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# Re-envisioning America's Frontier: A Speculative Journey through John Wesley Powell's Expedition to the American West and Jaclyn Backhaus's *Men on Boats*

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## ABSTRACT

Histories of the American West, including reports of settler colonial expeditions to newly occupied territories of the United States and accounts of life at the "frontier" have often been told as "heroic tales: stories of adventure, exploration and conflict" (Jameson and Armitage 10). White cisgender male protagonists captured the imagination of Americans in historiography and fiction. Gradually, historians like Patricia Limerick (1987), Anne M. Butler and Michael J. Lansing (2008), and Stephen Aron (2022) acted as game changers when they re-told the story of the American West as a shared space where different groups came into contact and conflict. Limerick describes the American West as "an important meeting ground" (27). This article argues that Jaclyn Backhaus's play *Men on Boats* (2015) brings such a "meeting ground" to the stage by re-versioning the story of the first government-sanctioned expedition on the Colorado River (1869). By means of an analysis of the play's devices, particularly its gender-fluid mode of casting, the article demonstrates how the dramatic text challenges the dominant ideology of manifest destiny and actively engages the audience in a transformative reimagining of America's frontier. This article dissects multiple versions of the Powell narrative: Powell's journal, a bronze statue of his boat, a monument on the Grand Canyon's South Rim, and a dramatic reimagining of Powell's journey performed by students based on Backhaus's text. It concludes with findings from two acting workshops conducted in the summer and winter semesters of 2023-2024, where pre-service teachers engaged with *Men on Boats* as the core text.

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**KEYWORDS**

Westward expansion, Manifest Destiny, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Colorado River, Grand Canyon, mapping, gender, theater workshop, performance studies

Narratives of the American West, including reports of settler colonial expeditions to newly occupied territories of the United States and accounts of life at the "frontier," have often been told as "heroic tales: stories of adventure, exploration and conflict" (Jameson and Armitage 10), depicting the larger historical process of westward expansion as the glorious achievement of White[1] men guided by Manifest Destiny. In 1869, the first government sanctioned expedition to explore and map the region of the Colorado River and its canyons was undertaken by Major John Wesley Powell, a geologist, teacher, and Civil War veteran. Together with nine other crew members, Powell set out on the Green River in Wyoming, aiming to explore the Colorado River in its entirety. After three months of navigating the river in simple wooden boats, covering a distance of more than a thousand miles, six out of the original ten expedition members successfully reached Arizona and southern Nevada via the Grand Canyon. During this time, the expedition was widely believed to have failed because no updates had been received about its progress ("The Story of John Wesley Powell"). Powell's version of the 1869 expedition is included in his *Exploration of the Colorado River of the West and Its Tributaries* (1875). Accounts such as Powell's that typically center on the experience of White cisgender male protagonists have captured the imagination of US-Americans, at the same time erasing the darker sides of the history and obliterating the experiences of others whose stories were marginalized due to their race, ethnicity or gender. This tendency was furthered by a lack of records and a lack of recognition of the few existing records by women, Indigenous peoples, Hispanics, Chinese (railroad workers), and many other ethnic groups, who had a major influence on the many histories (and versions) of the American West.

However, since the 1980s, the academic work of especially female historians and critics, such as Patricia Nelson Limerick, Susan Armitage, and Elizabeth Jameson, has led to the reassessment and reinterpretation of the history of this region. These revisionist versions reject the authority of a single dominant narrative of the history of the American West and include the experience of Native Americans, various ethnic

[1] We follow critics and journalists of Color who advocate for the capitalization of all racial and ethnic identity markers, including "White." This choice reflects our commitment to challenging the notion of Whiteness as a neutral or invisible category. Instead, we aim to highlight Whiteness as a racial construct and draw attention to its role in shaping social and political structures, as well as community dynamics (Nguyễn and Pendleton).

groups, and women. Patricia Limerick, Clyde A. Milner et al., Anne M. Butler and Michael J. Lansing, Paul Boyer, and Stephen Aron do not primarily focus on the actions of White people but encourage us to look at the West as a shared space in which different groups came into contact and conflict, as "an important meeting ground, the point where Indian America, Latin America, Anglo-America, Afro-America, and Asia intersected" (Limerick 27).

This perspective on the American West, emphasizing diverse interactions and shared spaces, provides a valuable framework for examining how these themes are also taken up and explored in literature. The play that our article focuses on, *Men on Boats* by Punjabi-American playwright Jaclyn Backhaus, reimagines the Colorado River voyage by John Wesley Powell and his men, creating a "meeting ground" as Limerick describes it. The text fundamentally questions the ideological basis of a Eurocentric, totalizing version of the history of the American West.[2] Moreover, by employing techniques characteristic of Linda Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction" (5), the play not only reconfigures traditional historical narratives but also exposes and interrogates the underlying ideologies that shape what we accept as historical truth. This article critically analyzes the play's speculative re-envisioning of the frontier, its dramatic strategies, and its gender-fluid and multi-racial mode of casting to show how the dramatic text critically challenges the dominant ideology of Manifest Destiny and actively engages the audience in a transformative re-imagining of America's frontier. To do this, our argument turns to Powell and his crew's experience as existing in multiple versions, including his own account of the expedition, a bronze statue of his boat, the Powell Monument on the Grand Canyon's South Rim, and a reimagination of Powell's journey based on Backhaus's text performed by students as a class project. The aim of incorporating these versions into this analysis is to highlight the idea of "versioning" the past as a political act of revision.

## Sociohistorical Context of the 1869 Expedition

To critically engage with the play's reinterpretation, it is essential to briefly contextualize the historical framework of the 1869 expedition that it relies on. The main objective of Powell's journey was to explore the geography of the region and to collect information on the geology as well as data on the Native American peoples inhabiting the area. Although the scientific results from the expedition were limited (Kirsch 554–55), the success of the pioneering journey turned Powell into a hero in the media and

[2] Since *Men on Boats* (2015), Backhaus has written and produced several plays, including *India Pale Ale* (2018), for which she won the 2018 Horton Foote Prize for Promising New American Play. She has written *Wives* (2019), *Out on the Moors Now* (2019), *Out of Time* (2022), and she has also been involved in projects for film and television. On her website, Backhaus states that her "work in theater and for the screen centers the multigenerational impact of South Asian diasporic immigration to America, and many of her works examine the intersection of underhistoricized people and known historical timelines" ("Jaclyn Backhaus").

in the eyes of the public (Kirsch 548; Warren and St. John 11). In the following years, Powell continued to explore and survey the region of the Grand Canyon and documented his findings in several publications. Most relevant for the critical analysis of Backhaus's play is Powell's account of the 1869 expedition included in his *Exploration of the Colorado River of the West and Its Tributaries* (1875). Powell is probably best known for his *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* (1879), which is "recognized as a foundational piece in American environmental thought" (Kirsch 548) and in which he argued for "the sustainable settlement of the American West" (Thompson). He thus made significant contributions to early climate science and land use planning, helping to establish the United States Geological Survey (USGS) and advocating for comprehensive topographic mapping and national mapping standards. His work laid the foundation for the current US Topodigital topographic map series ("John Wesley Powell"). Powell is therefore still esteemed both as a pioneering scientist and a daring explorer.

Since the 2000s, scholars have increasingly interrogated the motivations and contexts behind Powell's explorations, arguing that his assessments were not only objective accounts but also politically charged instruments (Kirsch; Lerberg). Scott Kirsch specifically critiques how his reports and maps were produced as "part of a wider traffic of knowledge linking Washington to the western territories" – a deliberate strategy to make the region legible and manageable for the government (548). Other critics maintain that Powell's anthropological research as the Director of the Bureau of Ethnology at the Smithsonian presupposed the racial inferiority of Native Americans (West 115; Pico) and point out that he regarded the removal of Native Americans to reservations as an inevitable step (Thompson). The complicated legacy of Powell will be examined more closely later in this article.

**The Frontier and the Ideology of Manifest Destiny**

The critical analysis of the play focuses on two key theoretical concepts: the frontier and Manifest Destiny, the latter notably articulated by John O'Sullivan. We agree with Elliot West when he points out that the frontier is an "evocative and elusive" word and that "few persons can agree on what the frontier was, yet few will deny it existed" (115). In his article "Go West! Frontier und die 'Idee' America," Wilfried Mausbach explains that the frontier is a basic motif that has influenced and defined the identity of the United States almost like no other idea, a motif signifying both the borderline of settlement and the horizon of progress, a boundary line which is continuously pushed further (5). Mausbach, of course, alludes to the hypothesis proposed by historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who "envisioned the development of a unique American identity based on the experiences of colonial settlers during westward expan-

sion" (Lerberg 302). In a speech delivered in front of the American Historical Association in Chicago in 1893, Turner described the frontier both as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" and "the line of most rapid and effective Americanization" (200, 201), arguing that during the colonist's experience of confronting the conditions of the frontier, characteristics perceived as typically US-American were engendered, such as individualism, practicality, ingenuity, and nervous energy. Although few scholars today would dispute Turner's profound impact, his argument has been dismantled for various reasons, ranging from the (false) assumption of the availability of "free land" for settlement to the fact that it "ignores Native Americans, Hispanics, Chinese, African Americans, [and] women" (Mitchell 449).

We concur with scholarship that presents a revised view of the frontier. In 1999, Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron argued that the frontier should be seen not as a boundary but as "a meeting place of peoples in which geographic and cultural borders were not clearly defined," effectively depicting frontiers as "*borderless* lands" (815–16, original emphasis). This perspective has become a cornerstone of current historiography, with historians today examining the intercultural relationships among various ethnic groups (Aron) and increasingly focusing on issues such as "racialization, economic power, land use, and gender models to understand the West" (Butler and Lansing 8).

The ideology of Manifest Destiny, which constitutes the main target of criticism in *Men on Boats*, generally refers to the doctrine "that U.S. expansion westward and southward was inevitable, just, and divinely ordained" (Black). The term was first coined by John O'Sullivan, an editor of *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, when he wrote in the July-August issue of 1845 that it was "our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence" (5). Several scholars have corroborated that the ideological concept of Manifest Destiny was inextricably connected with the process of westward expansion and used to justify territorial conquest (Butler and Lansing 110; Boyer et al.; Hine et al.).

**Reframing History: The Use(s) of Bodies**

To fully grasp how *Men on Boats* destabilizes the notion of Manifest Destiny, it is useful to draw on Judith Butler's theories of body performativity, which have fundamentally reshaped how theater and performance studies scholars understand identity, the body, and representation in theater. Her works *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1995) challenge the fixed nature of gender and highlight its constructed, performative aspects. By positing that the audience ascribes meaning to Blackness, maleness, and youth before entering the theater, Butler prompted a reevaluation of the notion of gender as fixed, which gradually endowed individuals with greater agency (xiv–xv).

Audiences bring preconceived notions to the theater and often project these onto the bodies of actors and their performances. Similarly, social conventions and our experience of history shape our expectations regarding the casting of John Wesley Powell, typically envisioning a White male actor in the role. These conventions also influence our reactions as audience members when we encounter a woman of Color playing this character. Seeing a Black woman as Powell may evoke a range of emotions – surprise, excitement, disappointment, confusion, frustration, or a combination of these. While the centrality of the body to dramatic action may seem self-evident, a play that challenges the conventional presentation of a body as well as the fact *whose* bodies are represented prompts deeper reflection. Robin Javonne Smith's performance at the 2017 production of the SpeakEasy Stage Company in Boston invites audiences to reconsider what they know about the history of the exploration of the West and the character of Powell as older and White ("Who's Who"). If we read the actor's body as a (theatrical) device that communicates meaning, this is also true for Smith's body; her race, age, and physical appearance prompt audiences to reflect on historicization and identity (Figure 1).

The playwright specifically requests this form of casting in the stage directions to her play, where she notes that *Men on Boats* is a play that "begs to be cast outside of the realm of the white cisgender male who would normally play these characters. It is important to populate the world of the play with people who would not have originally been on these boats, people who stand outside the realm of the White male conquest storyline, and who are normally not allowed to tell stories like these" (Backhaus, *Men on Boats* 2). In an interview, Backhaus expands on this idea, explaining that if historical accuracy were strictly followed, we would only hear the stories of a limited group of individuals, restricting our understanding of history (Banks). The diverse casting seeks to prompt audiences to reflect on this limitation and critically question whose stories are being told. In this vein, *Men on Boats* echoes the message of Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*, which premiered in the same year and announces in one of its most memorable lines that it is pertinent, "who lives, who dies, who tells your story." Both *Hamilton* and *Men on Boats* offer a platform for groups historically excluded from stories about the American Revolution and westward expansion, respectively.[3] These productions feature individuals of various genders (*Men on Boats*) and racial backgrounds (*Men on Boats*, *Hamilton*), providing a richer, more inclusive perspective on those historical eras (Vollmann). However, as Backhaus herself admits in an interview, there is an inherent challenge in retelling such stories, as adapting them risks

[3] In a similar vein, director Bill Rauch fulfilled his decades-long vision of producing a queer, interracial version of *Oklahoma!* with an all-women cast at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) in the spring of 2018. Lindsey Mantoan reflected on this production, concluding that it "is inventive and also a return to a more diverse, thus more historically accurate, representation of the frontier before the Territory joined the United States in 1907" (42).

reinforcing the very narratives – such as Manifest Destiny – that glorify figures and ideologies responsible for significant harm and oppression (Banks).

The casting of historically excluded individuals in *Men on Boats* goes beyond a mere thought or social experiment; it fundamentally reshapes the theatrical experience. As dramaturg Summer Banks argues, this casting choice "served as a reminder that theatre *tells* a story, it doesn't re-enact it" (Banks, original emphasis). Elissa Harbert notes that the "deliberate diversification of a theatrical act is a political act" (253) which, we would add, not only reflects on the past but also opens up new possibilities for envisioning alternative futures.

**Figure 1:** *Men on Boats* Photo-of-Cast.
This photo, "Cast of *Men on Boats* at SpeakEasy Stage Company" by Nile Scott Shots/Nile Hawver, was originally published on HowlRound Theatre Commons (howlround.com/men-and-women-and-non-binary-people-boats), on 26 Sept. 2018. It is licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Finally, the effect of defamiliarization achieved through the choice of casting in *Men on Boats* is crucial. By assigning the roles of the protagonists to actors that are "anything but" White cisgender male, the playwright defamiliarizes the story of Powell's expedition. By radically reframing Powell's story through a matriarchal lens – akin to Greta Gerwig's depiction of Barbieland in her 2023 film *Barbie*, in which women are central to power and all aspects of the world revolve around them – *Men on Boats* challenges us with, as Harbert puts it, "new versions of an ever-shifting cultural memory" (254).

## Critical Analysis of Dramatic Strategies

*Men on Boats* critiques the traditional narrative of the American West and outdated concepts of the frontier not through casting alone; its use of dramatic strategies plays an equally significant role. The following critical analysis will illustrate how storytelling, rumors, and journal writing contribute to the play's meaning making and how the use of language, irony, and satirical humor function to challenge influential ideological constructs, including the concept of the frontier and the ideology of Manifest Destiny.

## Storytelling and the Revisionist Versioning of History/ies

Storytelling and rumors occupy a central place in *Men on Boats* and underline the play's critical perspective of history. While some of the stories are told by characters in the play, such as the story of Bradley's mother, the readers and the audience are made aware of other stories that exist, for instance, the untold story of how Major Powell lost his[4] arm during the American Civil War or what really happened to Powell's brother "Old Shady" as a prisoner of war. Like Bradley, the youngest member of the crew, who gets only bits and pieces of these stories from Old Shady, the audience and readers are left to speculate about these other stories, which reach them only in the form of rumors and tall tales.

While stories are shown to have a powerful effect on the characters, the play also suggests that it is impossible to assess their validity, as particularly the rumors surrounding a possible earlier unsuccessful expedition into this region by a man named Ashley show: Both Powell and Sumner emphasize that the story of the failed Ashley expedition is true, despite the fact that the source of the story is questionable, since the man from whom Powell has heard it is a lunatic.

*Men on Boats* includes several instances of Powell writing in his journals or discussing the entries. These scenes draw attention to the constructed nature of history, prompting the audience to question the idea of its natural and unbiased emergence. This can be observed, for instance, in scene 1.4, in which Powell and his crew are acutely aware of the fact that the journal will eventually become the official history of the expedition: Using irony and humor, the theatrical text emphasizes that power and authority play an important role in the process of telling and writing history. The protagonists have just suffered an accident on the river and survey their provisions. Powell warns his brother Old Shady that if he does not take good care of the coffee beans, Powell will depict him negatively in the historical report he is writing. Although

[4] The pronouns he/him/his are used for readability when referring to characters in the play, although all roles are intended to be cast with actors who are "anything but" White cisgender men. A full representation of the cast would require the use of multiple pronouns to reflect this intentionally diverse casting choice.

the remark is delivered in a joking manner, Powell's comment nevertheless constitutes a clear assertion of his power and of the fact that he is in control of the historical narrative.

A short scene at the end of the play (scene 3.6) functions as a final warning to the audience not to trust historical accounts because they are always inaccurate and incomplete: When the six surviving members of the expedition emerge from the Grand Canyon, they are met by a desert settler named Mr. Asa. He congratulates them on their success and dismisses their concerns about the fate of the missing crew members, showing clear indifference to their fate. Asa's remark, "Well, we won't mention them until they've survived officially," implies that the experiences of those who perish are often excluded from the creation of historical accounts.

**Imaginary Frontiers**

In analyzing the representation of the frontier in *Men on Boats*, scene 1.7 is particularly significant as it centers on the concept. The arguments made by the crew members emphasize key aspects of this ideological construct: the false notion of 'free land' available for exploration and possession, and the individual's confrontation with a supposedly hostile environment. In the conversation depicted in this scene, the human dream to explore new and unknown territories and the desire to stand out emerge as two of the main motives of those seeking the experience of what they imagined to be the frontier.

When Powell brings up the story of Ashley's earlier but deadly expedition, Bradley reacts in a concerned and disappointed way:

> Bradley:[5] Wait, I thought we were the first ones to go down these streams
> Hall: Well, we're the first sanctioned by the government
> Seneca: Plenty of Natives have run these rivers before us
> O.G.: And plenty of Americans too, but most of them were deserters on the lam. Running away from the front lines of the war. So no one counts them.
> Bradley: I just guess I assumed we were on the frontier. I've always wanted to be the first at something.
> (Backhaus, *Men on Boats*, 2021, 243)

Powell's and Sumner's reactions to Bradley's comment are significant: Firstly, Powell reassures Bradley that they are actually on the frontier, which they are constantly pushing forward; secondly, the story of Ashley is itself a strong reminder of the life-threatening risks that exist at every moment of the undertaking.

Furthermore, Powell cautiously adds that the vested interest of the government in this expedition may change their experience entirely. Speaking in a similar vein,

[5] There are no colons after the character names in the original. We inserted them throughout to improve readability.

Sumner points out that the comforts of civilization they are able to enjoy during their trip render their journey a cozier and therefore less original frontier experience:

> Powell: Make no mistake, Bradley. We are on the frontier.
> But a government-sanctioned frontier is much different than uncharted land.
> Sumner: Believe me, kid. We have boats, we have somebody who makes us coffee. We have a map-maker. This is cushy frontiering.
> (Backhaus, *Men on Boats*, 2021, 243)

These statements satirically allude to some of the ideological concepts and hypotheses about the development and the state of US history that circulated in intellectual circles at the end of the nineteenth century. In particular, Sumner's remark satirizes the alleged process of Americanization on the frontier that Turner proclaimed. The irony evident in this and other scenes in the play serve a clear purpose. They aim at establishing a critical distance to myths of heroic adventures at the frontier. However, it is important to note that while *Men on Boats* cautions the audience to question tales conjuring up the grandeur of Powell's 1869 voyage, the play nevertheless acknowledges the outstanding personal strength of the characters, who are portrayed as courageous and sympathetic.

### Re-naming and Mapping in *Men on Boats*

*Men on Boats* emphasizes mapping and the naming of the landscape, along with a clever manipulation of language, to critique the concept of Manifest Destiny. This is best exemplified in scenes 1.2 and 2.5. The second scene of the first act depicts Powell and his crew engaged in the activity of inventing names for landmarks they encounter during their river journey. However, the dialogue Backhaus has imagined for this scene encourages the audience to view these acts of naming – or rather re-naming – geographical points and regions in the context of the settler-colonial history of the American West, as acts of conquest. In this way, the scene directly refers to the disastrous consequences of westward expansion and the ideology of Manifest Destiny, above all to the forced displacement (and extinction) of Native Americans. Despite the seriousness of the topic, the play approaches it with irony and humor at the expense of the explorers.

This is evident in the passage in which the audience observes Dunn's efforts to have a mountain named after himself. When Powell forces the hunter to iterate the three "Unwritten Rules" that have been established for getting something named and Dunn attempts to justify his claim, the whole absurdity of the concept becomes apparent:

> Dunn: The Unwritten Rules for Getting Something Named After You *are*:
> 1. You are the sole discoverer of the thing
> 2. You accomplished something directly in relation to the thing
> 3. No one objects and everyone agrees

Powell: Can you prove those points?
Dunn: Yup! 1. I remarked on the strange colors and jagged edges of that mountain before either of you.
Sumner: Wait no, that was me.
Powell: What did you say, Sumner?
Sumner: I said, "Would ya look at that"
(Backhaus, *Men on Boats*, 2021, 235)

The argument between Powell, Dunn, and Sumner not only reveals the arbitrariness and essential meaninglessness of the rules, but it also reflects the power structures that define the hierarchy in the group. Powell, as the leader of the expedition, is the ultimate authority when it comes to naming; he grants others the privilege of proposing names for landmarks or having them named, but it is he alone who makes the final decisions. This is exemplified by the case of "Knife's Point," a mountain in the area that was explored by Powell and his crew which still carries that name today.

Powell: You'll have your mountain, Dunn.
Sumner: Let's call the mountain Knife's Peak. Cause it looks like a knife
Powell: Or … Knife's Point. I like that better.
Dunn: That's super literal though
Powell: "I hereby name this mountain Knife's Point."
There. Where's my journal?
(Backhaus, *Men on Boats*, 2021, 235)

Apart from scenes that center on the topic of re-naming, *Men on Boats* contains many references to the work of cartography: The play shows crew members engaged in the task of producing maps, points out their responsibilities for producing maps, and frequently mentions the scientific instruments required for this work. The recurring theme of mapping as colonial and imperial practice reminds the reader and the audience of one of the main objectives of the historical expedition, which was to produce detailed maps of the region to assert territorial sovereignty, legitimize claims with regard to extractive agriculture, water rights, mining, and settlement policies, while ignoring existing indigenous knowledge about and ownership of the land. Moreover, it was also expected that the information on maps and the scientific data collected would aid the government in their interactions with Native American tribes living on these lands (Kirsch 549). This aspect of the expedition is viewed critically by scholars, in particular the fact that Powell's maps of proper land use made "the Colorado River legible to the US government as capital to be owned and exploited" (Pico).

**Use of Language as a Means to Challenge the Ideology of Manifest Destiny**

The ideology of Manifest Destiny that was dominant in the nineteenth century and the process of westward expansion are connected with the creation of stereotypical images of Native Americans (Limerick 19). In its essence, the doctrine of Manifest

Destiny upheld the view that Native Americans were savages, lacking culture and civilization, a view that is reflected in John Gast's painting *American Progress* (1872) as well as Turner's frontier hypothesis. *Men on Boats* effectively challenges the degrading view of Native Americans by ironically subverting expectations of their conversational skills. This strategy can be observed in a scene that appeared in the original production of the play but which the author removed from its later, published version "out of respect to this tribe, and the noted erasure of Indigenous perspectives from most recorded Western histories." Yet, Backhaus was aware that doing so "effectively removed a crucial lens – that of the Ute tribespeople with whom Powell meets" (Author's Note on Act Two, Scene Five, *Men on Boats*, 2021, 225). The scene referred to here depicts Powell's, Sumner's, and Goodman's visit to the Ute reservation, a trip they are forced to make because Goodman has decided to leave the expedition and because their provisions have reached a critical state.

The meeting between Powell, the Ute chief Tsauwiat, and his wife named The Bishop begins with an exchange of polite phrases, but the Ute chief and his wife quickly take control of the conversation.

> POWELL. It's really nice up here.
> THE BISHOP. Thanks
> POWELL. And you guys speak English so w-
> THE BISHOP. We learned a long time ago. When we started land negotiations with white people.
> POWELL. Oh wow. Cool.
> THE BISHOP. Yeah it was cool. They let us keep our birth lands, so we were pretty stoked
> TSAUWIAT. Yeah we were pretty stoked, yeah. The "Generosity," you know?
> *Tsauwiat and The Bishop just stare at Powell.*
> (Backhaus, *Men on Boats: The Summerworks Draft*, 2015, 51)

On one level, the conversation exemplifies the wrongful assumptions and prejudices of White people regarding Native Americans, in particular Powell's surprised reaction at the Utes' ability to speak English fluently. At the same time, The Bishop's account of how they acquired the language exposes the underlying mistrust and animosity beneath the surface of the Utes' hospitality toward the White intruders. Ironically, the character of Powell, based on a historical figure deeply interested in Native American languages, sees himself as an expert, yet fails to detect the subtle negative undertones concealed within The Bishop's seemingly friendly words.

In this scene, the Utes are portrayed as proficient English speakers, but their speech also incorporates youthful slang and contemporary expressions like "cool" and "pretty stoked." By portraying the Utes in this manner, the play challenges stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans (in film), which often depict them as using outdated, formal language that reinforces their association with a distant historical or mythical past. By contrast, the Native American characters Backhaus imagines in *Men*

*on Boats* are people whose culture is significant in the present and who are oriented towards the future.

### The Creation and Re-envisioning of John Wesley Powell's Legacy

Although Powell's administrative career and scientific achievements are significant, he is best known for his 1869 expedition. The journals from this journey present Powell's perspective on what the editors of a recent sesquicentennial collection describe as "an enterprise so hazardous it is properly characterized as a dangerous stunt" (Robison et al. xxi). However, it is also crucial to address a significant blind spot: Powell's disregard for Native American perspectives and institutions. While he appreciated individual Native Americans and their detailed knowledge of the land, he failed to respect or integrate their worldviews into his vision of regional development (Robison et al. xv).

**Figures 2 and 3:** Powell Monument, Grand Canyon National Park, August 2023.
Photos by Ingrid Gessner.

Long before Backhaus used Powell's journals to create a more multi-perspectival canvas of voices out of his record with *Men on Boats*, Powell's contemporaries as well as historians and the entertainment industry had already contributed to the narrative of Powell's journey down the Colorado River.

Carved in stone, the earliest representation of Powell's legacy is the Powell Monument on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon (Figures 2 and 3). Many memorials have been constructed in honor of Powell, but the first and most well-known one stands at the Grand Canyon. During a 1904 meeting of the International Geological Congress, on the second anniversary of Powell's death, members proposed erecting a memorial (Dellenbaugh 433). After five years of deliberation, Congress passed an Act on March 5, 1909, allocating $5,000 "for the purpose of procuring and erecting on the brink of the Grand Canyon . . . a memorial to the late John Wesley Powell, with a suitable pedestal, if necessary, in recognition of his distinguished public services as a soldier, explorer, and administrator of government scientific work" (qtd. in Dellenbaugh 434).

The description of his "distinguished public services" in the Act reflects an official recognition of Powell's legacy already seven years after his death. It positioned him within a broader national narrative that values military valor, explorations of what was perceived as the American frontier, and advancements in scientific knowledge.

The memorial design required approval from both the Secretary of the Interior and the Congressional Art Commission. However, the relatively modest budget, combined with the initial plan for a large seat and bronze record table on a stepped platform, proved impractical and had to be abandoned. As a result, the design was revised and scaled down. The final memorial, completed in December 1916 on Sentinel Point, a promontory 5,000 feet above the Colorado River, was designed by J.R. Marshall (Dellenbaugh 434–35). Built from native, unaltered rock, it takes the form of a classical staircase memorial, blending into its natural surroundings. At the top of the staircase – commonly symbolic of a journey in art history – a bronze tablet is affixed. The tablet features a portrait of Powell, created by sculptor and painter Leila Usher.

Although completed in 1916, the memorial was not dedicated until May 20, 1918, as the ceremony awaited Secretary of the Interior Franklin Knight Lane, who decided to hold it during a trip west. The inscription on the tablet reads: "Erected by the Congress of the United States to Major John Wesley Powell, first explorer of the Grand Canyon, who descended the river with his party in row boats, traversing the gorge beneath this point, August 17, 1869, and again September 1, 1872" (qtd. in Dellenbaugh 436). Secretary Lane concluded the ceremony with the following words, contributing yet another facet to Powell's legacy, that of conquest: "Powell's life was a success. His name is forever linked with the romance of the conquest of the American continent. . . . The soldiers returning from our great war across the ocean will, I trust, be put to work storing and leading out these waters upon the great plains below, and the homes that during the centuries to come will dot what now is waste land, will be the real monument to Major Powell" (qtd. in Dellenbaugh 436).

Memorials reveal more about the needs of the time in which they were built than about the events or people they seemingly commemorate. Secretary Lane's remarks during the dedication not only honored Powell but also connected his legacy to World War I. The Powell Monument was erected to celebrate American ingenuity and territorial conquest at a time the United States were fighting and eventually winning the war in Europe. Consequently, the names listed on the plaque are of those who survived the two expeditions. Those who did not – or left it earlier – are omitted.

As the national narrative evolved in the decades following World War I and eventually World War II, Wallace Stegner's 1954 book, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West*, portrayed Powell as a heroic figure, further solidifying his status as a pioneer of American exploration (Warren and St. John 23). The hundredth anniversary of Powell's expedition in 1969 saw further

popularization of his legacy through the Walt Disney Corporation's film *Ten Who Dared*, and a commemorative postage stamp issued by the US Postal Service (Warren and St. John 16). In 2001, Donald Worster noted that Powell had become an iconic figure, "canonized by the National Park Service and by the Bureau of Reclamation, by outdoor writers and boatmen, as one of the greatest pathfinders in American history and as a prophet of what the West might still become" (xi). The most recent historian's retelling of Powell's story was published in 2018 by John F. Ross. Ross presents Powell's journey as a compelling narrative, incorporating diary excerpts and building a sense of dramatic suspense, even as the reader knows the ultimate outcome.

**Figure 4:**
Clyde Ross Morgan, *Sockdolager*, 1985. Museum of Northern Arizona, Flagstaff, August 2023.
Photo by Ingrid Gessner.

While the previous examples in this section – a memorial, a film, and three major historical accounts – primarily contributed to Powell's iconic status, Clyde Ross Morgan's 1985 artwork *Sockdolager* presents a more nuanced narrative (Figure 4). Like Backhaus's play *Men on Boats*, Morgan's bronze statue critically engages with Powell's expedition. Inspired by Powell's journal entry from August 14, 1869, the statue captures a dramatic scene with John Colton Sumner and William H. Dunn struggling to steady their tilted boat, the Emma Dean, amidst "angry waves" (*The Exploration* 131). Powell named the rapid Sockdolager, a term for a heavy finishing blow, and it became the title of Morgan's statue, which is on display at the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff. The statue emphasizes the dynamic interplay between the human and non-human elements of the journey. Although Powell is central to the artwork, the focus extends to the waves, the boat, and the oars – elements that embody the relentless force of the river. This emphasis on non-human agents parallels the way *Men on*

*Boats* utilizes diverse perspectives to challenge traditional narratives, highlighting the broader forces at play in Powell's exploration.

**Experiences and Reflections of the Theater Workshop**

The last part of this essay summarizes our experience of yet another version of Powell's 1869 voyage: the theater workshop "*Men on Boats*," a project in which students at the University College of Teacher Education Vorarlberg worked on Jaclyn Backhaus's play with a director and theater professional from Seattle. To this end, we will briefly present the aims and structure of this workshop as well as the outcome of the project from the perspective of the instructors and the students. The project took place in 2023 and was integrated into the seminar "American Cultures: (Hi)stories of the American West."

There were several reasons for organizing this theater workshop. One important motivation was to offer students a hands-on, creative approach to US-American literature and culture that was not limited to theoretical knowledge. Another objective of the drama workshop was to offer students a further opportunity to reflect ideas and concepts they had encountered in the seminar (such as the myth of the frontier or the ideology of Manifest Destiny) and to create a learning experience that would enhance their understanding of political, social, economic, and ecological aspects of the history of the American West they had been studying throughout the semester.

The project consisted of two parts: First, the play, which was one of the texts on the syllabus of this seminar, was analyzed and discussed in class. During one session, the students even worked together to design and create the main props – four portable boats. The theater workshop was conducted in a hybrid form for financial reasons. This meant that the director and leader of the workshop collaborated with our students at the college in Feldkirch via Zoom; a special AI camera technology was used to ensure effective communication even when the students were moving and acting. After a general introduction, the participants of the workshop took part in various drama activities designed to prepare them physically and mentally for the project. The main part of the theater workshop consisted of several phases of detailed script analysis, which were regularly followed by scene practice and professional coaching to enhance the students' acting skills. The highlight of the workshop was the final performance of three scenes on stage before an audience.

Following the final performance, the students were assigned to write a portfolio entry that combined a critical interpretation of the play with a reflection on their personal workshop experience. These essays provided valuable feedback on the project, revealing that participating in the workshop allowed students to engage with the play on a deeper level than what could have been achieved through traditional class-

room methods alone, as they were able to explore the themes, characters, and historical context in a more interactive and immersive way. Their responses indicated that they gained significant new insights into both the play and its sociohistorical context. Additionally, many participants reported thoroughly enjoying the experience, noting that it enhanced their ability to communicate effectively, empathize with diverse learners, think creatively, and manage classrooms dynamically – skills they are eager to integrate into their future teaching careers.

Based on our experience with this project, we found that the theater workshop not only boosted students' motivation but also provided them with an embodied experience of Jaclyn Backhaus's play *Men on Boats*. The results suggest that this approach helped participants gain critical insights into US-American history and culture while deepening their understanding of complex course content.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the literary and dramatic strategies in *Men on Boats* shows that the play actively challenges Eurocentric, one-dimensional versions of the history of the American West. It brings to light alternative narratives, emphasizing the experiences of marginalized groups whose stories have been overshadowed or erased by the dominant narrative. This article demonstrates furthermore that the literary elements of *Men on Boats*, especially its gender-fluid and racially diverse casting, fundamentally challenge the ideology of Manifest Destiny and the traditional image of the frontier, often through means of satire and irony. These elements that lead to revising and versioning the past encourage the audience and, in our case, our students to adopt a critical perspective regarding the past that also opens up possibilities for critically viewing the present and possibly imagining a different future. This approach not only diversifies the representation but also enhances historical accuracy regarding the frontier experience. Although the 1869 expedition with John Wesley Powell originally included ten White men, the diverse cast in *Men on Boats* provides a richer, more inclusive perspective on that era.

The development of a critical perspective and the ability to draw connections between different versions of the frontier in American history and culture, from Powell's original report, the play by Backhaus, and the artistic and architectural versions, to the embodied experience of the theater workshop also constitute goals that our students should attain when taking university courses in the field of American cultural studies. We are convinced that the integration of art and theater can support students in reaching these aims.

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