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Narrative, Environment,
Social Justice

edited by Joshua Parker
and Robert A. Winkler

JAAAS

About

The Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies (*JAAAS*) is a peer-reviewed gold open-access journal which provides an interdisciplinary space for discussions about all aspects of American studies. The journal functions as a forum for Americanists in Austria and the global academic community. Published twice a year, the journal welcomes submissions on a wide range of topics, aiming to broaden the multi- and interdisciplinary study of American cultures.

Aims

Interrogating the notion of "America" and looking at the U.S. within its transnational and (trans-)hemispheric interconnections, JAAAS seeks to challenge disciplinary boundaries by bringing together original and innovative work by scholars who focus on topics as diverse as literature, cultural studies, film and new media, visual arts, ethnic studies, indigenous studies, performance studies, queer studies, border studies, mobility studies, age studies, game studies, and animal studies. Apart from offering insights into trans- and international American literary and cultural studies and offering European perspectives on America, the journal also solicits scholarship that deals with history, music, politics, geography, ecocriticism, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, law, and any other aspect of American culture and society.

Narrative, Environment, Social Justice

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Short Essays

Book Reviews

Introduction: Notes on the Relation of Narrative, Environment, and Social Justice

Joshua Parker and Robert A. Winkler

ABSTRACT

The idea for this *JAAAS* special issue comes from the 49th Annual Conference of the Austrian Association for American Studies, which took place at the University of Salzburg in Fall 2022. Presentations covered stories we tell about our environment, and about pressing social issues of the past or present. As varied as the presentations were, the common thread was inquiring into how we – as individuals and collectives – frame our experiences in these areas through narratives, to whom we tell them, and when, where, and why. The contributions here range in their treatment of subject matter from speculative prose to theater, from film to poetry, to a history of the advertising industry. They illustrate how issues of social justice, climate change, and storytelling are intimately linked, and explore various manifestations of this nexus in fresh and surprising ways.

KEYWORDS

Climate change, narrative theory, ecocriticism, American studies, North American literature, film

Scene 1: On 1 February 2017, North Dakota police arrested 76 activists at Standing Rock. Protests against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline were largely carried out by Native American grassroots organizations. The arrest took place after some protesters had established a camp near the construction side. While a spokesperson for the Morton County sheriff's office "claimed that a 'rogue group of protesters' had trespassed on private property," Linda Black Elk, a member of the local Catawba Nation, took an opposing standpoint: "We basically started to see police mobilizing from all directions. Someone came along and told us we had about 15 minutes before the camp would get raided" (qtd. in Levin).

Scene 2: On 23 September 2019, climate activist Greta Thunberg spoke at the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York. The initiator of the Fridays for Future movement accused the assembled world leaders of ignorance and passivity in the face of accelerated climate change: "People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!" (qtd. in NPR staff). Then-President Donald Trump made fun of her by tweeting: "She seems like a very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future. So nice to see!" (qtd. in Lyons). Thunberg, in turn, subtly mocked Trump by updating her Twitter profile – "A very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future" (qtd. in Greve) – thereby appropriating the sarcastic characterization (see also Nordensvard and Ketola).

Scene 3: In late May 2021, the remains of 215 Indigenous children were discovered at a former residential school in British Columbia, Canada. One of the largest educational facilities of its kind, the Kamloops Indian Residential School was part of the Canadian Indian residential school system which aimed at forcibly assimilating Indigenous children into white Canadian mainstream society. While leading Canadian politicians were publicly "horrified and heartbroken" (Austen) about the discovery, representatives of the Indigenous community were less astonished by the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism. In a statement, the CEO of the First Nations Health Authority, Richard Jock, made clear: "That this situation exists is sadly not a surprise and illustrates the damaging and lasting impacts that the residential school system continues to have on First Nations people, their families and communities" (qtd. in Dickson and Watson).

Given the medial omnipresence of our current polycrisis, we could present here an infinite list of similar scenes pertaining to the climate crisis and social (in)justice. The issues negotiated in such scenes, however, are never *not* political, even if a particular news item obfuscates its political nature and ideological underpinning to come across as 'mere fact,' 'naked information' or 'just objective.' The effectiveness of political

mobilization, then, comes down to the crucial question of which side tells the most convincing stories and offers the most engaging narrative frames. To reappropriate Bill Clinton's unofficial 1992 campaign slogan, "It's the narrative, stupid!"

The idea for this *JAAAS* special issue comes from the 49th Annual Conference of the Austrian Association for American Studies, which took place at the University of Salzburg in Fall 2022. Under the heading "Narrative, Environment, Social Justice" we solicited presentations on stories we tell about our environment, and about pressing social issues of the past or present. As varied as the presentations were, the common thread was inquiring into how we – as individuals and collectives – frame our experiences in these areas through narratives, to whom we tell them, and when, where, and why. Before introducing the texts collected in this special issue, let us briefly point to some of the key developments of the nexus narrative, environment, and social justice.

In recent decades, the two arguably most famous dictums undergirding poststructuralism – the author is dead and the text is above all – have themselves died, or considerably faded from the spotlight of discourses in the humanities. Our field has become preoccupied with the relation of the *world out there* and the *text in there*, with, as Rita Felski puts it, "real-world consequences" of literary and cultural artifacts (5). In this context, ecocriticism emerged as the approach par excellence, occupied with the "relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii) in general, and "between 'nature' and 'culture' and of the inherent ideologies of that relationship" in particular (Gerhardt and Grewe-Volpp 413). What distinguished this perspective from other literary theories when it became institutionalized in the 1990s was its focus on the "physical environment" and on "nature." Ecocriticism, in the words of Cheryll Glotfelty, "expands the notion of 'the world' to include the entire ecosphere" (xix).

Early ecocritical scholarship mapped the relation of narrative and environment by focusing on nature writing, a genre hitherto rather neglected in both the literary canon and literary criticism. Although by no means neglected, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and his entire oeuvre underwent a slight re-evaluation with more priority given to their quality as environmental texts *avant la lettre*. Lawrence Buell's seminal 1995 study *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, for instance, put forward the thesis that Thoreau's spiritual quest for a more authentic form of life in his cabin at Walden Pond materialized a "more 'ecocentric' way of being" (1). According to Buell, this literal and literary being-in-nature, far from epitomizing merely one individual's experiences, shaped the entire nation's environmental imagination in the nineteenth century (see also Nash; Kelleter; Winkler).

How, then, do environmental texts have an effect on both individual reader and collective culture? Alexa Weik von Mossner interrogates the nexus of narrative and environment by pointing to the implicit assumption that canonical nature writing such as Thoreau's, "according to Buell, had an affective impact not only on specific readers but on American society as a whole. This implies that the affective and rational understanding of readers . . . can be shaped or at least influenced by environmental narrative" ("Environmental Narrative, Embodiment, and Emotion" 534). While early ecocriticism operated on and took for granted this implicit assumption, contemporary scholarship has for the most part failed to explore how texts are constructed to achieve their assumed impacts on readers. To counter this, Weik von Mossner developed an econarratological approach "that draws on relevant scholarship in cognitive science, affective narratology, and the psychology of fiction" with the aim of considering "both *empathetic* emotions that are evoked as human and nonhuman protagonists move through storyworlds, cueing readers to feel along with them, and *direct* emotions that readers experience in response to the virtual environment of a storyworld" (535–36).

Weik von Mossner's *Affective Ecologies* demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of current ecocritical scholarship, with her narratological take primarily rooted in Erin James's influential considerations. James's 2015 *The Storyworld Accord* fused ecocritical and narratological perspectives into the new field of econarratology, which she characterizes as driven by "ecocriticism's interest in the relationship between literature and the physical environment [and] narratology's focus on the literary structures and devices by which writers compose narratives" (xv; see also Weik von Mossner "Environmental Narrative, Embodiment, and Emotion" 535). While *The Storyworld Accord* focused on postcolonial texts and frameworks, James's later work in *Narrative in the Anthropocene* engaged with Amitav Ghosh's dictum that "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (9). Both Weik von Mossner and James represent a current strain of ecocritical scholarship aiming to explore, with narratological tools, the emotionalizing – effective and affect-evoking – structures and working mechanisms of (environmental) texts.

Notions of affect and affectivity provide a key for better understandings of how environments are narrated in texts as they reverberate in individual and collective readers and their worlds. Affective ecocriticism further re-conceptualizes relations between world and text by taking more seriously the narrativity of the world out there and how it affects the embodiment of human and more-than-human beings. Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino, who pioneer this approach, conceive the affective perspective as enabling us to identify

emotions that circulate around environmental issues today, to clarify how that circulation works, to acknowledge the powerful role environments themselves play in shaping affective experience, and to identify new affects emerging in our contemporary moment. (3)

This theoretical framework rests on a productive synthesis of affect theory – developing Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's take on "intensities," "becomings," and "assemblages" (see Gregg and Seigworth) – with the ecocritical reconsideration of the effects the (natural) environment has on texts and vice versa. It is environments, after all, that make possible the emergence of affect as an "asignifying, precognitive bodily feeling, an 'intensity' or a perpetual state of 'becoming'" (Bladow and Ladino 5) and these particular environments are themselves affected by such economies and circulations.

The fusion of affect theory and ecocriticism enables us to zoom in on "the many non-narrative affective triggers in our everyday environments – the weather, built spaces, nonhuman animals, and objects with which we inhabit the world" which "deserve assessment in terms of their emotional impacts" (Bladow and Ladino 3). Bladow and Ladino conceptualize such affects as the all-encompassing environmental sphere which always already enfolds us in what Martin Heidegger calls our "being-in-the-world" (78–122). As "embodied capacities," that is as "phenomena that arise and circulate as intensities among assemblages" (Bladow and Ladino 6), affects are akin to the atmosphere, the climate, or the weather while they also 'petrify' and materialize in concrete emotions, affecting the individual. Inherently political, affective economies and circulations equally entail a utopian potential, as Bladow and Ladino point out: "Perhaps looking for micro-moments of affective intersection and building from them may be one small way forward in a political atmosphere of bubbles, divides, and seemingly entrenched polarization" (3).

Having highlighted some perspectives on the nexus of text and world, we might take into account broader conceptions of environment to go from affective ecocriticism to the relation of affects and social justice. "Atmosphere," "climate," and "weather" are concepts tied to the meteorological conditions of an actual environment – but they are also much more than that. In her 2016 *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharpe politicizes established notions around these concepts. For Sharpe, "the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack" (104). Atmosphere, here, transcends the realm of the meteorological as it affects us in a more holistic manner. In the development of her historical argument, Sharpe delves into the context of the mid-nineteenth-century United States, when, before the US Civil War, about four million black men, women, and children were enslaved. In 1850,

> after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act that "free air" of a "free state" is denied to those in the hold who would take their freedom; slavery is enforced as the law of the entire United States. Its atmospheric density increased; slavery undeniably became the total environment. (104)

The weather in this metaphorical sense of a deadly all-encompassing racial atmosphere had gotten worse for African Americans in the US, North and South alike.

Sharpe's broad conception of weather makes visible both affects perpetuating and underlying the racial climate, as well as the depersonalized, apparently incomprehensible categories of systemic and institutional racism. The diagnosis – "antiblackness is pervasive *as* climate" not just as weather (106) – thus also characterizes the moment of her writing in 2016. Antiblackness as climate is not shaping the political and cultural imaginary only, but, in turn, inherently meshed with meteorological climate and, significantly, with the phenomenon of climate change. This often unnoticed nexus is epitomized in a slogan which has recently been employed by different stakeholders such as Amnesty International, Black Lives Matter, and *Time* magazine: "Climate Justice is Racial Justice" (Amnesty International; Black Lives Matter; Lammy and Bapna). The environmental justice movement tries to put this insight into practice and attempts to "challenge the use of the term 'nature' as a category unmarked by race, class, or gender and to reconnect discussions of nature to question [sic] of community, urban, and racial justice" (Sze and Chau 180). When, as proposed at the beginning of this introduction, media coverage of issues pertaining to the climate crisis and social (in)justice is never *not* political, we can also identify those who are more responsible for and those who are more affected by its consequences.[1] It is the politically, socially, and economically marginalized segments of populations both in the Global South and North that suffer disproportionally from the life-threatening effects of climate change, environmental pollution, and related issues. In that respect, environmental justice activists speak of "environmental racism," a concept employed to "more accurately describe . . . environmental policies and industry practices that provide benefits to whites while shifting costs to people of color" (Alston 105).

The contributions to this special issue of *JAAAS* range in their treatment of subject matter from speculative prose to theater, from film to poetry, to a history of the advertising industry. As highlighted above, issues of social justice and climate change are intimately linked, much as presenting news to the public about the dangers of plastic waste, global heating, ocean acidification, or over-consumption is, in turn, equally linked with issues of narrative form. The contributions in this special issue explore various manifestations of this nexus in fresh and surprising ways.

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[1] Greta Olson explores the narrativity and narratives around the nexus of social (in)justice and gender in numerous of her works; see for instance "Legal Facts, Affective Truths, and Changing Narratives in Trials Involving Sexual Assault."

Marina Pingler's essay focuses on the "colonial Anthropocene" as it relates to a recent novel by Anishinaabe-Canadian author Waubgeshig Rice. While we may think of the beginning of the Anthropocene as something recent (or something only just now beginning), Pingler's essay makes clear the epoch can perhaps best be linked, or even traced to, the year 1492. Pingler's analysis stresses that thinking about social justice and the environment is work that, particularly in North America, involves examining traces of the past, as much as thinking about the future.

Markus Schwarz's contribution focuses on an imaginary future, and what hope it holds for thinking about the future's present. His reading of Catherynne M. Valente's *The Past Is Red* blends the thoughts of several theorists engaged in ideas of how hope itself can actually be harmful, and how real environmental protection and human rights activities might best focus on the beauty of what exists *now*, even in the midst of environmental catastrophe.

Nassim Balestrini's article turns to Canadian playwright Chantal Bildoeau's 2022 *No More Harveys*, whose title itself plays on an infamous figure in the #MeToo movement and the disastrous 2017 hurricane. Working with Caroline Levine's New Formalist literary studies methods, Balestrini discusses a "three-world approach" toward regions of the globe disjointed in their economic disparity, and how onstage metalepsis can be used to link developed and less-developed regions in contemporary North American activist theater.

Johannes Vith examines how visual landscapes 'speak' in the filmic narrative of James Benning's 1986 *Landscape Suicide*. Does collective trauma inhere in landscapes which witnessed violence? Again, metalepsis comes into play as Vith describes visual juxtapositions in the film of two sites of murders, one wealthy, middle-class, one less privileged.

Klaus Rieser likewise tracks filmic techniques presenting landscapes less as backgrounds than as ideological. In Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* (2020), he argues, the agency of characters left behind in the wake of post-industrialization situates them as place-makers, allowing them to form new identities in states of precarity and transition.

Lukas Hellmuth looks at the roots of horror film tropes and narrative techniques as they are reflected, or rejected, in Ari Aster's 2018 *Hereditary*. Working with Lauren Berlant's notions of cruel optimism and Jack Halberstam's queer theory, Hellmuth's readings of the film and its predecessors in the horror genre encourage readers and viewers to examine how affective experiences are based as much in culture as in narrative event, and to think about alternative social structures, which may offer happier outcomes, or at least more equitable ones.

We are delighted to have younger scholars joining in this issue, with two short essays. Julia Machtenberg examines Sylvia Plath's 1962 "Fever 103°," which, they

argue, has too long been read by framing Plath as a domestic figure, concerned with her own sphere as a mid-century US-American woman. Machtenberg's essay teases out this canonical poet's concerns about contemporary geopolitics and the environment. Ioana-Mihaela Cozac's "With Great Product Comes Great Responsibility: Marketing Gender and Eco-Responsibility" pulls a lens further out, discussing the history of misanthropic US advertising. Cozac's essay highlights twentieth- and twenty-first-century women's agency in purchasing power, in the face of the persistent "eco-gender gap." Finally, Martin Gabriel reviews a recent history of an area of North America currently undergoing rapid climate change, from a long-term perspective tracing the region back to its pre-human past.

We hope you find this issue thought-provoking, salient, and a wealth of reading and viewing resources. It's been a pleasure to work with this group of talented thinkers.

Acknowledgements

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studies, black heavyweight boxers, econarratology, literature and death, and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.

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The "Colonial Anthropocene" Imaginary: Re-Imagining Climate Change in Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (2018)

Marina Pingler

ABSTRACT

Climate imaginaries – collectively held visions of future climate change – take shape in a variety of media and genres, from computer models to poetry. While some climate imaginaries have proven particularly enduring and have managed to attain a hegemonic status in climate change discourse – for example, the "techno-market" imaginary and the "climate apocalypse" imaginary – others remain marginalized. Drawing on Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (2018), this article theorizes the "colonial Anthropocene" imaginary as an alternative imaginary and examines its co-production at the intersection of academic discourses, activism, and literature. The "colonial Anthropocene" imaginary generally and *Moon of the Crusted Snow* specifically negotiate ideological tensions that have emerged in the discourse on the Anthropocene and forge a connection between the seemingly exceptional event of anthropogenic climate change and a historical sequence of colonial violence and forced displacement of Indigenous peoples. As one of this imaginary's manifestations in the literary domain, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (2018) embeds climate change into a longer story that begins with settler colonialism on the North American continent by drawing on an equally old genre: the Indian captivity narrative. Significantly, the "colonial Anthropocene" imaginary is a reaction to the impulse toward claims to universality resurfacing in the discourse on the Anthropocene, particularly in the notion of "the human."

KEYWORDS

Settler colonialism, social (in)justice, activism, universalism, speculative fiction

Introduction

Panic sets in on a First Peoples' reservation in what is currently northern Canada in Anishinaabe author Waubgeshig Rice's novel *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (2018), when supplies from "the South" (3) fail to arrive, telecommunications collapse, and the infrastructure connecting the community to the power grid stops providing electricity. The Anishinaabe community must rely on Indigenous traditions, such as hunting, wood gathering, and rationing, to survive the winter. In particular, the community's young members perceive this breakdown – caused by climate change – as an unprecedented event. However, Aileen, the community's eldest member and spiritual guide, explains that the disruptions the community experiences are not new. They were always part of her world and, more importantly, the world of her ancestors:

> [W]hen young people come over . . . They say that this is the end of the world. The power's out and we've run out of gas and no one's come up from down south. They say the food is running out and that we're in danger. There's a word they say too – ah … pock … ah … Yes, apocalypse! What a silly word . . . Our world isn't ending. It already ended. It ended when the Zhaagnaash [white person] came into our original home down south on that bay and took it from us. (Rice 149)

Aileen makes it clear that the Indigenous community had already had such experiences due to their displacement and resettlement on the reservation. These disruptions have always had the same cause: the "Zhaagnaash," that is, the European settlers. Ultimately, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* frames climate change as a product of colonial exploitation and embeds it in a process that began with the oppression endured by previous generations when European settlers began displacing Anishinaabe First Nations. It is a cyclical process – as Aileen notes, "We've had that *over and over*" (Rice 150; my emphasis) – and yet developmental at the same time, as the crisis the community is now experiencing surpasses all previous ones. As the narrator notes, when Evan, the novel's protagonist, who lives on the reservation with his family, discovers the first dead body, "[e]ven in a place as familiar with tragedy as a northern reserve, it had reached levels he [Evan] had never experienced" (153). Thus, the novel establishes a trajectory leading directly from the arrival of the "Zhaagnash" to the "original home down south" of the First Nations peoples – that is, the south of what is currently Canada – to twenty-first-century climate change, representing it as what Potawatomi scholar and activist Kyle Powys Whyte refers to as an "intensified episode of colonialism" ("Indigenous Climate" 156).

By casting the colonial horrors committed against Indigenous peoples in apocalyptic terms, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* draws on and contributes to Indigenous studies discourses, which have long theorized the onset of colonization as apocalyptic for Indigenous communities and nations. "The hardships many nonIndigenous people dread most of the climate crisis are ones that Indigenous peoples have endured

already . . . : ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration," Whyte explains ("Indigenous Science" 226). Despite this, he emphasizes that Indigenous authors have strongly resisted "apocalypse" as a narrative framework (226–27).[1]

A similar understanding of climate change was articulated by the activists of the #NoDAPL protests. The Standing Rock Camp became the birthplace of a grassroots resistance movement. Tribal citizens of the Standing Rock Lakota Nation and other Lakota, Nakota and Dakota citizens established a spirit camp on April 1, 2016, alongside the planned route of the 1,172-mile Dakota Access Pipe Line (DAPL), which was intended to transport fracked oil from the Bakken and Three Forks oil fields to refineries in Illinois. This movement is just one of many social movements that have been at the forefront of the struggle against the destructive effects of extractive industries in recent years. It quickly gained significant media attention. Many supporters joined environmentalists and Lakota people to stop the construction of the pipeline, which risked affecting the main source of drinking water for a large portion of North Dakota, South Dakota, and tribal nations.[2]

I argue that *Moon of the Crusted Snow* has to be read against this background. The novel plays into wider discourses that are evident in theoretical discussions and in political activism for sovereignty and social justice on the ground. Together, these rest on the same premise: It is with the arrival of the settlers to the so-called "New World" that the Anthropocene begins, and it is the beginning of colonization that initiates a process that leads to twenty-first-century climate change. I propose to look beyond the level of the individual text and examine how *Moon of the Crusted Snow* participates in the co-production of an imaginary that emerges at the intersection of academic discourse, activism, and literature, which I coin the "colonial Anthropocene" imaginary. Climate imaginaries are collectively held visions of future climate change, and they are increasingly being acknowledged for their impact on shaping climate knowledge, either "fixing or unsettling" particular future visions (Davoudi and Machen 210). While some climate imaginaries, such as techno-market and climate apocalypse (Levy and Spicer; McQueen; Fagan), have attained a hegemonic status in climate change discourse, others remain marginalized.

In this article, I argue that the colonial Anthropocene imaginary generally and *Moon of the Crusted Snow* specifically allow for an imaginative shift in the

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[1] Various Indigenous scholars have underlined the point that Western notions of the apocalypse differ from non-Indigenous conceptions. For instance, Grace Dillon states that "[it] is almost commonplace to think that the Native Apocalypse, if contemplated seriously has already taken place" (8). Lawrence Gross, too, argues that "along with many other Native American peoples, the Anishinaabe have seen the end of our world" (437).

[2] See Streeby (34–69) for a more detailed account of the #NoDAPL movement as well as other struggles over water, oil, and resource extraction.

understanding of the Anthropocene and decolonizing future imaginaries. The texts co-producing the colonial Anthropocene imaginary challenge two major premises on which the dominant discourse on the Anthropocene and its "most salient ecological manifestation, global climate change" (Heise, "Comparative" 22), rest – the assumption that climate change is entirely unprecedented and the notion that human beings, as an undifferentiated collective, are responsible for the rupture of the Earth system. My argument unfolds in two steps. I begin with a general discussion of the colonial Anthropocene imaginary, in which I elaborate on why the concept of "the imaginary" is useful for considering collectively held visions of future climate change that are co-produced by different cultural forms, and in different knowledge domains and sociopolitical fields. The imaginary has become a ubiquitous concept in contemporary thought; however, the everyday use of the term masks conflicting views on what the imaginary is and what it can do.[3] Although a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this article, in the first part, I offer some conceptual clarity regarding the debate about the imaginary. In the second part, I analyze *Moon of the Crusted Snow* as a literary manifestation of the colonial Anthropocene imaginary. *Moon of the Crusted Snow* embeds climate change into a longer story, which begins with settler colonialism on the North American continent, by drawing on an equally old genre: the Indian captivity narrative. By doing so, the novel problematizes the universalism implicated in the concept of the Anthropocene and contends that it is not "the human" but rather a specific kind of human – that is, the European colonizer – who is responsible for causing climate change.

The "Colonial Anthropocene" Imaginary

The Anthropocene is a powerful concept that has sparked countless controversies, not only in the humanities but also in the natural sciences. The close link between the current planetary crisis and colonialism has found wide resonance in the scholarly discourse, particularly in criticism of the Anthropocene for which scholars have posited various different start dates. The most prominent are the invention of the steam engine in 1784, proposed by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer ("The 'Anthropocene'"), and the mid-twentieth century, proposed by the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG), an interdisciplinary research group dedicated to the study of the Anthropocene as part of the geologic time scale. The start date is crucial in shaping the understanding of the Anthropocene as "[e]ach proposal for a starting date gives a different historical account, pointing to different criteria and kinds of

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[3] See Arjun Appadurai, who argues that "[t]he image, the imagined, the imaginary . . . are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice" (31).

causality" (Bergthaller and Horn 25).[4] The start date associated with the beginning of European colonization is significant particularly for the production of the colonial Anthropocene imaginary.

In a 2015 article published in *Nature*, Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin proposed that the start date for the Anthropocene should be pushed back to the early seventeenth century and the advent of colonialism. The arrival of Europeans in the lands that would come to be known as the Americas "led to the largest human population replacement in the past 13,000 years, the first global trade networks linking Europe, China, Africa and the Americas, and the resultant mixing of previously separate biotas, known as the Columbian Exchange" (174). Similarly, Heather Davis and Zoe Todd argue that "the Anthropocene is not a new event, but is rather the continuation of practices of dispossession and genocide, coupled with a literal transformation of the environment, that have been at work for the last five hundred years" (761). Whyte also suggests that climate change is "an intensification of environmental change imposed on Indigenous peoples by colonialism" and that "colonially induced environmental changes" have already "altered the ecological conditions that supported Indigenous peoples' cultures, health, economies, and political self-determination" before colonization ("Indigenous Climate" 153–54). In this sense, the Anthropocene is temporally analogous to settler colonialism. Notably, on July 13, 2023, the environmental scientist Erle Ellis announced his resignation from the Anthropocene Working Group. As he clarified in an open letter, his resignation was a direct result of the group's narrow definition of the Anthropocene, which sets the mid-twentieth century as the starting date, thus neglecting the longer history of colonial environmental exploitation ("Why I Resigned").

Macarena Gómez-Barris was the first to explicity use the term "colonial Anthropocene" to critique the inadequacy of "the nomenclature of the Anthropocene," arguing that it both "universalize[s] its effects" and obscures the "ongoing consequences of colonialism" (2). She advocates for understanding planetary climate change and environmental destruction within a framework that "spans more than five centuries of colonial domination" (2). Gómez-Barris grounds her argument in decolonial theorizations that emphasize coloniality such as Sylvia Wynter's "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom" (2003) and Anibal Quijano's classic essay "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America" (2000). She also points to Kathryn Yusoff's terminology of *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, which "offers an explosion of the singular and names the racial logic that underpins planetary crises" (9). Gómez-Barris's notion of the "colonial Anthropocene" has a similar goal, "namely

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[4] For a detailed discussion of the possible start dates, see James (1–24) and Bergthaller and Horn (19–34).

to destabilize how knowledge about ecological crisis is temporalized, spatialized, and already locked within a regime of what Anibal Quijano first termed the coloniality of power" (9).

What all of these scholars have in common, despite representing different academic disciplines, is that they, like Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* or the #NoDAPL activists, co-produce the same climate imaginary. Hence, whereas Gómez-Barris's theorization provides a useful starting point for thinking about the continuities of climate change and colonization, this article's primary aim is not to intervene in the same debate as Gómez-Barris, Yusoff, and the other scholars mentioned above. Nor is it to debate which term is more appropriate to name the current epoch. Instead, this article examines how multiple texts, understood in the broadest sense, participate in the co-production of collectively held visions of future climate change.

As my introduction shows, the idea of a link between climate change and colonialism, as well as questioning the universal "we," has not only entered specialized academic discourses but also taken hold in other more public forms of writing, such as fiction. Novels such as Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), Rita Indiana's *Tentacle* (2018), Rebecca Roanhorse's *Trail of Lightning* (2018), and Darcie Little Badger's *A Snake Falls to Earth* (2021) mobilize the genre of speculative fiction to gesture toward the significance of Indigenous resurgence in finding an alternative to the devastating effects of settler colonialism. These texts have gained a broad readership and some are even considered for screen adaptations. According to *New York Times* critic Alexandra Alter, writing about the growing popularity and publicity of genre fiction published by Indigenous writers, these "authors are gaining recognition in a corner of the literary world that has traditionally been white, male and Eurocentric, rooted in Western mythology." Dimaline and Roanhorse even "signed multi-book deals with major publishing houses" ("We've Already Survived an Apocalypse"). Sequels to Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* and Roanhorse's *The Trail of Lightning* have already been published, and Rice's *Moon of the Turning Leaves*, the sequel to *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, was only recently released in October 2023.

In a similar vein, Amitav Ghosh's environmental non-fiction work *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021) reframes climate changes as the result of a "war of terraforming" waged by settlers against Indigenous peoples.[5] Mi'gmaw director Jeff Barnaby's zombie horror film *Blood Quantum* (2019) and Métis director Danis Goulet's dystopian film *Night Raiders* (2021) are just two examples that showcase how the medium of film links climate change to long histories of colonial

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[5] See my discussion of *The Marrow Thieves*, *Tentacle*, and *The Nutmeg's Curse* as manifestations of the colonial Anthropocene imaginary.

environmental exploitation. Moreover, Indigenous activists have produced numerous cultural forms linking past and ongoing operations of settler colonialism to current environmental struggles. For instance, the eight-minute documentary *Mni Wiconi: The Stand at Standing Rock* (2016) focuses on the battle by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, emphasizing Standing Rock's deep historical roots in settler colonialism. The broad variety of digital media through which movements such as #NoDAPL co-produce the colonial Anthropocene imaginary is particularly noteworthy, including TikToks, podcasts, manifestos, photography, and film, disseminated through the internet and social media, allowing less privileged producers to reach a broad audience.

The concept of the imaginary is well-suited to conceptualizing how these different texts forge a similar connection and how they shape ideas about climate change. Winfried Fluck's concept of the "cultural imaginary," which refers to the images, affects, and desires projected by a particular culture at a specific historical moment, is useful for considering shared visions of future climate change. I consider the colonial Anthropocene imaginary as part of a more general cultural imaginary. However, unlike Fluck, I conceive of climate imaginaries as abstractions of assemblages of texts in the broadest sense, which do not exist outside representation, are co-produced by different media, and circulated between different knowledge domains and social fields.[6] Hence, important to this process of co-production is the positioning of speculative fiction not just as a literary genre in the narrow sense but as a critical mode of envisioning futures at the intersection of science, activism, literature, and the arts. What ultimately allows the colonial Anthropocene imaginary to manifest in different cultural forms and reach broad audiences is its dependence on an adapted form of the template of "the declensionist narrative" (Heise, *Imagining* 7). This template attributes the environmental crisis to the settlers' disruption of Indigenous relationships with their lands and advocates for the protection of ecosystems from the colonizers' interference where possible. By simplifying intricate processes into a simpler storyline, the template facilitates transferability across different media, knowledge domains, and social fields.

There are at least three major constituents of the colonial Anthropocene imaginary. First, the texts co-producing the colonial Anthropocene imaginary link the onset of the Anthropocene with colonization. According to Zoltán B. Simon, there is no question that the Anthropocene "*is perceived* and *conceptually* captured as radical novelty" in certain discourses, and specifically in its formulation in Earth system science (501; original emphasis). The concept of the Anthropocene was proposed within

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[6] I build on research on the relationship between the imaginary and the medium in Media and Communication Studies and Science and Technology Studies. For more information on the approach to co-production, see Jasanoff. See also Simin Davoudi and Ruth Machen for a discussion of the relationship between climate imaginaries and different media.

Earth system science as a "conceptual effort to capture radical novelty," as it envisions the crossing of thresholds and planetary boundaries that would mean escaping the state of the Earth system in which human societies have evolved (502, 510). By contrast, the colonial Anthropocene imaginary participates in the "historical approach" to the Anthropocene, framing what is perceived as "radical novelty" (512) in certain discourses as a product of past and ongoing colonial exploitation and the ideologies that fuel it.

Second, the colonial Anthropocene imaginary emerged as a response to the impulse to universality resurfacing in the discourse on the Anthropocene, specifically in the notion of "the human." Numerous critics have called for the concept's interrogation and questioned whether this history of transformation applies equally to all humans. The Anthropocene "pose[s] a new task of negotiating the study of differences with the postulation of human universals" (Heise, "Comparative" 22). Indeed, long before the question of the human gained centrality within the Anthropocene discourse, Wynter has drawn attention to how the West has constituted humans throughout history. Wynter's work, as Katherine McKittrick aptly puts it, "patiently attends to the ways in which our specific conception of the human, Man, curtails alternative models of being, the fullness of our interrelated human realization, and a new science of human discourse" (2). For many scholars in the humanities, the *anthropos* represents the return of Enlightenment Man. Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that the global challenge of climate change requires a reevaluation of human differences. He proposes distinguishing between the human as *homo* and as *anthropos*. Accordingly, *homo* designates "humanity as a divided political subject" (173), that is, as Hannes Bergthaller and Eva Horn further explain, "differentiated by culture, gender, race, and economic situation" (70). Conversely, *anthropos* refers to the human as "a geological force, as a species, as a part of the history of life on this planet" (Chakrabarty 174). "The real challenge of thinking about the human in the Anthropocene," according to Bergthaller and Horn's summary of Chakrabarty's work, "consists precisely in the 'collision' of different conceptions of the human" (78). Rejecting the notion of the *anthropos* as a universal geologic agent, the colonial Anthropocene imaginary emphasizes that humanity is not universally implicated in the current climate crisis.

Finally, whereas the colonial Anthropocene imaginary mourns the severing of Indigenous peoples from their lands and relatives at the hands of settlers, portraying it as devastating not only to Indigenous peoples but also to the environment, this mourning is not seen as the sign of an end but as an opening for a new beginning. The texts co-producing the imaginary, particularly those emerging in the fictional and socio-political realms, envision the end of Euro-Western colonial ideology and instead

foreground Indigenous futurity, thereby gesturing toward the significance of Indigenous resurgence for finding alternatives to the devastating effects of the ongoing operations of settler colonialism.

Revamped Genre – The Captivity Narrative in Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (2018)

Zooming in on one of its manifestations in the fictional domain, Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* is an example of how the genre of the novel co-produces the colonial Anthropocene imaginary. The novel creates productive frames for considering how ecological vulnerability is experienced unequally and links climate change to long histories of colonial environmental exploitation. Although the novel never explicitly references climate change, there are several hints that allow for the novel's "apocalyptic" event – the energy blackout and subsequent resource depletion – to be read in the broader context of an environmental crisis including the change in migratory behavior of birds addressed in the opening of the novel, as well as the harsh winter. Set in what is currently northern Canada, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* revolves around the life of a rural Anishinaabe First Nation that was forced to leave its homeland generations ago and settle on a reservation. The Anishinaabeg consist of several First Nations whose ancestral homeland is in what is currently Southern Canada near the Great Lakes. In the seventeenth century, European settlers displaced the community, which then escaped to the remote areas of northern Canada, near the Arctic Circle. On the one hand, the novel establishes continuity between climate change and the colonial past by having Aileen, as the elder of the community, articulate the community's cultural memory. On the other hand, it establishes continuity through its genre. The novel locates the beginning of the Anthropocene at the beginning of colonization, specifically the settlement of the Puritans on the North American continent. This is achieved by drawing upon the genre of the Indian captivity narrative.

The Indian captivity narrative is commonly known and credited by many critics as the first genuinely American genre that originated from the early colonies of the seventeenth century. According to Lisa M. Logan, Amy Shrager Lang, Nancy Armstrong, and Leonard Tennenhouse, among others, have argued that the Indian captivity narrative constitutes America's first unique literary form (465). This claim has been contested by Linda Colley, who argues that, "[l]ike much American exceptionalism," this claim "badly needs qualifying" (201). The genre was

> exported to North America, along with so much else, by seventeenth century English emigrants . . . [who] brought with them a knowledge of the abundant literature and sermonising that surrounded men and women captured at sea by Barbary corsairs and enslaved in North Africa. (201)

I read Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* as a twenty-first-century Indigenous rewriting of the captivity narrative. The novel draws upon the form of its seventeenth-century Puritan precursor, in which Indigenous people were often cast as cannibals supposedly doing the devil's work. Instead, it casts settlers as cannibals and follows the common pattern of the captivity narrative, which typically begins with freedom, followed by captivity, and ends with freedom, to dramatize the multi-generational experience of the capture of Indigenous people. By doing so, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* connects European, particularly British, colonization of the American continent to anthropogenic climate change.

The novel not only establishes continuity between colonialism and climate change through its form but also opens a dialogue with a much older genre, thus calling for an interrogation of this genre and its role in harming the planet's well-being. In this sense, the novel is what Lena Linne refers to as a "metageneric text," a

> passage or an entire text which, either implicitly or explicitly, comments on the genre of another text; as an instance of genre A (meta-level) which reflects upon genre B (object-level), it requires the simultaneous presence of two different genres in a single text. (58)

Moon of the Crusted Snow subversively comments on the genre of the Indian captivity narrative, exposing it as complicit in fostering Euro-Western colonial ideology, such as colonial conquest, cultural hierarchy, and supremacy, which have contributed to the emergence of the colonial Anthropocene.

The novel does not revolve around captivity in a literal sense, as in the traditional Indian captivity narrative, in which an individual (usually female) is abducted and forced to live in an Indigenous community. However, I suggest that the forced resettlement of the community to a reservation represents a metaphorical form of captivity. According to Pauline Turner Strong, captivity in abstract terms is "the assertion of power over a person or group resulting in dislocation, physical confinement, and social transformation" (339). Therefore, forced removal and relocation to a reservation are tantamount to captivity. Even if the community is not physically forced to remain on the reservation, the possibility of settling elsewhere is non-existent, as relocation off the reservation would mean giving up Indigenous sovereignty.

Moon of the Crusted Snow extends the scope of captivity found in the traditional narrative. The captivity that the Indigenous community endures spans several generations, beginning with the first encounter with colonizers centuries ago. "They made us come all the way up here. This is not our homeland!" (Rice 149) Aileen tells Evan, the novel's protagonist. She holds a special place in the community, as she is the only one who speaks Ojibwe fluently, and she passes on ancestral knowledge to the younger generations.

> When the ancestors of these Anishinaabe people were forced to settle in this unfamiliar land, distant from their traditional home near the Great Lakes, their culture withered under the pressure of the incomers' Christianity. The white authorities displaced them far to the north to make way for towns and cities. (53)

Aileen evokes the broader, real-world historical context of the seventeenth-century displacement and genocide of the First Nations people. Moreover, Aileen makes it clear that while they have sovereignty as an Indigenous community on the reservation, they do not consider the reservation their home. Being unable to return home because they are confined to the reservation makes them effectively captives.

Furthermore, captivity is closely tied to modernity, symbolized in the novel by "the South" (Rice 3). The reader is given only vague information about the South. However, the community relies entirely on the infrastructure provided by the South, which supplies it with energy and running water, technologies, such as cars, the Internet, and cellular services, and the food produced industrially and supplied by the supermarket, which makes hunting, gathering, and fishing obsolete. As such, captivity not only entails territorial restrictions, legally preventing the community from settling elsewhere, but it is also compounded by the community's overall dependence on the "modern systems" (212). The settlers' interference with the Anishinaabe, as *Moon of the Crusted Snow* highlights, forced the community into a state of almost total dependence on "the South." More specifically, according to Reuben Martens, it is a total dependence on "a petromodern/petrocultural supply chain" (205–06), which further reinforces the Anishinaabe's state of captivity. Martens explains that "free movement, even within this rather confined community, is linked to access and availability of petroleum," because its members move around primarily by snowmobiles and automobiles (201). "Like people in many other northern reserves, they would be isolated by the long, unforgiving season, confined to a small radius around the village that extended only as far as a snowmobile's half tank of gas" (Rice 11). While Martens focuses primarily on the energopolitical violence of settler colonialism in the novel, I consider the community's dependence on diesel supply as fundamental to its captivity. Petroleum is obtained exclusively from the South. Once the connection to the South is cut, the community suffers, particularly due to its dependence. The Anishinaabe have gradually moved further away from its traditional way of living and become more reliant on the "modern systems," leading to a total dependence on the South, which is now well established (212).

In addition to negotiating the community's state of captivity, the novel draws on a number of other generic conventions that suggest reading it as a twenty-first-century re-rewriting of the Indian captivity narrative. Whereas *Moon of the Crusted Snow* enters into a dialogue with the genre more generally, I draw specifically on one of the most famous captivity narratives, Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness*

of God (1682) (also known as *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*), to exemplify how the novel draws upon the genre of the traditional Indian captivity narrative. Rowlandson's autobiographical account of nearly twelve weeks of imprisonment attracted a wide readership and is the first full-length prose text published in North America by a female author and the first example of the Indian captivity narrative (Hornung 1213).

While many critics agree that "the cultural work of captivity tales has not been simple or uniform" (Ebersole 2), one of its functions was to justify colonization under the moniker of a divine mission. *Moon of the Crusted Snow* offers a subversive take on the genre, as it draws on it to argue that colonial ideology has caused the climate crisis. Colonization was justified, among others, by casting Indigenous people as savages and inferior to the colonizers. Rowlandson begins her text by describing an attack by the Algonquian alliance on her house, which killed several occupants. The opening paragraph begins with the murder of a "[m]other and a sucking [c]hild . . . knockt [sic] on the head" and describes those shot down, "stript [sic] naked, and split open" (68). Featuring a portrayal of a vulnerable female captive "attempts to establish the validity (even the inevitability) of the conquest, even as it inverts the power relations at work. The powerless figure of the female captive, signifying the national body [which] belies the fact of colonial aggression" (Huhndorf 171). Moreover, Rowlandson describes the Algonquians as villainous, using terms such as "Barbarous Creatures," "Infidels," and "merciless Heathens" (69–70). As Rafia Zafar points out, this language "de-personalized and de-humanized the 'enemy,'" enabling the justification of colonial attacks, and reinforcing the "split between 'His people' and a 'hellish' unbelieving enemy – a dichotomy that would pave the way for generations of certainty in Native American inferiority" (24).

Like Rowlandson, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* uses the same dichotomized language, reversing a clear us-versus-them binary. The novel, like the traditional captivity narrative, establishes a moral dichotomy between the Anishinaabe and the settlers. This moral dichotomy is particularly reinforced through the character of Justin Scott, a non-Native Southerner, who represents all the tropes of colonial oppression, such as conquering the land, exploiting the community's resources, and introducing alcohol into the community. From the first moment Scott is introduced, he represents a threat to the community. When Evan hears the "buzz of a snowmobile" (98), which he recognizes as not belonging to the community, he feels "butterflies in his gut" (98) and immediately associates the stranger's arrival with danger. Before Scott even comes to a stop and takes off his helmet, Evan feels "the driver's eyes on him through the helmet's visor" and thinks, "He's coming right for me" (99). Scott's casting as the ultimate villain is reinforced by his clothing and equipment. "Everything was black –

the snowmobile, the self, the boots, the suit, and the helmet" (99). In Western tradition, the color black evokes notions of villainy, evil, and death, echoing Rowlandson's description of Native Americans as "black creatures" (71).

Moreover, the novel goes a step further than Rowlandson's narrative, using another long-serving tool in the Western process of othering – cannibalism, which may not feature in Rowlandson but in the genre of the captivity narrative. However, in *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, it is not the Native American but the settler who is cast as a cannibal. Scott turns into a cannibal once resources become scarce. Some members of the community die despite all efforts to keep all community members alive, and their bodies are kept in a makeshift morgue, where, at the height of the winter crisis, "twenty-one bodies [are] lined neatly in three rows" (155). Regardless of the fact that the corpses were friends and relatives of the community, Scott eats one in order to survive, using the dead body solely as a means of survival. *Moon of the Crusted Snow* thus reverses the cannibalism discourse by casting Scott as a cannibal. While Indigenous captors are represented as the "other" in the traditional captivity narrative, the settlers, in turn, become the "other" in *Moon of the Crusted Snow*.

As such, Scott is an allegory of settler colonialism conquering and exploiting the land. Indeed, one can read *Moon of the Crusted Snow* as a replay of historical terrors in a speculative future. However, I propose to consider his appearance not merely as an allegory but as a continuation of colonial violence that results from a process that started with the arrival of the first settlers. As noted above, the colonial Anthropocene imaginary is characterized by embedding climate change into a longer historical process that started with colonialism. *Moon of the Crusted Snow* places the singular events of the story world – that is, the disruptions that the community endures due to climate change, such as the blackout and Scott's arrival – into a longer history of violence that spans from the real world's past into the speculative future. The injustices that Scott commits – and, more importantly, the disruption that the community experiences due to the climate crisis – are framed as a continuation of colonial violence and not uncoupled from real-world Canada, as an allegorical reading would suggest.

Moon of the Crusted Snow, as a manifestation of the colonial Anthropocene imaginary, is characterized by moving the onset of the Anthropocene to the arrival of settlers on the North American continent. In doing so, it holds the settlers responsible for causing climate change, criticizing the notion of the *anthropos* as a universal agent equally implicated in the environmental crisis. Yet, the colonial Anthropocene imaginary offers a hopeful outlook toward the future. As with many other texts that co-produce this imaginary, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* promotes Indigenous ancestral knowledge and Indigenous traditions as a way out of the current conundrum. The

novel reverses the trajectory of modernity by casting what, in Western discourse, is considered nonmodern, i.e., Indigenous relationships to the land that affirm ancestral knowledges – as the key to the future and only way to survive. According to Mario Blaser, as "modernity becomes equated with the present, radical difference is (again) mapped out against a temporal grid, for if something is said to be nonmodern, its logical location is in the past" (549). By contrast, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* centers on the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge and traditions, suggesting that the traditions that are termed "nonmodern" in Western discourse better equip communities to survive the climate crisis.

As the "white man's modern systems" break down (Rice 212), relying on Indigenous traditions such as hunting, collecting wood, and rationing, is represented as the only way for the community to survive the winter. However, this proves difficult, as most of the younger generation in the community do not have the skills to survive on their own. As becomes clear through Aileen's character, much has already been lost in the process of cultural assimilation.

> Aileen was the last of the generation raised speaking Anishinaabemowin, with little English at all . . . She remembered the old ways and a lot of the important ceremonies. She had more knowledge than everyone else about the traditional lives of the Anishinaabeg. (146)

Moreover, many of the younger generation are reluctant to learn "the old ways." Some young community members, such as Kevin, Nick, and Evan, have "grown up in families that believed in teaching their kids how to live on the land and they kn[o]w how to hunt, fish, and trap" (78) and value learning from the older generation. For others, however, such as Evan's brother Cam, closeness to the white man's culture has resulted in a disconnection from culturally inherent knowledge and traditions. "When Evan had been out on the land learning real survival skills with his father and uncles as a teenager, . . . Cam had chosen to stay behind, learning simulated ones in video games" (34).

Thus, the novel also negotiates questions that have been central to the captivity narrative since its emergence: How close does the captive come to the captors, and as the captives are forced to live in another culture, are they able to retain their own cultural identity? Therefore, captivity triggers a process of reflection on one's own cultural identity. The captivity narrative, in its traditional form, required the captive to ward off the threat of another culture by preserving ties to modernity. Rice's novel poses similar questions; however, in this context, modernity is represented as the threat. In the genre's function of negotiating such tension, the subversive potential of rewriting the genre of the captivity narrative becomes particularly evident. The novel reflects a constant tension between assimilation to modern culture and

awareness of lost Indigenous culture. Wai Chee Dimock, who analyzes several passages of Rowlandson's narrative, shows how the "racial binary of us versus them remains in effect no longer with uniform strength" (18) and can become blurry. Furthermore, Dimock notes that Rowlandson was capable of "code switch[ing] so flexibly among Indians" (33). Similar to Rowlandson's narrative, the line between Indigenous and modern culture becomes blurry in Rice's novel as the younger generation has lost much of the traditional knowledge and practices.

Ultimately, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* stages a ruptured relationship between members of the community and the land, their elders, and their children through the hand of the settlers. What Nishnaabeg poet, critic, and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes for the Nishnaabeg holds true also for the novel's community:

> A great deal of the colonizer's energy has gone into breaking the intimate connection of Nishnaabeg bodies (and minds and spirits) to each other and to the practices and associated knowledges that connect us to land, because this is the base of our power. (41).

The community's disconnection from Indigenous knowledge and traditions is clearly presented in the novel as a result of what Evan describes as "the pull of the negative influences around [them]" (Rice 5), meaning the modern world. Modernity has held the community captive since the first resettlement in the reservation, forcing the community to assimilate to the "other" culture. The only way to deal with the collapse of the "modern systems" (212) and climate crisis, according to *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, is to resort to Indigenous traditions.

As with Rowlandson's narrative, Rice's novel ends on a hopeful note regarding the future. In the end, the community manages to revive lost knowledge and traditions. Although the death toll rises steadily, communal sense strengthens, and ties to ancestral knowledge and practices are revived. Indeed, as the novel affirms, "people like Aileen, her parents, and a few others had kept the old ways alive in secret," ensuring the future of the community (53).

> The skills they needed to preserve in this northern terrain, far from their original homeland farther south, were proud knowledge held close through the decades of imposed adversity. They were handed down to those in the next generation willing to learn. (48)

Although the novel clearly stresses the importance of preserving traditional relationships with the land, the Ojibwe language, and the relationship between younger members of the community and elders like Aileen, it is important to note that it does not advocate a return to the past. Laura Maria De Vos's theorization of the "spiralic resurgence of cultural traditions and ancestral knowledges" (2) is useful for thinking about the novel's relationship between past, present, and future. Disrupting the teleological progression from past to future, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* "emphasizes the

relationship across time between related, transformed experiences and allows for a dynamic return and rebirth of the past into the future" (5-6). Accordingly, this relationship is not "merely one of repeating a sterile past, but one of an unstoppable continuation of peoplehoods, transformed in and for each moment, always with an eye on creating a thriving future for Indigenous peoples" (5). Alternatively, as Simpson puts it by drawing on the Nishnaabeg word *biidaaban*, "the present . . . is a colliding of the past and the future. Everyday embodiment is therefore a mechanism for ancient beginnings" (193).

This understanding of time and the possibility for a new beginning then comes particularly to the fore in the final chapter of the novel. The surviving characters walk into the forest and away from the settlers' captivity. "[T]hey refused to wither completely, and a core of dedicated people had worked tirelessly to create their own settlement away from [the] town" (212), capturing the determination of this Anishinaabe First Nation people to survive and keep their culture alive. "They reached a clearing that led to a path through the bush. They stepped onto the trail, one by one, to begin this new life nestled deep in the heart of Anishinaabe territory" (213). The path symbolizes a new beginning and the way to a hopeful future away from modernity. This hope is underlined by the novel's epilogue, entitled "Ziigwaan" ("Spring"). It is only then that the novel suggests that the captivity has ended. The survivors "decided to take control of their own destiny" (212). Indigenous traditions have saved the community the first time they were removed and have had to adapt to their new circumstances. Similarly, their self-sufficiency and close relationship to their ancestral knowledge will save the community in the novel's present.

With this ending, where the old infrastructure is left behind for a new beginning, the novel gestures toward the end of Euro-Western colonial ideology. By dramatizing the collapse of the "modern systems," (212) the novel exposes the failure of modernity's "imaginary of progress to produce any kind of a future that remotely resembles a livable world" (Smith and Young 13). Instead, the novel foregrounds Indigenous futurity. *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, by rewriting the Indian captivity narrative, imaginatively stages the repatriation of those once captured and the end of a captivity that, according to the novel, began hundreds of years ago, persists to this day, and has been justified by texts such as Rowlandson's work. Although the Anishinaabe community does not return to its homeland, it is able to leave the reservation and, as is suggested in the novel, the confinements of modernity, as it no longer relies on the South. The novel follows the pattern of a traditional captivity narrative, beginning with freedom, followed by captivity, and ultimately ending with freedom. Hope for the future lies specifically with the generation that is able to relearn the ancestral traditions and practices and, more importantly, will be able to carry that knowledge

forward into the future, cherishing a dynamic relationship between ancestors and those who are still to be born.

Conclusion

According to Helmuth Trischler, the Anthropocene "involves more than just an exchange of scientific ideas"; rather, "it is a site where fundamental ethical positions are being renegotiated" (321). As I have shown, these ethical positions manifest particularly in the questions of how to understand the human and are negotiated not only in the scholarly realms but also in the sociopolitical and fictional realms. The colonial Anthropocene imaginary generally, and *Moon of the Crusted Snow* specifically, reject the notion of the *anthropos* as geological agent universally implicated in climate crisis and highlight that marginalized communities suffer disproportionately from the impacts of climate change. Accordingly, the texts co-producing the colonial Anthropocene imaginary perform the cultural work of shifting the focus in the debate on climate change from the Earth system and universalization of the human species to social injustices resulting from the history of settler colonialism. Moreover, the colonial Anthropocene imaginary is an example of how climate imaginaries are co-produced by different media at the intersection of academic discourses, activism, and literature. As with Indigenous studies discourses and the #NoDAPL movement, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* suggests an understanding of the climate crisis as long-term and cumulative, originating in the colonial period and intensifying over time.

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About the Author

Marina Pingler is a PhD candidate and research fellow in the American Studies Department at the University of Tübingen, Germany. She completed her state examination in English and History in September 2020, followed by a Master of Arts in American Studies in April 2021 at the University of Tübingen. Her PhD project focuses on collectively held visions of future climate change in American culture and literature – so-called "climate imaginaries" – that have emerged between 2016 and 2023 but remain marginalized in climate change discourse. In her project she examines the co-production of alternative scenarios of future climate change at the intersection of activism and literature, and asks how medial and genre-specific particularities influence these alternative imaginaries. From September 2023 to March 2024, she served as a visiting scholar at the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard University.

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"There's still a world":
Salvaging Hope in Garbagetown

Markus Schwarz

ABSTRACT

In Catherynne M. Valente's *The Past Is Red*, the world as we know it has already drowned. However, even after the apocalypse, traces of extractive capitalism – responsible for the destruction of the planet in the first place – are still lingering on as the novella is set in Garbagetown, a floating habitat of waste that emerged from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. This article takes this rubbish as its starting point and examines what Elizabeth DeLoughrey calls our "anticipated history of ruins" through the lenses of utopian theory and salvage-Marxism. By conceptualizing waste as one of the most visible markers of the Capitalocene (Moore), I argue that it is not only a planet's resources that are considered disposable in a capitalist economy but also some of its inhabitants. The analysis focuses on the novella's main character Tetley, who, in contrast to her fellow citizens, attempts to locate beauty in the ruins and has hope – not for salvation but for the broken world. By reading Tetley as a salvagepunk character, this article nods towards a different utopian horizon in *The Past Is Red*, one that is not defined by solastalgia (Albrecht) for the past or the hope for a future Eden but as a praxis of becoming post-apocalyptic, by learning to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway) of a world built out of trash.

KEYWORDS

Utopia, Capitalocene, salvagepunk, climate change

In 2015, US oceanographer Charles Moore reported in an interview for the magazine *New Scientist* that he had found one spot in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch "where there was so much accumulated rubbish you could walk on it" (qtd. in Reed 28). This floating pile of garbage is a powerful image for the rapidly increasing pollution of oceans in the "Capitalocene," a term coined by Jason W. Moore as an alternative to "Anthropocene" to more accurately describe the contemporary moment as a "historical era shaped by relations privileging the endless accumulation of capital" (176). What if, one wonders, not only capital but also this walkable flotsam of trash further accumulates, what if it indeed becomes an island? This is a speculation Catherynne M. Valente pursues in her 2021 novella *The Past Is Red*. It is set in a place called Garbagetown, a floating island of waste which emerged from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch after the rise of sea levels drowned all landmass of planet Earth. As such, Garbagetown is a place after the apocalypse, built out of the ruins, out of the trash of the capitalist past. From the perspective of the present moment, it seems like a terrible setting, a dystopian warning of what the future could look like when the rising sea levels continue to drown the world and a new place to live on has to be built out of waste – dirty, devastating, and devoid of life. However, the novella's narrator, a girl named Tetley, provides a different outlook: Since she is convinced that Garbagetown is the most beautiful place on Earth, she wants to protect it at all costs and see it thriving. From her perspective, the waste-world becomes a place of potential, a site where a life and a future can be built, even after climate disaster shatters the world as we know it. In this article, I approach the novella and its architecture precisely through Tetley's eyes, not to sugarcoat the (post-)apocalypse of the slow violence of capitalocentric climate change, but rather to put to the foreground a different way of engaging with the ruins of the present. Instead of falling into the trap of desiring to go back to a previous time – what Glenn Albrecht calls "solastalgia" – or passively hoping for salvation, hope in *The Past Is Red* can be understood as praxis, as an active process of working with the trash-traces of global capitalism towards new structures, both materially and figuratively. In contrast to the other characters in the novella, who desperately want to live like the "Fuckwits" again – a term the citizens of Garbagetown use to refer to the previous generations that are seen as responsible for climate change – Tetley "stays with the trouble" in Donna Haraway's terms and attempts to think with and through the ruins of her world.

As SF writer and literary critic China Miéville reminds us, apocalypse and utopia are intimately connected: "the apocalypse, the end-times rending of the veil, paves the way for the other, the time beyond, the new beginning" (20). This article is located in the break between apocalypse and utopia, between hope and despair. It attempts to conceive of what Megen de Bruin-Molé calls "utopian pessimism," the idea that the

hope for a new world (which in reality is the desire for a return to paradise) must first be abandoned in order to see what remains. As Valente imagines in her novella, the remnants after the destruction of the planet due to consumer capitalism are all floating around in the ocean in a gigantic pile of waste. But nonetheless, from this waste, a world can be salvaged and reassembled. Consequently, the theoretical foundation of this article is also built out of the ruins of the present. Drawing on salvage-Marxism as well as utopian theory, my analysis begins in the world of the "Fuckwits" to map out the blueprint of what subsequently becomes Garbagetown in *The Past Is Red*. Approaching the present moment through its trash allows for a new perspective on the ecological as well as the social implications of a capitalist economy, which not only discards matter but also people. After analyzing this floating archive of waste on which Garbagetown is built, I conceptualize Tetley as a salvagepunk character. "Salvagepunk" is a term coined by Evan Calder Williams in his book *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* and describes an engagement with one's surroundings that does not aim to rebuild the past but attempts to imagine and build something new out of the ruins of the present. In the novella, Tetley's salvagepunk vision unfolds against the dreams and desires of the other inhabitants, who hold on to the hope of going back to another time and place. Finally, the analysis moves from the trash-island in the ocean to a habitat in outer space. Comparing the intergalactic exodus of some people (read: the billionaire class) in *The Past Is Red* to the techno-utopian dreams of the contemporary corporate space age illustrates how the (imagined) colonization of outer space cannot act as a spatial or temporal outside refuge to a broken planet. On the contrary, it serves as a technologically mediated excuse to not change the social conditions but to merely preserve the logics of extraction that, strata by strata, leave their mark on planet Earth in the era of the Capitalocene.

A Theory of Trash: Floating Garbage, Ghosts of the Capitalocene

When every structure has drowned, the post-apocalyptic traces that remain in the novella are the products of a consumer society. They are sorted almost like supermarket aisles during the construction of Garbagetown: electronics in Electric City, teddy bears and matchbox cars in Toyside, as well as supplements and drugs on Pill Hill, as some of the areas on the island are called. But not only the districts in *The Past Is Red* are references to consumer products, this logic also extends to the inhabitants: Every name in the novella is drawn from a product, the identity of every single person a link back to the consumer-capitalist past. As child mortality is an everyday tragedy on this floating island of waste, children only get their names when they turn ten years old. On this birthday, the ritual that constitutes their names takes place. The children set off from their home and walk around the different districts of

Garbagetown without ever being allowed to wash themselves, thus collecting more and more garbage that sticks on their skin. As soon as another person calls out the brand of a piece of trash on their body, this product description becomes their name. Thus, the citizens of Garbagetown become full citizens not through the fact of being born but by being interpellated. This naming ceremony is an act of interpellation which inscribes the consumerist past onto the body of Garbagetown's inhabitants. Tetley, for instance, is a tea bag brand; her parents are named Life and Time after the magazines; there is a character called Babybel Oni, a reference to cheese. Everything in the novella's post-apocalyptic setting is a reference, a trace of rubbish of the past. This is reminiscent of what Anna Tsing et al. argue in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*: "Every landscape is haunted by past ways of life" (G2). In *The Past Is Red* this haunting is extended from the ruins of the land to every single body. The entire structure – materially, socially, and ontologically – of Garbagetown discloses ways of living in the past, its architecture literally only possible through the ruination of our neoliberal present. In grammatical terms, Garbagetown is the past continuous of a world that has ended. Analyzing the novella is an act of waste-work, of sorting the trash to uncover the foundation of the ruins on which a future can be built. *The Past Is Red* is thus set in what Elizabeth DeLoughrey calls "our anticipated history of ruins" (*Allegories* 100), the logical conclusion of neoliberal expansion, extraction, and pollution. And it is precisely through the waste on which it is built that we can approach questions of past, present, and future, because "[w]aste is a remainder, a remnant of history, a ruin, and might be understood as an unintended archive" (103). This resonates with Rachele Dini, who develops her argument on waste alongside Mary Douglas's landmark work *Purity and Danger*. Dini writes that

> waste is the product of a process: it signals the aftermath of an occurrence, be that occurrence a dog defecating, the explosion of a nuclear plant, or the end of a fashion trend. This temporal dimension endows waste with narrative qualities: with its very presence a waste object signals that something has come before. Where dirt is matter out of place, waste is matter out of time. (5)

Diving into the archive of trash of the present moment is a way of reading the (dominant archive of the) past. In the novella, waste constitutes a double archive, which holds both the past and the future. While Garbagetown is the place that remains after the apocalypse, its constitutive elements simultaneously afford the possibility of reassemblage into something else, something that is not yet. Thinking with Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future*, waste in *The Past Is Red* can thus be conceptualized as "analogous to the trace, only from the other end of time" (xv). The imagined waste-landscape of the novella reaches back to the past from the not yet of the future and, by doing so, allows for a different perspective of reading the present.

Garbagetown is the product of capitalism. It is a place built out of the discarded matter of products, the aftermath of an extractive economy, and the result of what Rob Nixon has called "slow violence," which he defines as "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (2). In his book, Nixon begins his argument with a proposal by Lawrence Summers, then-president of the World Bank, who planned the export of garbage and toxic waste of rich nations to the African continent. This is a form of slow violence which "impacts the environments – and the environmentalism – of the poor." Capitalism, from the moment of resource extraction until the waste dump, leaves its mark, both on people and on the planet.[1] Bronislaw Szerszynski even goes so far to argue that "the truth of the Anthropocene is less about what humanity is doing, than the *traces* that humanity will leave behind" (169). The traces that one finds in Garbagetown are clues for reading our contemporary moment, which might more accurately be understood as "Capitalocene," as the term "Anthropocene" obscures the fact that not all humans are equally responsible for the imagined waste-world of the future. Rather, through these traces it becomes possible to retroactively see "the rise of economic regimes of disposability," which "has created enormous plastic and chemical waste across the planet, particularly in the world's oceans" (DeLoughrey, *Allegories* 101). Garbagetown is the accumulation of the materiality of the present, the waste dump as archive.

As the long term effects of the byproducts of capitalist production are especially visible in the oceans, where "marine plastic debris is creating a crisis for ocean and bird life, ushering in the Plasticene and turning the ocean into a 'plastisphere'" (DeLoughrey, *Allegories* 138), the Great Pacific Garbage Patch can be read as the most prominent example of capitalism's swamping of the natural environment. Located in the North Pacific in a large gyre, the Garbage Patch remains almost invisible as it consists mostly of microplastics and plastic floating below the surface level. This invisibility of the looming threat of a garbage island is the perfect epitome of a mode of production that abuses the ecosystems from which it extracts its resources. As Raj Patel and Moore put it: "Capitalists are, for instance, happy to view the ocean as both storage facility for the seafood we have yet to catch and sinkhole for the detritus we produce on land" (Introduction). The results are becoming ever more visible: Warming

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[1] It is important to highlight the entanglement between capitalism and colonialism when it comes to waste, which is not addressed sufficiently in *The Past Is Red*. Whereas Valente's novella offers a great entry point into analyzing class differences when it comes to the causes and effects of climate change, it does not properly acknowledge the racialized nature of capitalist dispossession and accumulation. Max Liboiron's work probes these intersections through their books *Pollution is Colonialism* as well as *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power* (co-authored with Josh Lepawsky). In contrast to locating environmental pollution in an unspecified place in the epoch of the Anthropocene, "Liboiron identifies in waste a patently postcolonial dynamic, highlighting the ways in which colonization functions through the appropriation of land for settlement, resource mobilization, or outsourcing of unwanted and superfluous matter and populations in order to enforce normative social spaces and their strictly regulated borders" (Patranobish 38).

oceans, rising sea levels, and the extermination of more-than-human life in the world's waters all point to the devastating destruction of (marine) ecosystems.

The utopian horizon in this environment cannot be a patch of land, where the inhabitants of Garbagetown can start anew (and make the same mistakes again); this hope is abandoned by Tetley, who insists that Garbagetown is all there is. There will be no fresh start anywhere else, no magical salvation from the dire situation on the trash island. This is aligned with a salvage-Marxist understanding of utopia, as outlined by *Salvage Magazine*, which uses history's dustbin as a starting point and conceptualizes a utopian perspective that braids the idea of working towards a future with the insistence that everything is waste. As the editorial collective puts it in the inaugural issue, "between salvation and garbage there is salvage" (Salvage Editorial Collective). In other words, the utopian horizon is located between paradise and apocalypse. Precisely in this break lies the possibility to see and work through the present moment by learning from the ruins of the past. Megen de Bruin-Molé describes the outlook of salvage-Marxism as "utopian pessimism" (5), the idea that hope for salvation needs to be discarded first in order to see one's ruinated environment anew and figure out what is to be done.

Salvagepunk is exploring the other side of the Janus-faced coin of utopian narratives: Instead of milk and honey, the river that flows through its worlds is almost out of water, filled with toxic waste, dead. In salvagepunk narratives, Zak Bronson argues, "there can be no return – no salvaging of the social order that was – since all that remains is the discarded waste left buried behind" ("Reproduce, Reuse, Recycle" 84). However, this does not mean that there is nothing that can be done. In contrast to more traditional understandings of the utopian horizon, which might shimmer with the hope for a better future or the hope for returning to a glorified past (what Zygmunt Bauman has called "retrotopia"[2]), hope here is first abandoned to see what remains to build a future on. Salvagepunk "envisions the utopian possibilities of recreating the world anew by capturing what Jameson refers to as the radical break," as Bronson continues (84). For Jameson, this is precisely the power of the utopian imagination: "by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break" (232), utopia without a map can break free from the conviction that there is no alternative (to capitalist logics). In the novella, Tetley does not articulate or express how she imagines the future world to be, but in the negation of the nostalgia and the hope for a new

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[2] Bauman coined the term in his 2017 monograph *Retrotopia* and described it as "visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn" (5). He uses Walter Benjamin's angel of history to introduce his argument, which is also a useful linguistic metaphor for the inhabitants in Garbagetown: They live on a floating trash-island, drifting inevitably towards a future, always looking backwards towards what they believe to be paradise lost.

Promised Land, which all the other inhabitants of Garbagetown express, there lies the potential for change. She has abandoned hope for a new world, but not for this one. Consequently, she dwells in the break and sees potential in the trash, instead of falling into the trap of despair or salvation. Tetley knows that there is no future waiting outside the trash-world the Garbagetowners inhabit, which is also how she justifies her act of sabotaging the attempt of using all the fuel left for turning the floating island of trash into a boat to travel towards a promised land that does not exist: "This is *it*. This is the future. Garbagetown and the sea. We can't go back, not ever, not even for a minute" (Valente 30).

Towards Utopia: Between Solastalgia and Salvagepunk

The architecture of Garbagetown is characteristic of many contemporary dystopian (climate-fiction) works, in which "characters struggle to survive while living worlds absent of the new – their environments marked by barren lands, abandoned architecture, and rotting waste" (Bronson, "Reproduce, Reuse, Recycle" 82). Indeed, the people in Garbagetown do struggle: They live on a floating island made out of trash, which has been built and plotted by the first generation of the survivors of climate change, in an act that is memorized as the "Great Sorting." This act of place-making in a post-apocalyptic world "made neighborhoods out of a floating crapfill, land out of waste" (Valente 46). Uncannily resembling the societal structures from the past, although in Garbagetown all neighborhoods are built out of trash, there is still a hierarchy of trash, and Electric City is the power-hub, both materially and politically. The geography of Garbagetown thus is built unequally. Property even remains a structural advantage when a world is built out of waste. As Tetley states: "If Garbagetown had a heart, it was Electric City. Electric City pumped power. Power and privilege. In Electric City, the lights of the Fuckwit world were still on" (11). Power here is both understood in the sense of electricity, as well as politically. This is an understanding of power that is stuck in the capitalist past. The world that is evoked here is a world that does not exist anymore; it is only a shimmer, a ghostly presence. And yet, as Tsing et al. write: "Ghosts point to our forgetting, showing us how living landscapes are imbued with earlier tracks and traces" (G6). The power the people of Electric City hold on to is the power of a structure that preceded them and that can never be reached again. The lights of the previous world shimmer only as long as there are batteries and fuel left, at some point the whole social (infra)structure inevitably will crumble and needs to be imagined anew. In this sense, *The Past Is Red* serves as an analogy to the contemporary reliance on fossil fuels and the frustrating political and economic non-action, which leaves the limits to growth and extractive processes

unaddressed. As Matthias Schmelzer et al. succinctly write in *The Future is Degrowth*, it would be possible to build a world where every being can flourish, but to do so

> a fundamental political and economic reorganization of society is necessary, which aims at overcoming multiple structural growth dependencies inherent in the capitalist economy – from industrialized infrastructures to social systems to the ideological myths of growth societies. (Introduction)

But so far, the political and infrastructural powers continue – both in the present and in the fictional future of the novella.

Electric City also has the biggest and most important port of Garbagetown, which is why Brighton Pier docks there during a visit. Brighton Pier is another mobile island-like habitat, which has been floating around since the rise of sea levels and which serves a special function: It is a ghostly fun fair, an amusement park and museum of the past, where the Garbagetowners can read old restaurant menus, enjoy a minute of television or watch plays by Shakespeare. From the architecture to the social structure to the realm of culture, nothing is new in this world. The reference point always is the past, the gaze is always turned back in time. The mayor of Brighton Pier – who even calls himself emperor William Shakespeare in an attempt to keep up the illusion of the past – tells the people of Garbagetown during the visit that new land has been discovered, which is an honest lie, as one of the actresses of the theater company reveals to Tetley:

> We always say it. To everyone. It's our best show. *Gives people hope, you know?* But there's nothing out there, sugar. Nothing but ocean and more ocean and a handful of drifty lifeboat cities like yours circling the world like horses on a broken-down carousel. Nothing but blue. (Valente 27–28, my emphasis)

The phrase "Gives people hope, you know?" is especially interesting when reading it from the utopian understanding of salvage-Marxism. Because it is precisely this kind of hope that must be discarded first in order to work through the difficulties and challenges of the present moment. However, the people from Electric City take this illusion of hope literally and they have already built a gigantic engine, which is going to use all the power from all the batteries left to turn Garbagetown into a ship to cruise towards this imagined shore. Instead of using the resources they have to distribute them equally to all people and places on Garbagetown, the ones in power want to follow their desire to colonize, to claim the new land for themselves. In this sense, not only the architecture of Garbagetown is "absent of the new," as Bronson suggests is typical for salvagepunk narratives ("Reproduce, Reuse, Recycle" 82), but so are the ideas, which are haunted by the logics of the colonial and capitalist past. The political economy of Garbagetown operates through what Calder Williams defines as the logics of steampunk, which he says is a "romanticized do-over": Technology is preserved,

the clock is turned backwards, and a world is envisioned "without the material configurations of economic/technological development that produced those structures" (19).

Tetley, in contrast to the people of Electric City, does not believe in this (past-oriented) imagined future. When she hears about the plan to use up all the energy to sail towards this promised land, she destroys the engine. Reading Tetley with Andreas Malm's theorizations of activism in mind makes it possible to draw a parallel to contemporary climate activism. The aim is to grind down the structures of an economic and social order that destroys worlds. Consequently, Tetley uses physical action not to blow up a pipeline, as Malm's book suggests, but an array of engines that would destroy the livelihood of a world, even if it is built out of trash. As Haraway writes: "Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places" (1). While climate activism is often framed as destructive, it is a response to the real destruction of a whole planet, coming from a vision of care and hope to (re)build the whole structure, on which the world operates. Understanding Tetley's act of destruction from this perspective allows us to see her motives in a different light. She does not desire to move backwards towards a past that is unattainable; she tries to stay with the ruins of the present, trouble the engines (of thought), and reassemble the waste to something new – turn it into someplace that is not yet.

Living in this trash, however, most of the people in Garbagetown are not able to see Tetley's action in this way. They also feel the desire to go back, not only to a nation state on land but more fundamentally in time. After shattering this hope, Tetley becomes the most hated girl in Garbagetown – as also the first sentence of the novella foreshadows: "My name is Tetley Abegnedo and I am the most hated girl in Garbagetown" (Valente 1). Following philosopher Glenn Albrecht, the feeling of the inhabitants of Garbagetown could be described as "solastalgia," a term he suggests in order to emphasize the temporal changes of one place in contrast to nostalgia's focus on geographical displacement. The word solastalgia is a compound of two concepts, as Albrecht describes: solace and desolation. He defines solastalgia

> as the pain or distress caused by the ongoing loss of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory. It is the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change, manifest as an attack on one's sense of place. (38)

In *Earth Emotions*, Albrecht is interested in the affective entanglements between humans and the places they live in. He argues that the "negative transformation of a loved place triggers a negative emotion in the whole person who is still emplaced" (32). The setting of Garbagetown is especially interesting when read through the

concept of solastalgia, because the hostile architecture of trash makes it difficult for the inhabitants to feel "emplaced" in Garbagetown, rather they want to feel at home on Earth again. The solastalgic feeling that is prevalent in *The Past Is Red* operates on a larger scale, it represents the affective loss of the ecosystems of a whole planet. The true loss of the novella might best be understood not as the loss of place but as the loss of the possibility of feeling emplaced.

In *The Past Is Red*, the negative transformation of place, however, is twofold: On the one hand, there remains the desire to go back in time to the previous world, which has been transformed through climate disaster; on the other hand, the negative transformation of Garbagetown through Tetley's climate activist act of blowing up the engines puts an end to this solastalgic dream of going back in time. A dialogue between Tetley and a character named Babybel Oni reveals this sentiment:

> "I just want things to be easy like they used to be. I wanna be whoever I was going to be. I want to use up a whole toothpaste tube and throw it away with three-quarters of it left in the bottom because I'll just buy more tomorrow. I want to put my clocks forward in the spring and complain about it. I want to have to watch what I eat because it's so easy to get fat. I want to go where everybody knows my name. I want to be a Fuckwit."
>
> "I don't," I said evenly. "They ruined everything."
>
> Babybel sobbed. "I *want* to ruin everything! That's my birthright! But I never, ever will. I'll never get to ruin *anything.*" (Valente 91–92)

Although or maybe precisely because Babybel Oni has to exist in the aftermath of the slow apocalypse (thinking back to the quote by Rachel Dini, in this sense, the Garbagetowners can be considered people out of time), the desire to have the luxurious problems of late capitalism is strong.[3] If the world is ruined anyway, he feels that he should have at least been able to participate in the process of destruction. Thus, Babybel Oni can be read as a solastalgic character, he feels the "homesickness you have when you are still located within your home environment" (Albrecht 39), even when "home" here is a referent for a place and time that he has never experienced. Although Babybel Oni and Tetley are the remainders of a world destroyed by capitalism, his desire to go back is unwavering. This seems ironic and absurd, yet when read through the existentialist philosophy of Albert Camus, who cites Friedrich Nietzsche in the following quote, this is one of the most fundamental questions in a time of (temporal) exile without possibility of return: "the endless search for justification, the nostalgia without aim, 'the most painful, the most heart-breaking question, that

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[3] This quote also serves to illustrate the unaddressed whiteness and middle-class orientation of the novella – Valente does not engage with questions of race, class, and gender throughout *The Past Is Red*. As an example, the word "Fuckwits" to refer to the people of the past obscures the highly unequal causes and effects of climate change as it does not acknowledge the structures and logics of colonialism and extractive capitalism that have created the "totality of our environments" (104), the pervasiveness of the "weather" in the words of Christina Sharpe.

of the heart which asked itself: where can I feel at home?'" (70). Living after the end of the world engenders emotional distress, a sense of place- and timelessness in Babybel Oni and most of the other characters of the novella. However, Valente does not only offer this doom-laden solastalgia in the face of apocalypse but rather is in conversation with Nicole Seymour's argument in *Bad Environmentalism*, in which she argues "that despair and hope, gloom/doom and optimism are often merely different sides of the same coin, a coin that represents humans' desire for certainty and neat narratives about the future" (3–4). While Tetley arguably exists on the other side of the coin of doom, her journey through Garbagetown does not follow a linear trajectory towards certainty. She invites a reading of a messy utopia, a chaos-world that is in constant flux.

In contrast to her fellow citizens, Tetley's engagement with her surroundings can be described as post-apocalyptic, which Calder Williams frames as a state not of being but of becoming: "You become post-apocalyptic when you learn to do something better, or at least more morbidly fun, with the apocalyptic remains of the day" (47–48). Becoming post-apocalyptic, then, is also aligned with ruminating through the ruins of the present, of "staying with the trouble." According to Haraway, this state of being "requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (1). Tetley is truly living in the break between salvation and garbage; she is able to find joy in Garbagetown and loves the waste-world she inhabits. This evokes one particular scene in the documentary *Examined Life!* by filmmaker Astra Taylor. In the film, Taylor, among others, interviews Slavoj Žižek, who is talking about philosophy at a waste disposal site. He ends his segment with a quote that might perfectly describes Tetley's character:

> To recreate – if not beauty – then aesthetic dimension . . . in trash itself, that is the true love of the world. Because, what is love? Love is not idealization … Love means that you accept a person with all its failures, stupidities, ugly points. . . . You see perfection in imperfection itself and that is how we should learn to love the world. (qtd. in Taylor, 01:00:54–01:43)

The Past Is Red is one example of these works which fabricate a world where beauty can be glimpsed in the ruins. Beauty here is something that requires an active eye, keen on learning how to see beauty and where to locate it in the trash. And out of these ruins, the goal is to salvage whatever possible to create a future in a home that is built out of trash. In Tetley's own words:

> Despite everything, this is the best place there is. I know it. If I tell them, they will never think of anything but Mars ever again. They will stop seeing Garbagetown. They will

only look up and they'll die looking up because the road to Mars is airless and forever. (Valente 140)

This quote aligns perfectly with the idea of salvage-Marxism – because, as Megen de Bruin-Molé argues, instead of hope, it offers "a strategy for despite." Tetley's hope is not based on wishful thinking or the hope that there will be a land on the horizon that can be claimed. She abandons this hope altogether and attempts to "stay with the trouble" of the trash-world she inhabits. Despite living in a world made out of trash, working through the waste and "do[ing] something better with it" (47), in Calder Williams's terms, is the ground on which a different kind of hope can emerge: the hope that there is a future worth fighting for. This is truly utopian thinking, a grounded hope that is needed in apocalyptic times. It is impossible to go back to the world as it has been before and the future has to be built from the ruins. History is not a time machine, as Tetley states, "that's not how time works, and it's not how oceans work, either. Nothing you love comes back. I have hope for Garbagetown, not for some suckspittle scrap of dry dirt that wouldn't give us half of what we already have" (Valente 120).

Future Habitats: Astrocapitalist Utopias, Wasted Lives

The Past Is Red is not only an exercise in world-building out of trash but also the narrativization of a ridiculous truth: it is easier to imagine the geological as well as material transformation of a whole planet than to imagine the end of capitalism.[4] The story of the people in Garbagetown is the result of such an approach towards the world, because towards the end of *The Past Is Red*, there is a revelation. The people on floating islands are not the only survivors of climate change, but the rich and the powerful have escaped to Mars and started a settlement there. Thus, *The Past Is Red* is not only a dystopian story but also the fulfilment of the techno-utopian fever-dream of space colonization, which ultimately is doomed to fail. It becomes clear that making humans multiplanetary, because planet earth is considered to be doomed, is not going to save anyone. As Miéville puts it bluntly: "we *live* in utopia; it just isn't ours. So we live in apocalypse too" (24). Mars also is a hellhole where nobody can ever go outside and the utopia of the space colonizers becomes a dystopia of scarcity. Birth rates are declining, rising cases of bone cancer have become a serious issue, and radiation keeps everyone locked in technologically mediated surroundings. As Tetley pointedly states: "But we are alive on a live world and they can never go outside ever

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[4] This sentence is a riff on Mark Fisher's first chapter in *Capitalist Realism*, which is titled "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (2). Fisher cites both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek as sources for this quote, which has become a kind of truism in leftist discourses.

again. So I guess that's something" (Valente 144). This is the hidden story behind all grandiose narratives of space colonization, as Gerry Canavan writes:

> In stark contrast to the untold riches and total freedom they are imagined to provide, distant space colonies – whether on inhospitable moons or orbiting far-flung planets – are in fact necessarily markers of deep, abiding, and permanent scarcity, requiring, for any hope of survival, careful planning and rigorous management, without any waste of resources. (7)

The fact that no resources can be wasted in the uninhabitable environment of outer space is especially ironic in the context of Valente's novella, which is predominantly set on a floating island of wasted resources. Consequently, salvaging utopia on a broken planet is also aligned with sorting out the trash of the dominant archive – discard what has failed, reassemble what can be used to build towards something new. The question that really needs to be asked again and again is: What do we mean when we speak of a better future? The utopia that is promised by astrocapitalists such as Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk is offering a future that is not meant for everyone. The billions of dollars of public and private funding that go towards their space ventures are only legitimized when considered from the teleological perspective that climate disaster as well as technological and capitalist growth are inevitable facts. Seen through the eyes of (astro)capitalism, climate change provides yet another road towards profit, be it through "green energy" or the utopian promise of building a new habitat in space (Bezos) or another planet (Musk). These are the limits of utopia China Miéville writes about:

> Utopias are necessary. But not only are they insufficient: they can, in some iterations, be part of the ideology of the system, the bad totality that organises us, warms the skies, and condemns millions to peonage on garbage scree. The utopia of togetherness is a lie. Environmental justice means acknowledging that there is no whole earth, no 'we,' without a 'them.' That we are not all in this together. (16–17)

The millions to peonage on a garbage scree that Miéville describes here can be read as an analogy to the inhabitants of Garbagetown. Not only the architecture of Garbagetown is built out of trash, also its inhabitants are considered disposable, wasted. To make this connection between waste and wasted lives is a delicate act. I follow DeLoughrey here, who argues that this connection is "*not* to relegate peoples to waste but to foreground the political and social systems" which are responsible for this dehumanizing practice; "to render this practice visible is to open up the potential for radical political critique" (*Allegories* 103). Consequently, the escape story of the rich to Mars in the novel can be read as the intergalactic manifestation of Zygmunt Bauman's concept of *Wasted Lives*:

> The others do not need you; they can do as well, and better, without you. There is no self-evident reason for your being around and no obvious justification for your claim to

the right to stay aground. To be declared redundant means to have been disposed of *because of being disposable* – just like the empty and non-refundable plastic bottle or once-used syringe, an unattractive commodity with no buyers, or a substandard or stained product without use thrown off the assembly line by the quality inspectors. (12)

In a conversation between the inhabitants of Mars and Garbagetown, one of the space colonizers spells this theoretical idea out when he says to Tetley: "We are the best hope for humanity to survive. You are … well. What you have always been. The re-mainders" (Valente 133). The reference to the people on Garbagetown as "the remain-ders" perfectly illustrates that not only material waste but also wasted lives are in-scribed within a capitalist economy. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon but foundational for colonial modernity. For those writing "in the wake of slavery" (Sharpe 8), this has always been the reality. DeLoughrey also reminds us that "Carib-bean writers have long been concerned with the heavy waters of ocean modernity and have rendered waste in terms of pollution as well as the wasted lives of slaves and refugees" ("Heavy Waters" 708). Thus, the relegation of human beings to waste "is a dehumanizing and deeply entrenched social and political practice of capitalism, em-pire, and neoliberal globalization" (DeLoughrey, *Allegories* 103). The logical extension of this practice to the future and outer space is the utopia of billionaire astrocapital-ists, as Albrecht writes: "Their vision of the next era in human history will be one where the same murderous emotions that wrecked the Earth will be unleashed on new planets in other parts of galaxies that have Earth-like locations within them" (10). Both the place and the people of the novella can be understood as the byproducts of modernity, left behind with the waste of a broken planet.

Approaching *The Past Is Red* from an anti-capitalist, salvage-Marxist point of view opens up another utopia, because "in a world saturated with waste and garbage, char-acters are able to remake and refashion the world by repurposing objects according to their use-value instead of their exchange value" ("Living in the Wreckage"), as Bron-son writes in a portrait of *Salvage Magazine*. Precisely this process of reassembling objects into something that is useful beyond its transactional value points "to the hopeful possibilities of thinking a world beyond the limits of capitalism's need for endless growth ("Living in the Wreckage"). Tetley knows that the future for the people is not found in the voyage to another place, be it towards another planet or an imag-ined island on the ocean. The threatening apocalypse of climate change is not to be solved by a technological fix. Rather, the apocalypse should be seen as

the coming-apart of the rules of the game, and in the ruined wake of this, the task isn't one of rebuilding, of mourning, or of moving on. It can only be . . . the ceaseless struggle to dismantle and repurpose, to witness the uncanny persistence of old modes of life, and to redraw the maps and battle lines of the sites we occupy. (Calder Williams 8–9)

Virtually all other inhabitants of Garbagetown still follow the rules of the game of the past, the "uncanny persistence of old modes of life" is still highly visible, and Tetley is constantly and actively trying to dismantle them. The act of destroying the engine that would turn Garbagetown into a ship, sailing towards the unreachable shore of the past, is a post-apocalyptic act, a necessary action to truly salvage a future for everyone – a future that emerges out of the ruins, which are slowly turning towards something beautiful:

> The Lawn stretched out below me, full of the grass clippings and autumn leaves and fallen branches and banana peels and weeds and gnawed bones and eggshells of the fertile Fuckwit world, slowly turning into the gold of Garbagetown: soil. Real earth. Terra bloody firma. We can already grow rice in the dells. And here and there, big, blowsy flowers bang up out of the rot: hibiscus, African tulips, bitter gourds, a couple of purple lotuses floating in the damp mucky bits. (Valente 8–9)

This is a relation to one's surroundings that sees the shifting of the ground beneath one's feet. Even when the floating island is made out of waste, it is changing, slowly turning into something else, something beautiful. These changing ruins are the building blocks for a future, a truly post-apocalyptic and post-capitalist future that is not looking towards growth but towards growing. Beyond the binary of hope and despair, beyond the linear utopian narrative that always looks towards the horizon for something bigger and brighter, *The Past Is Red* is an invitation to think utopia through the trash, to look for the rose that grows not through the concrete but through its remains.

Conclusion: There Is Still a World

Tetley is a character who remains ambiguous – on the one hand, she seems naïve for loving the dystopian surroundings of her home, on the other hand, she seems to be the only person who attempts to create a world out of her material surroundings instead of dreaming of idealized pasts or futures. She wants to work with whatever is useful from Garbagetown and leave out the rest. Her friendships with animals and robots, her relations to the more-than-human, her act of resistance of destroying the engines of Electric City (and thus of destroying hope), her love for her world are all glimpses of what really needs to be salvaged – social relations: "The thought of salvage is the thought of all that is thrown out by the totality of late capitalism, the traditions and horizons of collectivity, solidarity, and true antagonism" (Calder Williams 43). Similarly, the novella remains as ambiguous and open-ended as the characterization of its main character. There is no closure, but an opening at the end – what could be considered a "radical break," coming back to Jameson. In Raffaela Baccolini's terms, the book could thus be considered a critical dystopia:

> The ambiguous, open endings of these novels, as we will see, maintain the utopian impulse within the work. In fact, by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those groups (women and other "eccentric" subjects whose subject position hegemonic discourse does not contemplate) for whom subjectivity has yet to be attained. (18)

This is what *The Past Is Red* does so well: The novella opens up this space of contesting the status quo, it opens up a space for a character like Tetley, who exists on the margins of society, and it allows us to critically think about what utopia means. Is it the technological development to build an engine to sail the ocean towards a shore that might not even exist, or is it a change in social and material relations that allows for a good life for everyone? Is it a rocket to Mars that can take just a few, or is it a global effort to deal with climate change on the only planet with an atmosphere in the galaxy? Utopia is always a question of perspective, and seeing the world through Tetley's eyes allows the reader to see the beauty and hope even in the trashcan. *The Past Is Red* is written in a unique voice that playfully traces the beauty in a world built out of trash, which, through the eyes of Tetley, becomes a beautiful world. Her somewhat naïve love of her home is what is needed to feel at home in this gigantic pile of garbage. This novella insists on a very simple truth: "There's still a world" (Valente 91). And seeing the beauty in it, engaging with it, working through it to imagine something new is precisely what is so important in apocalyptic times.

Acknowledgements

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Aesthetic Innovation and Activist Impetus in Climate Change Theater: Beyond a New Formalist Reading of Chantal Bildoeau's One-Actor Play *No More Harveys* (2022)

Nassim Balestrini

ABSTRACT

Canadian-American playwright and activist Chantal Bilodeau finds that we need innovative plays that meld climate change into the aesthetics, arguments, and social fabrics of drama and performance. Testing Bilodeau's suggestion, this essay focuses on the poetics of her newest full-length play, *No More Harveys* (2022). This reading of climate change theater and in particular of Bilodeau's one-actor play applies Caroline Levine's New Formalist method, which strives to read aesthetic and social forms simultaneously and non-hierarchically, and which raises pertinent questions as to how activist theater manages to balance aesthetics and (political and/or scientific) argumentation. While Levine's New Formalism offers a productive analytical angle on small- and large-scale forms, it cannot cover all literary and social phenomena single-handedly. The analysis offered here proposes to demonstrate the usefulness of complementary readings that take into account (a) decolonial and ecocritical concepts of planetarity, (b) a historically informed understanding of monodramatic and of autobiographical generic practices, and (c) the affordances of climate change theater at the present moment. As this contribution argues, Bilodeau employs and modifies elements of form and genre in a manner that allows multiple narratives of social injustice, violence, and detrimental hierarchies across large swaths of time and place to bleed into each other.

KEYWORDS

Climate change drama, New Formalism, planetarity, monodrama, life narrative, abuse of women, Indigenous Alaskan women, cross-species empathy, agency

In 2015, Canadian-American dramatist Chantal Bilodeau called for "a new consciousness" and "a new aesthetic" ("In Search") with which to respond to the horrific impact of an anthropocentric worldview. She translates this challenge into her endeavor to move from addressing climate change in her dramatic works "to writing plays that *are* climate change – plays that embody, in form, content, and process, the essence of the issues we are facing" ("In Search"). Among the six trends that she identifies in the oeuvres of like-minded artists, she names the foregrounding of Indigenous cosmologies of "interconnectivity," the incorporation of "science and policy," and a "shift from a concern for the individual, [sic] to a concern for communities" ("In Search"). Her advocacy for a change of artistic approach resulted, among other things, from her experience of developing the first play of *The Arctic Cycle*, her eight-part series focused on climate change. "All of the plays in the *Cycle* deal with community" (Bilodeau, "Writing Plays" 40), as Bilodeau explains in an interview.

In the first two dramas, *Sila* (2015) and *Forward* (2017), the tug-of-war between community and individuality is – among other things – embedded in multi-person character constellations that imply connectedness either via geographical space or historical time period ("Writing Plays" 40).[1] Although the third play, *No More Harveys* (2023; premiered on 1 April 2022 in Anchorage, Alaska) features only one human actor on stage, "the connecting tissue [which reaches beyond the protagonist] is a shared experience of abuse caused by the legacy of patriarchy and extractive industries" (40). In addition to linking the main character to (fictional and real) others offstage, the playwright aims at enabling audience members not only to live through "a self-reflective and generative process" during the performance, but also to "move one step closer to being actively engaged in solving the climate crisis" (46). This hope is based on the assumption that people who decide to watch a climate change play are already concerned about the threatening situation. What they need, then, is a nudge towards considering options for their personal contribution to preventing the worst-case scenario from happening.

The central character in Bilodeau's *No More Harveys* is a battered woman who decides to put as much geographical distance as possible between herself and her husband. She leaves New York City on a bus after her husband hit her in the face again and severely injured one of her cheekbones. The protagonist, who manages to travel

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[1] For detailed analyses of these plays, see the three articles by Balestrini in the Works Cited.

to Anchorage, Alaska, remains anonymous. We only learn that her name is *not* Renée – a telling name that challenges potentially facile notions of rebirth or re-invention of one's approach to life, for that matter, but the *ex negativo* statement does not, of course, offer clues about her actual name. Her state of not being named counteracts the unavoidable focus of a one-actor performance and lets her come across as representing innumerable abused women. Beyond that, she links herself with anyone severely affected by various types of violent oppression and the literal, social, and metaphorical 'climates' attached to such predicaments. The titular Harveys stand for, first, the protagonist's abusive husband; second, for "Harvey the hurricane" that "hit Texas" and Louisiana; and, third, for "Harvey the Hollywood producer" (Bilodeau, *No More Harveys* 6) – and the list is extended through the topics addressed in the course of the play.

Bilodeau's call for innovative plays that meld climate change into the aesthetic, argumentative, and social fabrics of developing a drama, the drama itself, and its performance raises the question as to which theoretical approach is suitable for unraveling the poetics of *No More Harveys*. In her well-received volume *Forms*, which does not address contemporary theater, Caroline Levine rejects the idea of "reading aesthetic forms as responses to given social realities" and instead asks "how both aesthetic *and* social forms act . . . in the world" (xi). By avoiding hierarchical and sequential thinking, Levine encourages a method of reading that prefers simultaneity and reciprocity, that avoids privileging the political or the aesthetic as stimuli. Perceiving the social and the aesthetic simultaneously is pertinent to theater because of the centrality of encounters, conflicts, and communication in dramatic texts and in performance situations. At the same time, activist theater – which is quite prevalent in the context of climate change drama – struggles with the question as to whether the aesthetic must huddle in the back seat in order to assure that the political message becomes clearly discernible. Climate change theater grapples with another related quandary, that is, whether scientific knowledge and dramatic aesthetics necessarily compete for audience members' attention or whether they can be complementary and thus mutually supportive. As I will argue, *No More Harveys* does not push aesthetics to the margins in favor of conveying sociopolitical issues or scientific insights, including a clarion call for change. Instead, Bilodeau employs and modifies elements of form and genre in a manner that allows multiple narratives of social injustice, violence, and detrimental hierarchies across large swaths of time and place to bleed into each other.

The concern with climate and climate change provides a logical playing field for this endeavor, as climate is a systemic phenomenon whose current manifestations can only be understood within an immense historical and spatial network of weather

patterns, human activity, and evolutionary change. Thus, Bilodeau's references to the roles of science, politics/policies, and connectedness (inter-human and otherwise) concretize central elements in this web of relations. In *Sila* and *Forward*, the playwright addresses, for example, settler-colonial economic policies, clashing notions of self and community, patriarchal oppression, the impact of Western scientific inquiries on Indigenous peoples and on Arctic environments, and attempts at trans-cultural or otherwise boundary-permeating interrelations.

While Levine's New Formalism offers a productive analytical angle on small- and large-scale forms, it cannot cover all literary and social phenomena single-handedly – and understandably so. Thus, I propose to show that a more nuanced reading of *No More Harveys* can result from taking into account three complementary components: (a) decolonial and ecocritical concepts of planetarity, (b) a historically informed understanding of monodramatic and of autobiographical generic practices, and (c) the affordances of climate change theater at the present moment. Ultimately, I will illustrate how Bilodeau's one-actor climate change drama realizes her above-described innovative goal. *No More Harveys* "is" – to modify the playwright's words – "climate change" in the sense that "climate" serves as a term that references multiple superimposed patterns of sustained and systemic abuse (of the planet, of women, and of other oppressed or violated beings) and that laminates weather systems over time (i.e., the Earth Science definition of climate) with social climates of exploitation. The play uses a three-world aesthetic as well as a decidedly absent fourth wall in order to achieve audience immersion. As the protagonist explicitly verbalizes, the strong relational bonds experienced between her and the theatergoers help achieve a change of "climate" in the theater. The performance strives "to be" the kind of connectivity that allows the fictional protagonist to go on with her life, that allegorizes sociality, solidarity, and friendship as prerequisites for fighting climate change, and that exerts an impact outside the spatial and temporal limits of the theater and the performance.

Levine's New Formalist Approach

In partial disagreement with Michel Foucault's pessimistic vision of social forms that tend to "converge in massive regimes of coordinated power" (xiii), Levine approaches such forms as more variegated and, thus, more hopeful. She directs our attention to forms in isolation *and* to "workable, progressive, thoughtful relations among forms – including containing wholes, rhythms of labor, economic, racial, and sexual hierarchies, and sprawling, connective networks of capital" (xiii). Instead of studying literary and social forms consecutively, as she finds new historicists to have done, she scrutinizes them in conjunction with one another and with the same method (1). Thus, Levine writes, "[f]orm, for our purposes, will mean all shapes and

configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference" (3). Her "new formalist method," she claims, thus unites "social and aesthetic forms" (3) as well as the ways in which we research either one.

While form as such is obviously not a new concern in literary studies, synthesizing understandings of form as "*containing, plural, overlapping, portable* and *situated*" (6) as well as borrowing the term "affordance" from "design theory" (6) is meant to enable researchers to keep both minute details and broader formal characteristics in view. The concept of "affordance" requires that we think about "potentialities" (6) and limits, which – again – may not have been discussed from this very perspective of functionality. In the context of my case study, this raises questions as to the affordances of specific dramatic forms that Bilodeau uses, expands, manipulates, or redesigns in *No More Harveys*. At the same time, Levine's perspective on specific forms and on interactions between them, as well as on extant formal features and the leeway for change and innovation, invites comparison with multiscalar, relational, and planetary ecological thinking.

In addition to the simultaneous study of aesthetic and social forms as singular and as built into meaningful interrelations, Levine emphasizes "effect[s]" that result from "colliding" forms, arguing that such collisions may offer "a new understanding of how power works" (8). In other words, while forms separately serve purposes of organizing things, processes, people, and so on, forms can also "meet" in ways that are collaborative or mutually disruptive (16–17).

What is new, then, in Levine's approach? She argues:

> Though we have not always called them forms, they are the political structures that have most concerned literary and cultural studies scholars: bounded *wholes*, from domestic walls to national boundaries; temporal *rhythms*, from the repetitions of industrial labor to the enduring patterns of institutions over time; powerful *hierarchies*, including gender, race, class, and bureaucracy; and *networks* that link people and objects, including multinational trade, terrorism, and transportation. (21)

The challenge that literary scholarship faces is not to consecutively proceed from, first, perceiving sociopolitical forms to, then, identifying them in artistic representations. Rather, it is necessary to discuss such 'real-life' patterns parallel to and in conjunction with possibly comparable literary counterparts.

Bounded Wholes: Spaces

Levine's method of identifying and discussing social and aesthetic "bounded wholes" lends itself to identifying at least three thematic strains in Bilodeau's play which indicate that material, physical, political, and social patterns are integrated with artistic, dramatic patterns: (a) references to and depictions of spaces, (b) relations within and across spaces, and (c) a specific material artifact with meta/physical

characteristics. These categorizations look neater and more distinctive than they ac-
tually are. Throughout the play, boundaries between bounded wholes are punctured
and transgressed. In addition to being questioned conceptually, some bounded
wholes are critiqued for their potential oppressiveness. Reconfigurations of and al-
ternatives for well-established bounded wholes create Levinian collisions, some of
which encapsulate the play's sociopolitical impetus towards future-oriented produc-
tive bounded wholes.

Spaces addressed and experienced in the play include geographical locations and
psychological states related to the protagonist as well as the theater as a place that
comprises a stage and an auditorium. In the first category, the protagonist reminds
us of the United States of America as a nation and of the spatial separation between
the 48 contiguous states and Alaska. On a figurative level, her journey from the East
Coast to Anchorage emphasizes that geographical distance serves as a spatial ana-
logue to the need to escape a physically threatening predicament in order to think
for herself. Within the world of the play, she manages to detach herself from New
York and from her marriage with the help of her Indigenous Alaskan female friends,
who understand the need for self-esteem, community, and a sense of belonging. In
the theater, the protagonist both addresses the audience and physically traverses the
boundary between stage and auditorium, thus creating a bounded whole by breaking
the fourth wall. Switching scales, the protagonist's physical journey to a location that
is especially vulnerable to climate change connects the psychological journey she ex-
periences to larger, global narratives: Her own story of a battered wife makes her
think about the victimization of other women through the impacts of patriarchal hi-
erarchies, of climate change, of environmental pollution, and of a lack of agency.

This multiplicity of bounded wholes all of which combine physical and mental
spaces is prefigured in Bilodeau's explanation that "[t]here are three distinct worlds
in this play: the theatre where the woman is speaking to the audience; her physical
journey across the United States; and her internal emotional journey" (Bilodeau, *No
More Harveys* 3). Thus, the worlding in *No More Harveys* comprises multiple bounded
wholes with boundaries that are zones of collision as well as permeability.

The motif of traveling and of being in various locations – which occurs both in
recognizable geographical settings and within the inner world of memory, feeling,
and thought – evolves into an understanding of the verb "to migrate" as facilitating
a different state of mind, which, in turn, is necessary for survival and for agency (10–
11, 16, 38, 45, 47, 56). At the end of the journey depicted in the play, the protagonist
perceives herself as able to work towards changing her mindset and her everyday
actions – and this is what she wants audience members to emulate. When the protag-
onist breaks the fourth wall within the spatial micro-level of the performance space,

she invites her viewers/listeners (as a collective and, thus, as another bounded whole) to be her friends whose individual empathy and solidarity make her courageously outspoken self-representation possible. This invitation, then, is an incentive towards effecting a change of social climate by opening a conversation and addressing how supportive this experience can be. This change is to spill across the temporal and spatial boundaries of each performance to the future and the world outside the theater.

Bounded Wholes: Relationships

Bounded wholes further contribute to how the play juxtaposes various kinds of relationships. Positively connoted relationships are depicted as fostering experiences of crossing primarily cultural and species boundaries. Such cross-boundary connectedness, in turn, may occur with the help of artistic and sensory elements (sonic, visual, and haptic) experienced by the protagonist and by audience members.

The first bounded whole in terms of traditional relationships that the play introduces is marriage (ideally based on love and respect), but it introduces it in an already shattered state. The constellation of three female friends – the protagonist and her Indigenous Alaskan friends Teri and Sonya (9–10) – offers an alternative network of solidarity and friendship that, from Harvey-the-husband's perspective, collides with and thus threatens his ability to control the closed system of the marital dyad. The trio of female friends is transformed when Teri dies of cancer caused by environmental pollution; I use the word "transformed" because the bond of friendship and solidarity remains unsevered. Rather, Teri continues to be connected to the protagonist and Sonya. This is indicated by yet another instance of showing the elasticity or permeability of spatial bounded wholes, in this case the physical and the metaphysical, the human and the non-human: While traveling on a ferry to Whittier during the night of Teri's passing, the protagonist interacts with a raven (49–50). As Teri belongs to the Raven clan within her tribe, the bird comes across as an emissary of her spirit, especially when the woman realizes that Teri died the night the raven visited her on the ferry to Alaska. The protagonist and the raven do not speak – or croak – the same language; nevertheless, the protagonist senses a connectedness beyond words, thus evoking another set of contrasting bounded wholes or, in this case, semiotic systems (43–45, 49–50). Also, she strokes the bird's feathers (50) and sees the same black-and-blue shimmer in them (43) as in the night sky (49). The raven's otherworldly associations offer an alternative reading of these hues than the obviously violence-based colors visible in the protagonist's face.

The protagonist's encounter with the raven veers strongly towards offering artistic, or at least aesthetic, perception as a pathway towards accessing connectedness,

thus implicitly creating a mise-en-abyme effect that audience members may consider in hindsight when thinking about the mental and emotional impression exerted by the play. The raven's croaking becomes a semiotically inaccessible narrative in an avian language or a message from beyond earthly communication in which boundaries between species as well as between the metaphysical and the physical partially dissolve.

The most extensively developed cross-species motif in *No More Harveys* is the protagonist's fascination with whales. She narrates the story of whale evolution and finds that whale songs, which are heard in several segments of the play, soothe her when she needs to calm down in moments of collision between hyperawareness of multiple threats and the need to turn inward. Whale evolution and songs provide an inkling of the agency and strength that she sees in female whales. Again, bounded wholes can also provide connectedness, not just internal coherence within one singular entity.

The protagonist understands (particularly female) whales as exemplary in the sense that they have shown a maximum of evolutionary adaptability: first, through migration across immense distances and, second, through evolving physically from land animals to ocean-living mammals (16). She sees this development as a conscious, self-directed process, ascribing "a winning strategy" (17) to these animals that, beyond all of these achievements, produce sounds that humans have described as songs (17). This partial anthropomorphizing of female whales as mistresses of their evolutionary fate becomes an inspirational emblem, especially when the protagonist dances to Gloria Gaynor's (here oddly Darwinian) "I Will Survive." She also sings part of the song a cappella (23) when she reflects on questions of self-sacrifice versus victimization (27), and when she depicts female whales as more aware and prescient than herself in the sense that they recognized a dire crisis early enough to survive through massive change (30). But, as in the scene with the raven, the play does not indulge in kitschy cross-species understanding. Her desire to immerse herself into 'whale-ness' notwithstanding, the protagonist acknowledges that she cannot really know what it means to be and feel like a whale (32, 35–37) and that she cannot tell whether "whale[s] ha[d] a vision of the future" (38). As it were, her actual inspiration for tackling the future are her friends Teri and Sonya (38–39) rather than the biggest animal on the planet, which currently is an endangered species (see, for instance, "Meet"). Visualizing the physical size, grandeur, and significance of whales in the play, the stage set of the 2022 Anchorage production included an immense whale-shaped prop (not stylized but rather striving for realism) and blue lighting. The protagonist moved around and along the large sculpture, caressed it, and reclined on it (see Bilodeau, "No More Harveys [US]").

The centrality of Teri as a figure of strength highlights the inextricability of a material work of art and its immaterial implications. As the weaver and wearer of a Tlingit ceremonial blanket, Teri demonstrates how a seemingly 'dead' physical object can be 'awakened' and can fulfil its vital function. This is the case when the wearer of the blanket moves in a performance that is part of community life. Teri's work of art transcends functionality in a purely physical sense as much as it crosses the boundary between action and interaction: "Teri weaves history books. She weaves her own migration path away from the Harveys" (45). According to the protagonist, Tlingit woven blankets – a system of threads and patterns – need to be worn and danced in to share their stories. Similar to the three worlds in the play, which are connected to the categories of space and relationality, the design and the danced narrative of Teri's blanket convey the immaterial, non-physical components of thought and emotion. As a result, individual agency and community-building narration can reside in visual images on a blanket, in the kinesthetic features of a dance, as much as in a dramatic monologue. It thus does not surprise that, in the published version of the play, Bilodeau's author's notes include the remark that "[y]ou might consider incorporating movement to support the storytelling" (4). Just as the raven's visit transcends the protagonist's rootedness in her own time and environment, whale songs and knowledge about whale evolution link beauty, science, agency, and hope for the future. And, later in the play, spending time outside and observing plants and animals has a positive effect on the unnamed protagonist's psyche (51–53). According to the stage directions, she "*interacts with the things she discovers*" (51) rather than just observing them. All in all, the physical and the metaphysical, the human and the more-than-human, the aesthetic and the scientific are presented as necessarily and beneficially intertwined throughout *No More Harveys.*

The play culminates in a double confirmation of valuable collisions of bounded wholes. Discerning the song of an approaching whale tears the protagonist out of a state of immense grief: "*She listens. Her inner world and the present merge*" (54). Her exultation upon seeing "[t]he great big whale from fifty million years ago" leads to an experience of seemingly merging with the whale, of diving into deep time, and of experiencing "other whales / my kin / my community" (55). Having decided to stay in Alaska and not to be defeated by any Harveys, she thanks the audience for instilling courage in her (57). Not only does she sing "Amazing Grace," but "*The whale joins her*" (57) as if confirming her newfound insights and her appeal to the audience to avoid, prevent, and overcome Harveys.

No More Harveys engages with bounded wholes in a manner that intertwines the social and the aesthetic, and in ways that link up with questions of hierarchy (Levine's third concern) and with competing networks (Levine's fourth concern). Regarding

hierarchies, Levine finds that they "includ[e] gender, race, class, and bureaucracy" (21). In Bilodeau's play, these occur particularly through the discussion of how patriarchy can foster sexual abuse and of how extractivism, environmental pollution, and economic oppression produce poverty, illness, and death among Indigenous people. Such hierarchies closely align with equally destructive networks, which the protagonist strives to counterbalance with alternate networks of mutual understanding, solidarity, and hope. Levine defines networks as "links [between] people and objects, including multinational trade, terrorism, and transportation" (21). Transportation (by bus, car, and ferry) is crucial to the protagonist's journey, and her solo travel is punctuated with men who accost her and size her up as a "fox" (16, 33) to the extent that she mistakes a kind man for a potential Harvey (46). The banking system intersects with gender hierarchy when she realizes that her husband canceled her credit and debit cards in response to her decision not to return (42). Most importantly, climate as a system of weather patterns comes across not only as the ultimate network that, from a planetary perspective, connects all places and beings but also as a network whose change for the worse can only be halted by neutralizing the ill effects of the hierarchy-network nexus that powers the play's allegorical Harveys.

Rhythms: Dramatizing Emotion, Technology, and Evolution

While my understanding of hierarchies and networks in Bilodeau's play mostly references plot elements (e.g., journey, failed marriage, and friendship), character constellations (e.g., protagonist and husband; protagonist, Teri, and Sonya), and character development (e.g., the protagonist's insights about interconnectedness and agency), Levine's second concern – rhythms – is especially attuned to the aesthetics and dramatic strategies of *No More Harveys*. As quoted earlier, Levine emphasizes "temporal *rhythms*, from the repetitions of industrial labor to the enduring patterns of institutions over time" (21). This definition overlaps rather bafflingly with a statement in Bilodeau's prefatory instructions in *No More Harveys*: "The juxtaposition of highly contrasting rhythms and emotional states, and finding ways to transition from one to the other, are key to this play" (3). While Levine highlights collisions, Bilodeau examines border crossings.

First of all, *No More Harveys* addresses social rhythms, particularly those related to the performance of gender roles and of hierarchical structures within marriage; then there is the ebb and flow of violence and forgiveness, of violence and non-violence; and the danger of regularity and circularity leading to passive acceptance. In the case of the protagonist, these social rhythms surface in how she treats her mobile phone as the remaining communicative link to her husband: She turns the phone on at the beginning of the play (5); she checks her messages but

initially is afraid to do so (5–6, 11, 20, 21, 24, 47); she sometimes ignores the dinging of her phone, which jolts her out of her inner world (7, 10, 11, 16, 26–27); she panics when the phone rings (28); for a while, she forces her phone onto an audience member for safekeeping (28, 37); the act of hanging up on her husband while the audience can hear him screaming at her signals the end of her willingness to communicate or return (48); at the end of the play, she discards the phone and confirms the value of supportive friendship as experienced with the audience (57).

Habits and the breaking of personal habits are contrasted in the play with the irregular rhythm and the shifts in the evolution of species. The emphasis is on responding pragmatically to changing existential circumstances; on the willingness to transform oneself through physical, mental, and emotional adjustments; as well as on agency and goal-oriented action. The prime example is the protagonist's narrative of whale evolution, which serves as a model for her decision to reorganize and refocus her own life, choose a new social environment, and speak up for causes that involve long-term and massive social change.

That aesthetic rhythms are closely intertwined with social rhythms can be seen in the varying characteristics of the protagonist's interactions. Interacting with her husband and most other men follows a rhythm of, first, trying to ignore potential Harveys; second, conversing with them as sparsely as possible; and, third, giving them a piece of her mind in a manner that does not follow rules of politeness. That this rhythm does not solve the problem and that the third strategy may harm a non-Harvey also becomes clear in the play which, to my mind, does not promote a simplistic female–male antagonism.

The protagonist also interacts with her Amazon Echo named Alexa. The fact that AI is programmed by humans but able to work somewhat independently can be discussed through Levine's category of affordances and can shed light on the bounded whole of the monodrama. While Alexa is a piece of contemporary technology and thus not human, the stage directions refer to "Characters" in the plural: "WOMAN, in her thirties or forties, of any race or ethnicity, whose name is not Renee" and "ALEXA, an Amazon Echo. ALEXA should be fully functional. She is a character in the play and what she says or doesn't say informs the two characters' relationship" (3). Bilodeau adds that, while the "unpredictab[ility]" of Alexa requires "improvis[ation]" skills on the part of the human performer, "a lot of Alexa's answers can be preprogrammed" (4). The use of Alexa is not just a gimmick that provides some comic relief. It rather highlights the temporal expansiveness of the play, which reaches from an era 50 million years ago in which predecessors of whales were land animals and experienced a major transformation, to the current twenty-first-century moment of our co-

existence with digital technology and AI, that is, with devices that resemble new limbs or at least new functionalities.

The rhythm of moving among the three distinct worlds (that I mentioned earlier on) shifts the monodrama towards an argumentative trajectory rather than providing a descriptive, linear narrative of a person's experience. Examples are that the sections set in the protagonist's "inner world" resemble spoken word poetry, that they include meditative self-observation of physical details like her heart-beat, sense perceptions, and emotional responses, that the actor's body language replicates the physical motion during traveling on a bus or boat as well as when struggling to breathe during a panic attack, and that some of the inner-world segments include a whale-song soundtrack. Transitions from such representation of the protagonist's inner world to unpleasant encounters, especially with Harvey-like men, either involve tearing off or putting on her pandemic-related mask or indications of how a man who accosts her disrupts the flow of her thoughts and feelings.

As shown, using "forms" as an approach to aesthetic and sociopolitical phenomena can be immensely helpful. First, such an approach acknowledges how "art" and "life" – or "the aesthetic" and "the experiential" – are inseparably intertwined, willingly or not, consciously or not. Second, "form" becomes a category that characterizes not only the human realm but more expansive material and immaterial worlds. It allows us to oscillate between production and perception of forms, and to contemplate notions of order whose impact ranges from the oppressive to the liberating. Finally, in terms of my understanding of literary and cultural studies and of the humanities as a whole, Levine's new formalist method demonstrates options for interdisciplinary epistemologies and collaborative efforts to gain and use insights for social and political change in service to the good of humanity.

Decoloniality, Planetarity, and Autobiographical Monodrama: Approaching Relationality in Social and Dramatic Forms

Chantal Bilodeau's project of writing eight plays for the Arctic Cycle comprises multiple scales: climate change as a global threat, the eight countries that make land claims in the Arctic, the predicaments of local communities, and the personal struggles of individuals. The anonymous protagonist of *No More Harveys* eventually grasps the connectivity between her personal situation and climate change (in the multiple senses discussed above). The playwright harnesses the possibilities of theater to achieve the feat of layering multiple crises encapsulated in the plural Harveys: "I gave myself the challenge to draw links between these seemingly unrelated events and I chose to do it by having multiple women exist in this one body on stage" (Bilodeau, "Writing Plays" 40). Bilodeau's approach counteracts the seemingly counterintuitive

decision to write a single-actor play about issues that pertain to multitudes across the globe. Using the affordances of monodramatic form to contemplate various aspects of relationality makes *No More Harveys* a drama that resonates with recent theorizations of planetarity and of decolonial enunciation.

A planetary perspective reveals "an incessantly thickening, historically unprecedented web of relations among people, cultures, and locales" (Elias and Moraru xii; see also Spivak; Miyoshi). One consequence of this focus on interrelatedness has been recent theorization of "a multiscalar method" (DeLoughrey 2; see also Chakrabarty). Studying multiple scales simultaneously pursues the goals of working against a predominantly Eurocentric universalizing logic (DeLoughrey 2, 4) and of contemplating coexisting cosmologies and epistemologies (see, for instance, Teves 136; Simpson, "Anticolonial" and "Indigenous"; Cajete for arguments in favor of opening up to Indigenous systems of thought).

The multiscalar relationality inherent in planetarity is central to Bilodeau's play and its performance. This shows in the shifts between three distinct worlds and between protagonist-specific and large-scale issues of social relations within the globe as an ecosystem. It also pertains to depicting the relation between grasping an issue and acting upon one's insights. The latter, then, applies to the central character's emotional as well as mental journey and to the hoped-for experience of the theatergoer. As Stephanie Nohelani Teves argues from an Indigenous worldview, "[p]erformance creates knowledge through action; by creating subjectivities, it is a process of world-making" (137; on the connection between creativity and knowledge see also Cajete 45–46 et passim). According to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Indigenous notions of relationality provide the basis for "resurgence" ("Indigenous" 22–23). On a broader plane, an analogous mechanism lies at the heart of activist theater or any theater context in which theater-makers and theatergoers are open to "moments of transformation" (Dolan 455).

This kind of personal engagement invites an understanding of activist climate change drama whose principal conceptualization coheres with those of decolonial analysis, particularly because it underscores the fact that non-Western individuals are more drastically affected by the consequences of climate change. While decolonial theory does not center around the deep time of Earth history, it does emphasize the kind of historical depth that relates to anthropogenic climate change and (still inconclusive and controversial) definitions of the Anthropocene. As Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh argue:

> Decoloniality denotes ways of thinking, knowing, being, and doing that began with, but also precede, the colonial enterprise and invasion. It implies the recognition and undoing of the hierarchical structures of race, gender, heteropatriarchy, and class that continue to control life, knowledge, spirituality, and thought, structures that are clearly

intertwined with and constitutive of global capitalism and Western modernity. . . . De-
coloniality . . . is not a static condition, an individual attribute, or a lineal point of arrival
or enlightenment. Instead, decoloniality seeks to make visible, open up, and advance
radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as
the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought. (17)

In tune with such a comprehensive and dynamic process, Mignolo and Walsh promote
a "relational way of seeing. It challenges the reader to think *with* (and not simply
about) the peoples, subjects, struggles, knowledges, and thought present here" (17).
Referencing Gloria Anzaldúa, they also point out that this approach facilitates
"think[ing] from and with struggles" (20), thus highlighting that the struggles rather
than a scholar's vantage point are crucial to the analytical angle and perspective.

Such a method of non-hierarchical active engagement is vital to understanding
theater as performing social relations on stage and as encouraging them in the entire
performance venue. A one-person play seems particularly suitable to foreground
such a process of thinking and rethinking, of thinking with and – relationally speak-
ing – through the experiences of others. The focus on a single voice invites contem-
plation of how the solo performer balances a focus on herself with specific ways of
depicting others.

Multiscalar thinking is central to reflections on the protagonist and her personal
Harvey. Thinking about the latter, she uses the metaphor of Harveys as having woven
a huge "web . . . around us" (28). Having voiced this thought, she experiences a panic
attack; her accompanying monolog addresses threats that range from large-scale cli-
mate change and environmental destruction to the racist, sexist, and classist abuse
of individuals (29–30). In the course of the play, the protagonist links small and im-
mense scales in order to persuasively argue in favor of using the survival skills of
whales as an inspiration for the current moment. Thus, the movement of the bus
evokes a swaying ocean (8); a multiplicity of phone screens recalls the perceived blue-
ness of an ocean: "Blue light from small screens / speckle [sic] the dark / like biolu-
minescent plankton" (8). Experiences of migration connect humans and animals (16).
While the singing of one whale is rhapsodized as extending across the globe and
across millions of years – "Her song reverberating / from the Eocene to the Anthro-
pocene / from the equator to the pole . . . Millennium after Millennium / she stays
the course" (19) –, the woman is aware that as soon as individuals cannot migrate to
any other places, "the survival of the species is threatened because individuals no
longer have access to what they need" (47). The protagonist's decision not to return
to her husband tears a hole in the powerful net spun by the Harveys. But the potential
predicament of running out of options still needs to be prevented.

As indicated earlier, Teri is an exemplary figure for the protagonist because she
unites creativity and knowledge. The protagonist first encounters her when the

Indigenous artist-scholar lectures at a university (21). As a basketmaker, weaver, and expert on nature (21), she tells (hi)stories and "weaves her own migration path away from the Harveys" (45) rather than relying on someone else's predetermined map. Thus, Teri's work plays a significant role on large and small scales. As the protagonist seems to realize, finding a path out of a predicament requires knowledge; accordingly, when she engages with the natural world in Alaska in her search for healing, she consciously "*interacts with the things she discovers*" (51), as emphasized earlier. This experience of cross-species relationality then continues in the epiphanic sense of merging with the mythical whale (54) and in joining "Amazing Grace" with a whale song (57).

Relational thinking *with* rather than *about* is what the protagonist tries to achieve in the whale scenes, and the culmination is a sense of delightful togetherness (55), as in the joyful recognition of various specimens of local flora and fauna (51–53). When depicting her two Alaskan friends, Teri and Sonya, and contemplating their Harveys, the process of "thinking with" (20) possibly occurs because of the protagonist's own experience. But differences remain, as the Indigenous women were subject to contextually different and centuries-long forms of abuse. Thus, the protagonist primarily learns from the other women's courage (38) and eventually dares to tentatively take her first independent steps in Alaska.

Transcending Genre

As indicated earlier, Bilodeau's monodrama represents part of her endeavor to create a play that *is* climate change rather than a play that only *addresses* climate change. In the following discussion of *No More Harveys* as a one-actor play, I will be less concerned with the boundaries of genre and focus primarily on form in Caroline Levine's sense. Levine argues that form is more stable than genre (13) because genres are "customary constellations of elements" that we recognize in "groupings of artistic objects," whereas "forms are organizations or arrangements that afford repetition and portability across materials and contexts" (14). This far-reaching conceptualization of form is immensely useful for transcultural, planetary, and relational perspectives on climate change theater, as it implies the possibility of transcending genre-related features that are embedded in more circumscribed cultural histories.

Moreover, the activist impetus of climate change drama coheres with the nuanced and future-oriented optimism of New Formalism: "Paying attention to the full range of affordances of literary and political wholes will challenge the assumption that all totalities must be disrupted or broken. In fact," Levine argues, "we cannot do without bounded wholes: their power to hold things together is what makes some of the most valuable kinds of political action possible at all" (27). Perceiving the link between

bounded wholes and the critical mass and momentum needed for "political action" implies the destructive and constructive potentialities of "totalities." To repeat: Bounded wholes are not per se to be rejected. Rather – just like rhythms – we need them (36), but they must be critically assessed and selected wisely. For a creative artist, then, the "strategic uses of form" (39) are crucial for whatever argument they want to make.

Activist theater, of course, uses the bounded whole of a performance with the goal of encouraging social change. Obviously, such bounded wholes are not meant to be poststructurally dismantled. Instead, as the playwright herself envisions, ideally a play "opens the door for a self-reflective and generative process. It can potentially help sidestep heated politics and entrenched ideologies by drawing attention to individual humans trying to find their way in specific circumstances – circumstances that we can hopefully all relate to" (Bilodeau, "Writing Plays" 46). Ultimately, contemplating the relation between an individual dramatic character and specific bounded wholes is the prerequisite for transformation of thought and/into action.

In monodrama as conceptualized, for example, in the early twentieth century by Nikolai Evreinov, the stage performance's intense focus on one character's inner world produces the illusion in the audience that they share that character's experience and perceptions (Taroff, "Home Is Where the Self Is" 326–27; Taroff, "The Mind's Stage" 90, 92, 94–95, 103). Monodrama in this sense can be a one- or a multi-actor drama, as long as the focus lies on one specific character's perceptions, experiences, and thoughts (Taroff, "The Mind's Stage" 103, 157, 191). According to Taroff's nomenclature, *No More Harveys* would be a "[s]ingle-actor spoken monodrama" (195). Beyond such subdivisions, Taroff advocates that the concept of monodrama can serve as a methodological lens rather than as a genre description. But the incentive in Bilodeau's play is neither Evreinov's kind of twentieth-century expressionism nor the duplication of earlier iterations such as the nineteenth-century Romantic "tragedy of the self" (Taroff, "The Mind's Stage" 44) or Jean Jacques Rousseau's musical drama *Pygmalion* of 1766 (4, 7). While the performance definitely encourages audience members to engage with the protagonist by listening to her story in the role of a friend, the experience of ostensibly perceiving the world through the central character's perspective goes beyond the connectivity between performed dramatic character and audience members during the performance in the theater. Rather, the protagonist's muted, yet palpable optimism at the end of the play is meant to spill over into the thoughts and actions of the audience members after they leave the premises.

Bilodeau's use of digital devices in her one-actor play confirms Taroff's notion that "[p]erhaps the field offering the most potential for the future development of monodrama is the intersection of theatre and technology" ("The Mind's Stage" 364). In *No*

More Harveys, technology is not simply a nod to the current moment, that is, to the ubiquity of cell phones and to the growing presence of artificial intelligence. It rather serves to stress relationality (and its negative and positive impacts on the protagonist's psyche) and the permeable boundary between the human and the humanoid. *No More Harveys* includes technology as a communicative channel (cell phone) and as a character (Alexa). Texting as well as phone calls evoke the presence of physically absent characters, which adds to the central character's chagrin at being abused (as seen in her husband's aggressively yelling at her and in his manipulative use of written language and emojis) and to the comfort of being connected to Teri and Sonya. Discarding her phone (57) is thus a symbolic act of "defeat[ing] a Harvey before it becomes a Harvey" (56).

In contrast to the conflict-focused exchanges between the protagonist and her husband, the physical technological object and audible voice of Alexa allows on-stage dialogue focused on questions and answers, which may or may not be harmonious, as well as moments of holding on to or setting aside the gadget, as if Alexa were a person. Importantly, the play features two moments in which Alexa speaks without having been prompted. The first one is a conflict situation in which the woman tells Alexa to "Shut up" – to which the machine responds with an annoyed "What did you say," "*a loud and obnoxious sound*," and the unprompted admonition to practice "[g]ood behaviour and respect" (34), which is exactly the phrase that the woman uses in her story about a whale who gave herself up to hunters that showed her this very conduct (27). In contrast to this altercation, Alexa comforts the protagonist after she has just learnt of Teri's death (50). Unprompted, she plays Carol King's "You've Got a Friend" (51), after which the woman "*picks up ALEXA and hugs her*" (51) – maybe because there are no human friends on stage and because this action emblematizes 'cross-species' compassion with a contemporary cyborgian twist.

The variegated use of the predominantly threatening cell phone and the somewhat moody, yet more amenable Alexa prevents a romanticization of technology; it depicts a broad range from care to harassment via light-hearted banter. To complement Taroff's suggestion about bringing monodrama into the present, I would also argue that Bilodeau's depiction of technology-based communication should be read in conjunction with the above-mentioned representation of non-human 'language' that emotionally affects the protagonist (as happens with the croaking raven and the singing whale). Ultimately, the play deeply contemplates but also reaches out far beyond the inner world of a single character through its multiscalar and planetary argument. I thus agree with Taroff's assessment that "monodrama still stand[s] as an impetus for new work, or perhaps even new forms" ("The Mind's Stage" 362).

The One-Actor Play as Life-Writing Performance

Similar to Taroff's suggestion that one can use monodrama as an analytical lens for certain plays rather than strictly as a genre designation, Jenn Stephenson picks up on life writing scholars Sidonie Smith's and Julia Watson's notion of autobiography as a "generic practice" (2) and not as a neatly defined set of features that extends across time and space. The fact that we only see one human actor on stage in *No More Harveys* invites discussion of how the study of self-life writing as a discursive strategy sheds light on dramatic character presentation. As Stephenson argues, an autobiographical perspective on drama allows reading "dramatic autobiographers" – that is, characters who tell their (real or fictional) life stories on stage – as engaging in "an evolving process of self-creation and transformation" (4). On the one hand, she discusses how "various self-performance strategies . . . engage major questions in the field of autobiography studies," on the other hand, she "demonstrate[s] the at times paradoxical ways that the fictionalizing act of self-storytelling can bring about profound actual-world effects" (4). Stephenson's focus on fictional stage autobiographers – she dubs such plays "meta-autobiography" (11) – ties her main incentive to the effect of monodrama as defined by Evreinov and to Bilodeau's goals. Such plays harness "the transformative power of autobiography" (Stephenson 11) in the sense that they address an ongoing "crisis" through the act of autobiographical discourse that connects retrospection, the present, and the future (16). As shown, this rings true for the multiple crises (ranging in scale from the personal to the planetary) addressed in *No More Harveys* and tied to an equally multiscalar perspective on time and space.

Related to this understanding of dramatic meta-autobiography and crisis, Stephenson's discussion of metalepsis as disruptive to a smoothly evolving self-life performance (17) confirms my earlier reading of Bilodeau's three-worlds strategy as a dramatic method that uses the collision of bounded wholes to depict the protagonist's experience of violence and attempts at healing. Tying this to the elimination of the fourth wall yet again emphasizes the communicative scenario inherent in theater and, as Stephenson argues, in autobiography (17). Furthermore, this approach implicates each audience member as an "active ethically responsible audience-witness" (45) who reads the play as a "powerful political act" because a "single story takes the stage and holds the attention of the audience" – an "encounter [. . .] rife with possibility – for understanding, for insight, and for tolerance and acceptance" (154). The open-endedness of autobiographical performance, thus, inherently nudges the viewer towards the future (22, 169). This orientation coheres with the encouraging closing appeal of *No More Harveys* and with Levine's cautiously hopeful New Formalist approach which allows for the possibility of sociopolitical change.

Concluding Thoughts: The Limits and Vistas of New Formalism

Combining Levine's New Formalist literary studies method, which is strongly rooted in the social sciences, with aesthetics- and discourse-focused approaches that provide a handle on one-actor plays as immersively transforming viewers (be it from the perspective of monodrama or autobiography) strengthens the nexus between theatrical form and political impetus. Bilodeau's *No More Harveys* does not simply fit into a preconceived notion of how a play can embody climate change. The work rather manages to instigate thought and action through playfully engaging recognizable social and aesthetic forms.

The protagonist's namelessness goes against the decided non-anonymity of autobiography. Her self-narrative provides psychological depth without navel-gazing. It prevents her from being a two-dimensional figure whose experience nevertheless is to function as an allegory for myriad humans and other beings. The multi-scalarity that Bilodeau achieves is one located between the (meta-)autobiographical I of the protagonist and the representative quality she assumes through redefining herself as a person seeking out types of relationality that allow her (and, by implication, her audience) to tread this path towards the future. She moves from the oppressive dyad of her marriage to a relational and even planetary sense of self that embraces empathy-based friendship and that transcends a single human's time and space through cross-species temporality and mobility. Why does the protagonist emphasize that her name is not Renée? Possibly to counteract an allegorical reading of her experience as one of an autonomous self's rebirth, which would fit into the pattern of famous men's autobiographies during the Enlightenment. Instead, she stresses evolution, knowledge, in-depth thinking, relationality, and hope.

The three-world approach expands an otherwise potentially less complex analytical focus on metalepsis. Two dualities – first, stage vs. auditorium and, second, the protagonist (inter-)acting in the material here and now vs. the protagonist living, remembering, feeling, and thinking in her inner world – add complexity to the scales as well as the spatial and temporal elements. When the protagonist appeals to her audience or even deposits her phone with an audience member and later retrieves it, she shows vulnerability, the search for solidarity, and eventually the beauty of sharing her newly gained strength. Similarly, moving between the inner and outer worlds entails being accosted by potential Harveys and provides soothing retreats from such experiences. At the end of the play, these worlds appear harmonized or balanced, and the protagonist advocates "*preventing*" Harveys through efforts to "defeat a Harvey before it becomes a Harvey" (56). While crises and threats will continue to develop, she now feels primed to sniff them out early and respond accordingly. Recognizing forms enables her to avoid or to engage with specific bounded wholes,

rhythms, hierarchies, and networks. For audience members and readers, drama and theater aesthetics builds experiential and interpretative bridges directed at the stage and at the world beyond the end of the performance, the theater, and the last page.

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Violent Landscapes:

James Benning's *Landscape Suicide* (1986)

Johannes Vith

ABSTRACT

While serial killings, murders, and other violent deaths are traumatic incidents for the communities in which they occur, they also attract a great deal of media attention and form the basis for numerous cinematic adaptations in US-American cinema and beyond. Many of these movies employ a sensationalist approach and focus on the social environments of the killings: the perpetrator's upbringing, triggering experiences, or a generally troubled personality. There are only a limited number of cinematic treatments of violent killings that focus on the natural environment or the landscapes where these incidents occurred.

This article is concerned with filmmakers using (cinematic) landscapes as a mode of cultural expression for violence and trauma. It seeks to show that James Benning's *Landscape Suicide* (1986) calls for a different understanding of landscape that goes beyond a mere setting for narrative, as it gives landscape active agency in its mediation of two seemingly unconnected murder cases. The film compares and juxtaposes the murder of Kirsten Costas by Bernadette Protti in a suburb of San Francisco in 1984 with the killings of Ed Gein in Plainfield, Wisconsin, in the 1950s. In doing so, the film presents viewers with two distinct functions of landscape in mediating violence and trauma: as a spatialization of time and as socio-political surroundings. Analyzing these aspects of the film helps us to better understand the link between landscape, violence, and trauma in cinematic treatments of violent incidents and also sheds light on the broader connection between landscape and trauma culture.

Murders and other violent killings are highly traumatic events for the communities in which they occur. Neighbors, friends, and acquaintances can quickly change from beloved community members to ostracized monsters in public perception. In response, many communities try to repress these collective memories, which is also related to questions of guilt in failing to prevent the killings. What had driven these murderers to commit their horrendous crimes? Could all this have been mitigated and avoided? What role did the community as such play in the killings? At the same time, murders, particularly serial killings, are prominent topics in news media. Mark Seltzer bases our culture's sensationalism related to these events on what he labels "wound culture." Central to this culture is "the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound" (1). This fascination with wounds and violence results in large-scale attention to such horrendous killings. Networks from all around the country report on these acts and identify all kinds of causes for such murders in an attempt to profit from our collective sensationalism. As a result, as Philip Simpson argues, many (serial) killers have become "immortal (and profitable) cultural icons" (2). Consequently, serial killers have also made their way onto the screen.

Violent (serial) killings and their perpetrators are a prominent topic in contemporary US-American cinema. Serial killers appear across various film genres, from horror to documentary film. For Brian Jarvis, this trend is driven by economic factors, as "[t]he commodification of violence is inseparable from the violence of commodification" (328). Based on our collective fascination with violence, movies about violent killings usually mediate the genesis and unfolding of these killings as well as the collective trauma that followed. Notably, though, most cinematic treatments focus rather on the sensationalist shock and horror of the incident than on the background thereof. If they do, they usually present the killers' psychological state or social environments: a look into their troubled childhood, a traumatic experience that would shape their future lives, or the development of an inherently evil person into a killer. These treatments fail to address the often complex ties between perpetrators' actions and their social and natural environments. There are remarkably few cinematic treatments of violent killings that focus on the natural environments or landscapes in which these incidents occur. This is notable not only because the majority of cinematic adaptations fail to acknowledge landscape's impact on human behavior, a subject's alienation, and its moral trans- and deformation but also because landscape has always been "a medium of cultural expression" (Mitchell 14). In this cultural understanding, landscape entails a significant semiotic function, so much so that we can use it as "a way of seeing the external world" (Cosgrove 46). How do filmmakers use (cinematic) landscapes to express violence? Which insights into violent incidents

and the communities where they occurred can be gained by using landscape as a visual and interpretative anchor?

This article is concerned with the cinematic representation of the link between violence, trauma, and landscape. In particular, I focus on film's potential to mediate trauma by analyzing the landscape surrounding violent incidents. James Benning's experimental documentary film *Landscape Suicide* (1986) sets out to revisit the story of two murder cases in different parts of the United States. The resulting film comprises countless landscape shots, each of which traces the natural and social environment surrounding the killings. I will argue that *Landscape Suicide* promotes an understanding of landscape that goes beyond a mere setting for narrative. In doing so, it presents viewers with two distinct functions of landscape in mediating violence and trauma: as a spatialization of time and as socio-political surroundings. In his attempt to present an alternative to the sensationalism found in both the media's and Hollywood's approach to and depiction of violent killings, Benning's film slowly reveals the landscape's impact on the killers. Landscape becomes a space for provocation and hesitation, processing and interpretation, as well as remembrance and reflection. Analyzing these aspects of the film helps us to better understand the link between landscape and violence and the ramifications thereof in Benning's film, and also sheds light on the connection between landscape and trauma culture in general.

In *Landscape Suicide*, Benning introduces a link between landscape and trauma that allows us to expand on and complicate existing research on cinematic landscapes and the trauma that they mediate. In recent years, different ecological crises have led scholars to reevaluate the traumatic potential of cinematic landscapes. While landscapes were long considered narrative background in trauma cinema, these theories present them as the source of trauma. Of particular note are Anil Narine's edited collection on *Eco-Trauma Cinema* (2015) and E. Ann Kaplan's *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (2016). Both books examine cinematic depictions of trauma that arise from (changing) landscapes. With *Landscape Suicide*, Benning proposes a sort of middle ground to these positions. Between a mere background to the narrative and a traumatizing agent, Benning looks at landscape as a witness to the violence. The notion of "witnessing" is central to trauma studies and trauma film studies alike. In trauma film, however, "witnessing" is closely connected to the audience of a film (see, e.g., Kaplan 204; Caruth 56). In contrast, Benning presents landscape as an active witness. With this, the film promotes a sense of what Michael Richardson calls "nonhuman witnessing" and gives landscapes agency in the otherwise anthropocentric process of witnessing (3–5). Benning's understanding of landscape thus transcends the dichotomy between human and non-human spaces. He suggests that, while the traumatic incidents are still caused by human actors,

audiences can better understand their actions by engaging with the landscape wherein they occurred. An analysis of *Landscape Suicide* thus allows us to expand on the connection between landscape, violence, and trauma.

James Benning, Filmmaker Extraordinaire

> Last summer, my daughter,[1] who was twelve at the time, and I took a train from Milwaukee to New York. We changed trains in Chicago and my daughter bought a *Rolling Stone* magazine. Somewhere in the middle of Indiana, she ripped six or seven pages out of the magazine and handed them to me and said she didn't wanna read this kind of article. It only scared her. (*Landscape Suicide* 00:06:55–07:20)

In the mid-1980s, James Benning was working on a script on the experience of violence, which would have featured the stories of convicted serial killer Ed Gein, Charles Evers (the brother of the assassinated civil rights activist Medgar Evers), and of a World War II ambulance driver. It was at that time that Sadie Benning stumbled upon a story about a murder case involving high school students in California. Benning realized that Sadie was as affected by this encounter with violence and death as he was when he learned of the case of Ed Gein as a teenager in 1957 (MacDonald, "James Benning" 244). Their subsequent conversation sparked the idea to make a film that compares and juxtaposes two murder cases from two different places in two different decades: the murder of Kirsten Costas by Bernadette Protti in a suburb of San Francisco in 1984 and the case of Ed Gein in Plainfield, Wisconsin, in the 1950s. Protti, who allegedly suffered from a long history of bullying and an inability to fit in, lured her classmate to a fake party and ended up stabbing and killing her. Whether or not the crime was carefully planned and committed in cold blood or happened in the heat of the moment remains subject to speculation. Gein had made the headlines for killing at least two women, Mary Hogan and Bernice Worden,[2] exhuming, mutilating, and disemboweling the corpses of several others, and for turning the bones, skin, etc. of his victims into pieces of furniture. While the film compares the two cases and the landscapes they occurred in, its central aspect of interest is the communal response to death. This focus on death informs much of Benning's opus in the 1980s.

During this time, Benning made several movies that addressed issues of crime, violence, and death. He often mentions 1979 as a turning point, when he woke up in bed and found a close friend dead next to him. This traumatic experience significantly influenced him and his filmmaking, and "death has cast a subtle shadow on his films" after the incident (Reynaud 79). His subsequent films in the 1980s – *Him and Me* (1982), *American Dreams* (1984), *Landscape Suicide* (1986), and *Used*

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[1] Sadie Benning has since identified as non-binary.
[2] Gein confessed to killing them in 1957 but was suspected to have killed several other people (Gollmar 81–88).

Innocence (1989) – address the aforementioned issues in one way or another. Benning later called the making of these films a process of coming to terms with "discovering death so close to me" (qtd. in Macdonald, "James Benning" 242). While Benning has often stated that one recurring idea may permeate several films (see, e.g., MacDonald, "Exploring the New West" 9; Zuvela), each of the films mentioned above presents us with a unique take on violence. In *Landscape Suicide*, his idea was not to focus on the violence itself but to investigate how perpetrators view their involvement in violent crimes and how this view changes over time (MacDonald, "James Benning" 244). Contrary to cinematic trends in the mediation of violent killings, *Landscape Suicide* is a very anti-sensationalist portrayal of the two murder cases.

The case of Ed Gein gave way to various sensationalist cinematic responses. The incidents of murder, grave robbing, corpse mutilation, and (alleged) cannibalism[3] were the inspiration for horror classics such as *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), and *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) (see, e.g., MacDonald, "James Benning" 223; de Bruyn 167; MacDonald, "Testing your Patience" 429).[4] Apart from these horror classics, Gein continues to be a prominent topic of documentary films and television series on serial killers. Most recently, Canadian filmmaker James Buddy Day explores Gein in his documentary miniseries *Psycho: The Lost Tapes of Ed Gein* (2023). Benning's film could not be more different from these films and television series. Gein's crimes (and to a similar degree his upbringing) take a central position in both the horror films and in most documentary films and series. *Landscape Suicide* refuses the sensationalist undertones that are usually associated with Gein. This rejection is what Nikolaj Lübecker calls the film's central "provocation" (61). Benning's approach to violence goes against common trends in addressing violent incidents in contemporary cinema. These trends vary from genre to genre, but both fiction and documentary films on violent incidents often feature a sense of sensationalism. While *Landscape Suicide* is a film about violence, it lacks any depiction thereof; shock and horror are entirely missing.

Instead, Benning examines the links between people and their surrounding environments, socio-political circumstances, and ultimately also the culture of remembrance and forgetting in the communities where the murders happened. Just as Benning rejects the sensationalism introduced by news coverage and the popular horror films mentioned above, he also goes beyond a simple geo-deterministic (i.e., something happened because of the landscape) treatment of the murder cases. Instead, he

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[3] When the police searched Gein's home after the murder of Bernice Worden, they found a human heart next to his stove, but Gein never confessed to cannibalism (Gollmar 24, 41).

[4] The case of Bernadette Protti sparked less cinematic interest. Two television films address the issue: *A Friend to Die For* (William A. Graham, 1994) and its remake, *Death of a Cheerleader* (Paul Shapiro, 2019).

links landscapes to bigger societal questions on economic inequality and rural isolation in the United States. For Lübecker, the film even invites broader reflections on the country as a whole and how its history, the violence it suffers from, and the natural environment are connected (56). Benning connects the violence of the two murder cases to an understanding of landscape and the natural world that awards each a form of agency.

In *Landscape Suicide* and his other films, Benning perpetuates a concept of landscape that refuses a dichotomy between a human and a non-human world. The landscape he depicts is not one that resists human presence but where humans and landscape need to be understood as one entity. In *Landscape Suicide*, Benning argues that the two killers and their actions are closely connected to their surrounding landscapes. The murders can only be fully understood by looking outward. To some extent, this implies an anthropocentric understanding of landscape in Benning's film. After all, Benning is in search of an answer to these murder cases and does not examine any violence inflicted on nonhuman spaces and ecosystems. However, landscape is more than a background and rather serves as a quiet witness to the crimes. Benning presents landscape much like a separate character that reveals subtle details of the murder cases to attentive viewers.

Benning's distinct understanding of landscape is in part inspired by Robert Frank's short film *Home Improvements* (1985). Addressing the function of landscape in his later movie *Deseret* (1995), Benning remarked that "[o]ut in the middle of a Western landscape, where nobody's around, there seems to be some answer, a feeling of getting back to something that's much more real than what we generally experience" (qtd. in MacDonald, "Exploring the New West" 5). He continues by stating that

> I think Robert Frank expresses it really well in his video, *Home Improvements* [1985], when he points the camera out his window in Nova Scotia, and says, "The answer's out there, but every time I look out, it's different; it's always changing." I think maybe that's what it is: a search for an answer *out there*, where every moment is different from the moment before. (5, original emphasis)

Similar to Frank, who assessed that we are "always looking outside trying to look inside. Trying to tell something that's true. But maybe nothing is really true, except what's out there. And what's out there is always different" (*Home Improvements* 00:25:08–40), Benning is also in search for a truth that only becomes visible "out there" (qtd. in Panse 66). While Frank presents landscape as a dynamic medium ("what's out there is always different"), Benning considers our individual perception of landscape and the environment as constantly changing over time (Panse 67). Frank's unique understanding of landscape thus greatly influenced Benning's approach to the two murder cases: An answer was out there, somewhere in their

environments. For Benning, this answer can only be found by approaching the image differently. To do so, he employs cinematography that strongly builds on duration.

In *Landscape Suicide*, Benning's cinematography and overall approach to filmmaking mirror his philosophical understanding of landscape. His practice of filmmaking is based on manipulating images to "make things more real than reality" (qtd. in Bértolo and Nascimento Duarte 203). In doing so, Benning explores the boundaries of John Grierson's ideal of documentaries as "a creative treatment of actuality" (13). Instead of actuality, *Landscape Suicide* offers visual and audio distortions and detachments. Benning's understanding of filmmaking strongly impacts his narrative style. By repeating shots, presenting them without clear narrative progression, disconnecting sound and image, and an overall unclear temporal structure, Benning breaks with several representational conventions of traditional documentary filmmaking (Wolfe 145; Nichols). Benning's use of various disconnects is crucial for the film, as they occur not only between sound and image and image and reality but also between memory and incident.

The Spatialization of Time

In *Landscape Suicide*, as in most of Benning's work, landscape is a critical marker of temporality and duration. In a somewhat humorous remark, Benning once stated that he is interested in both the spatialization of time and the temporalization of space (qtd. in Zuvela). Landscape can thus only be understood in connection to time and vice versa. Duration is a key element in Benning's work. After working on his California Trilogy,[5] he realized "that place can only be understood over time; that is, that place is a function of time" (Benning qtd. in MacDonald, "Testing your Patience" 430). Elements of this are already traceable in *Landscape Suicide*. On his way to Orinda, the San Francisco suburb where Bernadette Protti murdered Kirsten Costas, Benning presents audiences with an uninterrupted 20-second static shot. While 20 seconds is not particularly long compared to other shots both in *Landscape Suicide* and in Benning's other works, what makes this shot stand out is that it is entirely static and seemingly unrelated to the overall narrative. It carries no clear meaning; its sole purpose seems to be to allow viewers to make out the wind rustling through the trees and the passing cars in the background that they could otherwise not perceive.

Duration can have many effects on viewers. Engaging with the same image over a long period of time can almost serve as a form of irritation. For first-time viewers, as Danni Zuvela assesses, the effect of these static long takes is an experience "of radical, almost unnerving stillness." Such a sense of stillness can then give way to a reflection on the film. In this instance, it is mainly a reflection on the relationship

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[5] This trilogy includes *El Valley Centro* (1999), *Los* (2000), and *Sogobi* (2001).

between time and place. While the camera in this shot is static, the scene is still highly dynamic. The viewer's inability to place the shot in a narrative continuity renders the landscape in the scene almost provocative. Again, however, duration is vital, as "the formal elegance of the compositions somehow becomes surreal over time, as we look *into*, instead of *at*, the place" (Zuvela, original emphasis). The duration of the shots strongly influences the audience's act of seeing. Only through duration is it possible to look *into* a place and see beyond what is initially visible.

Benning's filmmaking strongly draws on a spatialization of time and the effect that duration can have on audiences. In his films, time becomes a complex concept with many different aspects that can each be manipulated. Each temporal change impacts the perception of the image. Benning states that

> I have an interest in exploring space-time relationships through film. There's real time, and there's how we perceive time. Time affects the way we perceive place. . . . In my films, I'm very aware of *recording place over time*, and the way that makes you understand place. Once you've been watching something for a while, you become aware of it differently. I could show you a photograph of the place, but that doesn't convince you, it's not the same as seeing it *in time*. . . .
> My films ask you to look *around* the frame, and *at* the frame, and have a different experience to the one you're probably used to from TV or Hollywood. If we see things being signposted all the time…we become lazy, we become dominated by the filmmaker instead of having room to move. (qtd. in Zuvela, original emphasis)

This different way of looking at an image – looking *into* an image *over time* – is crucial for understanding *Landscape Suicide*. While Benning asks us to think of these murder cases in relation to space, he also explores their connection to time in its strictest sense. Through his long, uninterrupted takes, he introduces us to certain feelings and experiences of space. In a two-minute scene, Benning drives through Orinda and gives the audience a first look at the city.

The time he dedicates to this exploration is crucial, as viewers can get a sense of place. Benning shows us an Orinda that is, first and foremost, a very affluent community: large houses, a lot of green, and gardens that are tended to. The longer the scene continues, the more we get the idea of a wealthy suburb. On closer inspection, by looking *into* the place instead of *at* it, we see that some cars are less fancy than others, some houses are smaller than the others on the street, and some gardens are not as lusciously green as others. The supporting audio features a preacher talking about sin. The audio not only serves as a kind of foreshadowing but also seems to illustrate how every deviation from the (affluent) norm could become subject to gossip in this community. Another notable element is the rain. Rain takes on a very calm, almost repressive quality in this shot. The grey sky somewhat clashes with the green yards. It gives viewers the impression that something remains hidden and repressed.

With this long, uninterrupted take of Orinda, Benning introduces ideas that are crucial for uncovering the connection between place and violence. Duration and time make viewers increasingly aware of the socio-economic disparities and a fear of gossiping that might have driven Bernadette Protti to commit the crime. The same goes for the repression of memory. Benning's first look at Orinda presents it as a rainy US-American suburb. In the film, the long take gives the rain a certain gravitas, a unique repressive quality. Awareness of temporality and duration is crucial for uncovering what connects this place to the violence that occurred there. Landscape, duration, and temporality are also key components of *Landscape Suicide*'s political subtext.

The Politics of Space

Benning's usage of the long shot is both a stylistic choice and a means of reintroducing a political meaning to the image. In an interview with Silke Panse, Benning ponders on the importance of duration for the political in his films, stating that, while his films might initially be an "aesthetic experience" for his audiences, "through duration that breaks down [,] there are hints in the image that become political or social" (65). Throughout *Landscape Suicide*, Benning carefully combines duration, landscape shots, and the story of these murders to reflect on the socio-political circumstances of the crimes. Benning's films all share political subtexts that are closely connected to his understanding of landscape.

Even though Benning ultimately chose art over political campaigning, his films are far from apolitical. Especially in his later films, he addresses highly ecocritical topics and focuses on humans' often unsustainable treatment of the natural world. The political message of his earlier films is less obvious, but it is nonetheless there. While he initially wanted to make films without a political message, "politics kept creeping in" (Benning qtd. in Bértolo and Nascimento Duarte 198) and he ultimately decided to embrace this tendency in his filmmaking. One important aspect of his turn to politics in his films is the aforementioned aesthetic engagement with duration and the long take. For Benning, the viewing experience is closely tied to the political aspect of his films. He believes that a different aesthetic treatment of an issue might enable audiences to engage with this issue politically as well (MacDonald, "James Benning" 231). Benning does not necessarily intend the political undertones of his films to change the beliefs held by the audience (231). Nonetheless, his films and their political messages confront viewers with their preconceived political ideas (Bértolo and Nascimento Duarte 198). This complex understanding of filmmaking and politics also informs Benning's treatment of landscape.

Landscape Suicide links Benning's political filmmaking to his understanding of the connection between humans and landscape. Similar to how landscape is a function

of time in Benning's films, the human subject is a function of landscape. *Landscape Suicide* was the first film where he tried to address this link between landscape and people (Panse 60). For Benning, there is a clear relationship between the murder cases and the social and physical environments they occurred in. Benning wanted to compare "the isolation produced by the Middle Wisconsin winter, an isolation so severe that it can almost lead to madness, to the alienation felt in the pristine landscape of affluent California that caused that kid to become a killer" (qtd. in Reynaud 78). His overall conclusion is that both forms of isolation and alienation "are somewhat a function of where [the killers] lived" (qtd. in Panse 60). Viewing the crimes committed by these perpetrators in relation to the communities they grew up in invites a comparison with the writings of Judith Butler, who asserts that

> we need to situate individual responsibility in light of its collective conditions [since] individuals are formed, and we would be making a mistake if we reduced their actions to purely self-generated acts of will or symptoms of individual pathology or "evil." (15)

While the two killers might not have been conditioned to commit their crimes, they were influenced and impacted by their social and physical environments in many ways. This assumption turns the environment and the landscape into highly political spaces. Already in its opening shot, *Landscape Suicide* introduces us to a political reading of landscape and of the two cases.

The film opens with an almost four-minute sequence of a tennis player. The man in view repeatedly serves a tennis ball in what initially appears to be a single looped shot. We only realize later in the sequence that the balls to the right become fewer and fewer. Ultimately, the film gives us a reverse angle shot that reveals the other side of the tennis court, where all the balls that had been served lie scattered around. Scholars and critics have argued that the scene introduces viewers to "the obsessive and competitive nature of the Orinda environment" (de Bruyn 162), hints at "the pressure to succeed at work or at play for Bernadette" (Reynaud 77), and "prompts us to think about the isolation of modern man in the wealthy Californian suburbs" (Lübecker 58). In this sense, the opening scene introduces the film's general link between environment and action but also presents the complexity of this relationship where cause and effect are not necessarily visible. The scene further lends itself to a discussion in the context of trauma cinema.

The temporal complexity, the repetitive action, and the affective provocation of the scene mirror the trauma that these killings induced. In his elaborations on the temporal quality of trauma, Robert Stolorow states that "[i]n the region of trauma, all duration or stretching-along collapses, past becomes present and future loses all meaning other than endless repetition" (55). Benning's scene helps us visualize this understanding of trauma long before Stolorow wrote these lines. The scene on the

tennis court serves as a reminder of the endless repetition of trauma. With its unique narrative focus, it also features levels of "disturbance and fragmentation of [both] narrative and stylistic regimes," which Janet Walker considers crucial for trauma cinema (19). In this sense, *Landscape Suicide* joins the ranks of other trauma films in that it is also "especially appropriate to figuring the visual, aural and non-linear phenomena of trauma – to performing it" and thereby manages to articulate the "paralysis, repetition, circularity" of trauma (Kaplan 204–05). The trauma of this scene is, however, not only related to the murders that would follow but also to an inability to conform to a neoliberal society's norms and expectations. The temporal ambiguity thus situates the trauma across the past, present, and future. In addition to this form of concealed politics, the film offers political undertones beyond such a socio-economic critique.

Landscape Suicide shows us another form of political landscape closely related to a US-American understanding of community, connection, and the natural world. After all, the film addresses violence in different parts of the United States (see also Lübecker 55), which introduces a national dimension to the relationship between violence and the environment. This national dimension becomes obvious only by looking *into* instead of *at* a frame. As part of his exploration of Orinda County, Benning shows viewers shots of highways, a railroad, and power lines, all of which hint at the imposition of human power and politics onto landscape. In reference to his earlier short film *I-94* (1974), on which he collaborated with feminist filmmaker Bette Gordon, Benning states that "we were aware of superhighways and railroad tracks as American public symbols. We chose extremely loaded images, not knowing everything about how they might be read" (qtd. in MacDonald, "James Benning" 226). Notably, he depicts the same symbolic spaces in *Landscape Suicide*. The power lines in the film seem, for MacDonald, "like a metaphor for power of all kinds" ("James Benning" 245), which certainly has to do with our cultural understanding of the human impact on landscape. This metaphorical quality of landscape is similar to W. J. T. Mitchell's assertion that landscape does not "merely signify and symbolize power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power, [which] naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable" (1–2). Politics in its different figurations permeate all landscapes in *Landscape Suicide*, but they become most apparent in Benning's stylistic choices when depicting Orinda and Plainfield.

Benning presents us with two clashing renditions of the United States: Orinda, a wealthy, affluent San Francisco suburb, and Plainfield, an almost run-down part of the Midwest. The portrayal of these spaces showcases the economic distances and disparities within the country. Orinda and Plainfield are as different as can be; the

only thing that ultimately links them is the violence they witnessed. Apart from the narration in the film, subtle details in certain shots hint at the economic affluence of Orinda. In Orinda, the used car dealer sells Porsches and Cadillacs. Everything makes it look like a very well-off community, so much so that "even the prison looks like a condominium," as MacDonald remarks ("James Benning" 245). While "Orinda County feels brand new" (Benning qtd. in MacDonald, "James Benning" 245), Plainfield feels the opposite. Everything looks run-down and old, and buildings look dilapidated and deserted. On the process of filming in Wisconsin in 1985, Benning noted that he "wanted what I shot to look like 1957, and there was no trouble doing that. If you bring in some old cars, it looks like 1957, 1940, 1930" (245–46). While Orinda feels very rich, Plainfield looks old, deserted, and derelict, which adds to the feeling of separation between the two. The closing scene further points to significant economic differences between the two places.

Benning links Plainfield to all sorts of violence. One form of violence comes up in a longer scene of a hunter carefully disemboweling a deer. This scene has several different meanings. First, it hints at Ed Gein's inability to cope with the sight of blood, as he had claimed during the interrogation. This is why, as he noted, he never hunted deer. Second, it illustrates what remains in the dark: Gein's treatment of the corpses at his home. Like the hunter in this scene, Gein had also disemboweled his 'prey.' Last, while the opening shot introduces pressure to succeed in a highly affluent community for Bernadette, the closing shot, according to Reynaud, hints at "a repulsion/fascination for blood produced by a frontier culture" for Gein (77). The painstaking detail in this shot clashes with the repetitiveness of the opening shot. This contrast provides the necessary framework for reading the film along socio-political lines.

Several scenes in *Landscape Suicide* illustrate Benning's attempt to present the subject as a function of its environment. Time and duration allow viewers to reflect on what they see and look *into* a place instead of *at* it. We can only discover the socio-political forces at play by looking into Orinda and Plainfield. In this context, landscape also takes on a third function in the film. While the stories told in the film seemingly culminate in the murders and the interrogations, Plainfield and Orinda forever remain the locations of these crimes. How do communities deal with such a lingering trauma? Upon visiting Orinda, Benning remarks that "things became more real" (00:37:50–54). This reading of the environment of a murder is not the case in Plainfield. There, Benning states that he "couldn't get a sense of the murder. But the feeling of a collective guilt still lingers" (00:58:25–33). This "collective guilt" gives way to another function of landscape in the film, as a space for remembrance, repression, and forgetting.

Landscape Suicide mediates the primary communal response to the murders, i.e., repression. Whereas both cases garnered a lot of community and media attention, the central response to each respective case was a sense of repression. Benning once more links this notion to landscape. The film presents us with emptied landscapes and shots of the communities; the crime scenes are deserted and seemingly forgotten. Benning shows us a landscape that has eventually reconquered the narrative. While the two killings were notably different, repression was crucial for both the killers and the communities wherein the crimes occurred. Derek Russell Davis defines repression as "a defence mechanism that ensures that what is unacceptable to the conscious mind, and would if recalled arouse anxiety, is prevented from entering into it" (803). While Davis refers to a psychological, unconscious form of repression, the communities opted for more active forms thereof. In the aftermath of the murder case, the Costas family left the community where Kirsten was killed and moved to Hawaii. Likewise, after having spent seven years in prison, Bernadette Protti changed her name and moved out of California. After Ed Gein had been committed to a hospital, his farmhouse came up for auction, but it burnt down under mysterious circumstances before it could be sold (Gollmar 80). Eventually, it seems the residents of Plainfield had imposed a communal sense of amnesia onto the landscape and their community (see also de Bruyn 166). With this, the community of Plainfield might not only have tried to forget Gein's horrendous crimes but also its own involvement in them. After all, Gein had been a trusted and valued neighbor within the community. In both cases, landscape is the only remaining witness, the only spatial reminder of the crimes and what the communities were trying to forget.

In this article, I traced the connection between violence, landscape, and trauma in James Benning's *Landscape Suicide*. In my analysis of the film, I found that landscape is a very productive medium to both express the power dynamics behind the film's violence and serve as a spatial witness to and reminder of the communities' collective trauma. Benning organizes the shots in *Landscape Suicide* in a non-linear way that supports neither dramatic development nor narrative closure. As no meaning can be derived from the narrative progression, the film forces viewers to engage with landscape differently, to look *into* instead of just *at* a space. This immersive attempt at filmmaking has enabled him to make a film that addresses events that were exploited by the news media without engaging in this sensationalism himself. In the movie, landscape becomes a constant reminder of crime, fear, and guilt. The ties between landscape, violence, and trauma in *Landscape Suicide* suggest that we need a new approach to trauma culture as a whole, one where landscape is more than background but not the source of trauma itself. *Landscape Suicide* presents landscape as a witness to both the build-up and the unfolding of the crimes. In many ways, the

film attempts to create a possible testimony of landscape and it allows viewers to immerse themselves in this testimony.

Acknowledgements

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Genre, Space, and Social Critique in Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* (2020)

Klaus Rieser

ABSTRACT

This article examines the extent to which *Nomadland* is a convincing representation of poverty in the United States and to assess the film's political stance concerning race, gender, and age. By analyzing *Nomadland*'s narrative and filmic techniques, this article points out three major characteristics of the film that are relevant for its portrayal of characters defined chiefly by their poverty and age. Firstly, *Nomadland* employs genres subtly to undercut their inherent ideological effects. Secondly, in its portrayal of space, it represents the characters as placemakers, showcasing their agency in the face of structural problems. Thirdly, it adopts a particular neorealist production style that lays a powerful claim to authenticity.

   While the film falls short of addressing the root causes of poverty and bypasses the question of race altogether, *Nomadland* serves as an exemplary model of socially conscious filmmaking in other regards. It transcends mere entertainment and counters a more mainstream strategy of personalizing structural problems through a nuanced portrayal of elderly working nomads while also displaying attention to gender and age.

KEYWORDS

Poverty, gender, age, space-place-nomadism, agency

Production Details

Nomadland is a 2020 drama film written, directed, edited, and co-produced by Chloé Zhao. Based on the 2017 participant observational nonfiction book *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century* by Jessica Bruder, it stars Frances McDormand, who is also a co-producer, and, in a supporting role, David Strathairn. Shot for only five million US dollars (Brooks), the film has earned more than 39 million US dollars in theaters ("*Nomadland*") and has won 256 awards, amongst them Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actress ("*Nomadland* Awards"). The film also did overwhelmingly well among critics: According to the website *Rotten Tomatoes*, 93% of 436 reviews were positive, with an average rating of 8.8 out of 10.

Bruder's book represents a notable contribution to the ethnographic tradition of participant observation. She immersed herself in the modern-day nomadic community, spending extended periods interviewing, observing, and living with them. In a style reminiscent of John Steinbeck and Barbara Ehrenreich, the book blends ethnographic research, journalistic reportage, and group biography. The book's success prompted the film adaptation, with Frances McDormand acquiring the rights and enlisting Chloé Zhao as director. The film features professional actors as well as amateur actors, including Linda May, Charlene Swankie, and Bob Wells, who play fictionalized versions of themselves. Zhao, in collaboration with McDormand and the cinematographer Joshua James Richards, created the storyline during the filming process, following a loose script. This unusual production method, along with the use of amateur actors, aligns with the neorealist Italian film tradition known to prioritize social engagement and authenticity in representing disadvantaged individuals.

The film begins in 2011, portraying the life of Fern, a mature-aged woman who not only grapples with the loss of her husband but is also left jobless and homeless due to the closure of the US Gypsum mine in Empire, Nevada (a factual location). The early 2010s indeed gained tragic notoriety when mining employment declined significantly all over America as the US raw material market contracted in the wake of the 2008 recession. Expulsed from her home, Fern embarks on a journey in a small but fully fitted pre-owned van, not only in search of work but also to find solace on the road. The movie captures her new nomadic lifestyle, as she moves from one temporary job to another, connects with fellow itinerants, and attends nomad reunions such as the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous in Quartzite, Arizona, an authentic gathering. Although the film plot is arranged in an episodic fashion, Fern undergoes a gradual transformation. By the end of the film, she relinquishes her possessions that were stored in a garage in Empire, along with the associated memories of her marital life and sets out in her van again – this time as an experienced nomad.

Depicting Poverty

Nomadland effectively addresses critical facets of poverty, as identified by social science research.[1] Primarily, the film highlights the challenge of housing security – the result of an absence of affordability and insufficient tenancy protections.[2] All principal characters in the film are houseless, residing in small vans or cars, or have no vehicle at all. These motorized vehicles, despite being homes for the nomads, offer only minimal protection against external factors: When parking for the night, stealth camper nomads are never safe from the dreaded "knock," which means getting up and looking for another spot for the rest of the night. Moreover, most of these vehicles are old and corroded. Once they break down, steep repair bills may push a person with very limited means over the edge. In *Nomadland*, we witness the despair Fern faces when her vehicle has a costly engine failure. The film also portrays food insecurity: Nomads and tramps have only limited access to sufficient nourishment. Similarly, in the film Fern prepares paltry meals in her van kitchenette and the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous features a communal kitchen where people in line are reassured that there will be enough food for everyone.

Another crucial issue is financial stability, specifically employment opportunities. In *Nomadland*, the main characters hold low-paying temporary jobs at various locations throughout the United States – such as in a fast-food restaurant, a stone shop for tourists in the desert, a sugar beet plant, a national park campground (where we see Fern on her knees trying to clean utterly disgusting toilets). However, the representation of employment most often discussed in critiques of the film is Fern's winter job at Amazon. The book devotes an entire chapter to work at Amazon and highlights the extreme physical demands placed on workers: lifting, bending, kneeling, reaching, pushing, pulling, climbing, moving. Painkillers are distributed for free at the plant. While elderly workers testify that they are grateful for the work during the winter season (when money is tight outside of the harvest season), they do feel exploited and replaceable. They also mention that the sheer abundance of items that will likely be discarded soon after being delivered is depressing, serving as a reminder of their very own obsolescence (230). Linda May, for example, is quoted in Bruder's book describing Amazon as "probably the biggest slave owner in the world," adding, "I hate this fucking job" (240). None of these hardships at Amazon are represented in the

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[1] See Cynthia Duncan's work on poverty in *Worlds Apart: Poverty and Politics in Rural America*. In addition, Stephen Pimpare discusses various aspects of poverty in *A People's History of Poverty in America* and traces their filmic representation in *Ghettos, Tramps, and Welfare Queens: Down and Out on the Silver Screen*. Eager et al. focus specifically on the nomads that are the subject of *Nomadland*.

[2] "[T]here are only a dozen counties and one metro area in America where a full-time minimum wage worker can afford a one-bedroom apartment at fair market rent. You'd have to make at least $ 16.35 an hour – more than twice the federal minimum wage – to rent such an apartment without spending more than the recommended 30 percent of income on housing" (Bruder 7).

film. Consequently, Arun Gupta and Michelle Fawcett critique the film for misrepresenting actual nomads, arguing that "by making Fern's story one of personal responsibility and freedom, the movie erases the causes of the nomads' economic pain" (2). Aside from the Amazon warehouse, however, the film does represent various aspects of poverty. For example, it touches upon the relevance of kin and community in the context of poverty. While limited financial resources make socializing more challenging, support systems by kin or friends are essential in alleviating some of the burden that comes with poverty. The film duly portrays Fern as often lonesome, highlighting the isolation that comes with poverty. Furthermore, the friendships she develops with Linda Mae and Dave, as well as connections with the wider community of fellow itinerants, are presented favorably, with warm lighting and a relaxed pace.

Overall, the film does not investigate structural causes of poverty or even poverty itself to a greater extent. While it is evident that Fern lost her job and with that her home, and that desirable employment opportunities are scarce, the mental, physical, and emotional toll of these economic hardships does not take center stage. Instead, the film emphasizes Fern's personal agenda such as the mourning for her husband, her love of the outdoors, and her resilient personality. Thus, *Nomadland* can be analyzed within the context of an "ideology of resilience," which, according to Brad Evans and Julian Reid, is

> grounded in a new 'ethics of responsibility' that lays on the individual and their communities all the burden for overcoming, surviving and thriving through crises, even if these are due to systemic or structural forces that no individual can change on their own. (65, also qtd. in Fraile-Marcos 4)

This perspective perceives resilience as "a raw material that the wretched of the earth possess" making it susceptible to exploitation (Fraille-Marcos 4).

However, Fern is no poster-girl for neoliberalism but rather stands between resilience and despair. She is definitely not the first subject of resilience in Bracke's three-partite categorization, a relatively safe "First World subject . . . whose longing for security aligns . . . with securitarian politics" (58). Nor does she fit the mold of a "subaltern subject" from the global South (60). Fern most closely resembles Bracke's third category of resilient subjects, characterized as a "subject of *postfeminist resilience*" (65, original emphasis): "the female subject who continues to survive patriarchy, is increasingly exposed to the neoliberal labor conditions of flexicurity, and is considered individually responsible for her survival" (65). However, *Nomadland* subverts the underlying neoliberal and postfeminist narrative associated with this type. Rather than a "Look, I Overcame" narrative (James qtd. in Bracke 67), the film adopts a "Getting By" narrative. This shift is evident not only in *Nomadland*'s characterization of Fern or its extolling of communality but also in the circular structure of the

story. Fittingly, Susan Bye, while acknowledging some shortcomings of *Nomadland* wonders whether Zhao's observational style and Fern's detachment might be seen as an "eschewal of what Lauren Berlant describes as 'cruel optimism,' a way of living in the world based on an unachievable vision of future possibility" (92). The film thus can be seen to fulfill Desmond and Western's requirement for "any full-bodied account of life far below the poverty line," namely to "be open not only to pain and exhaustion but also resilience and creativity" (310).

Balancing of Binaries

Nomadland evinces a high degree of ambivalence and a consistent undercutting of expectations. Surely, the problematic focus on individual resilience can be blamed for individualizing structural aspects of poverty. Also, the film aestheticizes poverty through stunning scenery and cinematography, especially with regard to nomad community gatherings or the sublime rendering of the great outdoors. These strategies of representation are, however, repeatedly subverted. Notably, the film tends to emphasize one term of a binary only to balance this out by giving extended attention also to the opposite. Many of these oppositions can be framed through that of structural problems and victimhood, on the one hand, versus personal issues and agency, on the other. As extensions of this binary, *Nomadland* weighs up necessity versus choice, homelessness versus nomadism, loneliness versus solitude, poverty versus personal loss/grief, and harsh working conditions versus personal endurance.

The emphasis on choice is a stock topic of the film's rhetoric. For example, Swankie, an elderly lady with late-stage cancer, prefers to remain in her van rather than be hospitalized. Choice is most obviously accentuated, however, in that Fern refuses offers to stay in a house at three (!) occasions (by a kind acquaintance, by her sister, and by her very special dear friend Dave, who frames his invitation in respectful and loving words). In a similar manner, the film honors Fern's voluntary solitude rather than her loneliness, presenting her as someone who thrives on being by herself in the wilderness. Overall, the film exhibits a fascination with nomadism that at times overshadows the harsh reality of houselessness: Various locations that signify impermanence (empty lots, desert spaces, lonely coastal regions, deserted tourist camps) are depicted agreeably, often in the early morning or late afternoon – the so-called golden hour. Fern's penchant for solitude and nomadism is, of course, also indicative of the film's emphasis on grief – rather than on poverty – as her primary motivation to embark on her road trip.

On a second look, however, *Nomadland* also presents loneliness, problems of housing insecurity, and poverty – that is, structural factors that limit the choices of the nomads. Generally characterized as alone by choice, Fern is also shown as lonely

such as when she sits by herself in a laundromat or when she spends a freezing night in her van – both scenes being rendered in cold blue colors. Houselessness rather than voluntary nomadism is also featured in the film, for example, in the above-mentioned dreaded "knock" when stealth parking and in a speech by real-life nomad Bob Wells, who is also a facilitator of the broader nomad community. In particular, *Nomadland* does not sideline the intersectionality of poverty and ageism. All nomads flock to Amazon in the pre-Christmas season because, although the work is hard, the pay is better than at many other places. Fern's dire financial situation is revealed when her van breaks down and, to have it repaired, she has to borrow money from her sister. And then there are two powerful monologues, first by fellow nomad Linda May, who recounts that she considered suicide when she ran out of money and could not find work:

> I was getting close to sixty-two at the time and I went online to look at my social security benefit. It said five hundred and fifty dollars. Fern, I worked my whole life. I worked since I was twelve years old. Raised two daughters. Now I've only got five hundred and fifty dollars a month to live with. (*Nomadland* 00:11:44–12:02)

Later, Bob Wells, who is an activist and founder of the website *CheapRVLiving* and the non-profit *Homes on Wheels Alliance*, gives a speech at the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous that also points out lack of resources as a prime motivation for the van-living crowd:

> We not only accept the tyranny of the dollar. We embrace it. We gladly live by it our whole lives. I think of the analogy as like a work horse. The work horse that is willing to work itself to death and then be put out to pasture. That's what happened to so many of us in 2008. If society is throwing us away and putting us out to pasture, we work horses have to gather together and take care of each other, and that is what this is all about. (*Nomadland* 00:18:47–19:23)

What are we to make of this confrontational balance between agency and structural factors? Arguably, the film here sticks close to the self-representation of the nomads. As Bruder reveals in her book, the nomads prioritize their agency and resilience over dwelling on the inevitable (46–47). Indeed, the film presents them as having adjusted to their situation. As Bye puts it, "they find a form of freedom in no longer hoping for the best" (97).

There is a final pairing in *Nomadland* that is not delimited by the agency vs. victimhood paradigm – individualism and communality – which are both represented side-by-side. In fact, individualism as well as community and friendship are stressed in the film with a visual focus on the latter. While Fern is an individualist, the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous (RTR), organized by Bob Wells, serves as a central hub of many of the nomads' lives. The RTR offers a collective kitchen, van life workshops, and political discussions. Community building and community maintenance are

portrayed as vital for the nomads, and although Fern at certain points prefers soli-tude and nature, the film portrays the collective in luminous and cheery colors whereas Fern on her own, inside her van or outdoors, is often depicted in chilly, grey- or blue-tinted hues. While the film presents Fern's individual trajectory as be-fitting her character and situation, this choice of colors implies that without the sup-port system of friends and companions her journey would be a rather bleak one.

(Trans)generic Aspects

This multifaceted portrayal of poverty, isolation, and individual strife is facilitated by the film's complex employment of genres. Chloé Zhao and her team employ a range of generic styles, including western, social drama, neorealism, and the road movie, to both engage with and challenge the audience's preconceptions of these genres' content and styles.

The western, characterized by vast open spaces, prairies, sierras, or deserts (Lang-ford 64–65), is perhaps the most conspicuous contributor to *Nomadland*. The wide-open scenery comes with a range of meanings and tensions. On the one hand, it champions independence, freedom from social constraints, and individual survival while, on the other, this scenery is often barren, intimidating, inanimate. *Nomadland* seizes on these connotations and complexities, presenting a central character who, while sociable in certain situations (e.g., helping a couple sell handmade jewelry or sharing food with a lone traveler), is also a loner who avoids forming close relation-ships and even more settling down. A decisive twist in the genre is evident in the jobs Fern is shown at. Her outdoor jobs are almost industrial (beet farming with heavy machinery), in tourism (camp hosting in national parks), or commercial (selling stones in Quartzite), and the narratively most striking job is indoors, in the vast halls of an Amazon warehouse. While the classical westerns liked to show cattle drives but not the slaughterhouses where the animals ended up, *Nomadland* shows more than only the adventurous outdoor work.

Above all, *Nomadland* replaces the male figure, who is typically antisocial and po-tentially violent but triumphs over 'virgin' territory, with a female protagonist who traverses the West in a petro vehicle, the modern-day equivalent of a wagon. According to Brooks, *Nomadland* thereby forms "part of a vibrant contemporary sub-genre of western films," including *American Honey*, *Leave No Trace*, and *Wendy and Lucy* that is "modern-dressed, female-centered, and defined by a mood of pensive restlessness – that is in turn connected to a classic Hollywood tradition." Further-more, Kisner contends that *Nomadland* explores "probing the isolation and alienation of people on the American 'frontier' – and in critiquing the frontier illusion itself, the

fantasy that fleeing toward the next horizon offers riches as well as freedom from the waste and damage left behind" (89).

The feminization of the western in *Nomadland* is further complemented by the genre's counterpoise, social drama. While on the visual level *Nomadland* is markedly defined by western aesthetics, its narrative employs social drama elements such as inequality and resistance or opposition to social norms. The film also contains aspects of melodrama, with its focus on intense and ongoing emotions such as loss and grief (for her husband), strained family relationships (with her sister), and finally – and particularly powerful – unconsummated romance, all of which are embodied by the resilient protagonist. However, *Nomadland* sets itself apart from the melodrama formula by its scarce employment of non-diegetic music, by a nuanced view of the world, by a lack of excessive visual stylization often present in melodramas – and, maybe most importantly, by a "damsel in distress" who chooses not to be saved by anyone but herself.

Nomadland also has recourse to the historical genre of Italian neorealism, a post-World War II film movement in Italy, that regularly cast non-professional actors, focused on the hardships of the lower classes, and had a realist but emotionally powerful style (see also Neher). Similarly, Zhao has brought to this larger film a technique that she had previously used for her independent "rez films" (Native American reservation movies) *Songs My Brother Taught Me* (2016) and *The Rider* (2018). In *Nomadland*, Zhao combines professional actors Frances McDormand as Fern and David Strathairn as Dave with real-life "nomads," who are playing fictionalized versions of themselves. Although the film is not a documentary, the nomads' characters are recognizable from the book, which Zhao refers to as not only an inspiration but also a "companion piece" (Feeney 45). Linda May from the book serves as a model for both the character Linda and aspects of Fern's character.

The neorealist style of *Nomadland* extends beyond casting non-professional actors in that Zhao and her team did not work from a finished screenplay. Instead, they had a guideline but finalized the film during shooting, allowing it to be molded by elements such as landscape, events, and people. This was made possible because the crew was kept small: "With a cast and crew of under 30 people, members of the production embedded themselves in the community and lived out of vans themselves for the months-long shoot" (Gutterman). This approach gives the film a poetics that is neither documentary, since it is too fictional and constructed for that, nor generic, in the sense of conforming to an established style, be that the western, the social drama, or, as will be discussed below, the road movie.

As the title suggests, *Nomadland* is readily identifiable as relating to the genre of the road movie. Indeed, the opening scenes depict Fern, having already left her home,

packing her van and leaving behind any excess belongings in a garage. Fern maintains her itinerant lifestyle throughout the film, eventually giving away her stored belongings and bidding a final farewell to her former home before embarking on another, unknown journey. Interestingly, scenes of Fern's actual physical movement are rare and usually depicted in montage sequences. Instead, the essence of the road movie is captured through the presentation of multiple, loosely identified locations, with only Quartzite and the Badlands (a staple location of director Zhao) being clearly identified. As will be discussed below, this focus on impermanent spaces forms a critical foundation for the film's exploration of space, place, and placemaking.

As a narrative style, the road movie format serves to unify the diverse locales, themes, and characters encountered by Fern on her journey. It facilitates an episodic structure, with each sequence functioning as a pearl on the string of her road trip. In its social signification, the road movie, like the western, is a quintessentially American genre, brimming with core US mythology. But the road movie is not just a vehicle for US ideology. As David Laderman argues in *Driving Visions*, "[t]he driving force propelling most road movies … is an embrace of the journey as a means of cultural critique" (1). Consequently, *Nomadland*, through its presentation of a "literal venturing outside of society" (2), offers a critique of American culture. While the protagonist's nomadism is largely motivated by her grief, her refusal to settle down and her embrace of the open road at the end of the film signal a more general social critique. The precise target of this critique remains often ambiguous, although it gains focus through the larger issue of elderly Americans unable to afford housing, as highlighted in Bruder's book as well as in the speeches by Linda and Bob Wells quoted above.

Nomadland avoids the criticism of "sentimental pastoralism" (Marx 5) that often characterizes road stories. The film acknowledges the role of technology in the lives of its characters, such as Amazon jobs, laundromats, and, above all, petro-mobility. This creates an "imaginative and complex" pastoralism, rather than a "popular and sentimental" one (5; see also Laderman 18–19). Although the film exhibits pastoralist veneration of nature by depicting beautiful landscapes that have a healing effect, it does not suggest that a simple "back to nature" – or any "return" for that matter – is a viable option. In this sense, *Nomadland* utilizes but also enhances the road movie genre, in the sense of Neil Archer's outlook on the future of the genre. He argues that a new era requires new ideas about freedom and that

> road movies can also point to optimistic futures, and not just nostalgically reassuring pasts. They can gift us with fantasies of escape or the romance of mobile communities and friendships; they are a vehicle for images of natural beauty, but can also take us into the disturbingly unfamiliar. (104)

Nomadland embodies this updated vision of the road movie, with its complex portrayal of pastoralism and its exploration of the lives of nomads in contemporary America, where upward mobility is giving way to horizontal mobility.

Spatial Theories

In addition to deconstructing genre work, *Nomadland* builds its semiotic web, including social critique, through its sophisticated representation of space and place. Space, according to most theorists, can be characterized as abstract and Cartesian, a container that derives its identity only from the objects with which it is filled (Hansen Löve 29; see also Cresswell *Place*). That is, space is something that can be rendered through maps, by overview, but otherwise is the emptiness between things: "[S]pace as something 'dead', that is, inanimate, objectively measurable and totally passive" (Matschi 177). Place, on the contrary, is relational, historical, produced by social interaction and concerned with identity. Moreover, place is anything that signifies "the clarity and distinctness of the near and small" while space points to "the emptiness of the far and enormous" (Casey 295). Massey does not distinguish sharply between spaces and places, she emphasizes that both are "a product of interrelations," (10) "heterogeneous," and "always in progress" (11). She also stresses that places should not be conceived "as points or areas on maps, but as integrations of space and time; as spatio-temporal events" (130).

Various theorists have designated specific sites with their own terms, such as Bakhtin's "chronotope," Bhabha and Soja's "thirdspace," Foucault's "heterotopia," and Augé's "non-place," the latter two resonating compellingly with *Nomadland*. Augé's non-place refers to what he calls "supermodern" sites of transit, including airports, shopping malls, and gas stations, that are designed for the processing of anonymous individuals. Although a non-place is a place, it is devoid of identity, creating a particular kind of equality because it is equally alienating for all. In contrast, Foucault's heterotopias are spaces that are different from the rest of the social sphere (ships, cemeteries, prisons, gardens) but have more relationships to other places than one might assume. Heterotopias can be real places that are either approximations or attempts at a utopia or parallel spaces, that are designed for undesirable bodies to make a real utopian space possible.

The concepts of space, place, non-place, and heterotopia are very helpful for understanding *Nomadland*'s representation of the American landscape and the experiences of its nomadic characters. By portraying the characters' movements across various spaces and their ability to make places, the film highlights the dehumanizing effects of non-place and emphasizes the importance of relationality and historical significance for the characters. Through its nuanced representation of these

concepts, *Nomadland* creates a powerful social critique while engaging its audience in a contemplative and introspective manner.

Spaces, Places, and Beyond

"The last free place in America is a parking spot" (Bruder 14).

As a film characterized by open spaces, *Nomadland* corresponds to Tzvetan Todorov's basic distinction, as elaborated by Leroi-Gourhan, between "radial space" and "itinerant space" (325–27). While the former is characterized by settled people, clear demarcations, and the archetypal element of the house, itinerant space designates "a nomadic world-view . . . and is most prominently characterized by a conspicuous absence of boundaries and the road as the most fundamental archetype" (Hansen Löve 40). This distinction is most prominently manifested when Fern stays with her sister, whose husband and friends are real-estate managers: They discuss property and financial gains while Fern talks about homelessness and social responsibility.

Nomads, thus, even when they are intersecting with settled people are in a different space altogether, a fact that characterizes the distance between Fern and her friend and suitor Dave. Interestingly, Dave's family home is presented as warm, welcoming, and open – amiable conversations, lovely company, great food, warm colors – but for Fern the scenery appears to be delimiting and distant, to the point of inaccessibility (*Nomadland* 01:23:16–29:47). She holds a baby in a very awkward manner, is scared of the horses, and at night, while observing Dave and his son playing four-handed piano, she sits on the stairs, separated from the scene by the bars of a railing. Restless, she moves to her van at night, and in the morning, the film presents her as separated from the house by a harsh, dark fence, a palisade, really (Figure 1). She meanders through the sleepy house as though it were a museum and then leaves without a farewell (*Nomadland* 01:30:28–31:42). The railing and the fence are reminiscent of Lotman's spatial narratology that conceptualizes a border as a central plot device for narratives. In *Nomadland*, they serve to establish two worlds that cannot be easily traversed, much less unified, reinforcing Fern's sentiment of alienation and Otherness.

Fern's van, along with other nomadic homes, is presented more emphatically but also wields a double-edged character – it is a personal place of retreat but not quite a safe haven. At one point, Fern is faced with the notorious "knock," followed by an anonymous voice instructing her to depart. Furthermore, when Fern's vehicle is rendered immobile (once due to a flat tire, another time due to an engine failure), it becomes apparent that, without an opportunity to escape, her "home" is unable to keep her safe. In her van, Fern may suffer from hypothermia due to a lack of insulation. Neither is it suitable for visitors, due to its limited size. Nevertheless, Fern takes

pride in its efficiency and values the space it provides. Linda's mobile home, "The Squeeze Inn," is one of the most positive depictions of any place in *Nomadland*, adorned with Christmas lights and trinkets, basking in a warm, yellow glow, presenting itself as a relational and lived space. But then this is the scene in which Linda tells of her considering suicide – a chilling reminder of why she is on the road (*Nomadland* 00:10:42–12:07).

Figure 1: A fence visually disconnects Fern from the family home and its inhabitants.

Figure 2: The Rubber Tramp Rendezvous

The film thus challenges the traditional concept of home – signified by the family house – as necessarily a safe, cozy, and convivial environment. Instead, the nomads find personal space and a feeling of belonging in vehicles originally designed for movement or leisure activities or even outdoors, for example, at the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous (Figure 2). Through this counter-hegemonic rendering of spaces and places, *Nomadland* offers a complex portrayal of both nomadism – neither pure liberty nor pure adversity – and the nomads – neither traditional western heroes nor mere victims of their circumstances. Instead, *Nomadland* highlights the ability of the nomads to create places, while avoiding the ideological baggage that often accompanies traditional notions of "home."

The placemaking ability of nomads even extends to non-places in Augé's sense. The Amazon warehouse and cafeteria, a mobile home park, a gas station, and tourist campsites are all characterized by economic efficiency, transience, and depersonalization. *Nomadland*'s representation of some of these non-places is at first often uncompromising, with dehumanizing and distancing camera shots emphasizing the spaces' inhumanity. However, the film then portrays how the people manage to transform these non-places into places, creating a sense of community and belonging, despite the bleakness of the surroundings. The film does so through a variety of strategies such as medium eye-level shots, soft lighting, warm colors, and dialogue that emphasizes interdependency.

In accordance with Pratt's concept of contact zones, personal engagements and human relations have the ability to transform non-places into places. This transformation is evident in various scenes in the film, where the Amazon warehouse (Figure 3), for instance, takes on a more personal dimension as safety regulations are

discussed and negotiated in a group setting. Similarly, the aloofness of a cafeteria is humanized through conversations among diners seated at a communal table (Figure 4). Furthermore, an otherwise bleak gas station parking lot where Fern parks for the night is imbued with a sense of humanity when a female attendant warns her of the frigid conditions and directs her to a nearby shelter (Figure 5). In a humorous display of ingenuity, Fern and Linda create a makeshift beauty parlor at their camp site by donning cucumber face masks while reclining in their camping chairs (Figure 6). In these ways, human interaction and caring moments serve to transform otherwise impersonal spaces into meaningful places of human connection.

Figure 3: The Amazon warehouse – Space

Figure 4: The table at the cafeteria – Place

Figure 5: Non-Place humanized

Figure 6: Open space transformed

These visual and narrative devices correspond to the theories of Massey discussed above: Meeting up with others occasions intersecting biographies. This is revealed not only in the dialogues Fern has with Linda, Bob, and a young man who travels on foot, but also in micro-interactions such as with the mother of a former pupil or when she embraces the man to whom she leaves her belongings. It is also helpful to recall here the distinction between radial and itinerant space mentioned above. While Leroi-Gourhan, following Todorov, posits a binary between house and road (325–27), in *Nomadland* houses (Dave's, or Fern's sister's) can be places, indeed homes – just not for Fern. Arguably, the concentric or radial space formation is too binding; it posits a center and thus a periphery, and, above all, fixates the historicity of its inhabitants, something that contradicts Fern's quest. Interestingly, the film also bends the concept of the road. As already mentioned, we rarely see Fern on the road – van trips are mostly compressed into short montage sequences. Instead, the predominant scenes are at locations where the nomads come together: campgrounds, a warehouse, a café-

teria, a laundromat. In these spaces that are temporarily transformed into places, history is constantly remade, offering a chance to Fern to leave her past (the lost home, the lost town, the lost husband) behind her.

The ongoing social work required to transform empty spaces or non-places into places while they also retain their erstwhile character (empty landscape, workplace, parking lot) is further reflected in Fern's struggle to balance her wish for independence and solitude with her growing awareness of the importance of communality. This dichotomy, explored in the classic film *The Searchers* (1956), which *Nomadland* references in its beginning and ending (Figure 7), is updated by director Chloé Zhao as she centers it on a female character. In John Ford's work, as pointed out by Claire Johnston, the woman represents the home and serves as a symbol for culture and civilization, while the male protagonist embodies mobility, freedom, and independence. In contrast, Zhao's protagonist, Fern, is drawn *both* to solitude and to communality, thus transcending the nature/culture binary. Consequently, the house that she walks away from at the end is not, as in *The Searchers*, a multi-generational family home but her own former home, now deserted (Figure 8). Having lost husband, house, and community, she is also liberated and establishes herself through her engagement both with nature (empty spaces) and with culture (places and their temporary inhabitants). As Massey argues, place does change us "not through some visceral belonging (some barely changing rootedness, as so many would have it) but through the practicing of place, the negotiation of intersecting trajectories; place as an arena where negotiation is forced upon us" (154). This is of course intensified when the place is temporary, an intersection of various histories. It is in this arena of negotiation that the character of Fern is formed, and her personal growth is insinuated.
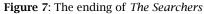

Figure 7: The ending of *The Searchers*   **Figure 8**: The ending of *Nomadland*

A particularly compelling example of the transformation of space into place is the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous in Quartzite, Arizona (an actual event). During most of the year, this site is an empty space, but for a few weeks each year, it becomes a gathering place for nomads. Foucault's concept of heterotopia, particularly his notion of "crisis heterotopia," is relevant to this site both in reality and as depicted in *Nomadland*. Insofar as they are social outcasts, the Quartzite camp would seem to be a

"heterotopia of deviation," a place for individuals who do not conform to everyday societal norms, such as a prison, a psychiatric hospital or a care home (Foucault 25). But then Fern and her fellow nomads go to the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous voluntarily, and thus it conforms to Foucault's crisis heterotopia, a place that is "reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis" (4), a place without geographical markers (5). Indeed, here, far from regular and regulating society, they are in a state of transition experiencing a crisis that Quartzite allows them to confront *collectively*. Both in Bruder's account of the real-life gathering and in Zhao's film, the site comes across as a utopian experiment where people share food, attend workshops, exchange possessions, grieve, forge friendships, and support each other in an egalitarian manner (*Nomadland* 00:18:20–30:11).

In brief, *Nomadland* through its use of space and place, as well as the introduction of non-places and heterotopias employs a complex and nuanced portrayal of the nomadic lifestyle. The film challenges traditional notions of home and road (as well as their concurring concepts of gender) and emphasizes the nomad's ability to create places while providing a sense of belonging in even the most desolate of spaces.

Conclusion

It can be asserted that the film successfully translates Jessica Bruder's participant observation book into a charming but still edgy fictionalized representation. Loosely weaving place-events around the narrative thread constituted by the protagonist's year-long journey, the film's focus on genre and space/place serves to portray the (structural) hardship of the nomads as well as their pride and agency. The film ultimately tackles a range of themes and topics, both personal and social in nature, including deprivation, grief, solitude, friendship, and the healing power of nature. *Nomadland* is particularly characterized by a nuanced and balanced portrayal. Vergari notes that in the film, "global and local, or universal and particular, interact constantly, dissolving into nuances – like those of the many sunsets that could be dawns – that break down barriers and judgements" (204).

As has been shown, the film achieves this subtlety in part by incorporating multiple genre conventions and manipulating them to serve its narrative and critical purpose. The film employs the road movie genre's critical impetus to great effect. It subverts western genre conventions through creative interventions such as a female protagonist and snow-covered desert settings. The film's neorealist cinematography adds authenticity and reinforces its interventionist approach. Narratively and visually, the film achieves this also by presenting the nomads as placemakers: They create a sense of place by maintaining their vehicles, displaying their stamina, and engaging

in a range of social interactions, which transform empty spaces and non-places into places.

While it has been criticized for downplaying the nomads' economic hardships (Brody; Gupta and Fawcett; Jurewicz), the film, a multiple Oscar winner with a mainstream audience in mind, aligns itself with the self-perception of actual nomads. The film's central message is that the nomads cannot alter their structural circumstances; instead, they make do with what they have. The film also aestheticizes and to some extent romanticizes nomadism but thereby manages to create empathy for the characters. Therefore, *Nomadland*, which was never intended as a radical text, can be regarded as highly successful in mainstreaming the indie film topic of rural poverty, which Zhao so aptly portrayed in *The Rider*.

The film's most marginalized social field is race, given that all central characters and most background characters are white. There seems to be no awareness of the racialized nature of "the road" as it has been revealed in Gretchen Sorin's 2020 book *Driving While Black* – and the entire idea of "empty space" or "open territory" is fraught with ignorance of white colonialism of Native territory. Class and capitalism are also relegated to the margins. While various indications of relative poverty are evident, such as bartering, food handouts, and insufficient funds for Fern to repair her van, these are not presented in the context of a class system or as byproducts of capitalism. However, the film boldly exhibits arduous labor conditions that are typically neglected in mainstream movies.

The film is also progressive in its addressing of gender with the protagonist being a female loner hero on a road trip and a predominantly female cast. As Vergari notes, "[t]he portrait of these, often single, women who decide to live alone also combines the rejection of a system that is not just economic but also patriarchal" (205). Even more radical, these are mature-aged women, a demographic commonly neglected in cinema. The film represents their alienation and subordination in a melancholy tone but at the same time portrays them as resourceful and resilient. The most joyful moments, both in terms of the narrative and the visuals, ensue with community building, which is presented as radiating hope and strength.

Overall, the film's tone and spirit encapsulate the socio-economic situation of its characters, challenge societal norms, and celebrate the resilience of a marginalized community. Significantly, the film's depiction of these marginalized characters is based on real people playing themselves, adding an authentic and poignant element to the production.

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In Search for Alternatives: Queer Theorizing, Affect, and the Horror Film

Lukas Hellmuth

ABSTRACT

This article argues that queer theories of affect not only offer an alternative approach to analyzing the horror film in the twenty-first century, but also that a new wave of horror media negotiates its social criticism in newly queer ways. Analyzing Ari Aster's 2018 film *Hereditary*, it becomes clear that its horrifying effect stems from queer affects within its narrative that both its character and audience share. In this, *Hereditary* goes beyond traditional forms of criticism regarding its deconstruction of normative family structures, present in horror films as early as 1974's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, as it not only points to potential horrors within the traditional family but instead lays open the inherent, inescapable affective horrors of these normative structures and narratives of belonging, necessitating the need for alternative forms of self-determination and community. Doing so, the film utilizes the established forms of the genre but plays both within and outside of its conventions, affecting its audience beyond mere shock. In applying queer theories of affect and negativity to the film, this article demonstrates a critique of the horrors of real-life institutions and systems that plague (queer) existence in our neoliberal society: normative family structures, sexual and romantic normativities, and complex feelings of (not) belonging. In this reading, *Hereditary* serves as a powerful counternarrative to the cruelly optimistic narratives of everyday life.

KEYWORDS

Ari Aster, *Hereditary*, psychoanalysis, queer theory, cruel optimism, happy objects

The horror film has often found itself being cast as an *alternative* genre. Given that a majority of horror can be categorized under the umbrella of speculative fiction, engaging with alternate realities and the supernatural, this characterization does not come as a surprise. In addition, the generic framework of horror has frequently been chosen for filmmakers' debut productions, oftentimes resulting in independent and low-budget, yet effective films, offering innovative and stylistically unique means of working within this field of cultural production. Nevertheless, it is particularly horror's transgressive nature in what is shown on screen "in terms of gore, shock, provocation, and politically incorrect titillation" (Benshoff, "Preface" xiv) that earns it this moniker, oftentimes pejoratively. Despite this, the genre has been a successful mainstay within cinematic history. Regarded as cheap thrill without meaningful content, what then makes horror alternative appears to be up to subjective outside assessment rather than a characteristic of the genre itself. As a consequence, this produces differently nuanced meanings of *alternative* when ascribed to the genre. Yet, this attribution as alternative also points to horror as a genre setting itself apart from other forms of filmmaking. Horror seems to offer a different kind of viewing experience.

Within cultural studies, queer theory finds itself in a similar place, in the double bind of a characterization as both alternative and offering alternatives. *Queer*, from its reclamation both within activism and academia, has served as a designation of "being *different*, but unapologetically so" (McCann and Monaghan 2, original emphasis). Simultaneously, it can be recognized as an effort to find "a *different* kind of thinking and engagement with questions of sexuality, gender, identity, power, and the politics of oppression" (3, my emphasis). In doing so, the alternatives of queer theorizing are not relegated to one aspect of questioning established frameworks but rather search for alternatives wherever they offer to be promising, from alternative approaches and archives to alternative imaginations of what constitutes a good life in opposition to the established structures of marginalization and oppression.

What queer theory offers then to an analysis of horror is a rereading exactly at a point where the genre is oftentimes lacking regarding alternatives, namely in its narrative. Having by now established itself as a major genre of narrative film, horror often follows conventional plot structures that reaffirm and reproduce hegemonial social hierarchies and reassure audiences that the status quo can be maintained. Yet, this is where a queer analytical perspective and a more recent wave of films interfere: By veering away from traditional genre tropes and accentuating the potential horror of society's structures, both the cinematic and the critical lens through which we engage with on-screen horrors can offer alternative viewing experiences, rendering these films counternarratives to traditional notions of the stories horror can tell. This article argues for the reexamination of these narratives to highlight readings that can

challenge these patterns, and in doing so, offers its own search for alternatives – as the title suggests – to explore horror's characterization as alternative and the potential therein. Additionally, it answers the question of *to what* these attributions offer alternatives. This search foregrounds and expands upon the promising nature of reassessing horror through a queer theory of affect.

Alternative Approaches to Horror

Academic interest in horror as a cinematic genre has been on the rise since the modern 'Golden Age' of the horror film, i. e. the 1970s and early 1980s. Scholars, given the traditionally psycho-sexual basis of the genre's narrative structure and its characters, turned to psychoanalysis as preferred approach to the genre. Following horror scholar Robin Wood and his methodology of utilizing Freudian ideas, we can clearly see how a psychoanalytical analysis of horror works productively. What horrifies is fueled by representations of repression and the Other, jointly manifested in the figure of the monster (Wood, "Introduction" 109–13). Yet, what is repressed and recognized as Other is closely tied to specific social and cultural contexts. Thus, in US-American culture, repression aims at anything hindering individuals from becoming "monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists" (109), potentially othering anybody veering from the dominant norms regarding aspects such as sex, gender, sexuality, race, ability, and class. Wood epitomizes this in teasing out a formula for the horror film and summarizes its narrative pattern thusly: "normality is threatened by the Monster" (116). Traditionally, this threat constitutes the plot: The monstrous Other endangers the dominant social order. It needs to be, and ultimately is defeated in order to reestablish the status quo and reaffirm the value of these social norms. This not only gives a simple psychoanalytical framework to horror as a genre but also establishes the dominant narrative reproduced again and again within it, instituting a tradition regarding how and what kind of stories are being told. While, as Wood points out and showcases himself, there are horror films that play with and subvert the tradition of this formula, a strict obedience to this narrative pattern is the most prevalent within the genre. The same can be said regarding psychoanalytical analyses of these genre films: They find themselves repeatedly adhering to a framework that requires a reading through the lens of this traditional narrative structure in order to produce their arguments.

Approaching horror films psychoanalytically as "our collective nightmares" (Wood, "Introduction" 116) has, however, been successful. Psychoanalysis has brought forth seminal studies on the genre itself, as well as concepts pertaining to the experience of horror that have been used productively. Feminist approaches to psychoanalysis, chief among them Julia Kristeva's work on abjection in *Powers of Horror* (1982),

fueled other scholars such as Barbara Creed (1993) and her conception of the monstrous-feminine, and have been widely used within the field (Kristeva 1–32, Creed 1–16, Chare et al. 1–34). Carol J. Clover's (1987) application of Freudian gender dynamics to the horror film has helped tremendously in establishing a conception of the inner workings of genre conventions to evaluate how these depictions on screen position themselves regarding dominant logics of our own culture. In doing so, these ideas have even found their way into popular culture. Clover's concept of the "Final Girl" (201–04) has become a mainstay in discussions within groups of horror enthusiasts, the trope even being memorialized in its own horror film in *The Final Girls* (2015).

Yet, there are discrepancies in fixating exclusively on psychoanalytical theories to horror, manifesting themselves strongly in the cultural spheres of horror that can be found in the current moment and inevitably leading to an only partly satisfying assessment of where and how horror is used and becomes useful today. One of these issues is based on the position of horror as a film genre: Both scholars and critics agree that it has been and mostly still is being regarded as disreputable, as low-brow entertainment aimed at young adult audiences. Simultaneously, the horror genre has also proven to be tremendously successful economically (Wood, "Introduction" 115; Turnock 1). This has not changed within what has by now been over a century of cinema. As to why this has been the case, psychoanalysis solely suggests the endless return of the repressed, coming back repeatedly clothed in different aesthetics and manifestations, always dependent on current cultural anxieties (Wood, "Introduction" 121–22 and "What Lies Beneath?" 401). While the assessment surely holds some truth, it necessarily analytically generalizes the inner makings of horror and why it appeals to an audience: Repression becomes the blanketed answer to any kind of way in which horror affects an audience. Following this argument, what has been repressed might slightly change over time, yet this reading does not differentiate between varied narrative approaches or technical means used by different horror media or their effect on a diverse range of audiences. It also, again, presumes an adherence to traditional genre plot structures. These circumstances become complicated further if one regards recent horror films: One can surely apply this logic to the material of franchise cinema and its endless prequels and sequels, yet it begins to run into problems taking into account what has been described as a new wave of horror productions, as "elevated" or "post-horror" (Church 1–3). These ventures into cinematic horror clearly play with and step away from established genre conventions, including plot structures, and do so successfully, horrifying in new ways and being lauded for it both critically and financially. In addition, horror found its way into a wide spectrum of media and other spheres of culture, ranging from children's television and toys to

even the marketing of consumer goods such as cereal. Thus, these horrors seemingly have become pacified and domesticated, far removed from a potential site of resurfaced repression.

A second issue that appears in solely focusing on horror psychoanalytically manifests itself in a neglect of the immediate and heavily individual effect horror has on those directly interacting with it, or in the case of the horror film, its respective viewers. The interaction with horror is not necessarily based in an immediate recognition of its inner logics – even though by now audiences have a familiarity with the genre's conventions – but much more so in an emotional and physical reaction to what is presented. As Linda Williams already argued in 1991, the bodily excess of violence, sex, and emotions shown on screen marks horror as a "body genre": Such displays of the human body trigger a bodily response in the viewer, not a cognitive but a physical reaction first and foremost, as the body of the spectator in part mimics the sensations of the cinematic bodies (3–4; see also Clover 189; Twitchell 10–11). Thus, encounters with these films first elicit affective responses as the audiences' bodies mirror the bodily responses of those on screen. As the monster's potential victim becomes nervous, we become nervous; as they cower in fear, we move deeper into our seats; as they scream, we scream. These bodily and emotional audience reactions are the initial stimulus that is only later conceptualized cognitively.

Arguably, the effectiveness and cultural permanence of horror relies as much on this affective experience of an encounter with it as on the larger psychological structures behind it. This notion has been picked up by Xavier Aldana Reyes, who corroborates the predominance of psychoanalytical readings of horror that, while opening "fertile ground for understanding some of the metaphoric and/or psychological implications . . . [,] are reductive" ("Beyond" 4). Affective approaches can intervene in recognizing horror's potential to be understood as "a lived-in experience" (4) and thus not supplant psychoanalysis but shed light on hitherto neglected aspects. Utilizing affect as an umbrella term "from a phenomenological point of view" to describe viewer responses on "emotional and somatic levels" (*Horror Film* 5) but nonetheless distinct from "more rational and cognitively engaged emotions" (6), Aldana Reyes argues that affect theory can deliver "a language that describes the way [h]orror films do things to viewers and their bodies" (5). While I agree with this simultaneously precise and flexible definition of affect and utilize the term in the same way, Aldana Reyes and many other scholars reading horror through affect tend to do so with a focus on the somatic, both in the display of bodies on screen and the bodily responses to them, strongly present in iterations of body horror films and similar displays of blood and gore ("Beyond" 7–8 and "Mobilising" 35–36). While the argument that the physical distress of these cinematic bodies causes distress in its viewers is

to be made, my focus is more so directed at the cause of this real-life distress being the emotional distress both depicted on screen and through the narratives of these films that interweave more traditional features of horror with queer feelings of unhappiness.

Initially, the affective responses are limited to their cinematic experience, neatly distinct from 'real life.' These depths of feeling, the shock and terror triggered by these films, are enticing, but the actual scenarios leading to their experience and not only their mimicry are relegated to the screen. Nobody would find enjoyment in having to live out the imagined scenarios of horror films in real life. Their audiences are granted a safety by the narrative patterns these films traditionally follow, a circumstance that viewers have become accustomed to. Given the wide applicability of Wood's formula of horror and the films' adherence to these dominant narratives, viewers usually know what to expect when engaging with horror as a cinematic genre. There is an understanding between horror audiences and horror filmmaking in upholding narrative promises. Most of these films promise the experience of the extremes of negative feelings without having to live with their real repercussions, with the eventual outcome being a positive one. The horror on screen only manifests itself as the characters or the circumstances they find themselves in veer away from social scripts. Living our lives according to the dominant social order, the traditional narrative conventions of horror ultimately promise happiness, a positive experience of our interaction with these cultural productions: an enjoyable thrill ride through the depths of emotion, safely simulated within the confines of the cinema, as long as viewers continue to follow social norms in their own lives once they leave the theater.

But what if they do not? What if the horror presented on screen is not sparked by transgressing social norms but by upholding them? These matters have been productively negotiated by queer scholarship on the horror film. The genre has been a point of interest as early as Richard Dyer's 1988 reading of vampirism as an analogy for homosexuality (74–83), picked up again by Ellis Hanson's application of the theme in relation to the AIDS crisis in 1991 ("Undead" 324–30). The centrality of monstrosity in horror has become a particular focus towards the new millennium, enabling readings of Gothic and horror fiction that aim to both problematize the figure of the monstrous queer as well as highlight its potential as a celebratory point of identification.[1]

Yet, in reviewing queer horror criticism over the last decades, one can mark out certain strains: on the one hand, there is a clear divide between interest in implicit, symbolic manifestations of queerness and analyses of its explicit representation (see

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[1] For two landmark studies of lasting relevance, see Halberstam's *Skin Shows* (1995) and Benshoff's *Monsters in the Closet* (1997).

Elliott-Smith 1–3; Elliott-Smith and Browning 1–2). The latter enables a focus "on the anxieties *within* gay subcultures" (Elliott-Smith 3, original emphasis), rather than within general culture *about* queerness, centering queer identities both in front and behind the camera. On the other hand, pointed out by Hanson, queer film criticism seems to fall into either strictly representational analysis that runs the risk of relegating itself to matters of respectability ("Introduction" 5) or, again, purely psychoanalytical approaches. Where Hanson sees the most potential for a queer approach to film is in a critical mode that aims "to theorize the process of production and consumption rather than simply to expose it" (10), allying itself with queer theory's endeavor to question established frameworks of thinking.

Thus, it is with particularly queer theories of affect that I turn to more recent, non-explicitly queer horror's on-screen negotiations of the real-life consequences of transgression and the potential horrors of their continuation. A turn to affect opens an alternative theoretical approach to horror via its nature of eliciting a strongly felt experience and interconnects with theoretical fields picked up by queer theorists within the last two decades, arguing that the promise of positive feelings is not universal. Assessing horror through this lens then offers an alternative approach to theorizing horror not just as a film genre but as just one striking manifestation of our larger social and cultural frameworks and narratives. This puts into perspective more recent cinematic negotiations of the genre that do not promise happiness within the bounds of society, but rather demonstrate the horrors of our real-life institutions and systems, allowing the potential for readings of these films as counternarratives.

Alternatives to the "Good Life"

Lauren Berlant speaks of the "cruel optimism" of our attachment to "objects of desire" – objects that hold a cluster of promises to us that this someone or something might provide or make possible. These attachments are highly individual, yet what makes them cruel is our maintenance of them despite their potential to impede our happiness, our actual possibilities of fulfilling such promises of "the good life" (Berlant, *Optimism* 23–24). Their maintenance, sustaining the fantasy of the good life regardless of the potential harm, reveals their cruel nature: Upholding this fantasy, the optimistic promises of something in the future, allows people to go through their everyday lives without breaking, even though the conditions of their lives have become unbearable. Berlant themself emphasizes that "it's not the object that's the problem, but how we learn to be in relation" ("Citizenship"). Importantly, these attachments might be individual, but they are learned. They are socially and culturally preconditioned and, thus, our previous experiences in life influence how we form these attachments.

If we take the horror film as an example, there are clear attachments regarding conventions and their promises: What is presented as the threat is what is Other; those that go against the norms of society become monstrous or lose their humanity entirely. Those that position themselves outside these norms, especially regarding sexual and gendered politics, are punished within the narrative. This traditional formula of the horror narrative upholds the cruel optimism within the viewer that if they tread carefully and move within these normative bounds in their own lives, instead of violating them as is shown on screen, they are in no danger of these threats being realized in their lives. Thus, the audience is reaffirmed in their promised place, in their attachment to rightfully belonging to the social order. In this, the dominant narrative of the horror film reflects real-life circumstances: If being Other becomes the ground for becoming monstrous within these narratives and justifies not only social ostracization but even punishment to rectify social norms and fulfill the narrative promises of these films, viewers can happily apply the same logics to their own lives. To be able to enjoy what these narratives promise them, audiences need to adhere to normative social structures, lest they be recognized as Other themselves. Berlant criticizes this in their thoughts on genre as crucial in upholding both these circumstances and narrative fantasies. Genre acts as a tool

> whose conventions of relating fantasy to ordinary life and whose depictions of the good life now appear to mark archaic expectations about having and building a life. Genres provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold. (*Optimism* 6)

Genres become models of life narratives in their setup in relation to the promise of the good life and inevitably also entail the promise of society's institutions.

One such institution, if not the social institution par excellence, is of course the family. Sara Ahmed speaks of the family as a happy object, with its happiness functioning "as a promise that directs us toward certain objects, which then circulate as social good. Such objects accumulate positive affective value" ("Objects" 29). Like the potential promises of attachments to the concept of the family, the family in its form as a normative social structure is circulated and loaded with this positive affective value. However, Ahmed argues that this positioning can only work and be maintained by the process of exclusion: "[T]he family sustains its place as a 'happy object' by identifying those who do not reproduce its line as the cause of unhappiness" (30). While an identification as not belonging to the family might be reason enough for individual unhappiness, even an acceptance of this outside position by those who do not fit into the hetero-patriarchal structures of the idealized, normative form of the family, such as the queer subject, cannot secure happiness for themselves. They do not share in the promises of these happy objects or other forms of happiness

potentially gained by refusing these objects. Even worse, they must "live with the consequences of being a cause of unhappiness for others" (44). Yet, there is potential in this unequal distribution of happiness. In Ahmed's words, "it is the very exposure of these unhappy effects that is affirmative, that gives us an alternative set of imaginings of what might count as a good or better life." An exposure to the horrors of social structures and feelings of not belonging can offer "an alternative model of the social good" (50).

Returning to the horror film, in 1979, Robin Wood writes about the family and the horror classic *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* from 1974. In this film, we follow sexually liberated youths as the film's protagonists, being hunted and killed by a grotesque, monstrous version of the traditional family. The horrors of family life overwhelm the film, becoming absurdly comedic. Whereas the traditional family comedy of the time utilizes humor to contain the potential horrors of family life, trying to make them palatable and numbing its viewers to these horrors, within *Massacre* "such containment is no longer possible, though ideology continues to repress the imagining of constructive social alternatives." Instead, the film becomes "a comedy of despair: as everything is hopeless, there is nothing left to do but laugh" (Wood, "Family Comedy" 179). Both within queer thought and the horror genre, in Ahmed and Wood, there is a strong call for alternatives to our ongoing normative structures of life, especially to the potentially horrifying confines of the family. Contemporary horror, in opposition to the traditional narrative patterns of the genre, illustrates the consequences of not constructing those alternatives, both within real life and the stories told. Bringing the social horrors of the family to the forefront, these films confront the affective results of a lack of alternatives, establishing counternarratives whose effectiveness relies on the horrors *felt* on screen, rather than the ones *seen*.

No Alternative: *Hereditary* (2018)

Ari Aster's 2018 debut film *Hereditary* finds itself among the stream of current horror films breaking away from established traditions and offering alternatives. Aster has become (in)famous as a horror filmmaker in recent years, following his first feature-length film with 2019's *Midsommar*. Both films sparked discourse in online spaces, from traditional press outlets to fan discussion, with *Hereditary* having been named the scariest film in recent years (Crittenden 26). This assessment closely ties the deeply affective nature of the film to its effectiveness as a piece of horror media.

The film follows the Grahams, a traditional nuclear family, consisting of the mother, Annie, a professional miniaturist, the stoic and narratively almost absent father, Steve, a psychiatrist, and their two teenage children, the peculiar daughter, Charlie, and her stereotypical teenage brother, Peter. The film opens shortly after the

death of the distant maternal grandmother of the family, Ellen, with the family attending her funeral. Here, we see no interaction between the family and the rest of the guests, with Annie in her eulogy noting her surprise to see "so many strange, new faces here today" (00:04:07–08). The cinematography focuses on Annie and her closest relatives, showing her speech in a 180-degree close-up pan rather than the congregation in front of her. Even when the other family members appear in medium shots, the camera focus remains shallow, obscuring the other guests. From the start, the focus is on the tightest bonds of the family, as strained as they might be. What starts out as a narrative of troublesome family dynamics unravels into their utter destruction, both physically and foremost emotionally. Unbeknownst to them, the family is in the clutches of a cult orchestrated by their dead grandmother, fully revealing itself only when it is already too late. While this might appear as a generic horror film synopsis, Aster's focus in telling the story lies with the terrifying family drama rather than a narrative of demonic possession. The latter serves as a constant unnerving background this drama plays out in, adding to a sense of predetermined dread, as well as the horrifying denouement of the film, as the family we are following annihilates itself. Aster weaves the details that lead to the downfall of the family so intricately that the audience might only fully grasp their nature on a second viewing, realizing that the entirety of the plot unfolds at the behest of the cult. These unexplained details and gaps in knowledge of the characters and the audience heighten the tension of the film and contribute to the atmosphere in which the story unfolds: With a complete lack of agency for its members, the family structure the film presents is destined to destroy itself and its individuals. The horror is, quite literally, hereditary, as within the narrative, there is no ability to save oneself from the family or to save the family itself as a supportive form of community.

As the audience is introduced to the family, the daughter Charlie can immediately be recognized as a character who fits into generic horror conventions. Both her appearance and behavior are clearly marked as Other: She behaves atypically to our expectations of a teenage girl, building dolls out of debris and dead animals, neurotically clicking her tongue, and being introverted to the point that she strikes up a conversation with her mother about death rather than talking to her peers at a party (00:09:30–10:10, 00:30:15–45). When Charlie gruesomely dies in an accident, being decapitated as she leans out of the window of a car driven by her brother in the first third of the film (00:33:41), the audience loses the character most clearly identifiable as a marker of the genre. The accident, later identified as part of the cult's plan, marks the descent of the narrative into the horrors of family drama rather than conventional shock, as well as the descent of its characters into the depths of trauma, grief, and guilt. In accordance with this shift in the narrative, *Hereditary*'s most

terrifying scenes are those devoid of any supernatural elements or other means of horrifying an audience within the traditions of the genre (Koresky 43–44).

Following Charlie's death, Annie is on the floor of her bedroom, writhing in the grief of losing a child. She repeatedly wails that she "just want[s] to die," that she "need[s] to die" as the camera slowly pans to the hallway just outside of the room and reveals Peter, listening but unable to share his mother's despair or console her, unable to so much as move towards his mother, faulting himself for causing the accident (00:38:00–53). Annie's cries remain throughout the scene, even when she is not shown anymore, transitioning into and persisting until Charlie's casket is finally lowered into the ground. The initially on-screen, then enduringly off-screen sound of Annie's agony creates and broadens an affective space in which no character (inter)action is shown in the frame. In these scenes, the only focus possible is the immediate emotional response to the shock of this sudden loss. The audience sees and especially hears the impact of this trauma on a mother and is enveloped in the feeling of sharing these deeply negative affects. However, the unnerving and raw performance of Toni Colette as Annie is so shocking that one finds oneself unable to react in any appropriate manner, helplessly watching a moment entirely too personal to be comfortable. The audience's inability to react mimics Peter's helplessness on screen: unmoving in the hallway, his face obscured, unable to show any form of proper response. Annie, already before but more so after Charlie's death, manically tries to seize control of her family's life, fixatedly holding on to her perception of how it is supposed to work, only for this idealized form of family to shatter repeatedly. In this, Annie becomes the driving force of detrimentally holding on to the attachments of what, with Berlant and Ahmed, can be described as a *good family*. Yet, she is repeatedly confronted by her inability to achieve happiness for and within the family, instead sealing its and her own fate.

While the relationship between Annie and her son becomes increasingly distant after the accident, Annie futilely tries to work through her trauma by detaching herself from it. She builds a miniature of the scene of Charlie's death to the shock of her husband Steve (00:55:13–56:22), denying the unhealthy nature of this response to her loss and the need of her family to talk to each other about their experience. This scene clearly highlights Steve's helpless passivity within the family, unable to remedy the situation or initiate conversation within his family. Trying to bring his wife and his son closer together over family dinner, he concedes and leaves the room after Annie's refusal to engage in conversation: "Come, stay, whatever you want. I don't really give a shit" (00:56:22–23). In contrast to Steve's absence, *Hereditary* utilizes Annie's profession as a miniaturist to illustrate her controlling but unsuccessful hold on her emotional state and her family life, or rather her attachment to the good life

of the family. Annie repeatedly works on personal scenes that challenge and undermine her idealized perception of the family and cause her emotional distress. Going beyond the scene of her daughter's death, the film presents miniatures of such events as nightly visits of Annie's own estranged mother to the married couple's bedroom (00:29:30–35) or Ellen breastfeeding her own grandchildren (00:13:17–23), highlighting Annie's incapability of confronting these feelings rather than representing them in miniature form. Yet, this attempt at control also fails professionally, with her familial circumstances hindering her from finishing pieces meant for a gallery exhibition, resulting in her destroying her own work in a fit of frustration (01:23:40–24:53). The motif of the miniatures is taken up by *Hereditary*'s cinematography; the Graham house is not only represented in miniature form by Annie but repeatedly by the film itself. Wide shots of interior scenes show entire rooms, rendering the house itself a miniature through the lens of the camera (e. g. in the film's opening scene, 00:02:12–03:05). Metonymically standing in for the family, the house at once becomes uncanny in the Freudian sense (74), intimately familiar yet with details being terribly off, and the "Terrible Place" (Clover 197–98) of conventional horror films where the misery plays out on screen. Here, both Aster's film and the genre generally pick up the Gothic motif of the suburban house becoming a mirror of the terrors of domestic life for women, inevitably ending in familial violence (Wallace 75–77, 85). What happens within the house, Annie's unsuccessful attempts at (re)creating dominant ideals of family and the film's cinematic framing of these domestic scenes, is "rendered Gothic by the emotional and metaphorical excesses which express the violent forces beneath ordinary family life" (80). If the house becomes a rendition of itself, a miniature stage for the unfolding narrative of the film, its inhabitants, especially the futilely controlling Annie, become its puppets determined by outside forces, by both the cult and the cruel optimism of being a good family.

Unable to stay in control through her means as a mother and her meticulous miniature work, Annie's resentment and blame towards Peter, for her daughter's death and the inability to sustain the fantasy of the good life for her family, culminate in a bloodcurdling monologue at the dinner table. The fact that this climactic confrontation and unrestrained expression of emotions is set here is no coincidence: No location in the domestic space is so strongly marked as a place of family as the dinner table. It is here that the family unit gathers, where who does and does not belong to it is clearly delineated. On the level of the film's plot, the setting clearly emphasizes Annie's wish and subsequent failure to unite her family again. Yet, it is Peter's position as the subject of Annie's condemnation for destroying both her literal family and her idealized fantasy of it that dooms this attempt and predicts Annie's outburst. Peter, while still literally a part of the family, finds himself affectively shunned from

being a part of the family, the person whose presence at the dinner table disturbs the familial structure. This attempt at reuniting the family without acknowledging the causes of its disruption mirrors Ahmed's description of assimilationist "calls for a return to the dinner table, as the presumed ground for social existence" (*Phenomenology* 173). Upholding the fantasy of the happy family gathering at the dinner table necessitates the ignorance of those differences, those unhappy feelings, and those not fitting into these norms to sustain itself. Failing to do so as in *Hereditary*, the dinner table must become the scene of the family's disruption, much like the scene at the dinner table in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Yet, *Massacre*'s family gathering at the dinner table becomes horrifying and farcical by inversion, the all-male family of murderers forcing their female victim to sit at the table and enjoy dinner together. The horror of *Hereditary*'s dinner table scene stems from its forceful expression of the depths of unhappiness within the bounds of what is supposed to be a happy family. In *Massacre*, the family at the dinner table becomes monstrous through the nature of its family members. In *Hereditary*, it is the farce of forcedly adhering to the normative fantasy of the family that turns this idea itself monstrous.

As the Graham family sits at the table in darkness and silence, Peter's attempt at initiating a conversation with his mother sparks Annie's disturbing tirade, powerfully delivered by Colette. With all other measures to potentially remedy the strained relationship taken, or rather ignored, Annie jumps up from the table and bluntly hurls her rage at her son:

> Don't you ever raise your voice at me! I'm your mother, you understand? All I do is worry and slave and defend you, and all I get back is that fucking face on your face! So full of disdain and resentment and always so annoyed. Well, now your sister is dead! And I know you miss her and I know it was an accident and I know you're in pain – and I wish I could take that away for you. I wish I could shield you from the knowledge that you did what you did – but your sister is dead. She's gone forever. And what a waste. If it could've maybe brought us together or something! If you could have just said "I'm sorry" or faced up to what happened: maybe then we could do something with this! But you can't take responsibility for anything, so now I can't accept. And I can't forgive. Because – because nobody admits anything they've done! (00:58:19–59:27)

The camera cuts back and forth from Annie's furious expression to the speechless faces of her son and husband, only dimly illuminated by the pendant light above the table. Towering above the rest of her family, Annie's outrage is framed as the horrifying manifestation of the dysfunctional family system to the shock of her family and the audience. Being unable to cope with her own feelings of loss of both her daughter and the good family, Annie projects her anger at her son. Peter then, to an extreme degree, becomes the cause of her unhappiness, the sole thing that destroys her chance of coming closer to what she imagines to be her object of happiness. While from the start of the film Annie's heavily strained relationship with her own mother

already marks this as a retroactive projection of a fantasy long gone awry, the emotional depths of her current situation blind her to any other option. Peter must become the only object of her scorn, standing in the way of realizing her presumed happiness.

In this, Annie's notions of her own role as a mother become tied up and create tension regarding the necessary family structure to achieve happiness: Her feelings toward motherhood encapsulate care for her children, a task evidently failed with Charlie's death, yet in a double bind when it comes to Peter. He becomes affectively alienated, being the subject Annie feels compelled to shield from the horrors of real life, to be the mother the good family necessitates her to be. At the same time, he is the sole reason why this is an unachievable fantasy, the one who fractures the family with his actions, his inability to communicate his feelings, and his incapability to fulfill his role as the son. The horror witnessed is based in this affective experience: The audience watches a family break apart due to the tremendous grief of losing its youngest member, but even more so is confronted with the depths of emotional negativity of realizing that the desired family structure itself, the supposedly ultimate object of happiness, is nothing more than a fantasy. *Hereditary* only later reveals that Annie's cruel imagination of a happy family and its ties to her own relationship to her children are a farce: She never wanted to be a mother and only gave in to the pressure of her mother to become pregnant, while trying in vain to have a miscarriage (01:12:02–13:00). Even after the birth of her children, this disidentification with motherhood manifests itself with Annie recounting her supposedly unconscious attempt at murdering both of her children and herself while sleepwalking (00:53:06–54:50). While this could be read as hypocritical considering her current manic behavior in desperately holding on to her idea of what it means to be a good family, it rather exposes the cruel nature of the attachment to these structures: Despite Annie's initial unwillingness to have children, outside pressure, both textually her own mother's and thus by extension the cult's as well as subtextually society's pressure to conform and find happiness in the traditional idea of the family, is forceful enough to make Annie invest into the promise of this form of community, only to be ultimately torn apart by it.

These instances of dissatisfaction with the reality of Annie's familial relations compared to her fantasy retain their affective force in their shared experience of them on screen. Yet, viewers become aware of the fact that the majority of them have been carefully planned by Ellen and her cult. While our awareness only heightens the tension within the family drama, Annie can only make a final gesture towards remedying her relationships and her resentment towards her son after encountering the supernatural at play in her family. Believing that burning Charlie's sketchbook will break

the apparent demonic curse on her family but kill her, she throws it into the fireplace, only to see her husband Steve burn (01:46:45–47:03). Aster himself states that

> that scene is meant to play as Annie's big redemptive moment . . . It's a beautiful gesture but part of the cruel logic of the film is it's an empty gesture. Ultimately, it's not her choice to make. She thinks there's a design here and she can end things if she sacrifices herself. But there's no design and there are no rules. (qtd. in Crittenden 26)

Annie's cruel optimism of being able to reinstate the good life of her family by her death as a martyr go up in flames just as Steve does. The working family system is revealed to be as much of an unrealized and unrealistic fantasy as Annie's hope for a systematic resolution against the already predetermined doom of herself and those that, despite her own anger, she claims to be her loved ones. Instead of this act saving the family in a physical sense and the idealized fantasy of the family in Annie's construction of it, Steve, the stoic but powerless father, dies. With Steve's presence within the family and the plot of the film being barely felt, *Hereditary* necessarily emphasizes the "weakness of the father." The same can be said about traditionally patriarchal power structures of the family "in relation to matriarchal power and the matrilineal ('hereditary') power that eventually rears its head in the final horror scenes" (Braun 53), as well as in relation to the affective power that resurfaces repeatedly in the horrors of the family life. With any hope for Annie's cruelly optimistic reestablishment of the family burning down in front of her and the demon now having taken hold of her, Annie chases down the final vessel.

Peter, having become guilt-stricken after the death of his sister, deteriorates further emotionally, becoming detached from the rest of his family and seemingly life itself. He apathetically goes through his day-to-day life, unable to pass time with his peers without having a panic attack (00:42:08–43:21) and repeatedly lying awake in bed at night (00:48:46, 01:20:15, 01:27:10). Rather passively drifting than actively expressing his sorrow, Peter is unable to find any outlet for his emotions. Only in the film's last third, in scenes of supernatural horror, does Peter's expression contrast his father's powerless rationalism and his mother's overbearing anger. Having been the subject of his mother's scorn and now openly witnessing the cult's approach, Peter finally breaks. Unable to stay within the bounds of neither the detached teenage boy Peter aspired to be before Charlie's accident, nor the fulfillment of the responsible adolescent son Annie wants him to be, his responses become motivated by unmediated affect.

While Peter's declining mental state becomes a feminized form of "male hysteria," he "mirrors many of the hysterical responses of his mother" (Posada 192–93). Peter bursts out into negative emotions when presented with the horrors of having become the centerpiece of the cult's machinations and the sole reason for his family's

unhappiness and demise. He emblematizes Ahmed's "unhappy queer [who] is made unhappy by the world that reads queers as unhappy" ("Objects" 43). Even before Charlie's death, Annie is not satisfied with Peter's uninvolved position within the family, not wanting to interact with his sister and avoiding family gatherings, thus not working towards the goal of the idealized happy family. Already presumed to be unhappy with the promise of the family by Annie, Peter becomes the epitome of this unhappiness once he is blamed for his sister's death. To retain the family fantasy as a happy object, Peter's unhappiness must be made the ultimate cause.

Peter's apathy renders him a queer figure in relation to the institutionalized structure of the family. He signifies this before Charlie's death as a detached participant in the lives of his relatives and afterwards in his helplessness in navigating his position as both part of the family and its saboteur. Elizabeth Freeman speaks of "families depend[ing] on timing" in their "choreographed displays of simultaneity" (28), such as the ritualized coming together at the dinner table. Yet, this temporal structure, as in the dinner scene in *Hereditary*, is fragile in establishing these bonds. They can be interrupted by the likes of Annie's animosity, or by temporalities that do not align with spending time together and orienting oneself towards achieving common goals, but instead going against the homogeneous order of time (Freeman xxii; Halberstam, *Queer Time* 2). These queer temporalities offer alternative orientations of non-productivity, regarding how this time is spent and what kind of outcomes they (re)produce. Jack Halberstam argues that the homogeneous order of how we narrate our lifetimes, this "logic of reproductive temporality," supports our "notions of the normal," such as traditional family life. Thus, "we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation" (*Queer Time* 4). In Peter, this order is reversed: Whereas before the events of the film, his unwillingness to move forward with his life in a manner productive for the family stems from being at the brink of adulthood, his reaction to the assault on his family goes against this forward movement. His apathy, as in doing nothing either to prevent what is happening in the background or in remedying his emotional state and relationships within the family, do not mirror Annie's futile, yet future-aligned attempts at upholding the family. Instead, Peter reverts to being the child rather than the adult. He lets unrestrained emotions wash over him. Even his drug use speaks to a desire for a "ludic temporality" (5) that interrupts the constructed time that his family maintains, privileging the "rapid bursts" (4) of experiencing drugs, in both their numbing and affectively heightening quality. This also leads to the harshest interruption of family life, the death of his sister: While Annie forces Peter to take Charlie with him to the party as a productive means of spending time together, easing both of them into expectations of becoming well-adjusted adults by Peter taking

responsibility for his younger sister and Charlie socializing in a proper manner, Peter fails by prioritizing his own appetite for drugs and sex. Peter structures his life in queer temporalities that are undesirable for normative society, through drug use and doing nothing, and in this non-commitment to reproductive temporality positions himself against the fantasy of the family.

Whereas a traditional coming-out narrative is "an account of the move away from the family" (Woods 346), in the framing of *Hereditary* as a horror film, the film's adolescent characters are not identified as queer but rather enabled to be read as figures of queerness through their situatedness within the narrative. Thus, this move away from the family must instead become its destruction. Peter can be understood as the unhappy queer in relation to Annie's cruel optimism of the good family. But as such, for the larger societal structures of reproductive temporality and normative fantasies, he, as the one threatening to destroy the family, becomes monstrous. Laura Westengard reads Lee Edelman's concept of the *sinthomo*sexual, the queer figures that "expose as mere fantasy the ideologies on which people base their existences, subverting the closed debate of reproductive futurity," as monsters, as they "turn the sequined fabric of society's fantasy structure inside out to reveal the knotted under-belly—to make what was once familiar and homelike horrifically exposed as something constructed and denaturalized" (48). Peter's positioning within *Hereditary* achieves just that: It is through him that Annie must realize that her fantasy of the good family is unachievable; it is through him that the family home becomes the Terrible Place; it is through him that the cult seeks to establish a demonic reign.

It is only in the film's finale, after the planning of the cult proves to be successful, that Peter, driven to his physical and emotional limits and becoming the vessel of the demon, reunites with his dead family and his newly found worshippers. This presents some form of resolution, being the only outcome possible for the family structure both determining the individuals' fate and leading to their downfall. *Hereditary* showcases the utter horror of the cruel optimism of seeking the good life through and within the rigid structure of the family. The film makes a mockery of the free will of the Grahams as they struggle to maintain their attachments to being a family, only to end up dead and in futility. Its efficacy lies in a negation of the fantasy of the good family throughout its disintegration, only to present a more horrifying alternative: In the final scene, we see the family of the cult reunited, gathered around their crowned demonic leader, while all the necessary elements are present, from its idols to its members, everything as predetermined from the start (02:03:05). *Hereditary* shows a grueling counternarrative to the happy object of the family, emphasizing the need for alternatives, or being faced with suffering within even more horrifying structures of community. By no means should this be read as an endorsement of cult-like

structures instead of traditional forms of kinship, yet it makes clear where the limits of these forms lie and who is suffering within them.

Conclusion: The Need for Alternatives

Contemporary horror proves itself to be a particularly productive field of inquiry, especially taking into account perspectives of queer theory. Queer theories of affect, in particular, can open different avenues in approaching the genre, not to dispose of psychoanalytic readings but to offer up alternatives that highlight previously neglected aspects and complement more traditionally symbolic analyses. In applying these to horror, both as larger cultural phenomenon and as cinematic genre, its potential to pick up queer discourses on negativity and the anti-social come to the forefront. These horror productions can fill what Jack Halberstam calls for in a new perspective on an anti-social archive: "an archive of alternatives" that "mixes high and low, known and unknown, popular and obscure . . . where the promise of self-shattering, loss of mastery and meaning, unregulated speech and desire are unloosed" ("Anti-Social" 153). Yet, it is also necessary to point out that many of the cinematic works of horror that are garnering mainstream appeal are not produced by self-identified queers. In reading these works through the lens of queer affect theory, we can recognize a general uncomfortableness with the traditional institutions of patriarchal, heteronormative society that opens a potential point of solidarity with marginalized identities. Works by queer filmmakers tackling these issues, however, are still not sharing in this wide recognition, and an application of these theories to them would necessarily have to adjust.

Nonetheless, in tackling societal institutions such as the family in newly horrifying ways, contemporary horror can be a means of expressing the sadness, grief, and depths of emotion that are tied up in the experience of not belonging within society and of this being the cost of the good life and the happiness of others. Doing so, these approaches to horror also offer alternatives to the dominant narratives of the genre: Instead of repeating the traditional narrative patterns that reaffirm those same norms that constitute unhappiness, they can be read as counternarratives to the deluge of unachievable promises of happiness. These newer forms of narrating horror emphasize that horrors are based in affective experiences and that by investigating how these experiences are shaped in our current cultural sphere, we can glean what alternatives to social structures are possible. More strongly, we can recognize where these alternatives are desperately needed to make equal the access to happiness and a good life for everybody, or at least to truly "make everyone a little less happy" (Halberstam, "Anti-Social" 154).

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Localizing the Global in Sylvia Plath's "Fever 103°"

Julia Machtenberg

ABSTRACT

The essay presents a close reading of Sylvia Plath's poem "Fever 103°" and argues that Plath's construction of her speaker's vulnerable self facilitates a breakdown of the boundaries between the embodied self and its socio-cultural environment. The argument is built on recent scholarship on Plath's work that views it in the context of the global political movements of her time. By examining the ways in which Plath's use of Cold War discourses shapes her construction of vulnerability, the essay shows how this construction produces the embodied self as deeply entangled with global political movements manifesting in and through the embodied self. By evoking and concurrently undermining the "poetics of hygiene," the poem suggests that any attempt to ascertain a state of utmost purity, of clearly delineated bodily and cultural boundaries, can only end in annihilation. It is in this sense that Plath's representation of her speaker's vulnerable self allows her to develop an astute perspective on the interconnectedness of the private, the national, and the global socio-political environment. In this way, the poet's construction of a vulnerable self represents an understanding of a globally interconnected world that poses localized dangers of (self-)destruction.

Canonized as a confessional poet renowned for her use of "'the trope of vulnerability'" (Morse 80), Plath's poems have frequently been read "as straightforward 'confession'" (Clark 362) of her own mental states. While the "trope of vulnerability" has been associated with plain language and an ostensibly candid voice giving expression to the poet's personal sentiments, Plath's poems also show a superb control over poetic form and devices (Morse 80). Still, for a considerable amount of time, scholarship on Plath approached her poetic engagement with vulnerability through an autobiographical and/or psychoanalytical lens. In doing so, these approaches, first, showed a narrow understanding of the condition of vulnerability as connoting a personal susceptibility to pain and suffering. While vulnerability can encompass these components, Erinn Gilson presents a more nuanced understanding of the condition as "a basic kind of openness to being affected and affecting in both positive and negative ways, which can take diverse forms in different social situations (for example, bodily, psychological, economic, emotional, and legal vulnerabilities)" (310). As this definition shows, vulnerability is a more complex condition than a mere susceptibility to personal suffering as it was often understood in relation to Plath's poetry.

Second, earlier approaches to Plath's poetry oftentimes obscured the historical context in which Plath's poems originated and hence missed its significance for her writing. As Robin Peel argues in his book *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (2002),

> Plath's later writing was produced in specific places in England during a period of heightened world tension, and her interaction with the specificities of place and time including the textual environment, the physical and cultural environments and the global political movement, should not be overshadowed by the narrative of her marriage and premature death. (24)

Plath herself points to the influence of her socio-historical environment on her writing in an interview published in the *London Magazine* in 1962:

> The issues of our time which preoccupy me at the moment are incalculable genetic effects of fallout and a documentary article on the terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of big business and the military in America – "Juggernaut, The Warfare State," by Fred J. Cook in a recent *Nation*. Does this influence the kind of poetry I write? Yes, but in a sidelong fashion. I am not gifted with the tongue of Jeremiah, though I may be sleepless enough before my vision of the apocalypse. My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark. (Plath, "Context" 64)

Even though Plath claims to abstain from addressing the Cold War and its threat of nuclear fallout in a direct manner in her poetry, the "sidelong fashion" in which these concerns impact her writing becomes perceivable in numerous ways.

The influence of the cultural climate of the Cold War on Plath's poetry becomes for instance apparent when paying close attention to the ways in which "discourses on pollution, toxicity, poisons, and fallout penetrate and circulate in Plath's poetry" (Bundtzen 46). Oftentimes, these discourses intersect with a "lexicon of suffering and clinical appraisal [whereby] Plath documents, in an unnervingly visceral manner, the impact of human vulnerability" (Didlake 269). Vulnerability here centers on the physically vulnerable human body and its striving for and failing to secure a supposedly safe state of invulnerability. Ralph Didlake concludes that these representations of bodily vulnerability work to "create . . . a powerful registry of human health and illness" (269). Building on Didlake's observations, I maintain that Plath's intermingling of medical and Cold War discourses in her representation of vulnerability destabilizes the boundaries between the speaking self and its socio-political environment. As I will show through an analysis of her poem "Fever 103°," Plath reconstructs vulnerability as a condition that may be located in her speaker's body but that nevertheless incorporates larger (trans)national phenomena. In this sense, Plath's representation of vulnerability, as "a basic kind of openness to being affected and affecting in both positive and negative ways" (Gilson 310), closely intertwines her speaker's private plight with her cultural environment. Thereby, Plath's construction of her speaker's vulnerable self represents seemingly localized dangers of (self-)destruction as deeply interwoven with a globally interconnected world, suggesting the impossibility of separating the bodily self from the world or vice versa.

Its title gives a clear indication of the poem's governing theme: a physical state situating the body in a defensive position against a hostile bacterial or viral invasion. Finding itself under threat of hostile invasion, the body increases its own temperature to fend off the intruder. A fever positions the body as exposed to and affected by dangerous viral forces while simultaneously affecting these very forces. As such, the feverish body represents one manifestation of physical vulnerability. However, in the context of Plath's poem, this physical state of vulnerability gains another layer. The poem's main concern – the speaker's embodied experience of danger and defense – becomes representative of US-American anxieties of the Cold War, when "[c]ommunism was considered the contaminated 'Other' – a metaphorical virus that threatened to infect the world and subvert the United States where it was most vulnerable" (Smith 308). Plath unfolds and complicates this analogy throughout the poem.

Instead of expressing fear in light of her ill, feverish state, the speaker opens the poem with two succinct questions: "Pure? What does it mean?" (Plath, "Fever 103°" 77). This concern with pureness is a recurrent theme of Plath's poetry. Laura Perry explains that "Plath's invocations of purity connect body with culture, inviting us to consider how ideas of what makes a clean body are gendered and policed by

institutions and norms" (194). By connecting "Plath's poetics of hygiene" with a post-Second World War "transatlantic discourse about hygiene . . . that trafficked in mid-century anxieties about biological containment, sexual purity and interracial contact" Perry demonstrates how the theme of hygiene in Plath's poetry "serves to reframe her search for transcendental purity ('my selves dissolving') (CP 232) by showing how this purity is embodied and historically located" (191). The two opening questions of "Fever 103°" introduce the reader to Plath's drawing on and further lyrical development of such global discourses of hygiene in the poem at hand. Placing those two questions at the onset of the poem, Plath sets the scene for an engagement with Cold War discourses seeking to safeguard the supposedly uncontaminated (US) body from hostile intruders. Analyzing the ways in which Plath constructs her speaker's vulnerable state through a hallucinatory language that recombines figures from Greek mythology with images of nuclear fallout against the backdrop of the speaker's fever shows not only "how [her speaker's search for] purity is embodied and historically located" (Perry 191). This analytical reading also reveals how Plath attempts to renegotiate her speaker's embodied (trans)national location by having her speaker strain and ultimately fail to attain a supposedly invulnerable state of utmost purity detached from the worldly ills affecting her bodily self.

Instead of providing a direct answer to her opening questions, the speaker refers to Greek mythology to reconfigure notions of pureness:

> The tongues of hell
> Are dull, dull as the triple
>
> Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus
> Who wheezes at the gate. Incapable
> Of licking clean
>
> The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin. (Plath, "Fever 103°" 77)

In these opening tercets, the speaker declares the fires of hell as lacking the power to burn off the sin from the deceased sinner just as the hellhound's tongues are too "dull" to lick off the sins from the sinner's body. While the exact nature of the sin remains unclarified, the subversion of myth effectively "undercuts our assumptions about purity . . . [The poet's] emphatic twist on the Cerberus myth renders the terrifying three-headed hound of hell into a plainly pathetic old dog who's 'wheezing' and sluggish . . ." (Wayson). Purity, as suggested by the speaker's line of inquiry, cannot be attained through culturally established cleansing rituals. Not only do the fires of hell fail to burn the sin from the sinful body, but also hell's creatures pale in comparison to "the aguey tendon" representing the notion of indistinguishable sin and the speaker's burning fever.

This subversive use of Greek mythology is not unusual for Plath's poetry. In this poem, Plath references the classics to reimagine notions of purity and contamination as they play out upon the speaker's feverish body. This renegotiation of purity and the deceased or indeed diseased body is significant in a US-American cultural context where

> [t]he poetics of cleanliness is a poetics of social discipline. Purification rituals prepare the body as a terrain of meaning, organizing flows of value across the self and the community and demarcating boundaries between one community and another. (McClintock qtd. in Perry 192)

In "Fever 103°," Plath upends this poetics by denying her speaker to attain a sense of cleanliness through the invocation of culturally sanctioned mythology. The poet thus undermines the speaker's attempts to restore a coherent sense of self to her body and as a result forces her to depart from traditional scripts in the effort to restore meaning and strength to her fevered body.

This construction of the speaker's fever posits the illness itself as an affective state with which the speaker is forced to engage but which she cannot fully control. Her body reacts to the bacterial or viral invasion on its own accord and might self-destruct in the process. Meanwhile, Plath's subversive use of mythological references next to telling cultural allusions situates the speaker in a cultural framework defined by Cold War fears of contamination. Accordingly, the speaker continues to declare that "[s]uch yellow sullen smokes / Make their own element" (Plath, "Fever 103°" 77). Although subtle, this description of the smoke recalls the gas released in the notorious gas chambers of the Second World War (Axelrod 222). As the speaker elaborates, this kind of smoke "will not rise, // But trundle round the globe / Choking the aged and the meek, / The weak // Hothouse baby in its crib, / the ghastly orchid / Hanging its hanging garden in the air" (Plath, "Fever 103°" 77). In her feverish state, the heat the speaker experiences becomes an uncontrollable entity; it turns into a poisonous, suffocating smoke that not only threatens to engulf the speaker but the whole planet, killing those who are most susceptible first. This allusion to the Second World War also suggests that the destructive forces of this war continue to "trundle the globe" to "choke" people right into the speaker's present moment. Next, the speaker declares,

> Devilish leopard!
> Radiation turned it white
> And killed it in an hour.
>
> Greasing the bodies of adulterers
> Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
> The sin. The sin. (Plath, "Fever 103°" 77)

By concluding the imaginary chain of metamorphoses from infant to flower to "devilish leopard" with the declaration that "Radiation turned it white / And killed it in an hour," Plath's speaker evokes the Cold War threat of nuclear annihilation. Claiming that the deadly nuclear radiation "greas[es] the bodies of adulterers like Hiroshima ash," the speaker blurs Cold War imagery with domestic homewreckers with the utter destruction the United States wrought in the Second World War in Japan. This conflation of domestic unrest and transatlantic warfare is typical of both the Cold War period and Plath's poetry, as Robin Peel explains: "The nuclear mushroom cloud was a potent and recurrent image haunting the Cold War period" (30). The image circulated in the media of the time and also found its way into Plath's writing: "the 103° fever that accompanies radiation sickness, the peeling skin, the baldness of the irradiated victims, and the presence of German Catholic priests suffering alongside the Japanese victims of the nuclear bomb" (30). The speaker's recurrent chant of "The sin. The sin" thus gains a much more complex meaning than its first appearance suggests. Instead of merely denoting seemingly indistinguishable, personal sins, the sin the speaker evokes transcends the personal to include ineradicable sins of humanity in the guise of gas chambers and nuclear annihilation. In this sense, Plath's construction of her speaker's fever as a profoundly unsettling affective state not only conveys the disorientation brought on by a high fever per se but registers a much more complex (trans)cultural meltdown in light of destructive forces produced by and at the same time used against humanity. Thereby, Plath represents her speaker's vulnerable body as not merely exposed to hostile forces but as a battleground on which those forces and their (trans)national significance play out and may be renegotiated.

Through the construction of her speaker's feverish state, Plath's poem merges and reconsiders notions of purity, embodiment, and worldly suffering. By thus representing

> the body's capacity and disintegration [Plath] challenges readers to probe deeply and bravely into the boundaries that support their own self-concepts. Key distinctions between life and death, existence and nonexistence, and the differing borders that health and illness pose with respect to the promise of life are dramatized in her poetry. (Didlake 270–71)

In "Fever 103°," Plath not only dramatizes but blurs the boundaries between such binarized concepts, suggesting that the body cannot be fully separated from its (trans)national context or vice versa. The speaker's feverish, embodied self constitutes a space that incorporates and engages with interior (bodily) as well as exterior (worldly) forces. The fact that the speaker strains to transcend those forces she deems unclean and disconcerting may appear to suggest that the poet writes in the

tradition of a "poetics of cleanliness." Yet, Plath's deliberate blurring of the personal with the transnational discourses of her time undermines this poetics in her poetry. Instead of reinforcing clearly demarcated boundaries and preconceived meanings, Plath's construction of the speaker's fever as a profoundly destabilizing affective state undermines any attempt to reinstate the presumed boundaries between the private self and the public global-political environment. Accordingly, the speaker ends the poem by declaring:

> Does not my heat astound you! And my light!
> All by myself I am a huge camellia
> Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.
>
> I think I am going up,
> I think I may rise–
> The beads of hot metal fly, and I love, I
>
> Am a pure acetylene
> Virgin
> Attended by roses,
>
> By kisses, by cherubim,
> By whatever these pink things mean!
> Not you, nor him
>
> Nor him, nor him
> (My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)–
> To Paradise. (Plath, "Fever 103°" 77)

In the concluding lines of the poem, the fever reaches its zenith. Plath's use of parallelisms, assonance, and frequent repetitions of the personal pronoun "I" jointly contributes to the speaker's apparent rising not above but in concordance with her fever. The speaker's rhythm of speaking matches the pulsating fever; the light vowels and imagery evoke the heat of her body as well as the speaker's movement toward transcendence. The fever's peak coincides with the speaker's apparent ascension to "paradise," suggesting that the speaker has finally found the answer to her opening question: purity appears to reside in a state of otherworldly perfection that is invulnerable to the world's ills. Elena Ciobanu, however, remarks that

> The "Paradise" in *Fever 103°* [sic.] is never reached . . . not only because the persona mocks at the myth underlying it, but also because her body, represented by her selves that are left behind like "old whore petticoats" . . . re-inscribes itself in the text as an almost imperceptible absence: the "acetylene virgin." Since acetylene is an odorless, colourless gas, highly unstable, that leads to explosions when associated with high temperatures, the acetylene body in Plath's poem, rising among "beads of hot metal," finally evaporates into nothingness. When the ban ages/selves have been discarded, there is only an emptiness. The poem, rather than affirming the possibility of the ascension of

the body into the sky, denies it altogether: the nature of the body does not allow it. (216–17)

In other words, the apparent transcension of the speaker's feverish state symbolizes the body's negation. Straining to find an answer to her initial questions, the speaker claims a pure, virginal state for herself but the concomitant transformation into "acetylene" signifies, as Ciobanu points out, that such a transcension of the body and the world's ills in fact results in "nothingness," i.e., in non-existence. Purity, in this sense, becomes aligned to a state of utter perfection and invulnerability whose realization, however, requires an impossible state of self-negation. The "Paradise" the speaker evokes at the end of the poem thus signifies a state of transcendence that does not sustain but destroy. Hence, the poem's conclusion suggests that the condition of vulnerability, for all the anguish it may entail, constitutes a vital connection between self and world.

In conclusion, Plath's reconstruction of her speaker's vulnerable state of ill health allows her to break down the boundaries between the private and the cultural sphere. By constructing a speaker who experiences the body as vulnerable to bacterial, viral, as well as (trans)national ills, the poet captures not only the speaker's ill health but also the socio-historical forces bearing upon this body. By evoking and concurrently undermining the "poetics of cleanliness," the poet suggests that any attempt to ascertain a state of utmost purity, of clearly delineated bodily and cultural boundaries, can only end in annihilation. It is in this sense that Plath's reconstruction of her speaker's vulnerable state allows her to develop an astute perspective on the interconnectedness of the private, the national, and the global socio-political environments.

About the Author

Julia Machtenberg is a PhD student at Ruhr University Bochum (RUB), Germany. Julia Machtenberg received their BA in German and Anglophone Studies from the University of Duisburg-Essen in 2017 and their MA in English and American Studies from the RUB in 2020. Currently, Julia Machtenberg is working on their PhD project with the working title "Vulnerability in US-American Poetry." Next to vulnerability and trauma studies, Julia Machtenberg's research interests include gender and queer studies.

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With Great Product Comes Great Responsibility: Marketing Gender and Eco-Responsibility

Ioana-Mihaela Cozac

ABSTRACT

US-American mass media was revolutionized when, at the turn of the twentieth century, mass printing of illustrations enabled the visual advertisement of lifestyles – the American Dream was now sellable at a faster rate than ever before. Today's mass media has refashioned itself by adapting to a rapid technological evolution, yet remains a space which enables monetization of identity. Women's purchasing power has resulted in a culture of advertisement developed to specifically target women. Whether it is overpriced and elaborate female hygiene products or universal items re-branded specifically for women, capitalism continues to thrive off of a gendered narrative of consumption. In recent years, it has merged with the rise of eco-friendly consumption. Many companies that engage in greenwashing strategies manufacture women's hygiene and skin care products. Additionally, due to a persistent sexual division of labor, household products turned green disproportionally target the female consumer. While there is a tendency for women to be more environmentally aware (Brough et al.; Capecchi; Zelezny), the urgency of this response is the result of a structure which has historically excluded women from positions of executive decision-making and production, while also perpetuating the exploitation of their gender-based identity. I argue that, as a consequence of this perpetuation, a narrative was established which ties responsibility of eco-awareness and ethical consumption to gender, manifesting in an "eco-gender gap" (Capecchi).

KEYWORDS

Eco gender gap, gender roles, gender capitalism, eco-capitalism

Introduction

We have reached a culminating point in our relationship to planet Earth. We are increasingly aware of our environment's steady destruction, which has triggered a plethora of narratives regarding our collective and individual involvement and responsibility. The (over)consumption habits of developed countries are a primary concern, yearly highlighted by an Earth Overshoot Day that has been worryingly approaching its first half-year mark. As these concerns progressively penetrate public discourse, corporations have been prompted to turn to more "eco-friendly" selling points in order to avoid backlash and sustain their profit. The problem is that today's consumer culture is ultimately the effect of past and present efforts to tie products to identity. This process of monetizing identity has been significantly marked by gender for over a century. Even as we deepen our collective understanding of the concept today, gendered marketing persists and now occurs alongside corporations' other attempts at forms of "woke capitalism." This essay highlights the bridge between mass marketing and gender identity that in the context of eco-consciousness inherently shifts a majority of responsibility toward eco-conscious purchasing to women. The exclusive form of language I use in this essay is necessitated by the gender binary that is perpetuated by marketers and not the language I personally consider would open up new ways of thinking about the world in relation to gender. For that, a complete dismantlement of the gender binary is necessary.

Advertising Identity

The Industrial Revolution of the 1900s marks a turning point for mass media production. While the bridge between assets and identity predates the nineteenth century, it was in the mid-1800s that Western advertising took off in the form of illustrations, enabling companies to attract consumers with visual displays of products. Roland Marchand explores the progression of visual advertisements during its golden era which "now regularly portrayed the lives of 'typical' consumers as enhanced by the use of the product" (xv). Carolyn Kitch traces this process by considering gender, establishing that the monetization of the American Dream was gendered from the early beginnings of visual advertising. While Kitch considers images of manhood and the nuclear family, most of her research in this publication is dedicated to pinpointing how mass illustrations contributed to maintaining specific ideas and ideals about womanhood while demonizing any attempts to transgress the norm. The dichotomy of "good woman" vs. "bad woman" was eventually translated into advertisements, inherently giving certain products, such as creams and pantyhose, the power to make someone more, or less, of a woman.

In 1941, NBC (at the time, New York station WNBT) enabled visual advertising to enter televisions. In 1994, AT&T was the first company to purchase an online banner ad. Today, marketing has become significantly more influential. EMarketer calculated worldwide digital ad spending at 567.49 billion US dollars in 2022, projecting an even bigger number for upcoming years ("Digital Advertising Spending Worldwide"). Advertising today functions on multiple levels due to its introduction to social media. More traditionally, platforms like Meta (Facebook, Instagram), YouTube, and TikTok make use of regular ad interruptions to earn profit from personalized ads based on retrieved user data. The more recently emerging economy of influencers and content creators has additionally provided brands with a way to advertise their products through sponsorships, placing advertisements directly within the content on social media and right in front of the desired target audience. While the employment of icons is not a new practice in advertising, social media fosters an often misleading sense of connection amongst its users which fabricates a sense of authenticity that traditional forms of advertisement have not yet achieved. The allure cultivates a consumer culture in which users are continuously persuaded to make purchasing decisions based on aspirational lifestyles and identities. This complicates efforts of sustainability and eco-conscious buying by glamorizing excessive consumption patterns.

The Eco-Gender Gap

In a multi-study paper focused on gendered attitudes toward environmental action, Janet K. Swim and her team conducted three separate studies looking at attitudes toward gender-bending (performing actions which are not associated with one's gender) as tied to Pro-Environmental Behaviors (PEBs). Not only did their studies show that PEBs are strongly linked to femininity, but they also suggested an aversion to gender-bending behaviors (conclusively on both sides). Both men and women viewed gender-bending PEBs (e.g. men utilizing reusable shopping bags or women taking part in protest) as off-putting. Aaron R. Brough et al. published an article encompassing six studies, which offered similar results. Their research concluded that gender identity played a big role in preventing men from engaging in environmentally friendly behavior. Not only is caring for the planet and devoting oneself to preventing climate change linked to femininity, but this factor negatively impacts people's determination to engage in such activities if they do not wish to identify or be identified as feminine. This bias is, however, sustained by problematic yet popular understandings of gender, which, as I argue in this essay, are perpetuated by mass media marketing for profit. Brough et al. suggest "masculine affirmation and masculine branding" as a step forward to transgressing the gendered boundary of ethical and sustainable behavior (580), marking gender as a crucial component to be closely considered in

public discourses surrounding climate change, and critically considered in mass-media depictions of eco-responsibility.

Gendered Responsibility

Roland Marchand and Carolyn Kitch are primarily concerned with early twentieth-century marketing strategies, but their research is not irrelevant today. The foundational methods of early advertisements persist in today's marketing strategies and, while the concept of gender has been destabilized by feminist efforts, the same gender roles that dictate household responsibilities are still perpetuated today (Kamp Dush et al.). CivicScience (2021) surveyed over 80,000 US-American adults and identified seventy percent of women as the primary shoppers in the household. Because of this discrepancy in domestic responsibility, women are more likely to act as decision-makers when purchasing household items such as cleaning, hygiene, and food products. These sectors already engage in greenwashing strategies and "eco-friendly" marketing by overwhelming consumers with labels claiming "recycled packaging" or CO_2 neutrality. They task the consumer with the responsibility of choosing between cheaper, more environmentally harmful options, such as chemical cleaning agents sold in plastic bottles, and expensive, longer-lasting alternatives, such as cleaning tabs sold in paper sachets. When purchasing groceries, consumers are faced with the responsibility of opting for a plant-based diet or supporting the meat industry, which has been a focal point in debates about eco-consciousness. Because women remain to a large extent responsible for domestic labor, they are inherently more likely to be exposed to such "eco-friendly" marketing efforts and thereby also more likely to be tasked with eco-responsibility when making purchase decisions.

A micro-narrative of early 2000s climate activism highly prioritized alternative menstrual products in sustainability discourses. Menstrual cups and period panties continue to be heavily commercialized as environmentally friendly replacements for menstrual hygiene products. While it is undeniable that these replacements protect the environment by reducing waste, they often appear advertised in contexts that denigrate the usage of tampons or pads, marking users of disposable hygiene products as the culprits of pollution. For example, a 2019 Sirona Hygiene ad for menstrual cups begins with a close-up of a woman positioned in a landfill beside a pile of discarded menstrual pads. She states: "I hate the environment. Just hate it. And that's why I love pads," before tossing a pad onto the pile ("#UncomfortablePads – Not Anymore!"). The video, which has amassed 1.4 million views as of spring 2024, suggests that women who use menstrual pads lack concern for the environment. Despite this claim, the company continues to sell disposable sanitary pads on its website. This narrative contributes to shifting environmental responsibility onto women who

continue to use tampons or other disposable means of menstrual protection, instead of criticizing the companies that commercialize and popularize those products in the context of hygiene and discreetness.

Menstrual products have a complex history. For millennia, women have used innovative and sustainable *bricoleur* approaches to menstrual protection, such as washable linen cloths, customizing them to their own needs and individual bodies (Strasser 162). Even though the menstrual cup has more recently gained popularity as a sustainable solution to wasteful tampons, it was first introduced by Leona Chalmers already in 1937. However, it failed to gain popularity because, around the same time, Earl Haas (Tampax) and Kimberly-Clark (Kotex) began marketing disposable pads. To make the products more appealing to consumers, advertisers chose to reinforce "[n]ew concerns about sanitation and germs, long-standing taboos about menstrual blood, and the privacy of mail order [to make] these pads attractive" (Strasser 162). Today, the disposable menstrual hygiene industry remains largely unchanged, and companies continue to gain profit through the perpetuation of similar gender-biased narratives. This is especially problematic because the menstrual hygiene industry, like other sectors, was founded and built without including women in executive decision-making in the first place. Because of this, the signal for women to be eco-conscious when purchasing menstrual products comes with an illusive agency while problematically shifting a majority of eco-responsibility onto women.

The cosmetic industry is another culprit of pollution and global warming which is allotted to the female sphere. Make-up companies have greatly benefitted from the rise of beauty influencers on social media such as James Charles, NikkieTutorials or Huda Kattan. The average makeup and skincare routines that are depicted online encompass a multitude of different products. In 2020, the average American woman spent up to 350 euros on cosmetic products per year (Petruzzi, "Average Annual Spend on Cosmetic Products"). That same year, skincare and makeup products purchased primarily by women made up 58% of the cosmetic market worldwide (Petruzzi, "Breakdown of the Cosmetic Market Worldwide"). From primer, foundation, blush, and contour to eyeshadow, eyeliner, eyelashes, and mascara; from oils, balms, gels, and masks to serums, creams, sprays, and toners; a mid-range makeup and skincare collection has the potential to cost up to thousands of dollars and, because of the bridge between feminine gender identity and cosmetic products, women are to a certain extent expected to own at least some of those products. Gender socialization, empowered by mass media marketing, continues to encourage women to maintain a polished image of health and beauty, and exhibit femininity through trendy fashion, multi-step makeup regimes, as well as elaborate skincare routines. This social conditioning continues to be supported by beauty influencers on social media, even as

attempts at restructuring concepts of gender see young men begin to use makeup and skin care as well. These products are, in turn, problematic within climate change discourse, because their production and distribution have a significant impact on our environment. The majority of multinational beauty companies still sell their products in countries that require animal testing, ship their products internationally, and use plastic containers instead of opting for alternative packaging. By association, women become the primary victims of narratives of individual responsibility and the direct targets of greenwashing campaigns for cosmetics. This makes women responsible for both a culturally curated image of womanhood, as well as the impacts of its production and distribution on our environment.

The fashion industry has received the most backlash from climate activists due to its complicity in water waste, chemical pollution, and emission of greenhouse gases, in addition to its exploitation of, primarily, female factory workers in developing countries. Like most sectors dominated by female consumers, the fashion industry is also gender-biased: "[A]part from a few men at the top, including manufacturers and retailers, celebrity designers and magazine publishers, it is and has been a female sphere of production and consumption" (McRobbie 84). Fashion companies actively capitalize both on gender identity, as well as eco-campaigning. Mariko Takedomi Karlsson and Vasna Ramasar look at ad campaigns by Swedish fast fashion brands H&M, Monki, and Gina Tricot, which promote the brands' commitment to sustainability. They analyzed six recurrent themes, which included "gender and sexuality," "individual responsibility," and "greenwashing." Their article does not carry out an in-depth analysis of how those themes interact, but it successfully identifies a connection. All three themes occur at the same time and in connection with one another. They promote individual eco-responsibility in the context of gender and sexual empowerment. While the study does not consider an eco-critical perspective, Angela McRobbie's paper highlights that women's absence in executive decision-making allows it "to remain a space of exploited production and guilty consumption" (87). Women have agency in the context of purchase power, but when it comes to the executive decisions which have the potential to make a difference globally, they are often overshadowed by an androgenic structure.

Multi-Level Solutions

The bridge between mass media marketing and consumer identity originated over a century ago, yet it remains a defining contributor to today's consumer culture. As I explored here, this bridge is distinctly marked by gender, and it has begun to foster the development of an eco-gender gap that tips responsibility for eco-responsible decision-making onto women. The foundational issues of this development in recent

years occur on multiple levels, but consumer responsibility is often an overlooked one. Overproduction and overconsumption, and their impact on the planet's atmosphere, have been foundational in the discourse on environmental action. But within this discourse, it has usually re-focused eco-responsibility from those who produce to those who consume. Sirona Hygiene's previously-mentioned advert practices this error by condemning users of the very disposable pads that the company itself produces and distributes. Even if eco-branded products did significantly decrease our output of greenhouse gases, they remain band-aid solutions. Instead, initiatives such as "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" encourage consumers to buy less and instead get more life and use out of products and resources already available to them. However, due to their need for profit for survival, companies blatantly ignore these initiatives and encourage the continuous expansion of our economy by creating "better alternatives." The aspiration of maintaining an infinitely expansive economy is absurd when the resources are finite. But in a globalized society that continues to be dependent on profit and defined by consumption, overcoming this habit requires a systematic restructuring.

This systematic restructuring requires a careful consideration of our dualistic understanding of gender. Marie Mies points out that the division of labor did not naturally occur but was instead "a violent [process] by which first certain categories of men, later certain peoples, were able mainly by virtue of arms and warfare to establish an exploitative relationship between themselves and women, and other peoples and classes" (74). The issue is that perpetuating gender roles perpetuates gender inequality, including unequal distribution of eco-responsibility. The sexual division of labor that prompted marketing firms in the mid-twentieth century to place women at the center of household product placements also contributed to women's present-day purchase power when shopping for household items, leading to a gender discrepancy in consumer decision-making. On a different level, "female industries" such as cosmetics, fashion, and even menstrual hygiene products were mostly founded and developed by men, in a way that made women's identities and bodies profitable to them. Women have only recently begun to occupy those executive roles but have been mostly excluded from the opportunity to make the decisions that have ultimately contributed to our current environmental crisis. Eco-responsibility would not be gendered in climate change discourses if our reconsideration of systems of operation and oppression included the deconstruction and dismantlement of the gender binary. We must consider how outdated gender narratives influence discourses about climate change in order to begin searching for solutions in this climate crisis.

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Book Reviews edited by Joshua Parker

Heaven's Harsh Tableland: A New History of the Llano Estacado. By Paul H. Carlson. Texas A&M UP, 2023, 386 pp.

"Twelve thousand years ago in a wet, frigid climate, huge Columbian mammoths sauntered across a marshy Llano Estacado. Monstrous armadillos and giant ground sloths the size of old Volkswagen Beetles walked through the Llano's tall, coarse grasses" (1). With these words, Paul H. Carlson, professor emeritus of history at Texas Tech University, begins his opus on a region whose name may be familiar, but that is still shrouded in mystery. Just as Alex Hunt states in the book's foreword, Carlson does not characterize the volume as "environmental history, but the book comes pretty close, demonstrating the degree to which human history and change are essentially connected to the bioregional realities" (xi). Carlson here illustrates the chances and the problems related to such an approach: We can imagine a region devoid of humans, populated by mega-sloths and other long-vanished animals, but it is often necessary to make comparisons to our own present (or at least a past we can relate to). Likewise, we can be sure such megafauna did not think about the Llano Estacado as Llano Estacado. Like basically every region on Earth, this area in what is now eastern New Mexico and western Texas – and its meanings – were constructed by the people living there, thinking about it or simply interested in its resources. As Carlson reminds us, the name Llano Estacado itself is quite young, dating back only to the late 1700s or the first half of the nineteenth century (his volume unfortunately does not say much about Native American concepts related to this specific area). The author goes on to describe the physiography and cultural spaces of the modern-day Llano Estacado, mentioning the variety of cotton or cattle agriculture, oil wells, and sprawling urban areas such as Amarillo or Odessa. While Carlson refers to Euro-American views when stating that "little had changed" (7) in the area three hundred years after the *conquistador* Coronado had described it as devoid of landmarks, it can be assumed that indigenous groups would have differed in their opinion. In a study on the nineteenth-century *Comanchería*, Daniel Gelo states that while information on its spatial features may indeed be based on physiography, an "areal breakdown does not reflect known Comanche categories" (278). The author goes on to deal with dinosaurs, bison, and the Clovis culture "of highly effective hunters and foragers" (23). Its shortcomings

notwithstanding, the chapter represents a laudable integrative approach to early human and environmental history. Part 1 (like subsequent chapters) concludes with a very concise and helpful summary.

Carlson's second chapter provides an overview of regional history from about 8,500 years BP to the eve of the first Spanish *entradas* in the sixteenth century. Observations on the issue of non-human animals such as canines being integrated into local populations or the topic of the Medieval Warm Period hint at the trans-regional aspects of history in eras long before the advent of "globalization." Even before contact with European migrants became closer, the acquisition of horses, new weapons, and tools heavily influenced relations between indigenous groups. "Horse technology allowed for larger loads, larger tipis, larger collections of personal possessions, and larger concerns for the grassland environment and the grazing requirements" (51). Carlson presents a clear argument for a re-conceptualization of the region by non-European groups. The book lays out the complicated history of European intrusions, mentioning, for example, the 1581 Rodríguez-Chamuscado expedition "of twenty-eight people: missionaries, soldiers, and servants" (67) as well as a slave-hunter; or the story of María de Ágreda, who allegedly bilocated to America from Spain in the seventeenth century to further the missionization of indigenous groups. The importance of animals for the history of the region is again exemplified by Carlson's mentions of beaver hunting or the "enormous demand for horses and mules" (94) that would only continue to increase after the 1830s, and the central role of the Comanche in an integrated raiding and horse trade economy. He fails, however, to outline reasons and strategies behind the rise of the "Comanche Empire" during the 1700s as clearly as, for example, Pekka Hämäläinen has done by focusing, among other things, on forms of movement (trading, migration etc.) as an "instrument of power politics" (99). Chapters five, six, and seven deal with the region's history during the second half of the nineteenth century, characterizing the US Civil War as a reprieve for indigenous groups – interrupted by events like the Sand Creek massacre of 1864, which is strangely labeled "unnecessary but horrific" (112). During the 1874 Red River War, "soldiers did not kill many Indians, but their destruction of homes, horses, and winter supplies produced economic catastrophe and social breakdown" (132). Intrusions of buffalo hunters and "hidemen," followed by the introduction of a sheep and, a little later, open range cattle economy, resulted in the forced creation of a "rural, settled agriculture commonwealth" (139). When Carlson mentions a European bragging about the skinning of a Native woman, but immediately afterwards states that while often being "brutal and insensitive, [adventurers] tended to be loyal and trustworthy hunting companions" (148), one could definitely accuse the author himself of a lack of sensitivity. He deserves more credit when it comes to the depiction of environmental history, describing, for example, the scarcity of water: "Even in

years of high average rainfall, good water remained scarce . . . Ogallala Aquifer, of course, held plenty of sweet water, but getting it to aboveground holding tanks proved challenging until ranchers drilled wells and erected windmills" (179). Carlson dedicates more than 100 pages to the Llano in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries (chapters eight to ten). Among other things, he excels in describing the development of cities such as Lubbock, "a transportation hub . . . and center of a highly productive agricultural area" (249) during the 1920s, or the "blowing dirt" problem of the 1930s. Oddly, Carlson states that Second World War started "when England and France challenged Germany over the latter's aggressive advance through western Europe" (267). It is in the context of war-related changes that some of the very few mentions of African Americans in the Llano area can be found (the book does include, however, a number of pages on the regional history of the Ku Klux Clan). After a veritable tour-de-force through war and post-war social, cultural, and economic developments (such as investments in military infrastructure or the history of music in the region), the epilogue includes a sober note on an "expanding desert environment with less rainfall, more heat, and shifting plant and animal life" (310) and a call for soil conservation to preserve the Llano's identity and enable the survival of its (human and non-human) inhabitants. *Heaven's Harsh Tableland* features a useful bibliography (21 pages) that includes not only academic publications but also interviews, government documents, and manuscripts from university collections. The index refers to geographic terms, animals, scholars, historical characters, and ethnic groups, and is an important tool for readers. The author sometimes lacks the ability to honor non-European perspectives and some topics beyond the regional history of the "Staked Plains" tend to be handled imprecisely. However, Carlson's knowledge of "cowboy culture," rural and urban western Texas, and (even more so) his excellent observations on the complex interplay between ecology, economy, and culture in this important contact zone, make this book worth reading.

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