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Introduction: Versions, Narratives, and American Studies

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ABSTRACT

This introduction lays out the concept of versioning as a cultural practice and highlights key premises and potentials of the analysis of such practices in the context of American studies. Drawing from narrative theory and theories of speculation, it theorizes the notion of a version as *a copy with a difference*. Moreover, the introduction identifies three forms of versioning in relation to the field of American studies: revisionist versioning, speculation-focused versioning, and code-oriented versioning.

KEYWORDS

Versioning, narratology, speculation, contemporary literature

When asked in an interview about his "new piece of mischief" (Wachtel), the 2020 novel *Telephone* and its publication in three different versions, Percival Everett responded with the following:

> Actually, two of the endings are fairly the same. One is different. But the novels are different throughout, very small changes and very large ones depending on which versions you're comparing. My entire artistic career – as a viewer and as a maker – contains people referring to the authority of the artist, and I wanted to question that, mainly by underscoring the authority of the reader, of the viewer. There is no work until the reader comes to it. And the reader does quite a bit of constructive work, not only in making the story mean something, but in making the story at all. . . . I did want to see what would happen when people started discussing the same novel. You can talk about all three of these and feel confident you're talking about the same book until you get to certain places, and then your stories will differ. And I was curious about disagreement concerning what a story says. (qtd. in Wachtel)

This explanation for *Telephone* will not come as a surprise to readers familiar with Everett as a writer who explicitly seeks reader involvement, revels in experimenting with narrative and taking formal risks, and who, in Everett scholar Anthony Stewart's words, does the work of "the magician who breaks the guild's code by revealing how the trick works" (192). Yet, there is more to Everett's take on his (at first secretly) versioned novel, as it addresses fundamental questions that resonate with the theme of the *JAAAS* special issue in hand: processes and practices of versioning. Everett, for instance, draws attention to the aesthetic dimensions entailed in acts of creating, using, and proliferating versions. Artists may deploy "very small changes and very large ones" (qtd. Wachtel), he claims and demonstrates in *Telephone*. They may play with code on a micro-level through minor variations (grammatically, through insertion, deletion, paraphrasing, etc.) or they may engage in versioning on the macro-level, for example, by multiplying plots, temporalities, storyworlds or – as Everett has done with his latest feat in *James* (2024) – by changing perspectives within established storyworlds. Moreover, Everett's challenge to the assumed authority of any *one* version created by an artist suggests that versioning provides ways to address epistemological and sometimes deeply philosophical questions. Acts of versioning, after all, are tied and have the capacity to transform perspectives, positions, and coordinates of knowledge. They can toy with (or, as is often the case with Everett, make fun of) human urges toward truth. Alternatively, they can be a means of critiquing philosophical ideas and political attitudes, e.g., in the form of what Derek C. Maus in *Jesting in Earnest* (2019) has identified as Everett's "Menippean satire." Therefore, Everett also points to the ethical and political potential of versioning, which become apparent, playfully and tongue-in-cheek, in his notion that *Telephone*'s multi-versional form will draw attention to readers' own involvement in the making of a story and will likely engender disputes and "disagreement concerning what a story says." This hints at how, so goes the driving argument behind the many contributions to this special issue, versioning creates perspectivity in relation to major categories such as text, work, story, and narrative and suggests that an interplay among these categories may be explored by looking at the aesthetics, epistemologies, ethics, and politics of practices of versioning.

The *JAAAS* special issue on "Versions of America: Speculative Pasts, Presents, Futures" turns to such practices of versioning as a way to explore US literature and culture. My concept of versioning as a cultural practice is related to established definitions of the term *version* but specifically suggests theorizing acts and processes of versioning as connecting narrative and practices of speculation. For the noun *version*, with its French and Latin roots, the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* lists 7 meanings. The most relevant for the present context are: 1.a. "A translation," 2.a. "The particular

form of a statement, account, report, etc.," and 2.b. "A special form or variant of something." There are also some more specific usages of *version* and *versionality*, as in the context of (scholarship on) editorial practices and book studies, where versionality is considered "a natural ingredient in any textual production, regardless of media, time or genre, and is normally regarded as irrelevant and redundant noise" (Dahlström). The information provided by the *OED* confirms that *version* (and words derived from it) have become part of the core vocabulary of the English language over the past decades. The frequency of *version* has steadily increased in the decades following the Second World War to an estimated 70 times per million words, making *version* currently one of the 2,000 most common words of the English language. The broadest meaning of the noun *version* designated by the *OED*, "a special form or variant of something" (2.b.), is conceptually closest to the notion of versioning as cultural practice proposed in this introduction to frame the contributions to this special issue. For the present purpose of sketching some of the potentials of a turn to practices of versioning, I define *version* broadly as *a copy with a difference*.[1] With this definition, the aim is to highlight an inherent and productive tension of a version's simultaneous multiplicity/openness and unity/fixedness that emerges from versioning as connecting narrative and practices of speculation. A focus on this fundamental tension, which I explicate in more detail below, introduces versioning as an analyzable cultural practice and as a vital concept for further exploring a variety of aesthetic, epistemological, ethical, and political dimensions of US literatures and cultures.

Aside from the generally increased use of the term version over the past decades, another, more recently notable trend toward what I would describe as versional storytelling undergirds the relevance of turning to practices of versioning today. Telling stories in more than one version is increasingly popular in contemporary forms of cultural production and media, in literature as well as films and series. A few well-known examples include novels such as Lionel Shriver's *The Post-Birthday World* (2007), Paul Auster's *4321* (2017), and Kiese Laymon's *Long Division* (2021) as well as films and series such as *The Butterfly Effect* (Eric Bress and J. Mckye Gruber, 2004), *Mr. Nobody* (Jaco Van Dormael, 2009), *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016), *Russian Doll* (Leslye Headland et al., 2019), and *Kaleidoscope* (Eric Garcia, 2023). These works have forerunners in canonized examples such as Jorge Luis Borges short story "The Garden of the Forking Paths" (1941) or Krzysztof Kieślowski's film *Blind Chance*

[1] I want to note here that, although my terminology at this point loosely echoes the notion of "repetition with a signal difference," as associated with Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s concept of "signifyin(g)" (xxiv), I am not presently drawing from this conceptual history. Instead, my concept of versioning as cultural practice primarily builds on narrative theory and theories of speculation to define the core notion of a version as *a copy with a difference*, which signals a bipolarity between "the narrative" and "the speculative" (as will be explained later). Nonetheless, I believe that concepts of "repetition with a difference" and African American traditions of versioning are extremely relevant for the analysis of practices of versioning in the United States and that there is potential for connecting conceptual traditions in the future.

(*Przypadek*) (1981), which are early, formative instances introducing the notion of multiple plots and worlds. More recently, however, roughly over the past three decades, we have seen an unprecedented proliferation of forms of versional storytelling, as some scholars have suggested. David Bordwell, for instance, notes (and is critical of) "a burst of parallel universe narratives in popular culture" in the 1990s (187), and Brian Richardson diagnoses a "*new narrative order*" (*Voices* 2, original emphasis), claiming that "multi-linearity" and "[n]arratives with multiple versions that branch off from the same forking early in the narrative constitute a new kind of progression that is becoming increasingly prevalent in the novel and in film" (130). Some have hinted that developments towards what I call here versional storytelling are linked to postmodernism or a form of post-postmodernism (Frangipane, "Two Sides"), or intersect with new forms of realism (Huber, Holland). In any case, such assessments indicate that Everett's distinct type of versioning in *Telephone*, which, as Martin Paul Eve puts it, "takes the study of version variance to a different level" (9), is part of larger artistic, medial, and cultural shifts that demand further reflection through a focus on practices of versioning.

Taken together, the prevalence of versional storytelling today as well as its advancing theorization through concepts such as "reflexive double narratives" (Frangipane, *Multiple* 4) or "future narratives" (Bode and Dietrich vii) hint at the ways in which practices of versioning and versionality as a widely perceived facet of narrative have come to shape the atmosphere in which writers and artists act and become creative in the first decades of the twenty-first century. "By the turn of the millennium," Bordwell noted in the 2000s, "the conventions of such films [that fall into the category described here as versional storytelling] seem so well-known that new movies can play off them" (185), and Frangipane in his study on reflexive double narratives remarks that "[w]hile only a few novels tell two explicit versions of their stories, there are countless more that . . . contain a double narrative through implication" (*Multiple* 6). All of this portends a widespread contemporary fascination with versional narrative experiments and with versioning as a popular idea but also hints at even wider shifts in current cultural conditions marked by practices of versioning which, the articles in this special issue show, are highly relevant for the study of US-American culture. Since the contributions to this special issue represent and interrogate diverse forms and functions of versioning as textual, literary, and cultural practices, they demonstrate some of the ways in which an analytical framework attending practices of versioning can contribute to debates and the discussion of core issues of American studies today.

Versioning, Speculation, Narrative

To lay out what a turn to versioning as a cultural practice entails and demands and what potential it holds, I propose to define my core concept of *version* as *a copy with a difference*. Initially, turning to questions of versioning may seem to present an encounter with an unwieldy conceptual terrain, considering the potential breadth of ideas of version, versioning, and versionality, if they are derived from an understanding of version as "a special form or variant of something" (*OED*). It is not surprising therefore that these ideas are integral parts of a wide range of scholarly fields, disciplines, and concepts, including research on risk and speculation, chance and probability studies, future(s) studies and futurology, psychological theories arguing for multiple-draft models of consciousness, and (some) scholarship in narrative theory and in literary, film, and video game studies. Although all of these discourses, at points, involve ideas of or related to versioning, more sustained, systematic theories of *versioning as cultural practice* have not been developed so far.

A focus through narrative theory, i.e., via the relation of version to narrative, is most productive to lay out some of the specific premises and highlight potentials of a turn to cultural practices of versioning. Thus, before suggesting a few concrete forms of versioning particularly relevant for an American studies context that are addressed through the articles gathered in this special issue, I want to flesh out in more detail what is at stake when thinking through the notion of version as *a copy with a difference*. In essence, my definition proposes that versioning practices characteristically involve a fundamental tension between speculation and narrative that is visible within a version's simultaneous multiplicity/openness and unity/fixedness. Thus, I understand a version as both something that exists on its own and something that in its singularity only exists in relation *with* (a difference to) something else. To think of versions as involving (and versioning as producing) a mode of existence marked by a *with* (a difference to something) goes beyond thinking within a mode of existence as marked by an *of* (something, such as an "original") and has important analytical implications. It does not mean that a version cannot be a version *of* something, but this is not the default position for an *analysis* of practices and processes of versioning, which de-naturalizes questions of, for example, originality or finality in favor of openly thinking about expressions of relationality. Addressing practices and processes of versioning in this sense offers, in my view, new ways to explore what Marie-Laure Ryan in *A New Anatomy of Storyworlds* (2022) describes as an increasingly complex "contemporary culture, whether popular or highbrow, [that] implements the full range of possible relationships between text, world, and story" (5). Moreover, it has the potential not only to enrich analyses of contemporary (US and

global) speculative cultures but also to help reconsider central questions and categories of narrative theory itself.

Whereas we do not find an explicit (let alone a full-fledged) theory of versioning in the diverse field of narrative theory so far, ideas of versionality have at points, as underlying features, been part of narratological concepts and analyses. This does not come as a surprise, considering that versionality in its broadest imaginable sense might be considered as offering a formula that has the potential of standing for the entire field of narratology. Theories focusing on storyworlds, for example, as proposed by Ryan (6–7) or David Herman (71–73), are in some ways rooted in the notion of versioning because this notion characteristically expresses the speculative capacities of the human mind. This resonates with the basic idea that constructing storyworlds means "to form a mental representation of a narrative text" (Ryan 6). Similarly, the engagements of the field called "Unnatural Narratologies," with its focus on the "extreme narrators and acts of narration in contemporary fiction" (Richardson, *Voices* 138), relate to versioning as they centrally attend to what Richardson, one of the field's main proponents, describes (at this point, in relation to temporalities and the past) as "incompatible versions" (Richardson, *Poetics* 3). Thus, implicitly building on notions of versioning through acts of narration, unnatural narratologists make claims about what they identify as anti-mimetic versions of narratives. Additionally, specific concepts in narrative theory, such as Bordwell's idea of "multiple-draft narratives" (184) in film and Espen Aarseth's notion of "ergodic literature" (1), resonate with questions of versioning. So do widely used concepts such as "disnarration" (Prince) and "denarration" (Richardson, *Voices*), which self-reflexively highlight the act of telling a story as a versioning practice as they play with more than one possible version of a story (not) being realized. Prince stresses how disnarration allows a writer to claim that "this narrative is worth narrating because it could have been otherwise" (36), thus emphasizing a speculative capacity of the human mind. Richardson claims that denarration constitutes a "kind of narrative negation in which a narrator denies significant aspects of his or her narrative that had earlier been presented as given" (*Voices* 87). Therefore, both concepts draw attention to versionality as a fundamental facet of narrative.

Even this quick tour and cursory glance at narrative theorical concepts shows how intimately and complexly interwoven practices and processes of versioning are with theories of narrative. By extension, this also hints at the ways in which explicitly and systematically analyzing versioning in a sustained way could provide a new lens on main dimensions of narrative by rethinking categories such as character, plot, temporality, and storyworld (all of which are visibly modulated in contemporary versional storytelling).

For the present context, I would like to lay out in some more detail an idea of the term *version* as context of this special issue. To define and draw attention to the analytical potentials of versioning as *copying with a difference*, I propose an understanding of version in relation to two poles: that of "the speculative" and that of "the narrative."

First, it is crucial to recognize an essential link to the speculative. A version is inevitably marked by a multiplicity/openness, being a copy with a *difference*. It is characterized by – because emerging through versioning from – its potential to be otherwise, which it bears precisely because it is *not*, as a version, otherwise. Thus, processes of versioning are linked to practices of speculation and, embracing uncertainty, acknowledge fluidity, dynamics, and the potential of an "otherwise-ness." This signals the extent to which I am building on a wide understanding of speculation in the sense of practices of conjecture and anticipation, as articulated, for example, by the collective groups of writers calling themselves an "Uncertain Commons" in *Speculate This!* "Speculation," they write, is "essentially always about potentiality: a reach toward those futures that are already latent in the present, those possibilities that already exist embedded in the here and now, about human and nonhuman power, which is, in effect, the ability to become different from what is present" (13). This, of course, does not mean that versioning can only be about a respective future. Rather, it suggests that our notions of a "present" need to be thought in a wider, more abstract sense as locus that opens a potentiality and otherwise-ness, which is the *sine qua non* for versionality to emerge. There is an inherent political (and resistance) potential in this process as even actions not usually associated with embracing or producing otherwise-ness (such as deleting, erasing, muffling, silencing) are framed through versioning as bearing potentiality, and because the speculative as it is understood in relation to versioning, figures as expression of a deeply human mental capacity. In its widest and most basic evolutionary sense, the paleoanthropologist Ian Tattersall describes this capacity in the following way: "[O]nly human beings are able arbitrarily to combine and recombine mental symbols and to ask themselves questions such as 'What if?' And it is the ability to do this, above everything else, that forms the foundation of our vaunted creativity" (70). Both the introductory example of Everett as a writer being emphatically interested in cognitive (readerly) processes in conjunction with aesthetic, epistemological, ethical, and political questions of versioning as well as the articles presented in this special issue draw attention in diverse ways to this "what if" capacity as fundamental to versioning practices.

There is also, however, another side that is essential for the proposed understanding of practices of versioning and of a version as *a copy with a difference*, which concerns the *copy* as signaling unity/fixedness, as a version finds an actualization

through narrative. Mark Currie's take on the novel in his philosophical study *About Time* (2006) is useful to illustrate this facet of versioning. He points out that

> the future, in a novel, is not absolutely open. In the written text, the future lies in wait in a specific way, in that it is possible to flout the linearity of writing and take an excursion into the future. I can abandon the moving now of fiction, the place of the bookmark, and skip ahead at will. . . . In this sense the fictional future is not really open, because events in the future are already written and awaiting my arrival, and this can be verified by actually visiting them out of turn. . . . Whereas the existence of the future is controversial in extra-fictional human time, it is much less controversial to claim that the fictional future already exists. (143)

What Currie lays out here for a specific context of fiction hints at a fundamental facet of versioning as it is understood in the present context: an "already existing" future that "lies in wait" expresses the notion that a version emerges through a moment when it ceases to be open and speculative, becomes fixed into form through narrative actualization. In line with Edward Branigan's claim that "in narrative generally, the phenomenon of alternative futures is merely a form of alternative pasts" (107), the creation of narrative as part of versioning processes functions as an act of closure. This narrative actualization in relation to and tension with an inherent speculative facet characterizes versioning and has theoretical potential not only regarding practices of versioning in the context of American studies but also more broadly regarding our thinking about relations among text, story, and narrative as well as questions of form, genre, media.

Ultimately, to think of a version as *a copy with a difference* therefore stresses that these two poles – a speculative otherwise-ness and a narrative actualization – are characteristic of practices of versioning. This bipolarity and the tension evoked are perceivable, for example, in "forking-path narratives" and the way in which they produce, as Branigan puts it, "in the shift from one path to the next the indefinable presence of a *being-without-yet-possessing-thing-ness*" (109, original emphasis). The two poles and characteristic tension could also be imagined metaphorically through many-worlds-theory and its idea of "random quantum processes caus[ing] the universe to split into multiple copies" (Ryan 127), which has been increasingly popular recently both in US-American culture (e.g. *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*) and scholarship (Holland 151–89; Strehle). Here, narrative closure acts in the manner of a "wave function" that collapses speculative processes. In any case, there is potential in more deeply thinking about versioning as process and version as a unit, as means of narrative and cultural analysis, as this could help us move against what Joseph R. Slaughter describes as the tendency of a "narrative turn . . . [that] replaced an ontological essentialism with a performative, discursive essentialism" (336). Versioning may thus help us develop a more function-oriented approach that contributes to

more openly rethinking traditional relations between genre, form, and media, while revisiting established categories of narrative.

Practices of Versioning and American Studies

The general potentials of a turn to practices of versioning have a particular valence in relation to American literary and cultural studies. One obvious reason is that the United States as nation and notion have traditionally been conceived, (self-)described, and ideologically framed as a land of freedom and opportunity, of chance and of taking chances, of modernity and the future, as a promise-yet-to-be-fulfilled or a nation-in-the-making, implying that a hopeful notion of versioning is engrained in its foundations. Moreover, practices of versioning play a prominent role in a US cultural context precisely when they are recognized as centrally involving forms of speculation, which (both in its economic and philosophical registers) has had a distinct bearing on the culture and history of the United States. As Gayle Rogers puts it in *Speculation: A Cultural History from Aristotle to AI* (2021), speculation has been "part of the character of the exceptional American experience, past, present, and future. It is no longer a threat to America's stability; rather, it *constitutes* stability and is a net public good" (113, original emphasis). Through this centrality of speculation to US culture in conjunction with a concept of versioning as connecting practices of speculation and narrative emerges a particular analytic potential at the intersection of narrative theory and American studies scholarship that invites a closer relation between the two (which, in my view, the broader "narrative turn" has not yet fully produced). The articles gathered here are laying out some directions in which exploring US culture through practices of versioning may take us.

The potential of thinking American studies concepts and debates through the lens of versioning is twofold: First, it can mean to examine the practices, processes, dynamics, and forms of versioning that shape US culture – a potential made visible through the contributions to this special issue as they represent and interrogate diverse ways of how US-American literature and culture creates, uses, distributes, negotiates, and transforms through versioning. In this sense, versioning provides an alternative conceptual focus that can be used for describing and analyzing facets of contemporary US culture and for reinterpreting established and canonized ones in a new light. As the articles in this special issue suggest, this focus may contribute to rethinking cultural spaces (such as the frontier, the American West, the cabin), help us better understand variants of the (e.g., Alaskan) environmental imagination, and enable us to read speculative modes (e.g., cli-fi) or meanings of classic literary works (e.g., by Harriet Beecher Stowe or Henry David Thoreau) in alternative ways. An emphasis on versioning may thus help further unravel US cultural processes through a

turn to various levels, by examining versioning on individual, communal, and local as well as collective, national, and global levels. This intersects with core debates of American studies as we understand US culture, in Heike Paul's words, as shaped by "myths [that] are not fixtures in the American national imaginary . . . [but undergoing] considerable narrative variation over time and across a broad social and cultural spectrum" (11). If, as Paul demonstrates, it is fruitful to interpret US culture, history, and literature, along such myths and their "many reconfigurations and reinterpretations" through "subnational perspectives" and, more recently, a "transnational or postnational dimension" (12–13), the focus on practices of versioning can contribute to this project by reframing our explorations especially in relation to current US cultures of uncertainty and speculation and their multiplicities and polarities. Looking at and through practices of versioning picks up existing threads in scholarship while shifting the focus through a conceptual framework that explicitly links questions of narrative with speculation as cultural practice, which is integral to the history but especially also to the current cultural dynamics of the United States.

Secondly, the potential of a focus on versioning for American studies also pertains to the ways in which it may afford a means of self-reflection on the field: its discourses and its multiple (and multiplying) historical and contemporary versions. While American studies as "a joint, interdisciplinary academic endeavour to gain systematic knowledge about American society and culture in order to understand the historical and present-day meaning and significance of the United States" (Fluck and Claviez ix) has always (intentionally, and as one of its great strengths) been marked by versionality, a turn to the field as itself a "versional narrative" seems timely witnessing a deeply polarized United States. Importantly, a turn to practices of versioning in the laid-out way may provide a closer relation with narratologies. As Sue J. Kim describes the general situation, "various sorts of narrative theories – or theories about narrative – have been proliferating over the past few decades quite independently of any narratology. Often informed by cultural studies (in its various forms), such theories of narratives have focused on issues of power, particularly race, class, imperialism, embodiment, sexuality, etc." (236). Moving on, however, she diagnoses that a "wide gap still exists between the field(s) of narratology and cultural, ideological, and historical studies of narrative" (236), and it is this gap that a turn to versioning can address productively, as it openly attempts linking practices of speculation and narrative.

Thus, calling for a closer relation between American studies and narrative theory through a focus on versioning should obviously not be misunderstood as (unduly) prioritizing either a "narratological toolbox" or American studies subject matter within analyses. And yet, re-rooting American studies today in relation to questions

and means of narratologies through the more open notion of versioning may be not just useful as analytical mode but a necessity at a time when the proliferation of different forms of versional narratives paradoxically coexists with particularly insidious brands of political storytelling that engage in versioning to insist on the authority of *one* correct and supposedly inevitable version of the United States. Although, in Jan Alber's words, "there is no inherent or stable link between narrative techniques and ideological implications" (3), it seems more important (and more political) than ever in the face of a Trumpist America to acknowledge that "narratives always make points by using specific techniques" (3) and to single out and focus on analyzing such techniques as thoroughly and rigorously as possible. To do this has the potential to mutually enrich both a field of American studies that self-consciously and self-critically considers versioning as central to US culture as well as narrative theory.

Against this backdrop, the articles in this special issue help spotlight a variety of potentials of a turn to practices of versioning for American studies and will hopefully provide starting points that inspire future research. A brief survey of the contributions gives me an opportunity to distinguish and underline three basic forms of versioning that are represented through the articles but also seem particularly productive for a US context in general. These three forms of versioning, differentiated with respect to their main function and focus, are: a revisionist versioning, a speculation-focused versioning, and a code-oriented versioning. All these forms are defined by the fundamental tension between the speculative and the narrative, and all of them involve (in different ways and to different degrees) aesthetic, epistemological, ethical, and political dimensions of versioning.

The first form, revisionist versioning, is characterized as a practice of versioning that speculates and creates a narrative in relation to or as reconsideration of a given past. This form draws on one of the main functions of narrative, namely, to inform about the past, and, mobilizing its speculative potential, versions through the idea of a multi-perspectivity of that past. Although loosely relatable historically to the revisionist phase of American studies that "coincided with the articulation of a 'negative' US exceptionalism and the development of new fields within and alongside American studies such as black studies, women's studies, popular culture studies, Native American studies, ethnic studies, and labor studies" (Paul 21), revisionist versioning designates more abstractly such forms of versioning in which *copies with a difference* emerge as variants of a set past. The epistemologies of revisionist versioning are thus of the "what also was"-type, as their primary politics in relation to a present emerge from what Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle describe as the foundational ways in which "the telling of a story is always bound up with power, with questions of authority, property, and domination" (73).

This type of versioning is central to the two articles that start off this special issue. Ingrid Gessner and Angelika Ilg's "Re-envisioning America's Frontier: A Speculative Journey through John Wesley Powell's Expedition to the American West and Jaclyn Backhaus' *Men on Boats*" engages with processes of revisionist versioning in two ways. First, the article examines a dramatic text, Jaclyn Backhaus' *Men on Boats* (2017), which, using a gender-fluid and multi-racial mode of casting, performs a revisionist versioning of the American West by reimagining the story of the first government-sanctioned expedition on the Colorado River of 1869. The authors thus concentrate on a text that challenges "Eurocentric, one-dimensional versions of the history of the American West" as it versions to add important (ethnic, gender) dimensions to a multi-perspectivally framed past, by analyzing the play's representation of storytelling, re-naming, mapping, and language use. Additionally, Gessner and Ilg's article adds to the scope of revisionist versioning explored by including a diverse variety of versions of Powell and his crew's experience ranging from Powell's own account to monuments to a student performance of Backhaus' play. This strategy aims to foster the ability "to draw connections between different versions of the frontier in American history and culture" and, more generally, to highlight potentials of versioning as a political act of revision that helps us develop critical perspectives of our multi-perspectival pasts.

Marija Krstic's contribution "'Last Frontier. North to the Future.' – Oil-Age Alaska and the Environmental Critique in Mei Mei Evans's *Oil and Water*" also focuses on versioning frontier discourse and acts of critical revisionism. Concentrating on an Alaskan context, this article frames its reading of Evans's 2013 novel *Oil and Water* historically and introduces three dominant versions of Alaska in the US national imagination: Alaska as a "Last Frontier" to be explored, as an enduring frontier (allegedly) balancing resource extraction and environmental protection, and as a wilderness to be preserved. Krstic's interpretation of the novel, which was inspired by the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, shows how *Oil and Water* negotiates and challenges these versions of Alaska's frontier through perspectives described as a "booster mentality" versus a "conservationist mentality." The article demonstrates how Evans challenges romanticized frontier myths in relation to questions of resource extraction and Native Alaskan communities' struggles in the face of their frequent exclusion from frontier narratives. Thus, Krstic's reading of Alaska's versioned frontier and of Evans's novel as "a social and environmental critique of oil extraction" draws attention to how practices of versioning are shaped by spatial and material (e.g., extractive) practices and highlights how storytelling can negotiate and help effectively rethink versioned spaces in critical ways.

A second type of versioning practices that is strikingly popular in current US cultural production is what can be broadly described for the purposes of this introduction as speculation-focused versioning. Notwithstanding the way in which any version necessarily involves a tension between speculation and narrative, this form of versioning emphatically engages in speculation as a cultural practice, i.e., foregrounds its being about "potentiality" as "a reach toward . . . those possibilities that already exist embedded in the here and now" (Uncertain Commons 13). Here, *copies with a difference* emerge not as variants relating to a perceived, set past through laying claim to "what was also" but in the form of variants representing "what is not (yet)." This does not imply that examples of speculation-focused versioning need to be explicitly future-oriented (although genres of cli-fi and science fiction clearly fall under its purview), but that they are driven by an urge towards otherwise-ness located in relation to something that is set as present. Currently, such speculation-focused versioning often occurs in relation to environmental issues, which is hardly surprising noting how being in the Anthropocene, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's words, "fragments human futures in unprecedented ways" (21). This produces "very short-term futures for humans – so short-term that one could think of them as 'the present'" (22), and is visible, for example, in genres such as climate change fiction, whose primary task, according to Jesse Oak Taylor, "amounts to simulating multiple possible futures" (115).

Robert Winkler's article, "Cabin Fever, or: Back to the Future? The (Anti-)Pastoral in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *Walden* (1854)," presents an argument that shows that speculation-focused versioning does not need to involve explicitly future-oriented texts, in the sense of texts belonging to identifiable future-oriented genres or discourses or involving explicitly futurist settings. Instead, Winkler turns to classic US-American texts of the 1850s by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry David Thoreau to lay open their modes of speculation and explores the "contradictory significations" of their works' complex depictions of cabins to demonstrate how these canonized classics engage in making hypotheses about a potential future of the US-American nation. Thinking the cabin not merely as space but as a "simple material form" and drawing from theories of the pastoral to illustrate how this form brings questions of slavery into *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s and *Walden*'s speculative frameworks, Winkler's article argues that both texts imaginatively create literary versions of a future nation without slavery.

Ruth Gehrmann's "Transplantation and Alternative Worlds: Speculation in Doctors' Life Writing" also suggests ways in which practices of versioning may be found and analyzed in a large variety of discourses, as it focuses on versioning in the form of speculative practices found in transplant surgeons' life writing. The article turns

to texts by Thomas E. Starzl, Thomas R. J. Todd, and Kathy E. Magliato and starts out by discussing intertextual references to speculative fiction. It argues that this genre offers frameworks that medical professionals draw from in their life writing to "make sense of surgically altered bodies" and, by extension, of their medical work and life experience. Gehrmann then examines "what if" narratives as a speculative mode that affords surgeons' life writing ways to think about the benefits of transplantation as they envision alternative worlds that deviate (here solely for the better) from their respective presents. The article's discussion of "the eternal novum of organ transplantation" thereby points to potentials of thinking about versioning as broader, widely engaged cultural practice and its socio-political relevance.

The socio-politics of climate change are central to Sylvia Mayer's "Narratives of Resilience in Times of Climate Crisis: Angry Optimism and Utopian Minimalism in Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* and Jenny Offill's *Weather*." Mayer's article is perhaps the most explicit example of a speculation-focused versioning in this special issue. Focusing on different versions of a climate-changed future, Mayer's contribution reads two climate change novels as "resilience narratives" to argue that contemporary climate fiction can move beyond merely "sounding the alarm" regarding climate risks or focusing exclusively on catastrophe. Mayer's interpretations of Robinson's *New York 2140* and Offill's *Weather* elucidate how these narratives, despite their differences in form, character conception, and temporal and spatial scaling, share "core epistemological, ontological, and ethical perspectives" that value interconnectedness with the more-than-human world and are set against neoliberal principles and unregulated market capitalism. Proposing an open notion of resilience that moves past its narrow meanings as conveying a return to a former, better state, Mayer highlights that the versions of climate-changed futures realized by Robinson and Offill can provide hope by communicating vital experiences and strategies of adaptation, flexibility, and endurance.

A third form of versioning that helps frame the emerging ideas at the center of attention in this special issue on "Versions of America" can be described as code-oriented versioning. Whilst not implying that there is no code-oriented-ness in revisionist or speculation-focused versioning (since these forms can overlap), this type of versioning is characterized by an emphasis on the textual and on transformations of a given code – as suggested, for example, in Everett's explanation of *Telephone* and his claim that versioning can involve "very small and very large" changes (qtd. in Wachtel).

The last contribution to this special issue, coming in the form of the experimental essay by Mahshid Mayar, showcases this type of versioning through its focus on eras-

ure as the outcome of a variety of "intently unsettling versioning techniques." Moreover, "Splintered Archives -- Versions and Versioning through Erasure Arts and Poetry" engages in revisionism, thus representing more than one of the introduced categories and ideally rounding off the special issue by alluding to some of the wider potentials of a turn to versioning. The essay is not only Mayar's topical engagement with erasure as a creative activist response to the contemporary "documental crises of US empire" and crucial for highlighting how a turn to versioning can enrich exploring notions of and relations to an "original" – an intriguing aspect of versioning that demands further theorization in the future. Simultaneously, as readers will see, the essay also delivers an inspiring performance that self-reflects on processes of versioning through its own form, by experimenting with these processes which stack "layer upon layer upon layer." Thus, Mayar's essay not only highlights aesthetic as well as crucial ethical and political dimensions of erasure and versioning that are highly relevant especially during times of a deeply polarized United States but also points to the necessity for scholarly self-reflexivity as part of a turn to and as one of the potentials of versioning.

Versioning as a concept that connects narrative with practices of speculation enables a new, open mode of analysis, for the analysis of a version is neither an analysis of a narrative nor merely an examination of speculative forms of "what if" thinking. Instead, it allows us to interrogate and explain textual and aesthetic as well as ethical, political, and power relations in new ways, as "vectors" that become visible in practices of versioning. The editors of this special issue hope that, if versioning indeed implicates, as Mayar puts it, "inquisitive staring, again, and again, and again," readers might repeatedly and inquisitively return and feel inspired by the articles collected here as steppingstones and encouragement for future research that thinks the United States through versioning as practice and new perspective.

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