynamic urban centers. (171)

This development resulted in left-leaning parties becoming more popular in cities and right-leaning parties being dominant in small towns and rural areas – and this trend did not just happen in the United States but in many Western democracies. A US-specific change in voter behavior, on the other hand, was caused by the Civil Rights Movement. Before the adoption of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts in the 1960s, voters in the rural South preferred the Democratic Party while the majority of people in the rural North voted Republican. Afterwards, the former (primarily the white people among this group, though) quickly moved towards the Republicans (171), a change that was likely aided by the so-called Southern strategy, i.e., the Republicans active embrace of Southern Democratic voters who disagreed with the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement. Following that period, rates remained relatively stable for the next 25 years (Mettler and Brown 131).

In *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America*, Robert Wuthnow observes the same shift in party support. While in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan still managed to receive votes from both rural and urban areas, the divide between large cities and suburbs backing Democratic presidential candidates and small towns supporting Republican candidates has been growing consistently since then (138). Trevor E. Brown and Suzanne Mettler's extensive study of the rural-urban political divide shows just how rapidly this split emerged. From the Republican Richard Nixon to the Democrat Bill Clinton, the difference between votes from the two areas was negligible and remained largely the same. However, starting in 2000, the two sides have kept moving further away from each other with every election cycle (3). According to Brown and Mettler, "[t]he gulf between them has grown from just two percentage points as recently as 1992 to 21 by 2020" (2).

The result of all these historical developments is that US federal elections are skewed in favor of the Republican Party. Even if (and when) the Democrats receive a majority of actual votes cast nationally, this does not (necessarily) translate to a Democratic president or a majority in the Senate. As Levitsky and Ziblatt summarize: "the Constitution's small-state bias, which became a *rural* bias in the twentieth century, has become a *partisan bias* in the twenty-first century" (171, original emphasis). The election of Donald Trump in 2016 encapsulated all these dynamics at play. As is commonly known, he lost the popular vote against Hillary Clinton by almost three million votes and yet won the electoral college and thus became president. And, as Wuthnow highlights, Trump received an incredible 62 percent of the rural, an even 50 percent of the suburban, and only 35 percent of the urban vote (1). Or as Senator Cruz framed Trump's victory to applause at the 2016 Federal Society National Lawyers Convention: "This election could be well understood as the revenge of flyover country" (qtd. in "Federalist Society" 00:31:26–33).

Importantly, we do not simply equate the concept of "flyover" with "rural America," since this would do neither of them justice. While flyover may draw on connotations of rurality in its conceptual ambiguity, it actually transcends a simplified rural-urban binary and offers a different perspective on polarization that may or may not align with this opposition. (After all, where do Chicago and Detroit fit in the flyover/coastal binary?) However, the states whose inhabitants call their own state "flyover" or claim that others do are, in fact, primarily low-population, more rural states, which, thus, have disproportionate power in choosing the elected officials in the federal government. The politicians who evoke the flyover narrative in order to defend the area they represent and attack metropolitan areas are mostly (though, as shown above, not exclusively) Republicans, whose party has a clear advantage in federal elections. And yet, so the lament goes, it is the liberal coastal elites that dominate the country and either ignore or look down on the rest. This perceived and/or strategically postulated powerlessness of "flyover country" may be the ultimate flyover fiction. Particularly, the opposition to Washington politics or the "Washington elite" is curious given how overrepresented they, in fact, are. In 2014, Barack Obama made a pointed joke about these structural disadvantages of high-population states and the Democratic Party. When asked by a supporter how they could help him, he quipped: "Move to North Dakota! . . . If I could just get about a million surplus votes in Brooklyn out to Nebraska, Wyoming" (qtd. in Reuters).

Besides Democratic votes, what would also increase in Nebraska and Wyoming if such a collective move were to take place is the racial and ethnic diversity of their populations. Even though rural counties have become less white over time, at only 24 % people of color are still the clear minority with a share that is well below the

whole country's, which is about 42 % (Rowlands and Love). As a result, white voters have disproportionate structural power in Washington. This problem is compounded by the fact that the five inhabited US territories (Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, US Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands) have no representation in the Senate (and only non-voting members in the House of Representatives) and do not get to participate in the presidential election. All of them have a high nonwhite population. In Puerto Rico, for instance, only 17.1 % are white (US Census Bureau, "Puerto Rico") and with over three million inhabitants, this single territory is bigger than 19 of the 50 US states (US Census Bureau, "QuickFacts"). And while the District of Columbia (i.e., Washington, DC), whose majority of inhabitants are of color (US Census Bureau, "District of Columbia"), does get three electors in the electoral college, they, like the US territories, have no representation in the Senate either. This has devastating consequences for how people of color are represented in the federal government. According to a *New York Times* report (provocatively titled "The Senate: Affirmative Action for White People"), the

> Senate gives the average black American only 75 percent as much representation as the average white American. The average Asian-American has 72 percent as much representation as a white person. And the average Hispanic American . . . only 55 percent as much. (Leonhardt)

Nonetheless (or therefore?), Trump's ascension to the highest office, which was made possible by all these structural advantages, was considered "the revenge of flyover country."

Interestingly, the way Wuthnow describes the relationship between rural communities and Washington is reminiscent of flyover's contradictory feeling of simultaneously being ignored and imposed upon – "the government ignores us and . . . intrudes in our lives" (9). And federal policies that affect them in ways they do not appreciate were not only perceived as an intrusion but "further evidence of being looked down on" (110). This begs the question why so many people with demonstrably outsize power to decide who is sent to Washington neither feel empowered nor that their values are represented there. Wuthnow explains this in part by the perceived (rather than geographical) distance and a critical discrepancy in size between Washington and wherever they call their home, a view that many people living in rural areas or small towns communicated to him:

> The basis of small-town life is not only that it is "rural" but that it is small . . . Whether Washington was "up there," "down there," or someplace else in people's minds, it was so far away . . . Whoever Washington was listening to, it wasn't anybody "small." Not the small farmer, the small-business owner, or people living in small places. It was somebody "big." It was the big interests, big cities, big businesses, and big farmers. Washington itself was big, too big to get anything done, run by the big boys who only knew how

> to talk big. It was "a bunch of big-headed guys" there with brilliant ideas that didn't work. . . . "Remember the little man" was a frequent plea. (98)

In other words, Washington is too remote to be able to understand and too big to even care to, so it cannot possibly be working for them.

Schaller and Waldman, however, see more sinister forces at work. They argue that conservative politicians (as Democrats did some time before them) aided by conservative news outlets foster these emotions by design: "Unfortunately, rural White Americans are told daily by the people they trust that . . . their fellow Americans who live in suburbs and cities look at them with disdain and that the answer is to look back with their own brand of belligerent contempt" (11). In other words, they use the triangular flyover imagination – 1) *we* imagine how 2) *they* imagine 3) *us* – and the resulting culture wars which focus on opposing values in lieu of fighting for policies that would actually help these areas. This, as Schaller and Waldman claim, is the reason people who live in rural areas – or, as we would extrapolate, who believe to live in flyover country – "feel passed over, desperate, even angry *despite winning elections*" (15, emphasis added).

Besides the disproportionate political power, there is another paradox that lies at the heart of flyover in this context – particularly the notions that its values are disparaged and the only culture that counts happens and is produced elsewhere. As Schaller and Waldman explain: "As much as rural people are convinced (not always without reason) that they are looked down upon, the lionization of them and rural culture is an equally powerful force" (104). To us, this is the difference and, in fact, highly interesting tension between the flyover and the heartland narratives. The rhetoric employed shows striking parallels but strongly departs when it comes to connotation and tone. The heartland describes an only slightly less loosely and diffusely defined area somewhere in 'the middle' of the United States (so it at least must exclude the coasts) than flyover. To this day, it is, and thus its people and values are, consistently championed, if not glorified, by the media (including left-leaning news outlets and Hollywood) and politicians (from both parties) alike. What these values are can also vary and be hard to pin down exactly, except that they are definitely all virtuous. People there are good people – hard-working, down-to-earth, humble, respectful, patriotic. They care for their families and neighbors as much as for their country. Perhaps above all they are authentic. What is, at the very least, implicit in this imagination is that these characteristics then do not apply to people living in the 'non-heartland'; for them, they are at best aspirational.

Importantly, this also suggests that the hegemonic normative power wielded by these cultural centers is somewhat presumptuous and illegitimate: They define the national norm while the *true* national norm is elsewhere, and so their norms must be

inauthentic and indeed alien to the genuine nationality that resides elsewhere. Again, this is the synecdochical contest of two sides that both employ a pars-pro-toto logic as they claim to be the part that best represents and defines the whole, and both of these positions are fictional in their triangular imaginations of self and other. This logic finds a close correspondence in populism, an ideology and rhetorical strategy defined by a distinction between an authentic people and the inauthentic elites that illegitimately rule them, with the added claim that "only some of the people are really the people" (Müller 21). It is no surprise that the rise of populism in the US in the 21st century coincides with the rise of flyover rhetoric and the shift of the trope from regional banter to a political weapon: Flyover is the ready-made blueprint for an imagination of polarization, and populism eventually embraced it especially because its vagueness ideally catered to the emotional appeal at the heart of this ideology.

Since this rise of populism in the US has mainly been a right-wing phenomenon, with the founding of the Tea Party and especially the election of Donald Trump to the presidency in 2016 as the major milestones, it is unsurprising that the heartland rhetoric and the flyover trope have become associated much more strongly with conservatism and the Republican Party. In the first chapter of *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, Thomas Frank describes the media coverage of the 2000 presidential election, which marked the first time all major television networks used the color red on the electoral map to designate that the Republicans and blue to indicate that the Democrats had won a given state (see also Kornacki 418–20). If one did not look too closely at this map (and many pundits decided not to because it would have undermined their predetermined take of the election), it could look as if the coasts were primarily blue and the middle solidly red. With this simple visual aid, commentators attempting to explain the meaning behind George W. Bush's victory over Al Gore were off to the races. As Frank puts it succinctly:

> From this one piece of evidence, the electoral map, the pundits simply veered off into authoritative-sounding cultural proclamation. Just by looking at the map, they reasoned, we could easily tell that George W. Bush was the choice of the plain people, the grassroots Americans who inhabited the place we know as the "heartland," a region of humility, guilelessness, and, above all, stout yeoman righteousness. The Democrats, on the other hand, were the party of the elite. Just by looking at the map we could see that liberals were sophisticated, wealthy, and materialistic. (16)

This made-up division of values and imprecise geography along party lines continued and even exacerbated during subsequent election cycles. During the 2008 election campaign, Republican vice-presidential candidate, Sarah Palin, repeatedly called small-town America the "real America" that stood in stark contrast with big town elites (see Klecker). Not much later, the flyover trope became more prominent within

the political discourse. Like *heartland*, *flyover*, too, focuses on a certain set of desirable (conservative) values and people that are considered the only authentic and real America. But it also adds a central ingredient that the heartland imagination does not contain: victimhood. The emphasis shifted from primarily a confident view about 'us' – we know we are the real and authentic America – to an apparent attack coming from 'them' – why do they not agree (anymore) with this self-evident assertion?

All these dynamics have been on display again during the 2024 presidential election. Since the incumbent president, Joe Biden, withdrew his candidacy in July, both major parties have chosen 'coastal elites' on the top of their respective presidential tickets – Kamala Harris from California and Donald Trump from New York. Both candidates, in turn, have chosen people from the Midwest (read: "flyover country") as their vice-presidential nominees: the already mentioned Tim Walz, governor of Minnesota, and J. D. Vance, Senator from Ohio. Only one of the two tickets can boast 'coastal elite' Ivy League School graduates, though, and it is not the Democratic one. As Trump has bragged repeatedly, he went to the Wharton School, which is the business school at the University of Pennsylvania, and, as Vance famously wrote in his memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*, he attended Yale Law School.

Interestingly, there is actually little evidence that either Harris or Trump chose their running mate on the basis that they should not be 'from the coasts.' Trump's list of potential running mates contained several people from the East Coast, even Elise Stefanik, a House representative from New York (Bender and Lieberman). Harris, according to news reporting, focused more on balancing her demographics rather than geography, which was reflected by the fact that Josh Shapiro, governor of the coastal state of Pennsylvania, ended up in the top two as well as that her shortlist included exclusively white men (Lerer et al.). As Elaine Godfrey in *The Atlantic* half-jokingly commented: "the vice president could be looking to make a diversity hire." However, the media coverage after their respective announcements as vice presidential candidates was full of references of how they would help rally voters from "middle America" (on Vance see, for instance, Popli; Gomez et al.; on Walz, for instance, Norris; Zurcher). This specific take on the picks was more pronounced, though, in the case of Walz. As, for example, *USA Today* wrote in reaction to his speech at the Democratic National Convention (which took place in Chicago): "The Midwest has long been considered 'flyover country' by many on the coasts. But in Chicago, the Midwest has temporarily taken over as the center of the political universe" (Pfannenstiel and Woodward). Or as Nancy Pelosi, Congresswoman from San Francisco and former Democratic Speaker of the House, was quoted in *The New York Times*: "It says to the heartland of America, 'You're not a flyover zone for us – we're all together in this'" (qtd. in Goldmacher et al.). Clearly, flyover rhetoric and dynamics are at play again

during the 2024 election cycle. Whether it is a winning strategy remains to be seen (as of this writing).

The contributions in this special issue titled "(Re)Imagining Flyover Fictions" explore related and also rather timely flyover fictions as we attempted in our analysis above. Phillip J. Ardoin's article, "From the Capitol to the Heartland: Analyzing Congressional Rhetoric and the 'Flyover Country' Narrative," offers a comprehensive study of the use of flyover rhetoric in committee hearings, congressional speeches, as well as correspondence with their constituents from 1995 to 2024 by members of the United States Congress. He tracks the development of the flyover trope as political tool over these decades and offers important insights into the various themes and talking points that it helps promote.

In "Murray Rothbard's Populist Blueprint: Paleo-Libertarianism and the Scent of the Political Right," David Bebnowski explores political discourse during roughly the same time period but in a decidedly different manner. He traces right-wing populist politics from Donald Trump's presidential election victory in 2016 back to libertarian strategies as articulated by Murray Rothbard in the early 1990s. Using flyover as a framework, he analyzes how Rothbard's pamphlet can be read as a road map for conservatives to employ imaginations of "middle America" and "real people" for political gain.

Eva-Maria Müller's article, "'Magic Dirt": Transcending Great Divides in Scott McClanahan's *Crapalachia*, moves away from considerations of party and campaign rhetoric in the narrowest sense but, nonetheless, explores political issues. She reads the semi-autobiography as both flyover and extraction fiction and deconstructs their dynamics in the process. Her analysis of this book about a young man growing up in a West Virginian valley is framed by her conceptualization of the Appalachian Mountains, flattened over decades by MRT mining, as a symbol for the flyover imagination.

In the last contribution, "'Out there in that cabin in the middle of nowhere in Montana': Narrating the Geographical and Mental Deviance of the Unabomber," Robert A. Winkler identifies the dominant media coverage of the domestic terrorist dubbed "Unabomber" in the wake of his capture (and even some criticism of said media coverage) as a flyover fiction. He argues that, among others, by focusing on his cabin in Montana, modelled after Henry David Thoreau's in *Walden*, the media lumped together geography, culture, and mental health in order to discredit the terrorist's criticism of modern technology.

All contributions included here provide us with new ways to consider timely cultural and political issues in the United States. They are an invitation to think about the flyover trope in different ways – but always, first and last, as a *fiction*.

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