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Versions of America: Speculative Pasts, Presents, Futures

edited by
Matthias Klestil and Marijana Mikić

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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.

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Introduction: Versions, Narratives, and American Studies

Matthias Klestil

ABSTRACT

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

KEYWORDS

Versioning, narratology, speculation, contemporary literature

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Versioning, Speculation, Narrative

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Practices of Versioning and American Studies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ingrid Gessner and Angelika Ilg

ABSTRACT

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

KEYWORDS

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sociohistorical Context of the 1869 Expedition

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

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

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

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

The Frontier and the Ideology of Manifest Destiny

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

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

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

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

Reframing History: The Use(s) of Bodies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Critical Analysis of Dramatic Strategies

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

Storytelling and the Revisionist Versioning of History/ies

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

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

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

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

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

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

Imaginary Frontiers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Re-naming and Mapping in *Men on Boats*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Experiences and Reflections of the Theater Workshop

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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"Last Frontier. North to the Future." – Oil-Age Alaska and the Environmental Critique in Mei Mei Evans's *Oil and Water*

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses Mei Mei Evans's 2013 novel *Oil and Water* as a critical response to the competing narratives that have historically shaped three dominant versions of Alaska in the national imagination: as the Last Frontier to be explored, as an enduring frontier promising a balance between resource extraction and environmental protection, and as a wilderness to be preserved. Inspired by the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, which takes a pivotal place in US environmental history, the novel offers a realistic exploration of the environmental, social, and cultural consequences of oil dependency. By dramatizing the spill's devastating impact on both human and more-than-human life, *Oil and Water* challenges the images of Alaska as a limitless resource frontier and the enduring frontier, while advancing the notion of Alaska as a wilderness to be protected.

KEYWORDS

Oil spill, wilderness, resource extraction, environmental discourse

The history of Alaska is a complex story of territorial expansion, resource exploitation, and unsettled questions of land ownership. These events contributed to shifting and often conflicting narratives about Alaska and its place in the national consciousness of the United States. Alaska's peculiar geography and resource-rich non-human nature shaped the dominant image of Alaska as the Last Frontier, which, according to

Susan Kollin, is "a region whose history has yet to be written and whose virgin lands have yet to be explored" (*Nature's State* 2). More recently, in the early twentieth century, the discovery of substantial oil deposits on the North Slope secured Alaska's place on the national and global petroleumscape map, transforming its economic, political, and social life. This consolidated the public image of Alaska as the Last Frontier versus last wilderness into an "enduring frontier," a term coined by Roxanne Willis, which, however, was challenged in the spring of 1989 when the Exxon Valdez tanker spilled crude oil into the waters of Prince William Sound in the Gulf of Alaska, causing an unprecedented environmental catastrophe and making Alaska "a place to be preserved rather than exploited" (131). Alaska, then, is a prime example of how particular spaces can exist in multiple versions, as it entered the national imagination as a variously versioned frontier, and it is these processes of versioning that the following turns to. As oil continues to shape the state's economy in the twenty-first century, the versioning frontier discourse reflects what Stephen Haycox calls the ongoing "struggle with the basic conceptual dichotomy between development and environmental protection" (353). These ideas permeate the Alaskan social and cultural life. They are present in non-fictional representations of the state and in the "casual publicity" visible in tourism advertisements representing its territory as a unique region of pristine nature and wilderness (352). They also inform cultural production, including fictional narratives that in varied ways respond to the different discourses of Alaska.

Against this backdrop, my article turns to Mei Mei Evans's 2013 novel *Oil and Water* as an example of a fictional narrative in which the conflicting discursive constructions of Alaska are translated into a narrative strategy and an explicit environmental and social critique of the oil-age Alaska. The novel challenges and negotiates the differing versions of Alaska's frontier through the perspectives of boosters and conservationists. While boosters support resource exploitation, conservationists can be divided into two groups: one that recognizes the need for economic development but advocates for a balance between industry and ecological protection, and one that denounces resource exploitation. Through actions and perspectives of the characters who represent these mentalities, Evans's novel negotiates three versions of the frontier: Alaska as a resource frontier to be exploited, as an enduring frontier that balances extraction and ecological protection, and as a wilderness to be preserved. Through its realistic depiction of the socially, culturally, and ecologically detrimental effects of oil dependency, the novel provides a subversive commentary on dominant frontier notions of Alaska. In doing so, it promotes the preservation of Alaska's wilderness while offering a space to critically reflect on the dominant narratives that shape perceptions of the land and culture.

On the one hand, the novel gives a central place to the characters who represent a conservationist mentality oriented toward balancing resource exploitation and environmental protection or who denounce the oil industry. Integral to the story is their attempt to mitigate the spill's impact by helping to save sea animals and wildlife while raising questions of responsibility, morality, and justice. By addressing these issues, the narrative underscores the coexistence and interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life acknowledging their shared vulnerability and recognizing the vast damage that a dependence on oil has caused. By so doing, the novel questions the possibility of balancing resource extraction and environmental protection that the notion of the enduring frontier promises.

On the other hand, the novel explores the booster mentality through the actions of characters who support the oil industry and who subscribe to the "rhetoric of acceptable risks" (Evans 232) it employs to promote spillage as a necessary downside of the oil business. Just as it seems that the oil company does everything to alleviate the damage, it makes a controversial demand: Everyone participating in the clean-up and animal-saving actions must accept the payment. The moral question of whether to accept this "deep-pocket approach" (134) deeply divides the community of Evans's fictional town of Selby which needs to find a way to restore "its former unity" (261).

Since *Oil and Water* shows a strong awareness of Alaskan (colonial) history and centrally includes perspectives of the Native people who were often excluded from the vision of Alaska as the Last Frontier, I frame my analysis historically. This historical framing shows that resource exploitation and oil development shaped discourses that inspired social action which challenged colonial legacies, confronted environmental degradation, and promoted Native land rights and environmental justice, strengthening the vision of Alaska as a wilderness to be protected rather than exploited. The following will begin by laying out the processes of resource exploitation that shaped conflicting narratives of expansion and conservation reflected in the three prominent versions of Alaska: as the Last Frontier (framed through the discourse of boosterism), the enduring frontier, and wilderness to be protected (both of the latter rooted in conservationist ideals). Subsequently, my article analyzes *Oil and Water* as a fictional narrative that negotiates the three frontier discourses, offering a social and environmental critique of oil extraction. I focus on how the actions of characters and their personal experiences of the oil spill challenge the narratives of the Last Frontier and the enduring frontier and advance the notion of Alaska as a wilderness to be protected rather than exploited.

Historical Frameworks and Versions of Alaska

Alaska has a unique place in the cultural geography of the United States. For a long time, it was missing from US-American historical accounts because of its geographic

and cultural distance from the contiguous United States, and because its history did not fit America's expansionist narrative. As Willis puts it: "Remote and mysterious, Alaska did not attract settlers" (11). In her study *Alaska's Place in the West: From the Last Frontier to the Last Great Wilderness*, she explains the reasons behind this. Native Alaskan people resisted the reservation system, and attempts to establish a colony of agricultural settlers failed. The region's vast and shifting landscape with polar nights made it unattractive to settlers. This is not to say that Alaska's history lacks colonial encounters. According to William Iggiagruk Hensley, the Native populations of Alaska "were adversely affected by the Russians, who came in search of valuable furs; then by the whalers and fishermen from ports around the world; and, beginning in the 1890s for several decades, by fortune seekers during the great gold rush" (197). These encounters not only brought diseases to which Native Alaskans had no immunity but also caused widespread starvation by depleting the game and fish on which Indigenous communities depended (197). Nevertheless, Willis points out that, after the gold rush, Alaska disappeared from "many American history textbooks" (2).

Furthermore, prominent narratives depicted Alaska as an isolated "place where people hunt for their own food, build their own houses, and live a rustic life 'close to nature'" (2) which distanced it from the US-American cultural imagination and the notion of American exceptionalism. This perception of Alaska as an isolated place and as an "icebox," a term used by Peter Coates (30), began to shift in the late nineteenth century as mineral exploitation transformed it into the Last Frontier, integrating it into US-American national identity and narrowing the cultural distance between Alaska and the contiguous United States. The most significant changes occurred in 1890 when "the Census Bureau reported that there was no longer a discernable frontier line, and [that] the era of 'free' American land had come to an end" (Willis 12). This was three years before Frederick James Turner famously declared that the American frontier had closed. Boosters, who saw great potential in Alaska for developing industries that resembled Western models, such as the cattle industry, attempted to make Alaska more like the contiguous United States (12). The exploitation of fish, timber, ore, and fur helped shape the narrative that Alaska "should remain a storehouse of natural resources to be exploited by private entrepreneurs" (11). Finally, the successful explorations of Alaska for minerals and the building of the railroad system to attract settlers rendered Alaska the Last Frontier (14).

Granting Alaska this status as Last Frontier, and thereby designating it as a (not-yet-closed) space for settlement and exploration, did more than merely "[lessen] the frontier anxiety" that the Turner thesis famously expressed. It "rendered Alaska comprehensible to Americans" (14–15), narrowing the cultural distance that complicated Alaska's integration into the national consciousness. Victoria Wyatt explains that US-Americans often perceived Alaska "as a metaphorical island – distanced from the

mainland by Canada rather than by an ocean, but distanced all the same" (565). In this light, the concept of the Last Frontier "made Alaska part of America, and everyone could feel confident about how the future of the region would unfold" (Willis 14–15). Alaska emerged as "a national salvation whose existence also alleviates fears about the inevitable environmental doom of the United States" (Kollin, *Nature's State* 5). The idea of the frontier closure meant, among other things, the end of US-American abundance, an abundance tied intrinsically to the exploitation of nature. As William Cronon explains:

> The forests that put roofs over American heads might vanish. The rivers that brought water to American cities might run dry. The coal mines that fueled American factories and heated American homes might give out. If these things happened, the nation's prosperity would surely erode and, with it, the political and personal freedoms that depended on prosperity for their survival. (606)

Alaska's diverse natural world, then, promised a solution to these fears.

However, Alaska's image as the Last Frontier was seriously challenged by the large-scale drilling of oil on the North Slope and the subsequent building of the oil infrastructure, most notably the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System. Oil development required "conquering" Alaska's landscape causing environmental destruction which initiated actions to protect the Alaskan wilderness and brought to light the unsettled questions of Native Alaskan land ownership. Conservationist activism and the political struggle by the Native Alaskans over land rights eventually yielded a version of Alaska as the enduring frontier that manages to maintain the balance between economic development and wilderness protection.

Native Alaskan questions concerning land ownership were the heritage of nineteenth-century developments when "Alaska became part of the United States through the Treaty of Concession with Russia" before it became the forty-ninth state of the American Union in 1958 (Williams, "Alaska and Its People" 9). The Treaty vaguely defined the status of the Native Alaskan people which made their rights "de facto nonexistent" (Willis 117). This vagueness became the unifying force in the 1950s and 1960s among the Native Alaskans who were usually "suspicious of one another, as their needs and wants varied from group to group and region to region" (Willis 129). One Alaska Native declared that "it has now become necessary to make a determined stand to protect what is rightfully ours" (qtd. in Willis 118–19). The state and federal government eventually negotiated the settlement that resulted in the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) that "extinguished indigenous land claims in exchange for forty-four million acres and nearly one billion dollars to be managed through twelve regional Alaska Native corporations" (Kollin, "Alaska Native Literature" 28).

According to Roy M. and Shari M. Huhndorf, the passage of ANCSA offered opportunities for financial power and political influence, but its corporate structure made the "land vulnerable to loss, and the separation of tribes from their land" raised issues of sovereignty (68). One Inupiat Eskimo speaking in the name of many Alaskans following the legislative approval of ANCSA said that the ANCSA saw "'the land as something to be measured in terms of profit and losses,' a 'vision of Alaska that makes lots of dollars and no sense to the people who live there, especially the Natives'" (qtd. in Huhndorf and Huhndorf 68). Despite many problematic cultural and societal implications and contested interpretations of the act as, in Evan Peter's words, "a politically correct illusion that perpetuated colonization in contemporary times" (180), or as endangering subsistence lifestyles of the Native Alaskan people, most of them accepted it as "the best settlement they could win" (Huhndorf and Huhndorf 68). Although ambiguous and echoing colonial resource extraction patterns, this settlement marked a turning point, fostering empowerment among Native Alaskan communities who were "subjected to colonial and genocidal pressures" that "took a tremendous toll on Alaska Native societies and almost destroyed them" (Williams, "Solidarity" 202).

Further activism led to the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), which protected millions of acres as national parks and wildlife refuges making it "the largest conservationist act in history, more than doubling the total acres in the U.S. Wilderness Preservation System" (Willis 129). In the public's view, these developments promised to balance oil exploitation with nature conservation. As a result, by 1980, Alaska emerged in the US-American consciousness as "a place that had it all, that protected the interests of everyone. The 'last frontier' was now an 'enduring frontier,' a place where Natives coexisted with non-Natives, and where national and state interests had been brought into balance" (129). Changed public perception of Alaska did not mean the end of struggles as Alaska Natives grappled with maintaining traditional lifestyles within the corporate framework, the state faced challenges from the oil industry's economic power, and Alaskans resisted the influx of regulations tied to federal land management (129). Nevertheless, in the 1980s "these battles became local concerns and Alaska once again faded into the background of national politics" (129).

The narrative of the enduring frontier was destabilized by the Exxon Valdez oil spill that inspired Evans's novel. In the aftermath of this catastrophe, which gained national attention and took a pivotal place in US environmental history, Alaska was "more likely to be described as America's 'last great wilderness,' a place to be preserved rather than exploited" (Willis 131). On March 24, 1989, the Exxon Valdez oil tanker, transporting crude oil from the North Slope, ran aground on Blight Reef in Prince William Sound, releasing twelve million gallons of crude oil. As Joanna Burger

explains, with the Alaskan winds and currents, it took only a few days for the crude oil to spread throughout the sound and reach the Gulf of Alaska "and the remote beaches at the end of convoluted fiords" (49). It is widely acknowledged that this disaster resulted from human error, as the captain's instructions were not promptly followed. By the time the crew realized the tanker was headed toward Blight Reef, "barely covered with ice waters," the ship was already locked in autopilot mode, making the crew's efforts to change course futile (47). The outcome was "the largest oil spill in U.S. history, and the sheer magnitude alarmed even the most complacent supporters of big industry and the oil companies" (47). Thousands of birds and sea otters died, and the spill "destroyed the subsistence lifestyle of native Alaskans" (51). For a long time, the spill remained at the forefront of public and scientific concern. It sparked "over a hundred studies outlining 'a process to determine proper compensation to the public for injuries to natural resources'" (53).

This oil spill is not notable solely due to its size. It was considered "most tragic because it took place in an area whose natural beauty was thought to surpass all others" (Kollin, *Nature's State* 2). The media coverage highlighted dramatic images of oil-slicked animals and tainted landscapes, lamenting "the destruction of one of the world's last remaining wilderness areas" (2). The threat was not limited to nature and wildlife. It also endangered the frontier "meanings assigned to Alaska in the popular national imagination" (3). Nevertheless, the frontier myths did not hold the same significance for all Alaska Natives, whose media reports shifted attention away from the dominant narrative toward "the crisis facing a population for whom nearly 50 percent of its food is harvested from the sea and the land" (5). In contrast, many Alaskans "took the news [of the spill] in stride, quietly celebrating the high-paying jobs that would come with the cleanup" (Willis 130). The event of the oil spill is thus a moment that highlights the existence of and tensions between various historical versions of Alaska: as Last Frontier, enduring frontier, and wilderness to protect.

Negotiations of the Frontier Discourse in *Oil and Water*

Oil and Water dramatizes these contrasting responses to the crisis through the perspectives of boosters, who view the oil spill as an acceptable cost of progress, and conservationists, who denounce the oil industry as harmful. By portraying these conflicting viewpoints, the novel negotiates different frontier versions of Alaska. On the one hand, it explores the actions of the oil industry and its staunch supporters, showing how deeply the frontier mentality is tied to resource exploitation. On the other hand, by exploring the community's fight for survival in the wake of the oil spill and by giving a central place to the Native and non-Native characters who voice ethical critiques of resource exploitation, the narrative challenges the version of Alaska as the Last Frontier and the enduring frontier and promotes an image of Alaska as a

wilderness to be protected. In doing so, the novel engages with frontier discourse as an environmental critique, exposing oil's profound impact on history, landscapes, and identities while highlighting the urgent need to preserve Alaska's wilderness.

The novel is inspired by Evans's personal experiences of the Exxon Valdez oil spill, which "became a complex symbol of environmental despoliation and corporate greed" (Haycox 336). As Rosanne Pagano points out, Evans worked as a public information officer for the city of Homer in Alaska and, in the aftermath of the spill, "became a trusted voice that helped quell rumors and countered spin." The novel represents a compelling and emotionally charged narrative that probes into the meanings of the oil spill as one of the most serious environmental disasters with long-term consequences. It chronicles 153 days following the spillage when the Mammoth Kuparuk tanker, described in a radio broadcast as "the Mammoth Petroleum Corporation's newest, largest, 'most state-of-the-art' oil tanker," carrying crude oil from the North Slope, "run[s] aground in Montagues Reef" in the Gulf of Alaska, releasing "twelve million gallons" of oil into Alaska's pristine waters. The petroleum industry tries to downplay this event by labeling it "the Critical Incident" (Evans 17), but it turns out that it is one of the largest oil spills globally and an unprecedented environmental disaster for Alaska and its people, a result that the novel ties to its dominant image as: "Last Frontier. North to the Future" (63).

The novel is set in the fictional town of Selby in Alaska at a critical moment of the oil spill. At the center are Gregg, a fisherman, and Lee his deckhand who share "the same thick black hair, same dusky complexion, same Asiatic eyes: her Korean and his Alaska Native blood" (Evans 2). Their discovery of the spill triggers the action of the novel. Waking from a nightmarish dream, Gregg realizes that something is seriously wrong. He smells fuel and in panic moves around his boat to "identify the danger" (13). But "[t]he smell, enormous and cloying, assaults him like a physical force. . . . The overwhelming odor calls to mind raw soil, as of earth scraped open by a bulldozer or backhoe, but it also smells like gasoline" (13-14). Making sure that it is not their skipper that is leaking fuel, Gregg and Lee look at the surrounding water for clues: "The sea appears dense and opaque, a plastic lifelessness to it that he's never seen before. Even in calm conditions – like here, a protected cove – the ocean is a living entity; it kisses your hull. But something is wrong with the water. It lies inanimate and limp, as if dead" (14). At dawn,

> they gaze upon a vast oil slick, its muddy discoloration extending as far as Lee can see, the rocky shoreline strained brownish-black in both directions from the night's high tide. Up close, the water surface is gelatinous, clotted, and coagulated like some kind of infernal gravy, complete with giblets of seaweed and driftwood. (Evans 16–17)

The results of the "most recent survey estimate the size of the spill at five hundred square miles" (Evans 18). The incoming information from oceanographers and state

officials is not encouraging since the spill is not only quickly expanding due to the second-highest tidal sequence of the year but "there is no organized effort to contain it" (18). Communities that are close to the point of spillage are attempting to prevent the slick from reaching the shore but their attempts prove futile and "[n]o one knows what to do" (33). While waiting for some kind of instruction on what measures to undertake, they realize that everyone is endangered: the traditional lifestyle of Native communities, people involved in the seafood industry, and the rich wildlife. But not everyone is worried because the spillage offers an opportunity for another economic boom through the money paid for the cleanup actions by the oil company responsible for the spill. These two perceptions of the spill illustrate the conservationist and the booster mentality. However, the novel does not offer a simplistic understanding of either the conservationist or booster perspectives. Instead, it depicts nuanced character transformations influenced by the spill, illustrating the complexity of ideological change.

Placing a Native Alaskan fisherman at the center of the narrative, the novel creates an authentic space to challenge and reframe Alaska's frontier images. Through Gregg and the perspective of his Native Alaskan friend Wassily, and the radio reporter Daniel, who share the same conservationist mentality, the novel anchors the frontier critique within the broader colonial history. The depiction of the oil spill's impact on Native Alaskan communities exposes how the frontier narrative endangers the subsistence lifestyle of the Native Alaskan communities and justifies environmental exploitation that threatens cultural survival and community well-being.

The characters learn that "the Native community of Pogibshi has been 'oiled' during the night" and that marine biologists caution them "not to eat anything harvested from the sea" (Evans 31). The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) estimates that "the two Chugachmiut villages on the Barrier Islands each hou[sing] a couple hundred mostly Native residents" will soon be affected. The stakes are high because the Barrier Islands are economically significant as "a huge draw for sightseers" (68). Moreover, they are a habitat for murres "whose eggs' food value has enabled continuous human settlement there over hundreds of years" (68). Gregg immediately thinks of his Native Alaskan friends Wassily and his wife Marie for whom, he thinks, "the case is closed: [s]o much for their Experiment in Indigeneity" (31). What Gregg perceives as an experiment in Indigeneity is the fact that Wassily and Marie with their three children "moved to Pogibshi last year in an attempt to recover a more purely traditional lifestyle. They haven't even had a summer there yet, the only time of year when subsistence comes easy" (31).

One Yup'ik writer, John Active, describes subsistence in the following way: "To take care; not to waste, but to share … To remember my elders, those living and dead … To be watchful at all times that I do not offend the spirits of the fish and animals that

I take for food … To take from land only what I can give to the needy if I have enough to share" (qtd. in Huhndorf and Huhndorf 75). Ken Ross explains that Native Alaskans see natural resources as "integral to their identity and way of life" because "gathering, distribution, processing, and consumption of wild goods [gives] them a sense of well-being and invigorate[s] their communities" (83). Gregg's concern about his Native Alaskan friends signals what Burger says about the Exxon Valdez oil spill: "The disruption of the lives of the people in subsistence-based villages was one of the most severe and long-lasting effects of the entire oil spill" (194).

For Gregg, the disruptive effects of the oil spill represent the consequences of the colonialist resource exploitation:

> Just as uncontained crude oil has proven fatal to the wild coast, he decides, a second wave – of unleashed greed – now toxifies the coastal community. From the earliest days of Russian incursion, Alaska has hosted a sequence of economic booms: the boom trade, logging, gold and copper mining, fishing, Pipeline construction, petroleum extraction. Now it's an oil spill: environmental holocaust turned growth industry. (Evans 155)

By referencing the earliest encounter with the Russians, Gregg situates the modern exploitation of oil within the broader context of colonial history that framed Alaska as the land of plenty initiating the cycle of environmental impoverishment. His rather provocative statement, "environmental holocaust turned growth industry," is a powerful ethical critique of resource exploitation that causes irreversible destruction for profit. Referring to the "second wave of unleashed greed," Gregg suggests that oil extraction not only contaminates the more-than-human world but that it contaminates communities, making them greedy and prioritizing profit while neglecting its environmental costs.

Furthermore, the perspectives of Wassily and Daniel, the radio reporter investigating the cause of the spill, too, demonstrate and critique the underlying colonial power relations of the Last Frontier narrative. Wassily argues that what they are experiencing now resembles war: "It's the same war *kass'aqs* [White people. Western uncivilization.] have been waging against Mother Earth and her creatures, including us original people, since time immemorial" (Evans 184, original emphasis). He explains: "Just ask the Ogoni, in Nigeria. . . . Or the tribes of the Oriente, in Ecuador. Ask what's left of the Osage, right here in the goods of old U.S. of A. They'll give you an earful about what it's like to go head-to-head with oil companies in defense of your life, your land" (184). Wassily here evokes the history of violence that characterizes the colonial encounter between the non-white and white world in the search for oil that connects geographically distant communities through the shared sense of dispossession. He also highlights what John Keeble describes as "the concomitant spiritual way of seeing that the Native people have formed over time" (9) that sets them apart from the "Western

uncivilization" (Evans 184). In this way, Wassily exposes the resource frontier as a site of violence, dispossession, and cultural erasure rather than progress.

Daniel is passionate about finding out the reason for the spill on his own because he is deeply distrustful of the petroleum industry. His distrust is triggered by the attitude of the officials and the oil industry toward the coastal residents and especially Native Alaskans. His perspective highlights the continuance of colonial practices that treat Native Alaskans as outsiders. The oil company is assuring them, third month into the crisis,

> that subsistence foods are "probably" safe to eat. Are they kidding? Daniel can exactly picture Wassily narrowing his eyes in skepticism and distrust. How must it feel to be among the nth generation to inhabit Alaska continuously for millennia, only to have the same people who overran your land and dispossessed you of your aboriginal rights now tell you what you can and cannot eat? (233)

Daniel's distrust ties back to the first encounters between the Native Alaskans and the settlers who saw Alaska as a space to be "civilized" and explored, ignoring generations of Native Alaskans who populated the region. Gregg's, Daniel's, and Wassily's perspectives thus reflect the ongoing effects of colonialism and critique the version of Alaska as the Last Frontier, emphasizing that Native Alaskans are, at the time of the spill, still affected by the decisions of those who have historically occupied their land.

Evans's novel, however, also features characters that challenge the version of Alaska as enduring frontier: As the spill's detrimental environmental and social effects unfold, Gregg, Tess, and Lee are the figures Evans uses to confront the oil industry's actions in deeply personal ways that expose the failure of the enduring frontier. Gregg's anger, Tess's activism, and Lee's sense of disillusionment reveal that Alaska cannot be "a place where economic development peacefully [meets] a wilderness landscape" and protects the interests of everyone (Willis 129). Even before the oil covers the coast of Selby, the oil company assembles bird-cleaning centers where animals are being cleaned or stored for further examination. With the oiled and dead birds arrives the unsettling news of hundreds of dead otters, which causes fear: "'I'm scared. Aren't you? Things are already crazy and oil hasn't hit us yet'" (Evans 71). These words anticipate the state some (not only Gregg) describe as an "environmental holocaust" (100) that emerges once the oil spill reaches Selby. On day six when "Selby gets greased," Mammoth Petroleum "announces the hiring of unskilled workers for beach cleanup" (92). It will stipulate "a flat rate of twenty dollars an hour and additionally provide all-you-can-eat hot meals to all workers" (92). Furthermore, they offer "to pay hundreds of dollars a day in leasing fees" for everyone willing to lend their vessels and boats to transport the workers (92). The company's "cheesy motto" "Energizing our lives" enrages Gregg: "First you destroy the place we live in and wipe out

our livelihood, then you offer to pay us so much you hope we won't notice" (92). Because "beaches [have been] contaminated overnight, the bodies of oiled birds and all manner of dead or dying marine life now begin to wash ashore below town" (92). As a result, "the state posts notices along the waterfront: 'Toxic Substance!' 'Health Hazard!'" (92).

What seems to enrage Gregg even more than the fact that people are accepting the company's payments is the thought that "ravens, foxes, seals and ospreys can't read" these signs which is why they play no role in protecting the animals: "Just as you can't remove this much toxicity from the environment, so too you can't prevent critters – be they finned, furred, or feathered – from coming into contact with it, ingesting it" (Evans 92). Once an animal ingests oil it makes it sick, and "a sick animal is tantamount to a dead animal, since it's the one that can no longer fend for itself" (93). Gregg's concern is shared by Lee who derives meaning and solace from the ocean while considering its inhabitants sacred: "How dare Big Business and government collude in jeopardizing the safety and sanctity of all the astonishing creatures who depend on the ocean for life!" (100). This sentiment is strongly present within the community. As a consequence, "[w]hen the spill buries Selby's beaches in a foot and a half of toxic mud, even those reticent by nature, the most law-abiding of citizens, storm the oil's company's officers in the new hotel to demand action and accountability" (93).

In contrast to Gregg, Lee, and other members of Selby's community who reject the payments and resent the oil industry, others fully embrace the oil spill as a chance for financial benefit, showing the ambivalence the novel's characters articulate regarding Alaska as enduring frontier. The contrasting responses are reflected in "[t]he wide range of sentiment concerning the event" (Evans 234). The slogans: "Boycott Mammoth Petroleum" and "Tanker from the Black Lagoon" versus "Alaskans to Big Oil: THANK YOU!" and "Our hero, Captain Aegnus!" illustrate two opposing attitudes to the oil spill, the petroleum industry in general, and to Alaska as a resource colony or the Last Frontier. The latter can be seen as the result of the "rhetoric of acceptable risks" used by the petroleum industry in the aftermath of the oil spill: "As unfortunate as this event may be, we do well to remember that it's also the normal cost of doing business" (232). Through this rhetoric and "with its money sustaining the community, those who don't curse it have come to worship the oil giant. No doubt some are even convinced they've never had it so good" (233). As a result, "at the height of its spill response, Mammoth Petroleum employs twenty thousand workers" (252), coming from different parts of the state and the world. Many residents of Selby experience the "spill prosperity" (233) also by renting accommodation to "thousands of job seekers" (136). This ambivalence is symbolic of the enduring conflict between the boosters

who support economic progress driven by oil and the conservationists worried about the protection of Alaska's wilderness.

The conflict between the boosters and conservationists causes the "social disintegration of the coastal communities" (Evans 252). The issue of "Mammoth money" continues to divide the coastal community, intensifying rather than easing the conflict. Tess, Daniel's wife and a nurse who came to Selby to help with the cleanup, observes that the conflict between those who are working for the oil company and those who are not is growing, leading to broken friendships and breakups. Ultimately, "mistrust and criticism separate those perceived of as profiting from the spill from those who" are not "seduced by the prospect of becoming 'spillionaires'" (149). As Tess observes, one of the greatest values and strengths of Selby as a community — "the tolerance most people routinely extended to one another," encapsulated in the phrase "Live and let live" — is now likely to never "[recover] its former unity" (261). In an open letter to the editor of the *Anchorage Tribune* she asserts: "Enough is enough . . . The real question is: can we learn to live with less? To have or to be. Is that the real question?" (261). Through this philosophical question, Tess challenges the human dependency on oil and confronts the frontier myth that values Alaska for what can be extracted from it.

Tess, however, did not always have this attitude toward extractive industries, and the change in her perception of oil extraction demonstrates the failure of the enduring frontier. At first, she had difficulties understanding the outrage toward people who agreed to be compensated for participating in the clean-up activities. To her, "those who've quit the bird and otter treatment centers rather than accept Mammoth's wages need to face reality. Of course no one's happy with the situation, but some of us seem to be doing a better job than others of accepting it. Oil is a fact of life, people. Get a grip" (Evans 134). However, the experience of the spill makes her question this conviction so that, at the end of the novel, she asks "what is it about petroleum" that makes "humans sell [their] souls for the stuff?" (262).

This change reflects Evans's broader narrative strategy that relies on character development to challenge the narrative of the enduring frontier and to advance the notion of Alaska as a wilderness to be protected. Tess is not the only character whose experience of the spill fundamentally changes her view of oil extraction from seeing it as an economic necessity to perceiving it as a social, cultural, and environmental threat. Even Gregg and Lee are initially deeply invested in resource exploitation through fishing, the former not being opposed to oil extraction as such but particularly to its risks in relation to Oceanic life. Although gaining his reputation in the community of Selby for his resistance to the oil industry, his activism before the spill was primarily inspired by his personal experience of other oil spills and influenced

by the media reports and images about their destruction of seas around the world. Readers learn that:

> He loathes the oil industry as only a fisherman can. When the Pipeline was first proposed to Congress, in fact, he was one of a group of Alaskans who'd traveled to D.C. at their own expense to lobby for an overland trucking route – anything to preempt industry's plan to transport crude petroleum by sea. The risk of an ocean spill was flat-out unacceptable, these Alaskans argued before the federal law-makers. (Evans 7)

On the one hand, this shows that Gregg and other members of the community of Selby are aware of the detrimental effects of oil infrastructure. On the other hand, this passage reveals a contradiction in Gregg's initial attitude to oil commodification. Although he loathes the oil industry, he was lobbying against it only from the perspective of a fisherman and supported the building of the pipeline on the land because for him it is the ocean, not the land, that is the main source of living. Before denouncing the oil industry in general, Gregg believes in Alaska as an enduring frontier, while trying to avoid or mitigate its detrimental environmental effects.

Even Lee, who has a profound relationship to Alaska's non-human nature, represents an ambivalence regarding Alaska as an enduring frontier, since at least at the beginning of the novel, she does not explicitly advocate against the oil industry. Instead, she acknowledges that it is the reason why she finds herself in Alaska. The family of her friend Tess, for instance, also moved to Alaska "when Mammoth Petroleum hired her father to work as a teamster in Prudhoe Bay" (Evans 89) where oil was first discovered on the North Slope. Many "fathers (and an occasional mother)" followed the oil boom in the North Slope because "the oil company made it very worthwhile for their employees: good pay, excellent benefits, generous bonuses, and time off" (89). Only with the understanding of the scale of the oil spill do the residents of Selby start questioning the cost of their dependence on oil as they demand that the oil industry take responsibility and necessary action to alleviate the damage of the spill. These changing perspectives challenge the notion of Alaska as a place that balances extractive industries and environmental protection and advance a version of Alaska as a wilderness worth preserving.

Since Lee, among all the characters of *Oil and Water*, represents the most profound and closest relationship with the more-than-human world, she also figures as Evans's primary means of expressing a version of Alaska as wilderness to be protected. The novel's depiction of her experience of and reaction to nature's destruction through the oil spill signals the urgency of protecting Alaska's sea life and wilderness:

> Lee's stupefied by the almost complete absence of life along the usually teeming shore. Nothing moves. No red-legged oystercatchers stilt-steeping into the surf; no shrilling peeps darting into the lace of foam at water's edge; no crabs zigging and zagging, their busy legs stitching tiny footprints into wet sand; no countless microscopic copepods spritzing about your feet like carbonation. Now nothing moves except the gulls and

> crows feeding opportunistically and gluttonously on the tainted flesh of the spill-killed. . . . How long before anyone will once more enjoy steamed clams and mussels? How long before fish and shrimp and crab are declared edible? What must it be like for the Chukanoks and others who rely on subsistence, for whom the gathering and eating of wild food is not just occasional novelty but the very means and meanings of existence? (Evans 180–81)

Lee's repetitive use of negatives emphasizes the absence of life and creates a sense of haunting emptiness and stillness of the place that used to thrive with life. Delineating the absence of different life forms – oystercatchers, peeps, crabs, copepods – Lee creates a rhythmic lament for the spill-killed life. The stillness of the scenery is contrasted with the movement of "the gulls and crows feeding opportunistically" on the dead. This contrast creates irony because life persists, but only in scavenging the consequences of death. Asking about the Chukanoks and other Native Alaskans, Lee establishes a direct link between the spill and the uncertain future of communities that depend on the ocean for survival, conveying a sense of injustice and loss that extends from the ocean to the coast. The imagery Lee evokes demonstrates the failure of the frontier myth of Alaska as a place of endless abundance and limitless progress. Her emphasis on erasure and absence mirrors the exhaustion of the more-than-human world and the possible erasure of Indigenous presence. Lee's two questions at the end of the passage expose the necessity to preserve wildlife in order to ensure human survival.

Finally, Lee's actions but also Gregg's tragic loss of his son toward the end of the novel bring forward the notion of Alaska as a wilderness to be protected. Lee laments that "[e]verybody wants something from Alaska. Furs, Gold, copper, zinc. Fish. Oil and timber. Hunting trophies. The 'pristine wilderness experience that renews your spirit' blah blah blah. But whatever it is, everyone's taking something; no one's giving back" (Evans 173). Here, Lee exposes the colonial mindset of the frontier narrative that views Alaska as the land to be relentlessly exploited. Through her sense of disillusionment, the novel brings to the forefront the image of Alaska as a wilderness that needs to be protected rather than a resource to be exploited. Here, Lee's nuanced understanding of the more-than-human world and her suffering due to the tragic death of Gregg's son Aaron, likely caused by exposure to the toxic oil fumes while on the animal saving expedition, demonstrates the failure of Alaska as an enduring frontier.

Aaron's death makes Lee feel most bereft in her life, and it is the moment when she explicitly accuses the oil industry, the state, and the government for failing "not just Alaskans but all Americans, as well as people everywhere who love wild nature, by their failure to take adequate precautions to protect it" (Evans 240). What makes this even more tragic is Gregg's conviction that he could have prevented it by taking Aaron to the doctor's office instead of leaving him alone in the apartment and going

back to his old habit, excessive drinking in the bar. His and the *Kuparuk* tanker captain's mistakes are, Gregg decides, "fuckups beyond forgiveness" (250). He decides to join Alcoholics Anonymous "as a debt to repay Aaron before he can contemplate the luxury of ending his own worthless life" (251). However, instead of engaging in self harm, Gregg decides to give up fishing and live a life that honors his son's memory by starting humanitarian work. Gregg's loss can be understood not only as a personal tragedy but as a symbol of the loss and erasure of the Native Alaskan cultures and the failure of both versions of Alaska as the Last Frontier and the enduring frontier. Because of Aaron's death and because of the damage inflicted on non-human nature, Lee finds it difficult to stay in Selby and decides to finish her studies and pursue "a master's degree in marine biology" (Evans 264).

The novel ends with an image of Lee, the most ardent advocate of nature preservation, wishing to ask her late friend Aaron: "What do you do if you love nature more than people, but people are destroying nature?" (Evans 266). This question initiates the closing imaginary dialogue of the novel:

> So far, all he's told her is that it's not the right question. "Nothing's going to change until people do," she hears him saying, and Lee wonders if humans are really capable of change.
> "Look at you," Gregg's son says. "You've changed. How about giving others the benefit of the doubt?"
> But I am not a joiner, she thinks.
> "Now would be a good time to start," he adds. (Evans 266)

Despite Lee's disillusionment and Gregg's tragic loss, the novel signals that there is hope to change things for the better and that such change starts with us, humans. Lee – for whom "the Northland is her first love," who "is married to Alaska," and who is "most alive when wandering the tundra, exploring the rain forest, or fishing on the ocean" – experiences wilderness as the ultimate value that gives Alaska and "her life meaning" (Evans 11). Lee sees the spill as a clear sign that "[Alaskans] can't have it both ways. Can't enjoy the benefits of resource extraction without any downside. Americans in general – and Alaskans in particular maybe – have grown so accustomed to entitlements that we're completely unwilling to pay the true cost of our lifestyle" (228). Lee's reasoning encapsulates the tension between economic progress and environmental preservation that the novel explores, resulting in its strong impulse to reimagine Alaska not as the Last Frontier nor as an enduring frontier but as a wilderness to be protected. In this sense, *Oil and Water* can be seen as what Lawrence Buell describes as a "unique [act] of environmental imagination" that "may direct thought toward alternative futures" (2).

Conclusion

Oil and Water remains an important fictional record of environmental destruction that participates in the frontier discourse as an environmental critique of the oil-age Alaska. The novel negotiates the competing frontier narratives of resource exploitation and environmental protection through a narrative strategy that relies on the actions of characters who embody booster and conservationist mentalities and whose activism has shaped contradicting versions of Alaska as a Last Frontier and resource colony, an enduring frontier that balances exploitation and preservation, and as a wilderness to be protected. Through its realistic portrayal of the devastating social, cultural, and environmental impacts of oil dependency, it effectively challenges romanticized frontier myths that frame Alaska as a land of endless opportunity. It brings moral and ethical dimensions to thinking of resource extraction by depicting the (Native Alaskan) community's struggle with the manipulative rhetoric of "acceptable risks" that justifies environmental devastation. By giving voice to Native communities often excluded from frontier narratives and emphasizing the interconnectedness of human and non-human life, *Oil and Water* challenges the myth of Alaska as an inexhaustible resource frontier. Ultimately, it advances a version of Alaska that is valued not for what can be extracted from it but for its cultural, ecological, and spiritual significance. In doing so, the novel signals the need to rethink the human relationship with the land and the ocean as it should be rooted in preservation rather than exploitation. The processes of versioning Alaska demonstrate that resource extraction shapes competing narratives that define the meanings of spaces. Reinterpreting spaces through storytelling is a powerful means of challenging extractive logics and imagining alternative futures both in Alaska and beyond.

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Cabin Fever, or: Back to the Future? The (Anti-)Pastoral in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *Walden* (1854)

Robert A. Winkler

Abstract

Canonized classics of US-American literature such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* were published at the beginning of the 1850s – that crucial moment in the history of the United States when it found itself on the brink of the Civil War. Both works epitomize the nation's contemporaneous racial climate, i.e. the legacy and workings of the institution of slavery, in the simple material form of the cabin. Deploying the theoretical frame of the pastoral, essentially qualified by the anti-pastoral (Bennett, M. 195–210) and the strategic pastoral (Klestil 85–124), this article argues that Stowe and Thoreau materialize the past and presence of slavery in the cabin in order to explicitly (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*) or implicitly (*Walden*) imagine and speculate about a future nation without slavery. This article hence compares and historicizes two defining literary versions of a United States the cultural influence and power of which are rooted in their respective depiction of the cabin as "both icon and shelter" (Hoagland 8).

Keywords

Cabin, 19th Century US-American Literature, strategic pastoral, environmental imagination

The cabin has become a symbol in the US-American cultural imaginary over the course of the last 200 years – indeed it has become many symbols. The cabin was one crucial site through which Black confinement was practiced during slavery. Other notorious significations include the cabin as the locus for a deadly terrorist critique of technology tied to the Unabomber's shelter, and the cabin as representation of and home to those 'deplorable' segments of the white population who are given the derogatory label "white trash." These 'dark' cultural and discursive significations coexist with the cabin as a more inspiring and future-oriented site: an icon for a cherished critique of technology as materialized in Thoreau's Walden house; a representation of the democratic values of the nation as epitomized in Abraham Lincoln's birthplace; a space in which enslaved Black people could, at times, temporarily find sanctuary despite and amid the carceral geographies of slavery.

In order to get closer to the cabin and what it actually is – symbol? icon? representation? space? home? locus? materiality? materialization? – we need to take a brief look at the existing cabin scholarship. The first academic studies on the cabin came out in the mid-20th century and were primarily interested in exploring the historical origins and prevalence of the cabin in North America (Shurtleff; Weslager). More recently, scholars have broadened the historical approach to trace the significance of the cabin in the realm of culture (Belonsky; Ahne). Current incarnations of the form of the cabin revolve around the fetishization of its aesthetic value as in Zach Klein's *Cabin Porn*.[1] While a variety of studies explore the significance of houses – and domestic spaces more broadly – in and for US-American literature (e.g. Chandler; Andrés and Alsina Rísquez), monographs zooming in on the literary cabin exclusively are, to my knowledge, lacking. In her seminal 2018 book *The Log Cabin: An American Icon*, Alison K. Hoagland explores the different narratives and counternarratives around the cabin from a cultural-historical perspective. Hoagland conceives the cabin as having always already been an object of nostalgia *and* a reasonable, practicable solution for constructing a home; this approach enables her to define the cabin as a material *and* a symbolic phenomenon, as "both icon and shelter" (8). In this regard, she characterizes the cabin as a sort of open signifier for projecting possible future versions of the nation that are, in turn, tied to differing evaluations of both the past and the present:

> The meaning Americans have found there has varied, of course, depending on who they were and what they were looking for, and it has varied, just as the log cabin has, depending on time and place. The story of the log cabin is ultimately one that is more about American values and perceptions than about the building itself. (8)

[1] For an excellent analysis of this phenomenon within Thoreau's literary frame and Bachelard's philosophical perspective, see Rosenthal.

As varied and ambiguous as the narratives and counternarratives as well as values and perceptions around the respective cabins might be, I suggest that they are nonetheless held together by one crucial characteristic: its very form. "Because 'form' is a passive description of outward appearance while being simultaneously a determining and shaping active principle," as Eugenie Brinkema defines it, and "because it can refer to an immaterial idea or a sensible shape (cast in wood or stone), . . ." (261) we are able to define the cabin as a peculiar form that simultaneously affords both the material and the symbolic dimensions Hoagland delineates. While the cabin can therefore function as all of the above – symbol, icon, representation, space, home, locus, materiality, materialization – as a form, I argue, it is a plain, small block dwelling made up of natural materials such as logs and devoid of technological sophistication, hence oftentimes without running water or electricity.

This article explores the contradictory significations of the cabin, read as a form, in two canonized classics of US-American literature, namely, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852) and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854). Both works functionalize their respective cabins to make present the past both symbolically and materially (by evoking this particular form on the page) in order to envision the future of the United States; and, both works were published in the first half of the 1850s – that crucial moment in the history of the nation when it found itself on the brink of the Civil War and when, according to F. O. Matthiessen's influential thesis, it witnessed an "extraordinarily concentrated moment of expression" that he termed "American Renaissance" (vii).[2]

Within a Matthiessian framework, the following close reading seeks to demonstrate that these two texts epitomize the nation's contemporaneous racial climate, understood with Christina Sharpe as the totality of racial discourses and dispositifs at a given time (102–34), in and through this very form. While the lens of the pastoral is a staple in literary and cultural studies on the cabin (Marx 242–63), its qualification through notions such as the anti-pastoral (Bennett, M. 195–210) and the strategic pastoral (Klestil 85–124) affords a more holistic theoretical perspective to explore the complex and ambivalent depictions of the cabin in mid-19th century literature. I argue that Stowe and Thoreau represent the past and presence of slavery in the cabin in order to explicitly (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*) or implicitly (*Walden*) imagine and speculate about a future nation without slavery. These two works thereby represent a

[2] Published in 1941, Matthiessen's canon of literary excellence focuses on five white men – Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman – and neglects literature produced by marginalized groups such as women or people of color. Christopher N. Phillips contextualizes this: "This vital focus, both highly persuasive and eminently teachable – only five authors to cover, and focused on democracy – came at a price. Matthiessen celebrated the radical impulses of the abolition movement, citing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as evidence of the abolition movement's energy, but he refused to do more than mention Stowe's book or treat her or her contemporaries, Frederick Douglass and Frances E. W. Harper, as literary authors" (3).

widespread conception of the United States as an essentially future-oriented land of opportunities rooted in speculative projection, which is reflective of Gayle Rogers' broader suggestion that "[s]peculation is part of the character of the exceptional American experience, past, present, and future" (113). This article hence compares and historicizes two defining literary versions of the United States, the cultural influence and power of which are essentially rooted in their respective use of the cabin as a form.

The Cabin in the Garden: The (Anti-)Pastoral

Conceived as one of the central myths and symbols in the US-American literary and cultural imaginary, the pastoral ideal integrates the opposites of what Roderick Frazier Nash famously conceptualizes as a "spectrum of conditions or environments ranging from the purely wild on the one end to the purely civilized on the other" (6). This spectrum comprises the apotheosis of a 'virgin land' on the one hand and the demonization of a sinister 'wilderness' on the other. According to Leo Marx, as "the yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence 'closer to nature,' that is the psychic root of all pastoralism" (6), the pastoral ideal functions as "middle ground" in the environmental imagination. 19th-century US-American literature would accordingly negotiate in a complex manner "the sense of the machine as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction" (29). Marx finds a quintessential expression of this intrusion of technology into a pastoral scenery in "the scene in *Walden* where Thoreau is sitting rapt in a revery [in front of his log cabin] and then, penetrating his woods like the scream of a hawk, the whistle of the locomotive is heard . . ." (15). Thoreau's cabin here stages a complex encounter of the forces of 'civilization' reaching out into the realm of 'wilderness.' At the time of Marx' writing about the pastoral ideal in 1964, the cabin itself has intruded into the quasi-pastoral scenery of suburban dooryards when the "'Thoreau Cabin Kit' – a build-it-yourself replica of the original cabin – entered the market in the 1950s, selling for four thousand dollars" (Nightingale 114). Reducing the complexity of Marx' understanding of the pastoral ideal, this kind of cabin is "understood to be the form that precedes the arrival of culture. The retreat is always a retreat in time, a withdrawal to a lost simplicity, purity, immediacy, harmony ... a lost beginning" (Wigley 123). What Marx calls sentimental pastoralism thus signifies the cabin exclusively as something raw and pre-cultural, withdrawn, simple, pure, immediate, and harmonious – as a primordial 'natural' and not as a constructed cultural artifact. At the same time, however, it needs to be emphasized that the cabin – even in the wildest realms of nature and erected by the most reclusive critic of technology – remains a human construct and therefore a marker of human activity. It is, after all, the form of the cabin that always already contains the different and ambivalent significations that demarcate the

boundaries of 'wilderness'/'civilization,' 'nature'/'culture,' as well as 'inhuman'/'human' both for the individual subject and the imagined community of the nation.

Many scholars have pointed to the inadequacy of trying to capture the African American experience of and in nature through conceptual frameworks (and traditional ecocritical lenses) of the pastoral and of the wilderness. In contrast, an "anti-pastoral African American literary tradition" (195), in the words of Michael Bennett, has developed under chattel slavery which "changed the nature of nature in African American culture, necessitating a break with the pastoral tradition developed within European American literature" (205). For the enslaved, oftentimes, nature was perceived as tied to and harnessed by slavery, and as co-producing their social and literal death. In order to lay open the environmental knowledge nonetheless inherent in African American literary expressions, Matthias Klestil proposes the "strategic pastoral" (85–124) as a way to explain how slave narratives deploy the pastoral in complex and ambivalent ways that are not simply anti-pastoral. Drawing on Susan Snyder's identification of "spatial" and "temporal" aspects of the pastoral, Klestil traces how African American authors have employed "a doubled (visual) perspective" (89) that resonates with both aspects of the pastoral. The perspective of the enslaved, as Klestil exemplifies in his reading of Henry Box Brown's 1849 *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* (101–6), could involve artistically creating the perception of a harmonious natural scenery and the concomitant invocation of the pastoral ideal. This very invocation, however, is then simultaneously undercut by the enslaved person's realization that given the dehumanizing regime of plantation slavery the pastoral ideal is not made for her, not even attainable as a "short-term haven" as Snyder delineates the affordance of the pastoral's spatial dimension for the hegemonic white subject position (Snyder 3; see also Klestil 90). While this spatial dimension of the strategic pastoral is oftentimes mobilizing anti-pastoral aspects and impulses,

> its temporal dimension involves not only a form of Golden Age pastoral in Snyder's sense, but is also potentially future-oriented, as it links a doubled vision enabled through the slave narrative's rhetoric of visibility to a doubling of time. Besides serving at certain points as a means for articulating environmental knowledge, the slave narrative's strategic pastoral is also a vehicle for criticizing the peculiar institution and expressing a utopian hope for a world without slavery. (Klestil 90)

Perceiving a pastoral scenery within the anti-pastoral context of plantation slavery instigates the perceiving entity, i.e. the enslaved and the reader, not only to go backwards in a Proustian search of lost time but also forward to imagine a better future where she might be enabled to enjoy the pastoral ideal after slavery will have been abolished.

Building on Klestil's take on the strategic pastoral, the following analyzes and compares both the pastoral as well as the anti-pastoral aspects in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Walden* in order to explore how the respective cabins serve as focal point for

imagining a different future, a different version of the nation without slavery. While neither Stowe's anti-slavery novel nor Thoreau's nature writing are slave narratives, the strategic pastoral still provides a fruitful theoretical perspective to explore the complex and ambivalent depictions of the cabin in nature.

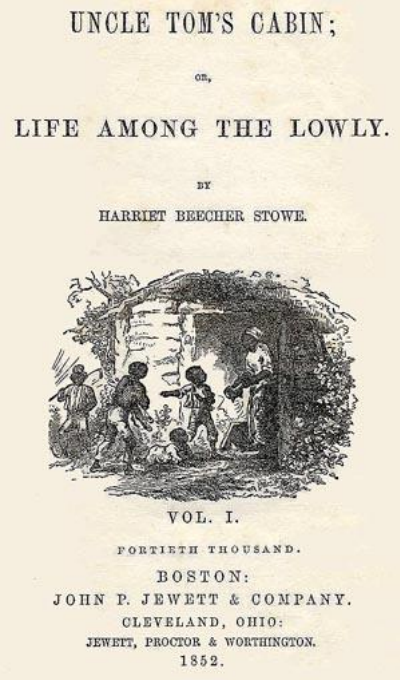
Harriet Stowe's (Anti-)Pastoral Cabin

The anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in book form in 1852 after it had been serialized in the abolitionist magazine *National Era* between June 1851 and April 1852 (Bromwich x). It is set in numerous locations across the country as it follows the fates of two enslaved people, middle-aged Uncle Tom and the young mother Eliza, after they are sold from a Kentucky plantation. Eventually, Uncle Tom dies after a long martyrdom at Simon Legree's Louisiana plantation – with the horrors of racial slavery portrayed as increasing as the setting moves further South – and Eliza is reunited with her family and flees the country.

Long disregarded by critics as sentimental and trivial literature, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the bestseller of the 19th-century United States surpassed only by the sales numbers of *The Bible* (DiMaggio 15). Its enormous influence, however, easily exceeded the confines of the literary realm and the popular text became a mass cultural phenomenon, which, in the words of Jim O'Loughlin, "played a crucial role in configuring American social and political life in the nineteenth and early twentieth century" (573). The numerous theater, musical, and film adaptations throughout the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries contributed to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s enormous popularity with many of these adaptations operating within the racist framework of blackface minstrelsy. Unsurprisingly, African American critics such as James Baldwin oftentimes perceived – and condemned – the novel's crucial role in affecting their community negatively by establishing and perpetuating racist stereotypes (Tillet 51–59). More recently, scholars have worked out the significance of domesticity for an understanding of both author and book (see, for instance, Halttunen; Askeland). The "completeness of Stowe's conformity to the domestic ideology," according to David Bromwich, enables her to "turn the tragedy of slavery into the drama of the breakup of a family" (xx). In the only article exclusively devoted to an analysis of the eponymous cabin vis-à-vis the novel's other "domestic establishments" (357), Egbert S. Oliver similarly reasons that Stowe has used "the symbolic cabin, the family center, and the family gathered peacefully in that center, as an archetypal judgment upon the broken families and the forces breaking families which make up the book" (360).[3]

[3] Lori Askeland highlights the contrasting significance of Simon Legree's house: "As Theodore Hovet has noted, the fall from spirituality to materialism could not be better symbolized in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* than by Simon Legree's significantly kitchenless, utterly materialistic 'anti-home'" (788).

The actual form of what Oliver terms the "symbolic cabin" is provided through the paratext as visual representation on the frontispiece of the book (Figure 1). Common for literary publications of the time, the upper and lower parts of the front page provide bibliographic information in plain font including title, author, and publishing house. The drawing of Uncle Tom's cabin provided by Hammatt Billings, who also drew six full-page illustrations and engravings for the first edition, fills the middle of the frontispiece. In coarsely gritted style, it depicts the entrance of the dwelling, which is partly concealed by ivy on its right side. A Black woman with a saucepan is standing in the doorframe and turning towards two Black children and a toddler. To the cabin's left side, a Black man emerging from the woods is spotted by one of the children. The surrounding flora is only implied as the drawing zooms in on the cabin – evoking a romanticized image of the cabin as a home to the enslaved Black family. This is also the image that Stowe initially sets up in her writing, before she goes on to reveal how tenuous Black family life was under slavery (Figure 2).


UNCLE TOM'S CABIN;

OR,

LIFE AMONG THE LOWLY.

BY

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE.

VOL. I.

FORTIETH THOUSAND.

BOSTON:
JOHN P. JEWETT & COMPANY.
CLEVELAND, OHIO:
JEWETT, PROCTOR & WORTHINGTON.
1852.

Figure 1: Title page of Harriet Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852, first edition, in the public domain.

Figure 2: Advertisement for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ca. 1852, reproduction of the original frontispiece in color, in the public domain.

The eponymous cabin is introduced rather early in the novel, namely in chapter 4 entitled "An Evening at Uncle Tom's Cabin." At this point in the novel, the reader – but not Tom – has already learned about the plans of his upcoming sale and the resultant uprooting from his environment and his family:

> The cabin of Uncle Tom was a small log building, close adjoining to "the house," as the negro *par excellence* designates his master's dwelling. In front it had a neat garden-patch, where, every summer, strawberries, raspberries, and a variety of fruits and

> vegetables, flourished under careful tending. The whole front of it was covered by a large scarlet bignonia and a native multiflora rose, which, entwisting and interlacing, left scarce a vestige of the rough logs to be seen. Here, also, in summer, various brilliant annuals, such as marigolds, petunias, four-o'clocks, found an indulgent corner in which to unfold their splendors, and were the delight and pride of Aunt Chloe's heart. Let us enter the dwelling. (Stowe 30, original emphasis)

Slavery as an institution forces Tom and his family to live in this kind of dwelling whose small log structure is contrasted with "the house," i.e. "his master's dwelling." The enforced confinement that this racialized spatial hierarchy signals has been central to the ways in which the cabin has been represented in African American narratives, such as Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901), or W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911). Instigated by the inhumanity of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, it was Stowe's primary agenda to harshly criticize the horrors of slavery by depicting its ugly reality. Through this law, slavery expanded its sphere of influence into the Northern states. It strengthened the property rights of slave holders by requiring authorities in non-slaveholding states to capture and return runaways from slavery. Also, civilians and officials who assisted fugitives or were unwilling to comply with recapture efforts could be severely punished (Lennon 671). "[A]fter the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act," in the words of Sharpe, "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). Abolitionists such as Stowe, in turn, mobilized their resources more effectively to increase their efforts to fight for a future nation in which people of African descent would no longer be enslaved.

As mentioned above, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sought to expose the horrors and injustice of slavery, conveyed, for instance, by the spatial forms of the slave cabin and the master's mansion – the former being confined and rudimentary and the latter spacious and indulgent – which speak to the ways in which racial hierarchies materialized in the built environment. For Tom, however, the cabin initially provides a kind of safe haven where the family comes together: The author depicts Tom's wife Aunt Chloe cooking, the slave master's white son Young George teaching him to write, his children playing, with all of them laughing and having a good time before the entire African American community comes together in the cabin to pray and worship. Stowe, in short, presents an apparently happy cabin life of domesticity, warmth, food, shelter, education, religion, and coziness. Oliver accordingly identifies the cabin in this scene as "a secure island of pastoral contentment" (356), which thereby affords "a withdrawal to a lost simplicity, purity, immediacy, harmony … a lost beginning" (Wigley 123) before or after the times of slavery.

The text itself, however, functions as strategic pastoral that lays bare as illusionary its own portrayal of an apparently pastoral slave cabin. In contrast to the "doubled (visual) perspective" (89) that Klestil identifies for the slave narrative's strategic pastoral, it is here not an enslaved narrator who perceives the spatial aspect of the pastoral to immediately realize its elusiveness. Instead, Stowe's omniscient narrator depicts the cabin both as pastoral *and* anti-pastoral: After the reader has seen its pastoral outside, she is led to "enter the dwelling" to perceive its cozy furnishings and to be literally introduced to the main characters "till we finish our picture of the cottage" (Stowe 31). Given Stowe's abolitionist agenda, the pastoral elements of the cabin are described vividly in order to be immediately deconstructed for the reader whose previous knowledge enables her to see through the false idyll as she already supposes that Tom will soon be sold away from his family. The moments of quasi-utopian cabin community are thus not meant to last. The cabin, in fact, is haunted by the anti-pastoral for the enslaved as is disclosed at the ending of the chapter: "While this scene was passing in the cabin of the man, one quite otherwise passed in the halls of the master" (43). Mr. Shelby seals the deal to sell Tom and Eliza's son, thereby making clear to the reader that, as enslaved people, Tom and his kin are not free even if they feel to be; or as Theodor W. Adorno memorably put it in another context that "[t]here is no right life in the wrong one" (39).

The cabin as epitome of the pastoral ideal is deconstructed even more forcefully as readers learn about the racial hierarchies playing out inside its walls. Stowe's own racial bias comes to the fore as she focuses mainly on the interactions between Tom, Aunt Chloe, and the slave master's white son Young George, while their own (Black) children remain underdeveloped as characters and merely function as comic relief in the background. Young George is properly introduced. He is the pivotal element of the chapter, has agency and power. For example, Aunt Chloe cooks for him and serves him first – "'you know'd your old aunty 'd keep the best for you'" (Stowe 34) – while the Black children only receive his leftovers, in a manner signaling white benevolence toward animalized, subhuman creatures: "'Here, you Mose, Pete,' he said, breaking off liberal bits, and throwing it at them; 'you want some, don't you? Come, Aunt Chloe, bake them some cakes'" (37). Furthermore, Aunt Chloe, in preemptive obedience, wants to put her children to bed before the religious gathering commences, but Young George demands their presence exclaiming: "'La, Aunt Chloe, shove it under, and let 'em sit up,' said Mas'r George, decisively, giving a push to the rude machine" (39). Not surprisingly and tellingly, the young master is the one who subsequently reads out the last chapters of Revelation throwing in "expositions of his own, from time to time, with a commendable seriousness and gravity, for which he was admired by the young and blessed by the old; and it was agreed, on all hands, that 'a minister couldn't lay it off better than he did; that ''t was reely 'mazin'!'" (42). While the initial description

of the cabin's pastoral front evokes a harmonious relation between non-human nature and human activity therein, these examples provide an actual look inside that hints at a much more anti-pastoral impulse. This impulse, or dark underside of the pastoral, reveals the cabin as a racialized space permeated by white supremacy in which relations of any kind – while harmonious on the surface – are built on domination and dehumanization.

A clear reversal of the pastoral facets of the cabin and a divergence into explicitly anti-pastoral overtones occurs only in the tenth chapter of the novel: Tom is pulled out of the cabin and he, together with the entire Black community, is confronted with the elusiveness of the pastoral fantasy. This realization is also indicated by the chapter heading, which reads "The Property Is Carried Off." Aunt Chloe and Tom are united in dread, desolation, and sadness in the face of their impending separation and breakup of their family with the weather conditions mirroring and strengthening the anti-pastoral mood: "The February morning looked gray and drizzling through the window of Uncle Tom's cabin. It looked on downcast faces, the images of mournful hearts" (Stowe 124). The home the cabin (allegedly) provided through its evocation of the pastoral during "An Evening at Uncle Tom's Cabin" is literally invaded, the apparently utopian pastoral slave cabin destroyed when the slave trader's "unceremonious kick pushed open the door" (129). In a twisted way, the slave trader functions in Marx's "sense of the machine as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction" (29), with the machine here signifying the inhumane machinery of slavery itself.

After the shackled Tom is carried away amidst universal mourning, Young George meets him on the road to say goodbye in tears. Strikingly, it is again he who has the agency to define the cabin in contrast to the apparently idyllic depiction the reader encountered earlier. "'I'll build your house all over, and you shall have a room for a parlor with a carpet on it, when I'm a man. O, you'll have good times yet!'" (Stowe 134), Young George exclaims in sadness over the disposal of his father's human property, thereby pointing towards the actual inadequacy of this one-room dwelling as a shelter for an entire family and further subverting the initial pastoral image.

Young George, who is an adult at this point, also spells out the symbolic dimension of the form of the cabin (Hoagland 79). It is this articulation that makes the novel come full circle. After having freed all of the enslaved remaining on his parents' plantation, he informs them about Tom's martyrdom and Christ-like death:

> "One thing more," said George, as he stopped the congratulations of the throng; "you all remember our good old Uncle Tom?" George here gave a short narration of the scene of his death, and of his loving farewell to all on the place, and added, "It was on his grave, my friends, that I resolved, before God, that I would never own another slave, while it was possible to free him; that nobody, through me, should ever run the risk of being parted from home and friends, and dying on a lonely plantation, as he died. So, when

> you rejoice in your freedom, think that you owe it to that good old soul, and pay it back in kindness to his wife and children. Think of your freedom, every time you see *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*; and let it be a memorial to put you all in mind to follow in his steps, and be as honest and faithful and Christian as he was" (Stowe 572, original emphasis)

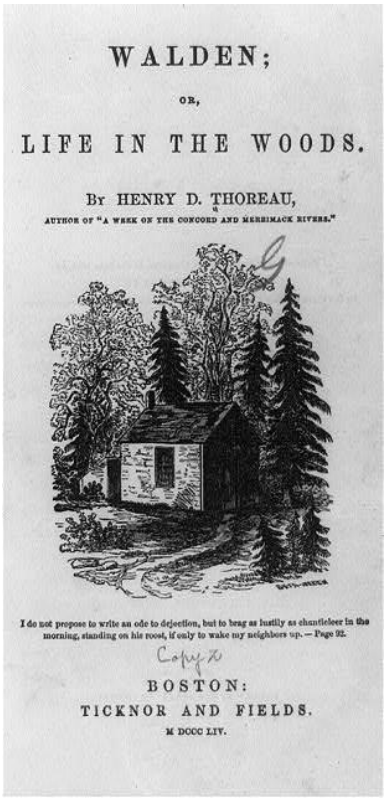
This powerful evocation of the cabin reveals its structural significance for Stowe's abolitionist agenda despite – or just because of – its relative absence from the plot. Oliver pinpoints that "[t]he cabin is more than a catchy part of the title: the cabin is the formative image for the novel. Not the cabin as structure, but the cabin as meaning" (356). However, the form of the cabin here matters as "both icon and shelter" (Hoagland 8) as Young George's evocation conflates its materiality with a symbolic glorification of Tom's Christ-like sacrifice for the future freedom of the Black – and, as Stowe implies, the entire US-American – community. Stowe's visual evocation of the pastoral's spatial aspect in the last sentence of the book – "Think of your freedom, every time you see *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN* . . ." – completes her strategic pastoral defined with Klestil as "potentially future-oriented, as it links a doubled vision enabled through the slave narrative's rhetoric of visibility to a doubling of time" (90). Like a never-ending Moebius strip, this interconnected "doubled vision" and "doubling of time" turns backwards to re-envision both the pastoral and the anti-pastoral cabin as experienced before and during Tom's disposal as well as forward to "expressing a utopian hope for a world without slavery" (Klestil 90) when Tom's cabin will have been returned to its pastoral state. The fact that Stowe here uses a different font to refer to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* suggests, as O'Loughlin highlights, "that George's speech refers not just to the physical structure of the cabin, but to Stowe's novel itself. The inspirational purpose of the novel is similar to that of the cabin, to create a memorial that could stand for and motivate ways of acting and feeling" (593–94). It is, after all, Stowe's strategic pastoral as epitomized in the form of the cabin that affords the vision and version of a nation without slavery – not only in the storyworld but also in the 'real' world.

Henry David Thoreau's (Anti-)Pastoral Cabin

From 1845 until 1847, for two years, two months, and two days, Henry David Thoreau lived in a self-built cabin on the property of his mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, at Waldon Pond outside his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts. In 1854, he published his experience under the title *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. After the initial reception was already rather positive, the work eventually became a classic not only of nature writing but of US-American literature (Dean and Scharnhorst). It is therefore no surprise that ecocritical scholars focused on Thoreau when ecocriticism became institutionalized as a field of academic study in the 1990s. Lawrence Buell's 1995 *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* ascribes a formative role to the author of *Walden* for the emergence of proto-

ecological awareness in the second half of the 19th century (as clearly indicated by the book's title). Buell's dictum of a "more 'ecocentric' way of being" (1) permeating Thoreau's writing influenced a wave of new scholarship that focused on themes such as Thoreau's life (Walls), his take on politics (Bennett, J.), his unorthodox view of economy/economics (Kelleter), and, crucially for the present context, the role of his cabin (Maynard; Quigley; Curtis).

Walden's portrayal of what would become one of the most iconic cabins in US history initially evokes pastoral images and associations not by meeting readers verbally but by engaging them visually through the frontispiece of the book (Figure 3). The structure of the front page shows similarities to that of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: The font is plain and presents the title, author, bibliographic information, and a quote from the novel. The center of the frontispiece is occupied by the only existing visual representation of his cabin – a drawing by Thoreau's younger sister Sophia. The style of the engraving is as simple as the cabin, which seems to be merging with the surrounding trees; natural object and natural environment appear to be in organic symbiosis. This effect is achieved through the shading of the cabin's front face, which is simultaneously concealed and highlighted by the tall dark firs to its right. A few smaller fir trees frame the cabin's front while some other trees can be found along its backside.


WALDEN;

OR,

LIFE IN THE WOODS.

By HENRY D. THOREAU,

AUTHOR OF "A WEEK ON THE CONCORD AND MERRIMACK RIVERS."

I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up. — Page 92.

BOSTON:

TICKNOR AND FIELDS.

M DCCC LIV.

Figure 3: Title page of Henry D. Thoreau's *Walden; or Life in the Woods*, showing Thoreau's hut at Walden Pond, in the public domain.

The drawing gives the reader both a concrete representation of Thoreau's pastoral cabin and a not-so-subtle hint at the literal and literary centrality of this architectural form for the book they are about to open. It is hence surprising that any description of the cabin – and any narrative detailing of the form of life materializing therein – is

deferred until well into "Economy," the first and by far longest chapter of *Walden*. The bulk of the chapter instead engages in a fierce and often sarcastic critique of US-American society, with the first-person narrator, that is Thoreau's persona, aiming to expose what he perceives as the adversities of materialism, conformity, and acquisitiveness. The question concerning the right and proper dwelling is the focal point of this critique as "[m]ost men appear never to have considered what a house is" (Thoreau 35) – unlike the narrator as the frontispiece already indicated (Quigley 95–124). Withholding the narrator's cabin through this narrative latency marks and highlights the contrast between "[t]he mass of men [who] lead lives of quiet desperation" (8) and the proposed antidote to this condition, namely the narrator's temporary flight from the confines of 'civilization' in order to regenerate in and through nature – this classic pastoral move. In the course of immersing themselves in the book, the readers slowly grasp what critics have identified as "the two major elements in *Walden*: the story of how [Thoreau] lived at the pond, and the comparison of what he lived for with what many people of New England lived for" (Shanley 19, qtd. in Woodson 443).

The cabin, eventually, is introduced twice in the text, for the first time roughly in the middle of the first chapter when it does not yet exist:

> Near the end of March, 1845, I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods by Walden Pond, nearest to where I intended to build my house, and began to cut down some tall arrowy white pines, still in their youth, for timber. It is difficult to begin without borrowing, but perhaps it is the most generous course thus to permit your fellow-men to have an interest in your enterprise. (Thoreau 40–41)

Unsurprisingly, an Emersonian self-reliance underlies the Walden experiment: The narrator first has to build his dwelling instead of merely and mindlessly 'consuming' it like his fellow countrymen and -women. Nonetheless, this self-reliance has its limits as the narrator essentially also relies on his neighbor in order to be equipped and thus able to build his house in the first place.

A few pages later, the cabin has been constructed and the narrator provides a detailed description:

> I have thus a tight shingled and plastered house, ten feet wide by fifteen long, and eight-feet posts, with a garret and a closet, a large window on each side, two trap doors, one door at the end, and a brick fireplace opposite. The exact cost of my house, paying the usual price for such materials as I used, but not counting the work, all of which was done by myself, was as follows; and I give the details because very few are able to tell exactly what their houses cost, . . . (Thoreau 48)

What follows is a painstakingly detailed account of the cabin's material and its prices. This passage affords a few insights crucial for the entire *Walden* endeavor. Firstly, the exact measures lay bare that this is a rather small cabin and hence indicate Thoreau's status as a single person without a family to take care of. Secondly, accounting for his cabin demonstrates the simplicity of this lifestyle and consequently lends

credibility to his foregoing critique of industrial society; he is keeping book in order to show that anybody could afford this. Thirdly, the excessive accounting of cabin materials, food, and all other expenses ironically deconstructs the underlying rationale of the United States' emerging proto-capitalist society, as Michael Zakim highlights:

> Thoreau soon made the culture of the bottom line the subject of extensive ridicule in *Walden*, which he wrote in general protest against the commodity form's deleterious effects on American civilization. His assault on the ledger was most pointedly on display in the facetiously pedantic record of expenditures with which Thoreau pretended to document the superiority of his alternative economy. (95)

The economy Thoreau has in mind is an economy of living inspired and taught by the economy of nature (Kelleter 177–92), which motivates the narrator to flee 'civilization' in favor of 'wilderness,' "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach" (Thoreau 90).

The Walden endeavor in general, and the cabin in particular, can thus be interpreted through the lens of the pastoral ideal (see Marx 242–63 for a reading of *Walden*'s pastoral). However, the book also bears traces of the anti-pastoral, traces that bear witness to the Black experience and heritage and that are relevant for my reading of the cabin as a form that enables imagining and speculating about different versions of the United States. The chapter "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors" interjects biographical sketches of those dwelling at Walden Pond before Thoreau set up his cabin there. Many of the former dwellers had been enslaved at the beginning of the 19th century and fled to the woods when they acquired their freedom. Thoreau records their lives and legacies, for example Cato's, about whom "[s]ome say that he was a Guinea Negro. There are a few who remember his little patch among the walnuts, which he let grow up till he should be old and need them" (Thoreau 257). While only a few remember him and his place in person, Thoreau makes sure to put him on record in and through his writing. Some of the former inhabitants were also cabin dwellers such as Zilpha – "a colored woman" – whose small house was to be found around the corner of his own bean field,

> where she spun linen for the townsfolk, making the Walden Woods ring with her shrill singing, for she had a loud and notable voice. At length, in the war of 1812, her dwelling was set on fire by English soldiers, prisoners on parole, when she was away, and her cat and dog and hens were all burned up together. She led a hard life, and somewhat inhumane. One old frequenter of these woods remembers, that as he passed her house one noon he heard her muttering to herself over her gurgling pot, – "Ye are all bones, bones!" I have seen bricks amid the oak copse there. (257)

As passages such as these indicate, Thoreau's nature writing – just like Stowe's anti-slavery novel – can be read as a strategic pastoral consciously deploying its spatial and temporal aspects to foster a political agenda. In stark contrast to the pastoral

idyll his own cabin affords and which he delineates meticulously, Thoreau acknowledges the anti-pastoral impulse underlying his predecessor's dwelling, as Zilpha, the formerly enslaved person, had to lead "a hard life, and somewhat inhumane" that readers are enabled to visualize (257). Thoreau hence not only describes the flora and fauna of his present environment but mobilizes the temporal aspects of the pastoral. In this way he reaches out into the past to retrieve the lived experiences of the formerly enslaved who had inhabited this piece of land beforehand, thus doing justice to their very experience and existence as US-American citizens.

Tracing the often-ignored history of slavery in Concord, Massachusetts, Elise Lemire similarly acknowledges Thoreau's visionary groundwork in *Walden*, particularly in the chapter under discussion:

> That chapter . . . makes the case that the green spaces cherished in Concord today are not solely products of nature. They are the result of a highly stratified social order in which the highest echelon was comprised of Concord's wealthiest residents, more than half of whom were slaveholders, and the bottom echelon of slaves who were shunted by their former owners onto Concord's margins and left there to make a life for themselves as best they could. To put it more concisely, the history of slavery and its aftermath reveals that at least some of our nation's cherished green spaces began as black spaces, with Walden Woods a particularly striking case in point. (11–12)

Thoreau's work accordingly affords the insight that, while the present environment appears at first sight to merely comprise its flora and fauna, it is as much founded upon its past racial climate that materializes in "marks left on the landscape." If it is true that the "nation's cherished green spaces" – the various mobilizations of the pastoral ideal as in Thoreau's cabin – "began as black spaces" the latter acquire a double meaning: First, green spaces turn into Black spaces since they were the habitats of formerly enslaved Black people. Second, as Black people were forced into green spaces their relationship to them is complicated and oftentimes limited to a 'dark,' that is anti-pastoral, lens under the institution of chattel slavery.

Recalling that Thoreau was writing in a considerably worsened racial climate – marked by the "atmospheric density" of slavery (Sharpe 104) in the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Act – reveals his discussion of Walden Pond's prior Black inhabitants as highly political. Michael Jonik neatly pinpoints this often-overlooked dimension of *Walden* by reasoning that

> the political intervention his philosophy of dwelling-with offers is not only to be understood in terms of his own house, but also how Thoreau comes to think of those who are unhoused. His writing offers an archive of the unhoused: the African American slaves and Irish immigrants whose ruined houses and forgotten lives he memorializes in *Walden* . . . (173)

All in all, the speculative future of the nation envisioned in *Walden* is not one of monistic solitude but, quite on the contrary, one of enlightened community and

solidarity that potentially transcends the racial regimes of the day. The blistering sarcasm permeating the first part of the book has at times been read in isolation, thus contributing to the enduring stereotype of Thoreau as an anti-social hermit despising any kind of community. This one-dimensional perception overlooks the fact that, while at his Walden Pond cabin, he was still participating in communal life; most significantly, just as Thoreau needed his neighbor's axe to enable his self-reliance in the first place, solitude, here, is not a permanent escape or definite end in itself. Instead, the narrator's experience and description of nature enables him to develop a more organic and holistic understanding of the living community of all beings. In the course of the text, he increasingly replaces the ironic distance towards his human neighbors through mildness and grace, a change of perspective that is mirrored in his increasing use of "we" instead of "I." Consequently, by the end of *Walden*, both the book and the endeavor, Thoreau becomes a fellow sojourner of his neighbors again. His flight from 'civilization' into the domesticized 'wilderness' of Walden Pond probes the idea that a more natural, healthier, and more racially just future American community might be imaginable on the basis of the form of the cabin.

Cabin Fever, or: Back to the Future?

With respect to the literary imaginary, the first half of the 1850s was indeed what Matthiessen termed that "extraordinarily concentrated moment of expression" (vii), the young nation's "American Renaissance." *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Walden* were part of this moment and demonstrate that its expressive power involved the cabin as a form to speculate about the future of the nation in various ways.

My readings have demonstrated that Uncle Tom's cabin is first portrayed as providing a kind of pastoral slave community, an apparent safe haven where his family is able to commune and enjoy moments of relief and peace. The initial portrayal of the cabin through a pastoral lens, however, is turned on its head to reveal its anti-pastoral underside: The presence of the slave master's white son Young George in the cabin demonstrates the reach of white supremacy into Black domestic space, while the selling of Tom explicitly deconstructs the pastoral fantasy as unattainable for the enslaved. This deployment of the cabin as strategic pastoral finds its climax at the end of the novel when it is explicitly evoked as the most powerful symbol for a future in which Tom's Christ-like martyrdom will have redeemed the nation from the past and present reality of slavery. The concrete form of the cabin brings together its material and symbolic dimensions and thus lends itself to expressing the future-oriented potential of a nation without slavery – for many a utopian vision at the time of the book's publication only two years after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The immediate impact of the novel's call for a future which ought have overcome the horrors of slavery is arguably best exemplified in a popular anecdote (even though

Daniel R. Vollaro refutes its historical verifiability [18]): "Harriet Beecher Stowe's most famous introduction took place on or around Thanksgiving Day, 1862, when she was introduced to President Abraham Lincoln, who allegedly greeted her with these memorable words, 'So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!'" (Weinstein 1).

Henry David Thoreau's cabin is brought into position to contrast with the deadening living, dwelling, and working conditions of those "who are said to live in New England" (4), as the narrator sarcastically remarks. The cabin's pastoral dimension is grounded in the actual real-life counterpart Thoreau was inhabiting for two years during his flight from 'civilization' and already evoked through the iconic drawing by his sister which adorns the book's frontispiece. The painstakingly detailed account of Thoreau's building of *his* cabin might indicate a solitary, anti-social endeavor that is the basis for a merely individual spiritual regeneration. This cabin, however, also affords a political, future-oriented dimension, hinting at a version of the United States which can be explicated through the lens of the strategic pastoral: Thoreau mobilizes both the spatial and temporal aspects of the pastoral by contrasting his privileged cabin with the dwellings of the area's former inhabitants, many of whom had been enslaved. Going back in time to trace the Black heritage and experience transforms the very place he inhabits through his cabin by fostering the insight that Thoreau's former Walden neighbors most likely perceived their – and his – environment (also) as anti-pastoral given the de-humanizing regime of chattel slavery. The interplay of pastoral and anti-pastoral impulses serves as both the precondition of and the inspiration for the betterment of a society living in "quiet desperation" (Thoreau 8) and sweltering racial injustice. Thoreau, consequently, leaves the cabin and rejoins his townspeople to becoming more openly political and supporting the abolitionist movement more forcefully (Walls 169–70, 185–86; Ellis 61–95; Winkler 37–54). His veneration for wilderness and the underlying conception of nature as something beautiful, sublime, and inherently valuable has been hailed as shaping the environmental imagination of the entire nation in the 19th century, but his cabin affords much more than that, namely the vision of a more inclusive, attentive, and racially just nation.

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Transplantation and Alternative Worlds: Speculation in Doctors' Life Writing

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ABSTRACT

Even though organ transplantation has turned into a repeatable and comparatively reliable practice, it still presents ample cause for speculation. In fact, various works of speculative fiction explore the practice in relation to the future. Yet, as this article suggests, speculation about transplantation does not only occur within the pages of fictional works but also impacts the life writing of medical professionals. This article engages specifically with the life writing of transplant surgeons: Thomas Starzl's *The Puzzle People: Memoirs of a Transplant Surgeon* (1992), Kathy E. Magliato's *Heart Matters: A Memoir of a Female Heart Surgeon* (2010), and *Breathless: A Transplant Surgeon's Journal* by Thomas R. J. Todd (2007). By focusing on two distinct forms of speculation – the employment of elements from speculative fiction and the pervasiveness of the question "What if …?" – this article emphasizes the underlying but often overlooked significance of speculation in medical contexts.

KEYWORDS

Surgeons' autobiography, surgeons' memoir, speculative fiction, medical humanities

Until 1983, when the immunosuppressive drug cyclosporine was approved for clinical use, the future of organ transplantation as a medical practice was marked by uncertainty. Today, however, organ transplantation is commonly framed as non-experimental as Cara K. Black et al. summarize: "Solid organ transplantation (SOT) has emerged from an experimental approach in the 20th century to now being an established and practical definitive treatment option for patients with end-organ

dysfunction" (409). While transplantation has become a "practical definitive treatment," discourses of organ transplantation, even after the release of cyclosporine, often engage in speculation and refer to speculative fiction. For example, in 1989, the heart surgeon William Frist recalls a moment when he carried a donor heart to an airplane and explicitly references a concrete genre of speculative fiction: "If someone had told Dad fifty years ago when he began practicing medicine what I would be doing that night, he would have laughed and shook his head in disbelief, dismissing it all as pure science fiction" (33). Transplantation is framed as part of an imagined world – one that belongs to the realm of science fiction –, and scholarship has highlighted how speculative fiction renders and envisions organ transplantation.[1]

This article takes a different turn, as it analyzes how speculation enters autobiographical texts written by transplant surgeons. Hereby, it takes its cue from Emily Russell's concept of "speculative medicine," which she positions "as a parallel to the genre of speculative fiction" (268). Russell emphasizes the creative and imaginative forces at play in medical experimentation (268). Moreover, the article builds on Gayle Rogers's definition of speculation as "a certain kind of thinking and acting: a charged and unruly (and sometimes unscrupulous) 'cognitive provisionality,' rather than more rational and deliberate planning, knowing, and constructing" (4). This "cognitive provisionality" takes specific forms in the autobiographical texts discussed here. The article explores two ways in which speculation emerges in four autobiographical texts penned by transplant surgeons: Thomas E. Starzl's *The Puzzle People* (1992) and "In a Small Iowa Town" (1988), Thomas R. J. Todd's *Breathless* (2007), and Kathy E. Magliato's *Heart Matters* (2010). First, it analyzes how surgeons make intertextual references to speculative fiction, which is understood as an umbrella term that connects different genres with an emphasis "not so much on possible though fictional matters as on events that are impossible under the physical laws and constraints of our ordinary world" (Gill 72). Second, it illustrates how they employ "what if" narratives as a speculative mode to muse about the ways in which transplantation could benefit the world. Interrelating the life writing of surgeons with speculative fiction, this analysis contributes to demonstrating that medical professionals draw on fiction to make sense of surgically altered bodies and engage in speculation to assert the benefits of transplantation.

[1] For an overview of the representation of transplantation in science fiction and the genre's critical function, see Anne Chozinski's "Science Fiction as Critique of Science: Organ Transplantation and the Body" (2016). See also Gavin Miller and Anna McFarlane's "Science Fiction and the Medical Humanities" (2016), Emily Russell's *Transplant Fictions: A Cultural Study of Organ Exchange* (2019), R. D. O'Neill's "'Frankenstein to Futurism': Representations of Organ Donation and Transplantation in Popular Culture" (2006). In my monograph *Future T/Issues: Organ Transplantation in Medical and Literary Narratives* (2024), I have traced the relationship between speculative fiction, life writing, and organ transplantation.

Speculative Fiction in Autobiographical Writing

As Emily Russell explains: "Transplant ideology is not only expressed in patient testimony or bioethical debates, it emerges through television medical dramas and sentimental tearjerkers, *People* magazine headlines and monster movies of the week" (25). Thus, not only organ transplantation but also its representation in the fictional realm has a specific history, as the latter has developed over time and has brought forth different tropes. In the genre of horror, for example, recipients may be haunted by the organs' donor (201), while in other instances, transplantation creates new forms of familial kinship or romantic relations (O'Neill 226).

These tropes and storylines, however, are not confined to the realm of fiction but extend into life writing. Autobiographical texts by surgeons are no exception with respect to the influence of fictional narratives. For example, Thomas R. J. Todd's autobiography *Breathless: A Transplant Surgeon's Journal* (2007) engages with the 1980s when the first single and double lung transplantations were successfully performed in Toronto, Canada. In his account, Todd remembers a complication: As a patient's organs began to swell, the medical team chose to leave her chest open, covering it with adhesive tape to relieve the pressure. Therefore, the patient's heart could be seen "beating away through the translucent material" (95). Clearly, the encounter with such a "misty window into the chest" (95) appears challenging to the medical team, who turn to an example of speculative fiction to conceptualize the patient:

> In our distress, as we commiserated with each other, someone recognized the resemblance of the chest to the then popular alien in the movie *ET*. That comment provided the comic relief that was definitely required at that point. Diane will always be remembered in the ICU as "the ET girl." (95)

The reference to Steven Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) appears timely in the context of the 1980s when the film was the highest-grossing motion picture of all time (Chappell). *E.T.* created a paradigm shift by presenting a decidedly harmless alien instead of previous versions of fear-instilling invaders. Spielberg notes: "For the better part of five decades, Hollywood treated aliens as hostile invaders, but I felt that had been done enough. I always regarded the heavens as a source of great solace, curiosity, and wonder…." (qtd. in Gaines 12). The surgeons' assessment mirrors this reading of the alien as not only harmless but as a source of wonder. The reference to E.T. thus builds on creating an analogy: In the case of both the patient and the fictional alien, the usually concealed heart is rendered visible. The heart of the patient can be seen through the translucent material, that of the alien can be seen glowing inside his rib cage. *E.T.*'s optical effects coordinator Mitch Suskin explains: "I realized up front that to get over an audience's natural revulsion toward organs, we'd have to come up with some very warm, friendly innards" (qtd. in Gaines 78). In Todd's anecdote, E.T.'s "friendly innards" function as a vehicle, which not only likens Diane's heart to that of

the alien but soon turns her entire being into an alien Other: She becomes "ET girl." Here, the post-operative patient – whose organs are displayed – is intertextually linked to the alien and is no longer described using medical terminology.

While the renaming of Diane as "ET girl" is an intertextual reference to Spielberg's film, it also resonates with the significance of metaphors in medical practice and illness narratives. Although Susan Sontag has argued that science fiction imagery may contribute to an understanding of a patient with an illness as alien (68), Anita Wohlmann shows that metaphors hold creative potential, and "continued use is possible because new meanings and uses can emerge from even the tritest metaphors" (77). Central to such processes of reclaiming, however, is also who employs a given metaphor. Wohlmann postulates that "[a] lingering question concerns the problem of agency: Who exactly is doing the work of reusing metaphors?" (189). In *Breathless*, Diane is turned into "ET girl" and does not choose the reference herself. The impact of reframing the passive patient as alien, and thus as interesting, is palpable: Her room becomes a site of spectacle. Todd recalls: "The unit and indeed the whole hospital buzzed about ET. There was a regular queue outside the window of her room, and we had to mount extra security to prevent too much of a sideshow atmosphere" (97). A certain tension arises regarding the reference to *E.T.*: While in Spielberg's film the miraculous alien needs to be hidden from prying eyes, the use of "ET girl" has the inverse effect in Todd's hospital, as it renders the extraordinary patient overtly visible.

The reference to the speculative text thus does not retain its role as a source of relief in a moment of distress, nor is it used merely to frame the patient as vulnerable and in need of protection or seclusion. Instead, it becomes an attribute that defines the patient's role as a foreign form of life, as a spectacle to be looked at. As I have noted elsewhere (10), the reference to speculative fiction offers an alternate frame of meaning-making, a frame that distances the patient from her identity as human and imagines her as an alien in need of human assistance. Interestingly, this shift does not function analogously to Sontag's argument that sick patients (cancer patients in particular) are seen as alien because their body is being invaded by "mutant" cells (68). In Diane's case, it is a surgical intervention and its narrative framing that "create" "ET girl." In other words, not her prior illness but the surgeons' employment of translucent material invites the intertextual reference to Spielberg's alien, and it is the surgeons themselves who reframe their patient in these terms. While speculative fiction has been understood to create awareness in the public about scientific advancements (Gerhard), this example, through life writing, hints at the ways in which medical professionals are also impacted by and deliberately refer to speculative fiction in an effort to make meaning of surgically changed bodies.

Heart surgeon Kathy E. Magliato's memoir *Heart Matters: A Memoir of a Female Heart Surgeon* (2010) offers another example of how references to speculative fiction are used in surgeons' life writing. This text uses the figure of the cyborg as it describes the implantation of an artificial heart and clarifies: "The human heart has to be prepared to accept the machine [the artificial heart] and the machine has to be assembled in such a way as to be accepted by the heart" (155). Here, humans and machines are paired, as both become part of medical intervention and preparation. Recalling the development of her program focused on artificial hearts, Magliato recounts the story of a patient, Lindsey, whom she understands to be key to the program's success. In a chapter titled "The Bionic Woman," Magliato imagines Lindsey as the titular "bionic woman" (157). Even though, in contrast to Todd's direct reference to *E.T.*, Magliato does not further elaborate on the phrase, its use evokes a speculative text of the same name, namely the successful television series *The Bionic Woman* (1976–1978), in which a young woman receives bionic implants that grant her superpowers, specifically advanced hearing, strength, and speed. Commenting on the series, Donna Binns observes that "[t]he bionic man and woman represent an early television look at the complications of becoming both human and machine" (90). This perspective aligns with Magliato's reflection on the fusion of humans and machines: Both her memoir and the television show explore the intersection of the human and the mechanical.

While the label "bionic woman" distances the post-operative human from her pre-operative self, it does not turn Lindsey into an alien. Instead, it allows for interpreting her as superhuman. Importantly, being a cyborg in the series is a trait that viewers are invited to aspire to, and Herbie J. Pilato notes that "[a]ll these years later, one thing remains indelibly true: these shows were fun. It should be fun to be bionic, and it was" (loc. 117). Magliato's framing of the recipient of bionic implants might present Lindsey as different, yet it suggests a gain in her agency, power, and even the mere "fun" of being alive. The transplant story becomes the ultimate success story: Surgical intervention has turned the patient into a "bionic woman," a superhuman who inspires Magliato's readers. As a result, readers may feel inclined to understand Magliato's work in line with the doctors in the series who turn the accident victim Jamie Summers into a bionic woman. Magliato's use of "bionic woman," specifically when read in the framework of the television series, suggests that surgical intervention and the implantation of an artificial heart have changed Lindsey in the eyes of the surgeon: Lindsey no longer appears completely human. Similar to Todd's use of "ET girl," surgical intervention functions as an agent of transformation; in Lindsey's case, this results in the shift from human to "bionic woman." Reading Magliato's use of "bionic woman" in its intertextual relation to a speculative text and its pop cultural significance illustrates the ways in which fictional stories of enhancement can impact the conceptualization and narrative framing of people who use prosthetic devices.

Magliato's use of "bionic woman" can also be understood as positioning her patient's abilities beyond those of common humans, given that the referenced fictional character's bionic body is supernaturally strong and fast. An understanding of the post-operative patient in these terms resonates with the "supercrip" narrative, in which people with disabilities are shown to overcome their disability and, thus, become a source of inspiration. Carla Filomena Silva and P. David Howe explain: "Supercrip narratives can be considered to be an expression of society's low-level expectation placed upon people with disability, which ultimately perpetuates the understanding of their existence as a 'problem'" (175). Magliato's use of "bionic woman" can be brought into conversation with these narratives. After the artificial heart starts to fully work in her chest, Lindsey is no longer in need of assistance, and Magliato remarks: "With each step that Lindsey took, she grew stronger and my MAD [Medical Assist Device] program grew stronger" (157). Lindsey's personal improvement is linked to the program that facilitated her survival and turned her into a "bionic woman." The patient's resilience is intertwined with the series' framing of the transplant narrative as a triumph over previous limitations – a narrative that runs the risk of evoking the supercrip storyline.

The influence of speculative texts on the development of prosthetic devices that is at stake here also becomes evident in other instances, for example, in the design of a prosthetic arm by the non-profit Limbitless Solution, which drew inspiration from the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). In a promotional video (2015), the fictional Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.), the tech-savvy entrepreneur behind the superhero Iron Man, is shown visiting the 7-year-old Alex, who has a partially developed arm, to deliver a prosthesis which was modeled after the suit worn by Iron Man (Objective 3D). In her analysis of the marketing campaign, Susan Smith explains that it perpetuates the supercrip stereotype and "problematically portrays an impaired child 'in need' of 'repair' and subsequently 'fixed' by technology" (259). The supercrip narrative can thus also present a shift that is facilitated by the implantation of technology: People with disabilities or chronic illnesses are narrated as a "before" version of their later, fully developed selves. With regard to Magliato, it becomes apparent that Lindsey is conceptualized as human prior to her surgery and as a "bionic woman" after it. While Magliato may understand the label as a compliment – a compliment also directed at herself as the yielder of the life-saving technology – she also suggests that, similar to Alex, Lindsey has been "'fixed' by technology" (Smith 259). Limbitless Solution's reference to a character from the speculative world of the MCU may be expectable, given that elements reminiscent of speculative texts are often used in reports on biotechnological progress,[2]

[2] The employment of elements borrowed from speculative fiction in news reports on organ transplantation are manifold, for instance, already in 1963, an article in *Time* featured a description of an operating room in which "[t]he grey-gowned figure in charge looks like a visitor from another planet. Between skull cap and mask, his head sprouts a startling pair of binocular spectacles" ("Surgery: The Best Hope of All").

yet Magliato's use of "bionic woman" suggests the permeable boundary between the life writing of medical professionals and speculative fiction.

These examples thus illustrate that references to speculative fiction can express the transgressive force of surgical intervention and frame their patients as different from their pre-operative selves. The references posit possibilities and challenges that relate to the use of metaphors in the medical realm. They may run the risk of dehumanizing patients: The use of "ET girl," for instance, turns a patient into a spectacle through the narrative rendering of a medical intervention intended to facilitate her healing. In the discussed cases, elements borrowed from speculative fiction are used to assess patients from the surgeons' perspectives, a tendency that resonates with Wohlmann's reading of institutionalized metaphors: "And when metaphors are institutionalised or become associated with a hegemonic cultural discourse, they can be instrumentalised in power dynamics between the 'definers' on the one hand and the 'defined' on the other" (27). Although the discussed references to speculative fiction cannot be understood as "institutionalised," they have become part of a hegemonic discourse of doctors speaking *about* their patients. Tying into Wohlmann's argument regarding "definers" and "defined," patients are thus understood to be changed by surgery and defined by the labels they receive from their surgeons. The use of "ET girl" and "bionic woman" shows that speculative elements enter physicians' life writing and give concrete form to abstract and complex readings of the human body changed by transplantation.

What If …?: The Alternative Worlds of Transplantation

Another way in which surgeons' autobiographies engage in practices of speculation concerns their construction of alternative pasts and presents by deploying "what if" narratives. By wondering "what if" and speculating about days yet to come (whether from a vantage point in the present or in the past), surgeons' life writing also uses a mode that is commonly associated with science fiction. The pursuit of "what if" as a fundamental guiding question presents an entryway into the speculative mode that is shared across fictional and non-fictional genres and forms of writing. Tracing the role of speculative thought in physicians' life writing, the following discussion focuses on autobiographical texts by two surgeons: Thomas Starzl's "In a Small Iowa Town" (1988) and his memoir *The Puzzle People: Memoirs of a Transplant Surgeon* (1992) and Kathy E. Magliato's already discussed *Heart Matters*.

As late as 1988, more than twenty years after the first heart transplantation had made headlines in 1964, Thomas Starzl remarked about organ transplantation: "How new this field really is, and how unexpected" ("Small Iowa Town" 12). Starzl, who was the first to successfully transplant a liver in 1967 and who has been called "the father of modern surgical transplantation" (Black et al. 409), still assesses transplantation

as utterly novel. This reading of the practice as cutting-edge is further substantiated by surgeon Bud Shaw, who recalls a conversation in 1983 in which Starzl explains: "You're riding a rocket ship to the stars, you know. The sky's the limit. Shit, the limit's beyond the sky" (170). This hints at the way in which the perceived boldness of transplantation turns the practice into a part of an imagined, technologically facilitated future: Medical practice itself becomes a "rocket ship," a novum of technological progress promising hope for patients.

Starzl had already established the ties between transplantation and a medically advanced future at the annual session of the American College of Physicians in 1967, where he argued that many advances in transplantation were "fed by the needs and wishes of desperate patients who had the misfortune of not becoming ill at a later and more convenient time" (*The Puzzle People* 164). This "later and more convenient time" is a compelling vision of a future in which transplantation already produces dependable results. Following this vision of the future as a more "convenient time" to be requiring medical assistance, Starzl speculates about the future as a realm of possibilities in which the death and suffering the surgeon has witnessed is made obsolete. He thus remembers his colleague's child, a "beautiful daughter, who died in childhood of a disease that would not have been fatal if it had come a few years later" (*The Puzzle People* 183). What was once a deadly disease ceases to be one in the (respective) future: Speculation opens an imaginative space for alternate histories in which medical treatment, and transplantation in particular, change the course of past events. Here, transplantation itself can be understood as a novum in Darko Suvin's sense "as an important deviation from the author's norm of reality" (36). This unprecedented development offers the basis for the surgeon's thought experiment and presents a beneficial force in the lives of those fortunate enough to be born after its establishment.

It is also noteworthy just who Starzl imagines benefitting from transplant practices: By speculating how transplantation could have impacted past events, he envisions alternate life courses shaped by the practice's existence. In "In a Small Iowa Town," the surgeon muses about how the introduction of the immunosuppressive drug cyclosporine made transplantation easier and triggered further speculation:

> To many physicians, thoughts turned back to what might have been. How much more complete might the world have been if Mozart had been treated with renal transplantation instead of dying of glomerulonephritis at the age of 34. Or, closer to home, what might have become of that little girl so mourned by Father O'Toole 50 years ago in a small town in Iowa. The people who could be most helped by transplantation were those with the greatest potential, often at a young age, who had been doomed by failure of a single organ system but with all other organ systems intact. Now, they could be saved. It was like a miracle. ("Small Iowa Town" 12–13)

Starzl constructs an alternative history that reinterprets the past, positioning transplantation as the novum within a speculated past. How might the world have changed, he wonders, if transplantation had been there at an earlier time to make it "more complete"? Starzl's phrasing suggests that the world is made "more complete" by the survival of people "with the greatest potential," among them are two individuals: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and a young, unnamed girl. Dying young, they function as the epitome of innocent and promising lives being lost. Mozart, the "Wunderkind," and the unnamed girl have died before their time, a wrong that could now be righted by transplantation. Moreover, the girl's death and the priest's grief introduce the impact of transplantation on an utterly private and intimate level, inviting empathy while also implicitly alluding to Christian beliefs and family values. Moreover, both the unnamed girl and Mozart can be presumed to come from educated households and are products of Western upbringing. While they are thus part of a specific part of the world and social sphere, their survival is portrayed as universally beneficial. In effect, the artist and the girl's "potential" contributes to a speculated world that is more "complete" due to the novum of transplantation as a beneficiary force.

While Starzl was one of the pioneers of transplant practices, the tendency to wonder "what if" cannot be reduced to transplantation's early days. In 2010, Kathy E. Magliato follows a similarly speculative approach when musing in *Heart Matters*:

> One donor can change – no make that *save* – the world. What if the recipient of that lung goes on to find the cure for cancer? What if the recipient of that kidney goes on to develop the alternative clean energy source that can power all forms of transportation? What if the liver recipient achieves world peace? (176, original emphasis)

It is interesting to note that Magliato, too, presents people who might make the world more "complete," to echo Starzl's framing ("Small Iowa Town" 12). The crucial difference with her imagined individuals is, however, that their potential survival appears to relate solely to global benefit: By focusing on cancer-curing, alternative energy sources, and world peace, Magliato imagines the contributions of transplant recipients as deeply intertwined with global welfare and as extending beyond the boundaries of medicine. Ultimately, these speculative future people survive because of the organ donation of one person, and this donor, Magliato comments, has in fact *saved* the world. The donor – and the practice of organ transplantation – then, are speculated to have changed the course of history and to have shaped a world of tomorrow. As I have argued elsewhere (101), the imagined impact of transplantation is solely beneficial: The patients saved by the practice not only go on to live what can be assumed to be fulfilled lives, they also actively change the world for the better. In this fantastical narrative, Magliato, somewhat unsurprisingly, refrains from alluding to, for instance, the financial strain of long-term medication (Elshiekh et al. 49). Nor does she mention that organ transplantation can also facilitate organ markets which are

linked to structural inequality. As interviewees in Nancy Scheper-Hughes's study in Brazil and South Africa observe, there is a tendency of "organs moving from poor and black bodies . . . for transplantation into more affluent white bodies" (10). Instead, transplantation appears as a force that moves the world solely towards global benefit, given that a recipient may "achiev[e] world peace." The imagined recipients, it can be concluded, are not supposed to present an average group of people, or, possibly, include a person whose survival could be destructive to the imagined better world of tomorrow. The surgeon's world of tomorrow is thus ripe with developments discussed in speculative fiction: It boasts clean energies, no cancer, and world peace. This future is based on medical intervention, the willingness to donate, and an exceptional group of people who have received medical treatment. In effect, this exceptional group may also be read as specifically deserving of the medical care they have received. In Magliato's future, then, transplantation is introduced as a universally beneficial practice that functions independently from any socio-political markers that may impact the practice in her present.

By wondering "what if" and specifically by imagining who might be saved by transplantations and their impact on a more "complete" ("Small Iowa Town" 12) world of tomorrow, Magliato and Starzl thus illustrate the underlying significance of speculation for medical practice, invention, and motivation. As transplantation becomes possible, Starzl muses about time as a tragic element: It is patients not falling ill at a more "convenient" time that proves to be fatal, rather than their illness. By focusing on the impact of one donor on the imagined grandeur of those saved by transplantation, Magliato suggests that organ donation contributes solely to a greater, universal good, without accounting for the more ambivalent socio-political realities in which the practice is also embedded.

Conclusion

This article has shown that speculation shapes surgeons' life writing and their perception of their field. It ties into Gavin Miller and Anna McFarlane's understanding that "[s]cience fiction clearly matters to medicine" (213) and shapes the minds of those invested in medical practice. Even though organ transplantation had become an established practice by the time the works discussed in this article were penned, it continues to be imagined as a radical novum in these texts. Firstly, it has become apparent that surgeons intertextually draw on speculative fiction in different forms and with different impacts: Todd's reference to *E.T.*, for instance, illustrates that popular narratives impact those invested in the medical practice and offer a frame of meaning-making beyond medical explanation. While these references to speculative fiction serve as shortcuts to denote the complex alterations that transplantation causes in patients' bodies, they also run the risk of dehumanizing post-transplant

patients or of unknowingly perpetuating stereotypical understandings of the post-transplant body. Secondly, the readings have revealed the speculative potential of wondering "what if" in surgeons' life writing. Here, the imagined futures brought about by transplantation are understood to be, as Starzl phrases, more "complete" ("Small Iowa Town" 12), and people saved by transplantation are imagined contributing to a better world. Thus, the novum of transplantation is removed from socio-political contexts and imagined as a purely beneficial force that serves the universal good. Magliato, wondering whether an organ donor might make world peace possible, presents a comparatively clear-cut version of a future shaped by transplantation. The fact that her imagined recipients contribute to universal good may even frame them as being specifically deserving of the medical care they receive.

This prevalence of speculation emphasizes medicine's position within a specific cultural framework and suggests that transplantation is not only a medical procedure but also a cultural practice. Thus, transplantation is not only connected to the availability of technology, for instance, the heart-lung-machine, or pharmaceutical developments, such as the release of the immunosuppressive drug cyclosporine, it is also tied to a specific understanding of the body. This body, accordingly, can be understood "as simultaneously a physical and symbolic artifact, as both naturally and culturally produced, and as securely anchored in a particular historical moment" (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 9). The employment of elements from speculative texts makes visible how fictional texts reveal but also contribute to the cultural establishment of the body. Speculative fiction, then, does not merely serve as a mirror for ongoing developments in the life sciences but offers frameworks in which medical professionals think and create alternative frames of meaning-making.

By tracing the presence of speculation in doctors' life writing, this article suggests the significant and long-lasting impact of speculative fiction and underlines its ability to create ripples across disciplinary boundaries. As I have also suggested elsewhere (4), speculation appears as a mode that surpasses barriers between fictional and non-fictional writing. A focus on speculation connects seemingly different texts and emphasizes their shared strategies: By wondering "what if," surgeons' life writing mobilize Rogers's "cognitive provisionality" (4). Even though they present accounts of medical practice, they simultaneously envision alternative worlds that deviate from the present and that are shaped by what surgeons imagine to be the eternal novum of organ transplantation.

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Narratives of Resilience in Times of Climate Crisis: Angry Optimism and Utopian Minimalism in Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* and Jenny Offill's *Weather*

Sylvia Mayer

ABSTRACT

The essay discusses two climate change novels, Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* and Jenny Offill's *Weather*, as resilience narratives. It argues that these novels – *New York 2140* speculating about a possible future, set more than 100 years in the future, *Weather* engaging our present cultural moment, the early 21st century – explore diverse experiences of, and responses to, human-made climate crisis, directly engaging with the interconnected ecological, political, economic, social, and cultural effects of global warming, but also with responses such as climate skepticism and denial as well as cognitive dissonance, climate anxiety, and grief related to climate change. Applying the concept of resilience in its diverse meanings as an analytical framework emphasizes that fictional climate narratives often go beyond merely "sounding the alarm" about climate risks or concentrating exclusively on catastrophe. Rather, they also shed light on strategies of adaptation, flexibility and endurance and on the potential for transformation to allow for a more hopeful and even utopian reading. For this purpose, the concepts of "angry optimism" and "utopian minimalism" are introduced, the former articulated by Robinson, the latter introduced by critic Anahid Nersessian, who have both participated in the debate on the relevance and timeliness of utopianism in times of climate crisis.

KEYWORDS

Transformation, solidarity, co-operation, socio-ecological systems, climate fiction, climate anxiety

Writing about global warming and climate change in the United States has often meant "sounding the alarm." Since at least the 1980s, perhaps most notably when NASA climate scientist James Hansen alerted the world to the greenhouse effect, scientists and environmental activists have warned that inaction on reducing greenhouse gas emissions would lead to profound changes everywhere on the planet, with disastrous consequences for both humans and the more-than-human world. Since the 1990s, scientific warnings, expressed in factual texts such as the IPCC (the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report, have been increasingly complemented by fictional texts. Most significantly, perhaps, climate change novels and movies have begun to explore the current moment of increased uncertainty or envision possible planetary futures, the latter more often than not dystopian scenarios that depict a world after climate collapse (Johns-Putra; Mehnert; Andersen). The climate knowledge offered by these fictional narratives of socio-ecological catastrophe, but also the knowledge provided especially by novels that focus on the risks of global warming, i.e. on the mere anticipation of possible disasters, have contributed significantly to raising awareness and warning against a wide array of possible threats (Mayer).

For a long time, such alarm-sounding has been met with strong skepticism or outright denial on the part of a majority of the US population, explaining the country's often obstructionist stance in international climate change policy (Falke). In recent years, however, the range of responses to factual and fictional climate alarm-sounding has further expanded not only in the United States but in large parts of the affluent West. The increasingly undeniable impacts of a changing climate have drawn heightened attention to psychological and emotional challenges, such as climate anxiety or climate-related grief and cognitive dissonance. In the case of climate change, the latter describes the discomfort that arises when personal lifestyle choices conflict with climate change awareness. Reflecting on the experience of her students, the "climate generation" contending with feelings of powerlessness and despair over the ineffectiveness of national and international climate policies, Sarah Jacquette Ray notes that "[f]eelings of grief, mourning, fear, and overwhelm are giving rise to a new vocabulary, including such terms as *climate anxiety*, *vicarious trauma*, *solastalgia*, *pre-traumatic stress disorder*, and *secondary grief*" (5–6; original emphasis). Clinical psychologist Sarah Lowe defines climate anxiety as "distress about climate change and its impacts on the landscape and human existence," as "intrusive thoughts or feelings of distress about future disasters or the long-term future of human existence and the world, including one's own descendants" (qtd. in "Yale Experts"). Her colleague, geographer and climate communication specialist Anthony Leiserowitz in this

context distinguishes between "worry" and "distress." He explains that distress involves more intense physiological and behavioral effects that have a stronger negative effect on health and social relationships. Worry, on the other hand, can be beneficial. As he notes, "if you worry about something, you are motivated to figure out what you can do about it . . . We actually need more people to be worried about climate change" (qtd. in "Yale Experts"). Finally, climate change-related grief, Lesley Head claims, means "the converging, congealing grief at the loss of the conditions that underpin contemporary Western prosperity . . . for the approaching demise of the conditions sustaining life as we know it . . . for the loss of a future characterised by hope" (2).

The response of politics to a steadily increasing number of climate-induced, large-scale disasters across the United States, caused, for instance, by record-breaking wildfires, rainfall, flooding, and heat waves, has been a focus on building resilience. To help US-American communities better withstand and recover from such disasters, US federal governments have, since Hurricane Sandy in 2012, progressively invested in "sea walls, storm drains, building science, forest management and other strategies," such as "disaster resilience zones." In 2023 alone, as Christopher Flavelle points out, FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) designated almost 500 communities as disaster resilience zones, which are eligible for increased federal funding.

Building resilience has become a central concern in climate change policies, not least as a response to increasing climate anxiety, both in the United States and internationally. "Resilience," however, has by now also become a concept with many meanings that signal its relevance for a variety of fields. Since the 1970s and 1980s, it has become what Sarah Bracke calls a "traveling concept" (55), a concept that originated in the natural and social sciences but then expanded into the realms of politics and culture. More recently, it has entered the fields of literary and cultural studies. In this essay, I will draw on several meanings of resilience and discuss two contemporary climate change novels as "resilience narratives": Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017), which speculates about a possible future more than a century from now, and Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020), set in our present cultural moment, the early 21st century. I will show how these novels explore diverse experiences of and responses to the climate crisis by directly engaging with the interconnected ecological, political, economic, social, and cultural effects of ongoing global warming, but also, especially in the case of *Weather*, with climate skepticism and denial as well as cognitive dissonance, climate anxiety, and grief related to climate change. Applying resilience as an analytical framework emphasizes that fictional climate narratives go beyond merely "sounding the alarm" about climate risks or concentrating exclusively on catastrophe. Rather, they also shed light on experiences and strategies of adaptation, flexibility,

and endurance, allowing for a more hopeful, even utopian, reading. Before engaging the two novels, however, I will introduce the three concepts that are central to my readings of the texts as resilience narratives: the concepts of "angry optimism" and "utopian minimalism," articulated by writer Kim Stanley Robinson and critic Anahid Nersessian respectively, and the concept of resilience, which has developed a broad range of meanings over time. I will conclude with a few remarks on the potential contribution fictional resilience narratives like *New York 2140* and *Weather* make to overcome a narrow focus on dystopian scenarios and instead draw on the tradition of utopian writing to develop a more complex perspective, including a sense of hope.

Angry Optimism, Utopian Minimalism, and Resilience: Conceptual Issues

Kim Stanley Robinson has for a long time explored the risks of climate change in his work, primarily through science fiction and speculative fiction novels. However, beyond his fiction, in interviews and essays, he has joined literary scholars such as Ursula K. Heise and Gerry Canavan in challenging the common notion that climate fiction is dominated by dystopian or disaster narratives. Like them, he has put emphasis on the unique role of science fiction in offering alternative narratives that engage much more complexly in the topic. Reflecting on his own body of work, Robinson expresses surprise when realizing that over the past three decades many of his novels reveal a persistent utopian dimension – despite worsening environmental risk scenarios and inadequate political, economic, and cultural action on climate change. This drive toward utopianism he calls "angry optimism."

In his 2016 essay "Remarks on Utopia in the Age of Climate Change," Robinson explains his holding on to utopianism by stating his conviction that a speedy, global de-carbonization will still give humanity the time to prevent the worst consequences of climate change. Emphasizing the urgency of the situation and the need to become active and implement de-carbonization measures, he even argues that today "utopia is no longer a nice idea but, rather, a survival necessity" (10). A year later, in 2017, he uses the phrase angry optimism in an interview to describe the driving force behind his writing. Robinson refers to a well-known statement from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, where Gramsci, while critically analyzing the rise of authoritarianism in the 1930s, maintains an optimistic belief in the potential for socialist change. Gramsci describes this stance as "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" (qtd. in de Vicente). When interviewer José Luis de Vicente asks Robinson: "Why do you think we need to defend optimism, in the face of this massive problem that is so scary?", he responds:

> I do think [optimism is] important, but you do have to begin and hold on to the idea that this is a massive problem, that there is going to be suffering and disaster. Then,

> the optimism involved in there is just a very angry optimism . . . the optimism that I'm trying to express is that there won't be an apocalypse, there will be a disaster. But after the disaster comes the next world on. (qtd. in de Vicente)

Robinson writes not only for present-day audiences but also for "the next world on" – for future generations. His anger is directed primarily at the privileged parts of the world, against affluent elites that bear significant historical responsibility for global warming yet fail to take sufficient action to address it. His critique targets in particular the unwillingness to recognize, respect and put to use the many insights that the sciences have produced, insights that disprove the claims of climate skeptics and deniers.

Robinson expresses his stance again in a 2023 interview, entitled "How to Create an Optopia?". "Given our situation," he argues, "I would recommend being fueled by dread, but also buoyed, and kept focused on the necessary work, by willed hope, as a political position." He picks up the term "optopia," which he attributes to feminist science fiction writer Joanna Russ, to explain that his goal in writing climate fiction is to envision "the optimum society, the best one possible given where we are now . . . We have a moral obligation to find that optopia" (qtd. in Mikes and New 231). My argument is that such "optopias," expressions of Robinson's angry optimism, may come in the form of resilience narratives.

In her article "Utopia's Afterlife in the Anthropocene," published in 2017, Anahid Nersessian also contributes to the debate on whether utopianism is viable or even justified in times of environmental crisis. She argues that "the crisis itself would seem to remain incommodious to anything that smacks of utopianism, if by utopian we mean *optimistic*" (91). However, like Robinson, Nersessian comes to the defense of utopianism by proposing "utopian minimalism," a concept that moves away from visions of utopia as "perfection" in the sense of "plenitude." Instead, it asks how "both the idea and the value of 'perfection' might be calibrated to a planetary situation of amplified instability and attenuated possibilities" (92). By tracing a tradition of utopian thought and writing that does not center on ideas of "plenitude" – a tradition exemplified, for example, by Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction novel *The Dispossessed* (1974) – Nersessian suggests embracing "the radicalism of being minimal" (92).

For Nersessian, philosopher Kate Soper's idea of "alternative hedonism" best describes what she has in mind. Alternative hedonism advocates for the pursuit of pleasure that encompasses both intellectual and sensory experiences, embracing "lively, even joyous practices of moderation and restraint" (93). Drawing on Le Guin's novel as an example, Nersessian shows that utopianism may refer to "another kind of revolutionary social transformation: the necessary but no less ethical rejection of

plenitude as the promise of utopian achievement" (95). Thus, in Nersessian's view, utopianism becomes a positive commitment to the idea and the value of limitation, a commitment that can also become a defining feature of resilience narratives.

The term "resilience" originates "from the Latin verb *resilire*, meaning to leap back, rebound, or return to form" after experiencing shock or disturbance; it is, more generally, "linked to the capacity of beings – human and nonhuman, individual or collective – to withstand adversity, to endure by being flexible, to adapt to conditions of crisis" (Fraile-Marcos 1). Initially used in materials science in the early 19th century, resilience later emerged as a key analytical concept across multiple academic disciplines in the 20th century. Scholarship by now distinguishes between two "parallel discourses . . . that might be termed 'psycho-social resilience' and 'socio-ecological resilience'" (Welsh 16). Psycho-social resilience discourse focuses on individuals and communities and their ability to "sustain health and psychological wellbeing in the face of continuing adversity" (17). Socio-ecological resilience discourse looks at ecological and, since the 1990s, at socio-ecological systems and their capacity to respond to disturbances by successfully transforming and reorganizing themselves.

Today, the concept has acquired a rather broad range of meanings. It has become a "traveling concept" (Bracke 55), which also extends into the realm of politics. Here, it has been prominently adopted by the political economy of neoliberal capitalism, which has shaped globalization since the 1980s. As political geographer Marc Welsh argues, in this context resilience has become "a structuring discourse of government," which is characterized, most importantly, by having "responsibilise[d] risk away from the state and on to individuals and institutions" (Welsh 17). Welsh defines the neoliberal resilient self as "autonomous and entrepreneurial" (16), as accepting uncertainty, risk, and adversity as unalterable conditions of life, and shouldering the responsibility for its well-being on its own. It is not supposed to challenge the socio-political or economic organization of neoliberalism, which rests on principles such as the deregulation, privatization, and expansion of markets and the cutback of state support for social services. Adaptability, flexibility, and persistence that are central when it comes to building resilience are fully individualized. Needless to say, the neoliberal resilience paradigm also turns a blind eye to the ecological costs our current globalized economy generates. In other words, it fails to address the impacts of ongoing global climate change in an environmentally responsible manner.

Resilience becomes a valuable analytical category for literary studies, including ecocriticism, if we adopt Michael Basseler's argument that all concepts of resilience are intrinsically narrative in nature. Any concept of resilience is "significantly constructed through narratives" (18), he argues, and he convincingly claims that the analysis of both factual and fictional texts allows us to better understand "how narratives

shape resilience and how resilience is essentially a narrative concept" (26). If we look at psycho-social resilience discourse, we can, for instance, see how "self-narratives enable people to overcome psychological crises and stress" (Neimeyer and Levitt qtd. in Basseler 20). If we look at socio-ecological resilience discourse, we can see that narratives can highlight change and transformation as central principles of ecology but also as indicative of the transformation societies have been undergoing due to the effects of climate change.

The convergence of various resilience discourses – psycho-social, socio-ecological, and political – offers a rich framework for interpreting climate change novels as "resilience narratives." It provides various lenses on what the literary texts communicate, most importantly, perhaps, drawing attention again and again to the relationality, interdependence, and reciprocity that have always defined human lives as integral parts of ecosystems and multispecies communities. Fictional resilience narratives can therefore be defined as stories that (a) depict partial adaptation to situations of crisis or disaster, (b) emphasize strategies, practices, and underlying values for coping with disasters in the present and preparing for future ones, and (c) articulate the capacity for transformative change, both individually and socio-ecologically – all features that give up the original meaning of the term resilience as conveying the notion of simply returning to a former, better state.

Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*: The Resilience Narrative as Novel of the Collective

New York 2140 is set in New York City in the years 2140 to 2143. Much of the city is submerged in water, a consequence of the devastating effects of anthropogenic climate change. By 2140, sea levels have risen approximately 60 feet since the beginning of the 21st century, triggered by two "Pulses," massive flooding events caused by the melting of Antarctica's polar ice sheets due to global warming and the continuous increase in greenhouse gas emissions. The first Pulse occurs in the 2050s, "raising sea level by ten feet in ten years," as a result of which global trade and shipping systems break down and cause "a depression that was even more damaging to the people of that generation than the accompanying refugee crisis, which, using the unit popular at the time, was rated as fifty katrinas" (Robinson, *New York 2140* 139). The second Pulse occurs at the end of the 21st century, when "the total rise in sea level ended up at around fifty feet" and "thrashed all the coastlines of the world, causing a refugee crisis rated at ten thousand katrinas" (144). In its eight parts that each consists of several sections giving voice to the novel's major characters, *New York 2140* presents a set of characters of different class and ethnic backgrounds, who live in the partly drowned city and for whom building and practicing resilience is essential

for survival. They have to be creative and inventive to keep adapting to changing and challenging environmental conditions, both individually and collectively. Narrating the novel by employing a large number of voices turns *New York 2140* into what Andrew Rowcroft has called a "novel of the collective," a formal and thematic turn to be found especially in more recent Robinson novels such as *2312* and *The Ministry for the Future*, "in which individual identity and growth are replaced by collective activity and organization" (30). Similarly, focusing on the novel's goal to "take on the challenge of imagining new kinds of collectivity, and radical change" (1), David Sergeant reads this polyphony of voices as "an allegorical assemblage" (159) that links individual characters' attitudes and actions to overarching themes such as the struggle between the rich and the poor, between finance capitalism and democracy in the context of climate crisis. Read as a resilience narrative, I argue that *New York 2140*, as a novel of the collective, uses the narrative strategy of polyphony to formally express the key features of the concept of resilience the novel ultimately advocates. Firmly rooted in collective effort, solidarity, and cooperation, resilience becomes manifest in the partial adaptation to a situation of climate crisis many New Yorkers have achieved when the novel opens. It becomes manifest in the strategies that some of the protagonists successfully develop in the course of the novel to overcome the neoliberal capitalist sociopolitical order – the Capitalocene setting, as Stephanie Bender argues, drawing on Jason Moore's concept of capitalist world-making, "which foregrounds the entanglement of the human economy with the ecology of the planet" (71). In a plot development characterized by both "civil resistance" and "prodemocratic action" (Sergeant 163), the novel presents the capacity for transformative change and the ability to prepare for the future, thereby moving toward an optopia, an "optimum society."

While the novel also addresses the planetary dimension of climate change – for example, by portraying New York as one of the remaining global financial centers, engaging issues of global ecosystem change and biodiversity, or exploring worldwide climate migration – its primary focus is on the spaces of Manhattan. These are divided into three zones. Upper Manhattan, which lies significantly higher than the rest, has stayed dry. It has continued to attract investors and now parades so-called "superscrapers" of unprecedented height and technological innovation, which are owned by the one-percent of the super-rich. Midtown Manhattan has become an intertidal zone, an area where the water comes and goes and where the survival or collapse of buildings has become a lucrative object of real estate speculation. It is here, where the working and middle classes live, people whose lives are relatively stable and secure, largely because they have permanent housing. Lower Manhattan, finally, has been permanently flooded, with its dilapidated buildings occupied mostly by squatters,

the large and still growing number of people, including climate refugees, that come to the city and are most vulnerable in terms of existential insecurity. Living conditions, especially the housing situation, in this future New York City are thus generally unstable and, for most inhabitants, highly precarious, as they have to struggle with resource scarcity, unprotected exposure to extreme weather events, and the enduring impact of a neoliberal political economy that has persisted beyond climate catastrophe. In 2140, New York City as well as the United States as a whole remain defined by a lack of adequate infrastructure and social services, placing the burden of risk squarely on individuals. New Yorkers are expected to live the neoliberal ideal of the "autonomous," resilient self, solely responsible for their own survival. Except for the super-rich, everyone in this future New York has to put up with the compounded effects of climate change, intricately linked with social inequality, violence, and corruption.

Engaging this dystopian scenario, the novel critically examines the neoliberal conception of resilience and its political and economic consequences for city inhabitants. It develops alternative political and economic principles that support a more equitable and sustainable way of organizing society. Despite and because of precarious conditions of living, the city and many of its inhabitants do display resilience, demonstrating adaptability, flexibility, and perseverance: By doing so, however, they ultimately show the transformative power of resilience. They replace neoliberal ideals in favor of a society and political economy that is characterized by solidarity, political cooperation, and economic regulation.

At the level of social organization, the novel suggests that personal as well as social resilience can only be effectively built if the neoliberal emphasis on individualism is massively qualified and, ultimately, replaced with a notion of the individual as firmly relying on group solidarity. The story follows the major characters, all of whom at some point live in the Met Building – a massive, former insurance building in the intertidal zone that now houses around 2,000 people and that can, as David Sergeant has pointed out, be regarded as a co-operative that "replaces the nuclear family as the building block for society" (181). Moreover, with its conversion to co-operative ownership, the building no longer symbolizes capitalist individualized protection but has, ironically, become a symbol of community-driven security. It is now jointly run by its residents, who share in its upkeep and benefit from the security, stability, and protection that co-operative membership offers. Life in the Met Building is far from "perfect"; resources are limited, and those who arrive late to the communal dining hall may have to make do with scraps or go without a meal entirely. While a stable housing situation is a privilege, rooms and apartments are rather small, and the

building is vulnerable to natural forces, extreme weather, and sabotage – all intensified by an economic system that encourages financial speculation on the housing market. The Met Building co-operative therefore lives an ethos of utopian minimalism, it has recalibrated the idea and value of perfection in a way that is suited to a planetary situation marked by instability and scarcity.

One of the novel's protagonists, Charlotte Armstrong, exemplifies the drive toward broader social change in particular. Serving as the co-op board's chairwoman, she eventually decides to run for Congress, aiming to bring the principle of solidarity to the national stage. Her election suggests the potential to introduce this ethos into a larger political framework. Charlotte is a character who enacts the attitude of angry optimism. Aware of the enormity of socio-ecological, especially climate-driven issues, but also strongly caring for current and future generations, she holds on to the belief that social, political, and economic change is possible. Angry optimism has become the driving force for her work as co-op chairwoman, as a lawyer and social worker for climate migrants that pour into New York City, and, finally, as an emerging politician. Charlotte is angry about the entrenched privileges of small affluent elites who resist change, who continue the manipulation of power through capital, thereby exacerbating the housing crisis in the city. She is also angry about the despair of her clients, hundreds and hundreds of undocumented people who have lost their digital citizenship records in the second Pulse. Listening to their stories, she "had to keep professional distance," even though "it was the thing that made her tired at the end of a day . . . Bone tired, and at some deep level, angry. Not at her clients, but at the system that made them so needy and so numerous" (Robinson, *New York 2140* 223–24). In all her endeavors, Charlotte – who has long realized that she feels "better working on things than not. I experience less stress" (10) – practices what can be described as "optimism of the will" in the midst of circumstances that could make her feel pessimistic. Ultimately, this attitude leads to success. Supported by the majority of the inhabitants, she prevents the Met Building from being sold on the global investment market, and, through her political involvement, is elected to a new Congress committed to economic reform.

At the level of politics and the economy, the novel thus suggests that building a resilient society requires a departure from neoliberal principles and unregulated market capitalism. Toward the end of the novel, a hurricane strikes New York, triggering an uprising against the wealthiest "one-percent" (Robinson, *New York 2140* 140) whose interests dominate the political system. Major characters – including Charlotte, Franklin Garr (a stockbroker), and Amelia Black (an internet nature documentary celebrity) – succeed in initiating a nationwide strike in which people refuse to pay bills, mortgages, and insurance premiums. This large-scale strike destabilizes the

economy massively and contributes to a radically new politics, involving the nationalization of banks and a shift in the power dynamics in Congress. The excesses of neoliberal capitalism are curtailed and replaced by a political economy grounded in market regulation and sustainable, long-term investment. At the novel's end, at least for the moment, political power has returned to the people. They are still expected to demonstrate personal resilience, to be flexible, persistent, creative and inventive, but now as members of a society that begins to design an infrastructure that is able to reduce precariousness. In this context, resilience is no longer an individual burden but a shared societal goal.

Finally, resilience – and with it a sense of optimism – also shows at the ecological level, as the city's ecosystems demonstrate successful adaptation and persistence. While the novel addresses the dystopian reality of species extinction, notably in Amelia's development from internet celebrity to animal rights activist, it also portrays the resilience of the non-human world. In several passages, *New York 2140* presents an urban, socio-ecological ecosystem that underscores the interconnectedness of humans and non-human nature, illustrating what Heise, in her discussion of the novel, describes as "the rebirth of waterborne biodiversity in and around New York" and as "a process of ecological restoration" (37):

> On the floors of the canals, the old sewer holes spew life from below. Up and down life floats, in and out with the tides. Salamanders and frogs and turtles proliferate among the fishes and eels, burrow in the mulm. Above them birds flock and nest in the concrete cliffs of the city. . . whales swim into the upper bay to birth their babies. . . Wolves and foxes skulk in the forests of the outer boroughs. . . River otters, mink, fishers, weasels, raccoons: all these citizens inhabit the world the beavers made from their version of lumber. Around them swim harbor seals, harbor porpoises. A sperm whale sails through the Narrows like an ocean liner. Squirrels and bats. The American black bear. They have all come back like the tide . . ." (Robinson, New York 2140 319–20)

This passage pays tribute to the robustness, the tenacity, the adaptability, and the resilience of non-human nature and shows that ecosystems do not return to a former state but constantly transform to reach a new, temporary kind of stability. However, the fact that the narrator of this passage talks about the animals as "all these citizens," adds an important dimension to the socio-ecological vision the novel presents. Including non-human animals into its reflections on what an ecologically sounder social and political world might look like, it hints at important epistemological and ontological arguments: Building resilience depends on the recognition of non-human nature's agency, on the fundamental relationality that characterizes human-nonhuman nature entanglements.

The future vision of *New York 2140* articulates Robinson's notion of angry optimism. There is, on the one hand, anger about the missed chances of the past; there

is worrying about the present and the future, about unstoppable, continuing climate change. But, on the other hand, this anger does not dominate the novel. There may be "pessimism of the intellect," most notably in some of the sections presented by a character simply called "the citizen," who functions as chronicler of the city's political and environmental history and who critically, sometimes sarcastically analyses its present state. But there is also "optimism of the will," expressed by all major characters who are able to adapt to conditions of limitation, scarcity, and social inequity while finding the strength to effect positive transformation. These creative and resourceful characters point out a path toward a better society, an optopia, throughout the novel, as they actively work toward building a more equitable society. Charlotte, for example, enters politics and collaborates with Inspector Gen to fight corruption. Franklin invests "in the real economy" (Robinson, *New York 2140* 219), in "eelgrass housing" (286), i.e. in massive floating docks, the size of a Manhattan block, in the Intertidal Zone, to improve the housing situation. Their successes, at least for the time being, signal the novel's utopian minimalism. They reflect its attempt to re-calibrate the idea of perfection, moving away from notions of plenitude when responding to a planetary situation of "amplified instability and attenuated possibilities" (Nersessian 92). *New York 2140*, Robinson's novel of the collective, can thus be understood as yet another example of a fictional socio-ecological vision involving a massively reformed capitalist system that will allow for specific ways of resilience building. It shows what in a 2023 interview Robinson calls "the shapes of a solution," which "is very important for anybody that wants to have hope or everybody that is realizing that there will be humans after us, the generations to come" (qtd. in de Vicente).

Jenny Offill, *Weather*: The Personal Resilience Narrative

Jenny Offill's *Weather* is in many ways strikingly different from Robinson's *New York 2140*, a contrast made immediately apparent by several of its formal characteristics. First, Offill's novel, while also using New York City as setting, does not focus on a post-climate collapse future but on the early 21st century present that is marked by growing climate insecurity and heightened climate anxiety. Secondly, unlike Robinson, whose novel makes use of ten focalizers across its eight parts, incorporating both heterodiegetic and autodiegetic narration, as well as dialogue, to depict a narrative of social evolution, Offill relies exclusively on a single, first-person female voice in the six parts her novel comprises. Her protagonist writes a notebook, consisting of short entries that vary considerably in their typographical design as they present thoughts and observations, quotations from overheard conversations, interviews, podcast episodes, political speeches, as well as excerpts from email correspondence. Because of this structure *Weather* has repeatedly been categorized as a "social media

inflected novel" (Peinado-Abarrio 6), conveying with striking immediacy a sense of a contemporary United States in times of climate crisis from the perspective of a white, well-educated, middle-class woman. Thirdly, while the various voices in *New York 2140* create a readerly, easily accessible text that does not demand a high degree of reader participation in the process of meaning making, the fragmented narration of *Weather* generates a writerly text that demands a much more active role on the part of its readers. They must fill in the blanks between fragments, piece together plot lines, and identify thematic preoccupations, and by doing so actively participate in the narrator's intellectual and emotional development. Finally, there is a key difference between the novels since in *New York 2140*, early 21st century responses to climate change such as skepticism, denial or anxiety do not play a central role – climate collapse has already occurred, denial or skepticism have been disproven, and cognitive dissonance, a response that only the very wealthy can still afford to cultivate, is not thematically relevant for the novel's exploration of, most significantly, political and socio-ecological resilience. *Weather*, in contrast, engages deeply with issues of climate-related cognitive dissonance, denial, and anxiety, which shape the narrator-protagonist's responses throughout the narrative. At the same time, however, I argue that the novel also adopts a political stance of angry optimism and a sense of utopian minimalism, emphasizing the cultivation of personal resilience and, ultimately, suggesting a pathway toward broader social resilience.

The narrator, Lizzie, is a woman in her mid-forties, working as a librarian after giving up writing her dissertation. She is married to Ben, a former Classics scholar turned programmer of educational computer games, and the couple has a ten-year-old son, Eli. Lizzie also has a close relationship with her brother, Henry, who struggles with long-standing issues of depression, alcoholism, and medication addiction. One of the plot threads that unfolds in the novel explores her ongoing efforts to support and "stabilize" (Offill 133) Henry, who has become a father but feels unable to care for his baby daughter and eventually has to cope with the breakdown of his marriage. Lizzie's efforts to help Henry reflect a recurring pattern in her behavior – prioritizing others at the expense of her own needs and those of her husband and son, which ultimately leaves her vulnerable to depression. Rubén Peinado-Abarrio regards Lizzie and Henry's relationship as a "relation of mutual dependence that prevents their individual growth and threatens to fracture her marriage" (13). By the novel's end, however, Lizzie has managed to avoid being drawn into a downward spiral of depression; instead, she has experienced intellectual and emotional growth, which also strengthens her marriage.

Two other significant figures play important roles in Lizzie's life. The first is Sylvia, her former dissertation advisor, a professor of social sciences and cultural studies

whose work focuses on climate change. When Lizzie abandons her dissertation, Sylvia helps her secure a position at the library and later employs her to assist with her email correspondence. The second is Will, a war-zone journalist, recently returned from Syria, with whom she briefly contemplates having an affair but ultimately learns to value as a friend. During their short acquaintance, Will offers her perspective on the complicated family situation she has maneuvered herself into and helps her confront the anxieties that weigh heavily on her. The novel concentrates on the process in which Lizzie overcomes her most pressing anxieties and is able to gradually build personal resilience, allowing her to actively contribute to her community's efforts toward building collective resilience. A turning point in this process – and in the novel's plot development in general – is a presidential election closely modeled upon (though never explicitly stated as) the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

The fragments of Lizzie's notebook present a wide array of social, political, and economic challenges that afflict the deeply polarized contemporary United States. Taken together, these challenges turn *Weather* into a novel permeated by anxieties. Lizzie's more personal anxieties – about aging and parenting, for instance – are deeply intertwined with broader societal anxieties, for example, about income inequality and the lack of social services, ethnic tensions, the ongoing opioid crisis, and the risks associated with the medicalization of depression. The latter is critiqued as a particularly insidious byproduct of neoliberal capitalism, benefiting primarily the pharmaceutical industry and its shareholders. The novel even explicitly expresses a fear of a "descent into fascism" (Offill 117) following the unexpected election of a president who holds supremacist, racist, and antisemitic political positions. At one point, Lizzie asks her friend Will, the war-zone journalist, "Does this feel like a country at peace or at war?" His ominous reply underscores the tension that is palpable in the society: "[I]t feels the way it does just before it starts . . . Even while everybody's convincing themselves it's going to be okay, it's there in the air somehow" (Offill 165).

Finally, there is the pervasive theme of climate anxiety. The novel is saturated with fragments that show how omnipresent distress and worrying about the effects of ongoing global warming are in the social milieu in which Lizzie's life unfolds. Early on in the novel, we find the remark: "The moon will be fine, I think. No one's worrying about the moon" (Offill 7), a comment implying the need to direct one's concern toward the earth. A little further on, a fragment reads: "Young person worry: What if nothing I do matters? Old person worry: What if everything I do does?" (Offill 21–22). This reflection, following a lecture on the dangers of climate change, suggests Lizzie contemplating the contrasting ways different generations grapple with the urgency of developing practices that help to at least slow down climate change. At one point, Lizzie recalls a podcast episode in which the guest mentions "that many scientists

are in a state of barely suppressed panic about the latest data coming in. Their previous models were much too conservative. Everything is happening much faster than expected" (Offill 76). Somewhat later, she picks up the information that "New York City will begin to experience dramatic, life-altering temperatures by 2047" (Offill 106). The two quotations indicate the novel's engagement with the material agency of non-human nature – here referring to the eponymous weather – that highlights a growing awareness of ecological interdependencies, of the permeability of boundaries that separate the human and the non-human. The fear expressed here can be linked, moreover, to the question whether there are any "safe" places to relocate to, or to take your children to, once the climate collapses, which is repeatedly raised. Finally, while some fragments provide information about the risks of species extinction, others discuss the wealthy investing "in floating cities, the kind that can be anchored in international waters and run by unmeddlesome governments" (Offill 52). Thoughts like the latter signal the underlying socioeconomic and political dimensions of climate anxiety as well as the need for political reform and economic regulation. What all these notebook entries ultimately show is how constant exposure to scientific information about climate change but also, and maybe even more significantly, to societal responses of climate-related fear can amplify and exacerbate climate anxiety. They reveal how psychological phenomena such as vicarious trauma, "the cumulative emotional impact that results from empathic engagement with traumatic experiences" (Davenport 112-13), emerge in times of climate crisis, how they can influence a person's attitudes, emotional well-being, and coping abilities.

And yet, as the novel unfolds, this bleak outlook is continually counterbalanced by a political stance characterized by angry optimism and utopian minimalism. Lizzie's notebook entries keep reflecting her struggle against the depressing impact of climate anxiety, ultimately indicating a process of successfully building personal resilience. Central to this process is her evolving relationship with her mentor Sylvia, who for a long time represents angry optimism, embodying Robinson's point that "[g]iven our situation, I would recommend being fueled by dread, but also buoyed, and kept focused on the necessary work, by willed hope, as a political position" (qtd. in Mikes and New 231). As an academic, but also due to the many activities she undertakes to communicate the findings of climate science, she becomes "the character who most consistently shows not only a comprehensive awareness of the need to tackle the climate emergency, but also a determined disposition to make a difference" (Peinado-Abarrio 12). Through her scholarly work and wide-ranging outreach efforts – including delivering public lectures worldwide and hosting a podcast tellingly titled *Hell and High Water,* dedicated to the imminent climate catastrophe – Sylvia emerges as a driving force for change. She even attempts, albeit unsuccessfully, to persuade

her Silicon Valley podcast donors to fund a large-scale rewilding project. Peinado-Abarrio describes her as the novel's "moral compass," highlighting her posthumanist ethos and her vision of an interconnected reality where "human and non-human, nature and technology, are intertwined" (12). This ethos, grounded in a decentered view of humanity's role, expresses a complex yet hopeful approach to tackling climate crisis.

Sylvia is, for much of the novel, a character who demonstrates a high degree of personal resilience. Despite her comprehensive understanding of the dire realities revealed by climate science, she is able to draw upon the intellectual, emotional, and physical resources necessary to remain highly active, creative, and committed to convincing the public that something needs to be done. However, an intriguing plot twist reveals the limitedness of these resources, thereby firmly rejecting the notion that any one heroic figure – a "superman" or "superwoman" – can single-handedly rescue Earth from the unfolding climate crisis. After the presidential election, Sylvia experiences an onslaught of exhaustion, when she realizes that her political efforts have seemingly been rendered futile, "swept away with the stroke of a pen." She tells Lizzie that she wants to go "somewhere quiet and dark" (Offill 140) and then disappears for some time. When she comes back, Lizzie learns that she has started "to water her garden" (Offill 198), a decision echoing the end of Voltaire's *Candide*. There, the protagonist, after all his travels, has realized that he had uncritically relied on a naïve optimism that had blinded him to the hypocrisy, injustice, and absurdity of human disposition and society. In the context of the novel, the metaphor of cultivating one's garden can be read as representing a different kind of optimism – an angry optimism that combines sharp social and political critique with a determination to take responsibility for one's life by making something meaningful grow. Sylvia's gardening relates to the "community gardening" (Offill 19) that Lizzie and her family participate in and to the "community garden [Ben] was involved in" (Offill 188) at the time they met. Gardening emphasizes collaboration and community-building, highlighting a resource from which both personal and collective resilience can emerge. And it indicates utopian minimalism. "Perfection" here is not linked to "plenitude" but to smaller things, for instance, to the eggplant in the community garden that Ben, on their first date, tells Lizzy he "was having trouble with." While Lizzie cannot remember whether the plant needed "a little more rain or a little more sun," she does remember that he "had hopes for it though" (Offill 188), capturing the quiet optimism embedded in small acts of care and attention.

Sylvia's exhaustion thus points toward a critical cultural resource that is essential for sustaining personal but also psycho-social resilience amid the political conflicts she engages in: solidarity. Similar to what *New York 2140* suggests, this solidarity is

rooted in the recognition of the intricate interconnectedness of life on Earth and the need for an environmental ethics that transcends the human to encompass the non-human world. The belief in solidarity and relational thinking may offer an implicit answer to a question posed by a young woman after one of Sylvia's lectures in an early, one-line fragment, a question that is never directly answered: "How do you maintain your optimism?" (Offill 21).

The last pages of the novel reveal that Lizzie, like Sylvia, has come to draw upon solidarity as a vital resource, and in doing so seems to have found her "moral compass" within herself. Central to her transformation, i.e. central for understanding how she ultimately has learned to come to terms with her anxieties and become more resilient, is, again, the presidential election. In its immediate aftermath, when she observes people in her neighborhood as well as in the country as a whole being shocked and deeply worried about the new president's prospective policies, she writes in her notebook: "It was the same after 9/11, there was that hum in the air . . . Everyone everywhere talking about the same thing. In stores, in restaurants, on the subway" (Offill 113). A little later on, she adds: "I keep wondering how we might channel all of this dread into action" (Offill 137). From this point on, Lizzie intensifies her quest for stability and security, exploring both spiritual answers offered by different religions and practical strategies, such as survival techniques used by prepper communities. These efforts reflect her attempts to adapt to adverse conditions, remain flexible, and endure in times of crisis.

Her husband Ben also plays a role in encouraging Lizzie's growth, reminding her of her responsibilities to herself and her family with the maxim, taken from the Stoic philosopher Epictetus: "You are not some disinterested bystander / Exert yourself" (Offill 195). Signs of Lizzie actively confronting her fears and building resilience are evident when she, for instance, finally sees a doctor, after putting the appointment off for a long time, only to learn that her fears of illness are unfounded. Similarly, her decision to attend a Unitarian church service with her mother and to shake hands with members of the congregation marks a significant step in lowering her defenses against interactions with other people. She learns that while these interactions may provoke anxiety, they may also be a chance to experience solidarity.

The very last sentence of the novel, finally, leaves no doubt that relational thinking and the practice of solidarity are what will sustain Lizzie's personal resilience in the future. The last fragment picks up, again, an unanswered question, asked by Lizzie's mediation teacher, that was presented in an earlier fragment: "What is the core delusion? Margot asks the class, but nobody knows the right answer, and she doesn't bother to tell us" (Offill 193). In the very last fragment, the very last sentence of the novel, Lizzie seems to have found the answer: "The core delusion is that I am here

and you are there" (Offill 201). This realization underscores her recognition of interconnectedness as the key to sustaining resilience and navigating the challenges ahead.

Resilience Narratives, the Climate Crisis, and Utopian Writing: Epistemological, Ontological, and Ethical Implications

Read as resilience narratives that are driven by angry optimism and utopian minimalism, *New York 2140* and *Weather* explore experiences of climate crisis in ways that emphasize transformation, solidarity, and hope. The two novels represent two distinct but complementary kinds of resilience narratives. *New York 2140*, on the one hand, relying on a multiplicity of voices, is a resilience narrative of the collective. It focuses on the resilience of communities and socio-ecological systems in a future setting that has been and still is confronted with the complex challenges of climate change. It proposes that transformation toward a more sustainable, environmentally just political and economic order can only develop via collective action, solidarity, and co-operative engagement, based on an understanding that recognizes the interconnectedness of all life. *Weather*, on the other hand, focuses on personal resilience, largely in a context of climate anxiety and political instability that manifests in psychological crisis. Here, resilience is framed as an intimate, introspective process. The novel's fragmented form emphasizes a process of tentative transformation that reveals how climate change can affect an individual's mental, emotional, and psychological life. It shows that it needs trust in others and in yourself to develop a stable resilient self that leaves the autonomous resilient self of neoliberalism behind and becomes ready for participating in acts of solidarity and cooperation.

Moreover, *New York 2140* and *Weather*, as resilience narratives, share core epistemological, ontological, and ethical perspectives. Epistemologically, both novels challenge the neoliberal concept of the entrepreneurial, self-interested individual, whose major function is to stabilize the political and socioeconomic system; instead, they imagine the individual as fundamentally shaped by cooperation and solidarity. This epistemological shift calls for a new understanding of freedom, which, as Elizabeth R. Anker observes, has long served to justify capitalist practices, particularly in North America, and thus has provided a critical ideological foundation of the climate crisis. Anker contends that the current "normative ideal of freedom" is rooted in notions of "control over nature, individual sovereignty," and "human exceptionalism" (149), which must be replaced by an alternative ideal grounded in an understanding of the "co-constituting relations of life" (150), relations that inherently entail certain limitations. Ontologically, therefore, both novels reject an anthropocentric view of the world, suggesting instead that humans are deeply entangled with the non-human

world in complex, multispecies relationships. This decentering of humanity allows for a more inclusive understanding of resilience, one that embraces ecological and social interdependence without losing sight of the specific accountability and moral responsibility privileged members of more privileged societies have had over time. Ethically, both novels advocate for a moral framework that includes non-human nature, emphasizing practices of solidarity, care, and collective action as central to resilience-building. Angry optimism feeds this ethical stance, balancing the acknowledgment of uncertainty, instability, and profound loss with the determination to act, adapt, and transform. Utopian minimalism complements this perspective, advocating for sustainable, restrained approaches to life that take ecological and social realities fully into consideration. By embracing limitations and finding value also in small, collective actions, the novels underscore the potential for ethical transformation.

By presenting resilience as a transformative, relational process that allows both individuals and communities to actively and successfully deal with the impacts of climate change, to re-calibrate life "to a planetary situation of amplified instability and attenuated possibilities" (Nersessian 92), both novels, regardless of their differences in terms of narrative form, character focus, as well as temporal and spatial scale, offer a utopian sense of possibility in the midst of crisis and uncertainty. While a lot more work needs to be done on the contribution of climate resilience narratives to the utopian tradition of environmental writing, *New York 2140* and *Weather* certainly represent what Lisa Garforth, discussing green utopias since the 1990s, called "a modest, grounded and pragmatic utopianism." In *Weather*, this utopianism "thread[s] its way through small actions, keeping open the possibility of surprising change," *New York 2140* demonstrates that "[I]n the hands of a utopian science fiction writer, adaptation can even be figured as radically transformative" (100). Analyzing climate fiction by applying the lens of resilience – in its multiple meanings developed by psycho-social, socio-ecological, and political resilience discourses – provides a unique way of understanding how our present and our possible futures are related and how a more just and sustainable future can be imagined. This future recognizes losses and vulnerabilities, but at the same time embraces the complexities of ecological interconnectedness and fosters optimism, hope, and the potential for meaningful change.

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Splintered Archives -- Versions and Versioning through Erasure Arts and Poetry

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ABSTRACT

A predominantly twenty-first-century, textual-visual practice in othering and versioning documents, erasure (arts and poetry) is the outcome of a variety of disruptive techniques such as black-out, white-out, or strike-through of segments of the "pre-text," text-that-is-already-there. Erasure thus bridges *and* separates the "original" (however we may define and understand the term) to *and* from the subsequent versions of the original that are erased out of it by the same or subsequent authors. A study of two single works of erasure by Niina Pollari and Jenny Holzer in order to showcase some of the ways creative works of erasure "version" documents and "splinter" archives, this essay examines erasure poetry and arts as a creative activist response to the documental crises of US empire in the present century.

KEYWORDS

creative activism, erasure poetry, erasure art, US Empire, versions and versioning, literature and history, archival politics

1. Emerging from, yet remaining in a skin-close correspondence with, documents in terms of form, language, and the textual space it occupies, erasure poetry is a subgenre of what Michael Leong calls "documental poetry" (2). Both document and *not* (indeed document and *more*), it is therefore a unique example of what arises at the interplay between poetry and "its generic others" (Ramazani 5). On the rise in the past twenty years, this increasingly popular, inter-generic poetic form has roots in earlier, experimental writerly and artistic practices of the twentieth century, such as

collaging, pastiche, copying, transcribing, citing, and ready-making – practices that Kornelia Freitag identifies as formalistic attempts at "unsettling language" (3).

open the book. *The Ferguson Report. Yellow Rain. all this can be yours. The O Mission Repo. Look. Sand Opera. Zong!* [1] watch out for what's left behind to (un-)read. watch out for the rites of versioning. listen to versions. look for the layers – brimming with the ineffable, re-birthed by erasure. they confirm: erasure is the multiplication of meaning in the aftermath of textual de-construction: layer upon layer upon layer of splinters stacked on top of one another. commemorative of individuals perished at the hands of the merciless, erasure is a poetic act of arrival, partial yet pointed.

In terms of form, erasure can be the outcome of a variety of intently unsettling versioning techniques such as black-out, white-out, or strike-through of segments of the "pre-text," text-that-is-already-there. Employing such techniques, erasure thus bridges *and* separates the "original" (however we may define and understand the term) to *and* from the subsequent versions of the original that are erased out of it by the same or subsequent authors. In this sense, then, erasure emerges out of two practices: Beginning with (1) versioning (i.e., splintering the textual-visual body of the original into a whole with holes and cracks in it), it is immediately completed by (2) layering (i.e., putting the splinters together in a new order). The outcome? The fractured, veiled body of the original posited not only *under* its second, third, …, umpteenth editions but also *against* its various versions through acts of layering. Adapting and depending on this generative, two-step serial attitude, erasure (poetry and visual arts) splinters, stains, and thus multiplies the original, right on the spot, into various versions of it – versions foreseeable *and*, more pointedly and even controversially, versions *un*foreseeable: versions that are expected, envisioned, celebrated, or endorsed, as well as versions that are dreaded, negated, excluded, even averted. My focus in the present essay is on the latter in two works of erasure that engage with, intrude, and do unwelcome but urgently necessary things to the documents of empire in the twenty-first century.

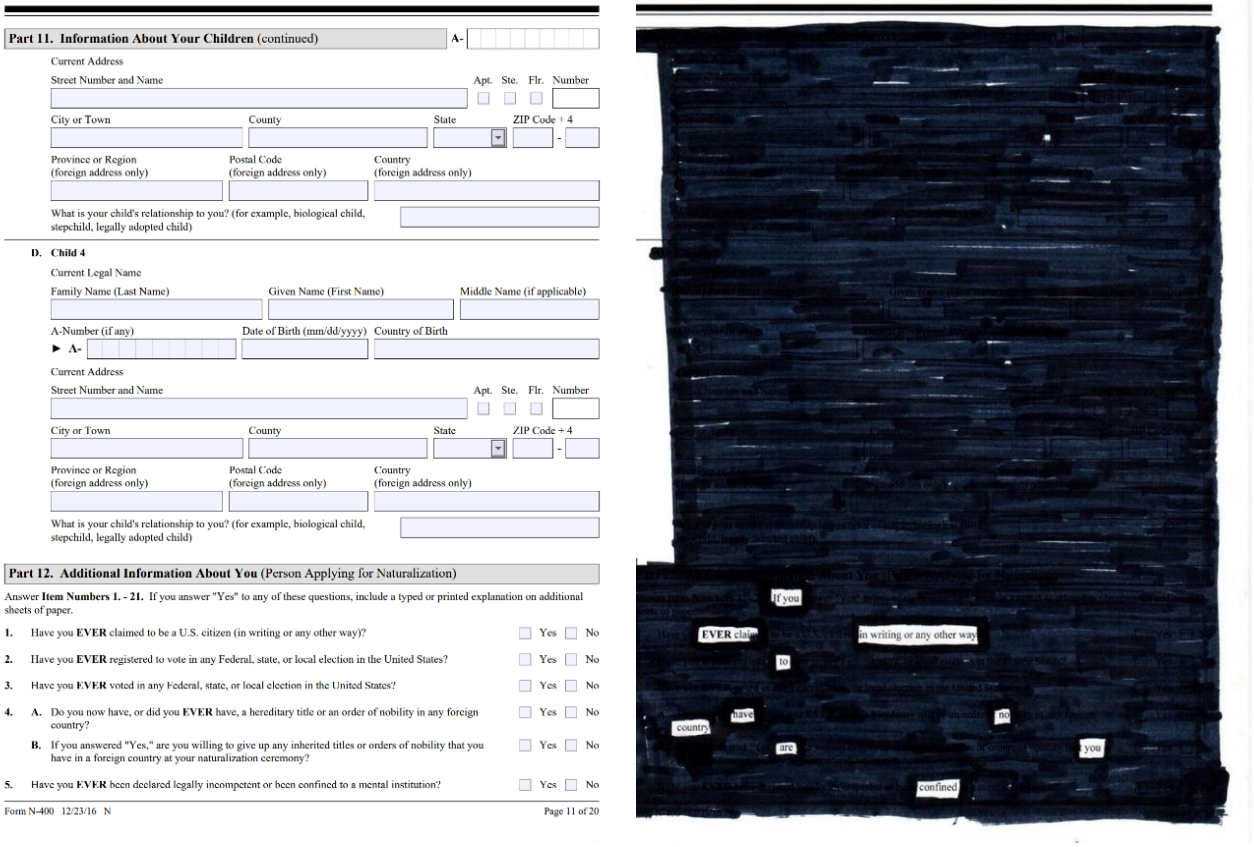
2. Niina Pollari's erasure poems (which happen to be the first examples of erasure poetry that I encountered several years ago) were first published in *New York Tyrant* in 2017. Pollari's "Form N-400 Erasures" (Figure 2) are monumental not in terms of size but in the degree to which they employ blackout to the "USCIS Form N-400" (Figure 1), a run-of-the-mill naturalization form that "eligible" individuals who wish

[1] This is but a short sub-list of a much longer and ever-growing list of literary and artistic works of erasure that have been published in North America in the past ca. 20 years in response to recent but also older ongoing documental chaos and crisis. For further examples of erasure literature and arts (political and otherwise), both that pursue an activist agenda and who focus on erasure's creative potential, see the respective pages at the New York Public Library and the Academy of American Poets.

to apply for US citizenship should file in order to initiate the process. Pollari's version of page eleven of the digital naturalization form (words, punctuation marks, boxes, drop-down menus, and numbers) is indeed a fractured version of an official document of empire – an empire born out of immigration and forceful re-settlement of Indigenous land and yet increasingly suspicious of and surveilling new migrant demographics:

> If you / **EVER** claim / in writing or any other way / to / have / no / country / are you confined

Seventeen words in total, Pollari's version closely resembles a redacted political document, access to which is restricted both visually and semantically. The erased version comes across as a decelerated draft of the original, the reading of which necessitates holding one's breaths and running one's squinted eyes over long stretches of illegible legal text. The erasure is therefore monumental, not only in terms of form but also in the ways it systematically disrupts Form N-400 in terms of its formality and weight, register and documental intent.



Part 11. Information About Your Children (continued) A-

Current Address

Street Number and Name | Apt. Ste. Flr. | Number

City or Town | County | State | ZIP Code + 4

Province or Region (foreign address only) | Postal Code (foreign address only) | Country (foreign address only)

What is your child's relationship to you? (for example, biological child, stepchild, legally adopted child)

D. Child 4

Current Legal Name

Family Name (Last Name) | Given Name (First Name) | Middle Name (if applicable)

A-Number (if any) | Date of Birth (mm/dd/yyyy) | Country of Birth

► A-

Current Address

Street Number and Name | Apt. Ste. Flr. | Number

City or Town | County | State | ZIP Code + 4

Province or Region (foreign address only) | Postal Code (foreign address only) | Country (foreign address only)

What is your child's relationship to you? (for example, biological child, stepchild, legally adopted child)

Part 12. Additional Information About You (Person Applying for Naturalization)

Answer **Item Numbers 1. - 21.** If you answer "Yes" to any of these questions, include a typed or printed explanation on additional sheets of paper.

1. Have you **EVER** claimed to be a U.S. citizen (in writing or any other way)? Yes No
2. Have you **EVER** registered to vote in any Federal, state, or local election in the United States? Yes No
3. Have you **EVER** voted in any Federal, state, or local election in the United States? Yes No
4. **A.** Do you now have, or did you **EVER** have, a hereditary title or an order of nobility in any foreign country? Yes No
   B. If you answered "Yes," are you willing to give up any inherited titles or orders of nobility that you have in a foreign country at your naturalization ceremony? Yes No
5. Have you **EVER** been declared legally incompetent or been confined to a mental institution? Yes No

Form N-400 12/23/16 N Page 11 of 20

Figure 1: "USCIS Form N-400. The version of the form that Pollari erased was valid until 31 March 2019 and has since been replaced by a new version that will be valid until 28 February 2027.

Figure 2: "Form N-400 Erasures." Redacted by Niina Pollari from the Form N-400, Feb. 23, 2017, New York Tyrant. Reproduced with author's permission.

Carefully crafted at the crossover between partializing violence and partial survival, erasure has been sometimes conceived (i.e., dismissed) as an example of writing *sans* originality, as text-generation *in spite of* and *past* the writer's block, and as writerly labor *sans* integrity – in sum, as a minor, coterie aesthetic movement under the umbrella of conceptual poetry and arts – that reveals a playful, indeed derisive obsession with the idea of the "original" and the power it wishes to exert and the grandiose degrees of loyalty it demands. And, yet, that is exactly why, with its proximity to pentimento and palimpsest, erasure works of art and poetry (especially subversive, politically invested examples such as Pollari's "Form N-400 Erasures") distort *as well as* version the original to a degree that cannot be comprehended other than as "deformance." Following Emily Dickinson's practice of "Backward Reading," Lisa Samuels and Jerome J. McGann conceptualize deformance as a range of radical, disruptive reading strategies, including re-ordering the lines of a poem from the last to the first, re-writing in the form of prose, covering verbs or nouns in the body of a poem, and so on (McGann 35). In the present essay, I extend the usage of the term to make sense of a broader host of de-formative tools (including the insertion of gaps and pauses) that erasure activists employ in working with documents, works of art, and literature.

3. The unique-to-erasure, perforated de-formance that is at the heart of activist erasure poetry (and arts) is itself a borrowed method. Documentary redaction, often done to documents before they arrive at the archives of the state, precede its literary and artistic adaptations. Consider these relatively recent, widely-known series of examples between 2015 and 2019: In April 2019, the long-awaited 448-page Mueller Report reached the public with considerable sections redacted. It was a de-formed, perforated document that brimmed with gaps for reasons ranging from Harm to Ongoing Matter to Personal Privacy. In January of the same year, and while the Mueller investigation was still going on, faultily redacted documents were released by Paul Manafort's lawyers regarding ongoing backroom interactions between him and an alleged Russian spy. This was preceded by the publication of *Guantánamo Diary*, a diary written by the falsely accused Guantánamo detainee, Mohamedou Ould Slahi, that came out in 2015 only after it had been carefully and extensively de-formed by government agencies (A "restored" second edition of the national best-seller followed in 2017).

from archive box to archive box, blanks are left behind by redactors. archives are witness to centuries of them: to the left of the map, in the Atlantic; to the south, masking the memories and memoirs of the detainees in Guantánamo; to the right and to the north, behind the stack of N-400 forms in the US immigration office – scars etched onto stained surfaces, stains left on withered faces, faces held by threatened

throats. and, here, we, witness to the failures of the archived records, run into walls. and while we do, we'll have to be watchful of the labyrinth placed right behind them. or else, we get lost in the alleyways of redaction, of the un-said, of the un-written. whichever document we inspect, we'll need our archive gloves on, or else we might lose the right to touch and to trace. we'll need our gloves on or else splinters will make us bleed.

Redacted documents, such as these, are versions of the originals with which they co-habit and part of which they conceal. With their varying degrees of silencing and erasing (news censorship, documentary redaction, classification, and partial, case-based de-classification of documents), and despite their pretense to finality and formality, these examples attest to the ways redaction has helped empower, protect, and sustain political actors, systems, and discourses in and out of state politics.

Borrowing, yet distancing itself, from the violating grip of documentary redaction, erasure (in literature and visual arts) is often founded on a dual, decidedly subtractive/extractive serial attitude that insists both on systematically subtracting from the original (one word, one phrase, one entire line or paragraph or even an entire page at a time) and on gradually yet incrementally adding to the original's total length.[2] And in so doing, it both converses with and others the "original." In the end, works of erasure consist of an unevenly and asymmetrically layered assemblage of texts that exist at the same time in the same semantic space: the erased original text; the shorter, second edition consisting of the visible words and phrases (interrupted by black or white intervals); as well as a longer, multi-layered version that consists of both the visible bits and the redacted text, the *sous rature*, that is rendered (at least partly) invisible and illegible underneath it.

4. Jenny Holzer's visual erasures bring a somewhat different take to the hard-to-digest adaptation of documentary redaction as creative documental work: Without versioning the already redacted and classified state-generated documents – that is, documents that have been already versioned by an unnamed sensor officer in the context of the "War on Terror" – Jenny Holzer's installations grapple head-on with redaction as what the state does to its documents, particularly of a war that has been under erasure like no other before. Indeed, if we were to repeat what I did in the case of Pollari's erasure in Figures 1 and 2 (juxtaposing the original document and Pollari's erasure of it) and add the "source document" with which Holzer works to her painting of it, we would end up with two seemingly identical images, whose difference we

[2] Engaging with Mel Bochner's understanding of the term, I write about "the serial attitude" in *A Humument* and *Tree of Codes* in the forthcoming article "Erasure as Seriality: A Study of the 'Serial Attitude' in A Humument and Tree of Codes."

would only notice by closely reading the image caption (where differences in size, medium, and location are listed).

Transmogrifying redacted documents into investigative documentary art, what she does in the many exhibitions she has held in the United States, Germany, South Korea, Switzerland, and elsewhere is this: She transforms redacted documents, exactly as she finds them in the National Archives, into large-format art exhibition material. As she does so, she changes little more than the document's size and the material on which it appears (from ink on paper to oil on linen). In effect, what she does seems to be not so much production of art as it is the act of re-framing, enlarging, and projecting the un-aesthetic document *as if* it could be art. As we examine Holzer's redaction works such as "PALM, FINGERS & FINGERTIPS (RIGHT HAND) 000394," "Left Hand DOD-044401, 2007," and "PALM AND FINGERS + Fingertips, LEFT HAND 000052, 2007,"[3] it is hardly possible to make any meaningful guesses as to what they are (about): Oversize x-ray sheets? Experimental art? Or redacted documents?

Once we realize that they are examples of the latter (that is, of documents that originally contained sensitive information about human rights violations done by the US Army personnel during the war on terror), we then can (and should) pause and ask ourselves a number of questions: What do we see? What do we *hope* to see? Will the act of seeing ever accomplish anything? And, if the subject is redacted documentary evidence about war crimes, evidence that has been "made available" to the public as a result of Freedom of Information Act requests by journalists, humanitarian organizations, and academics, then why is it presented to us in an art gallery and as art? In other words, what does the act of looking at, but not seeing much in, a document masqueraded as art hope to accomplish?

erasure implicates inquisitive staring, again, and again, and again. and in doing so, it discomforts not only cognitively but also affectively: in rage or awe, in terror or exasperation, staring, not blinking hurts. is erasure a blocking of the sensory or a reduction thereof? does it heighten the sensory effects of the erased text/object that asks for not only readership but also spectatorship? what kind of sensory relationships does it envision between the covered and the *dis*covered? is it a reading experience that asks for not only reading by seeing, but also reading by touching and reading by listening? what does erasure do against the hegemony of the textual, of the alphabet-based act of expression? how do the invisible and the visible, the perceived and the interpreted, the written and the retouched come together in its multilayered, splintered labyrinth?

[3] Holzer gifted these works to National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., in 2010.

Joshua Craze makes an exceedingly significant point concerning the acts of thinking and writing about Holzer's documental paintings:

> In painting [these documentary paintings], Holzer removes the documents from the media cycle and turns them into objects of contemplation. Her work refuses the journalistic reduction of these documents to mere sources of information and insists that there is something to be seen in the redactions themselves. Instead of filling gaps in our understanding, the paintings replicate the omissions of the documents. (61)

Holzer's removing of these documents out of the archives of the state and (occasionally out of) the media cycle and presenting them as large-format art installations, is an act of salvation. This re-placement delivers redacted documents from their common, reductionist readings as faulty, hardly legible sources of information. The need for this "versioning" itinerary, her installations seem to assert, is to depart from information (that isn't there) and to arrive at understanding (that needs to be arrived at). As Craze points out:

> Holzer's paintings . . . insist that, despite all we know about the War on Terror, we have yet to understand. If the redacted documents that Holzer paints make the truth invisible – a series of heavy black marks on paper, obscuring dates and names – then Holzer's paintings of these documents make this invisibility visible and ask us to dwell in it. (61)

In effect, Holzer's redaction paintings – this shedding of light *on* the illegibility of what has been perennially shredded into unintelligibility, through the medium of painting – is an act of versioning despite the initial act of redaction that is in *aversion* to it: Her remarkably accurate reproductions of the documents, the changing of their size, the occasional addition of a solid background color, the shift in the representational mode (from documental to artistic), and the spaces where these otherwise obscure documents are held (from archives to art galleries) attempt to make sure that the art-intellectual onlookers do *not* simply skip over illegible documents for the sake of what *is* legible.

5. Re-thinking the enabling forces behind erasure in arts and poetry, it becomes evident that erasure is arduous labor, even obsessive, repetitive action that involves doctoring the source document as an act of versioning. Even when expected the least, versioning happens so that each layer of the versioned text is there precisely because it differs from the previous and the subsequent layers in the semantic labor it is meant to perform and also in the overall form and the materiality that it takes. And in many works of erasure (such as the examples examined in this essay), this versioning happens with the single purpose of re-drafting, underlining, and capturing both temporary loss *and* what is permanently lost.

words, erasure insists, are objects, have volume, can be taken out of the page, can be thrown into the void or their mass covered by a blanket of black ink. activist erasure, 21st-century literary and artistic examples of it amply confirm, delivers documents from their generic restraints; lets their words loose; sets them free. remove the blanket and we'll encounter the erratic, rebuffed, hidden "original," the "first edition." what is counterfeit? where is the place of the original? and who can say what has been delivered or distorted? removed or restored? left or lifted? shortened or shrouded?

On the one hand, versioning can be an act of preservation against disintegration, a vital attempt at summarizing and making digestible, a pleasurable pastime, an obsessive exercise in curiosity, or a critical commentary on consumerism. On the other hand, as Holzer's and Pollari's works attest, versions can be echoes of or glimpses into the original, a means to make sense of othering, of contradictions, of the aesthetics of insurgency, of resistance. In this essay, I have briefly engaged with the political career of and the insurgencies carried within the act of versioning of the contentious narratives of the US empire in the present century and at the cross-over between documents and creative, critical works of erasure, for there lies tensions that signal implosion (under the conditions of duress) rather than expansion and tenacity; that disclose disintegration, disagreement, and rot rather than unity, homogeneity, and universality of the seemingly "a-versional."

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About the Author

Mahshid Mayar [she/her] is an assistant professor of American Studies at the Department of American Studies, University of Innsbruck, Austria. She is the author of

Citizens and Rulers of the World: The American Child and the Cartographic Pedagogies of Empire (U of North Carolina P, 2022), which was awarded the Shelley Fisher Fishkin Prize for International Scholarship in Transnational American Studies (by the American Studies Association). Staying with the question of empire, Mayar's second-book/*Habilitation* project, is conceived at the crossover between literature and history. The project interrogates the politics and poetics of silence, absence, and histories of anti-imperial protest through "erasure poetry" by contemporary Asian and Indigenous American poets, such as Philip Metres, Solmaz Sharif, and Layli Long Soldier. Over the years, she has published extensively on American childhoods, cultural history *and* geography of the US empire, race and racialization, and, more recently, on silence and silencing and twenty-first-century US poetry. Together with Marion Schulte (University of Rostock), she has co-edited *Silence and Its Derivatives: Conversations across Disciplines* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022). Moreover, together with Mischa Honeck, Mayar is the co-editor of a handbook of US Empire, which is forthcoming with De Gruyter.

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Book Reviews edited by Joshua Parker

Profiles and Plotlines: Data Surveillance in Twenty-First Century Literature. By Katherine D. Johnston. U of Iowa P, 2023, 207 pp.

Katherine Johnston's first monograph sets itself an unusual task: It treats pressing social issues in real time and examines how those issues are treated in recent prose fiction and poetry. The issues are electronic data surveillance and collection, US-American racism, and the connections of all three to racial profiling and discrimination in the online and the real world. The literary texts examined are best-sellers by Jennifer Egan, Claudia Rankine, William Gibson, and Mohsin Hamid.

Johnston's work highlights the subtle and often creepy ways computer algorithms and literary narrators function in similar ways. As Wayne Booth once suggested, an author's voice is always present in a text, even when disguised. Unsettlingly, the same is true of computer software, artificial intelligence, and social media and commercial algorithms. Data surveillance's main job, as Johnston sees it, is to "tell stories" – not primarily to consumers, but rather to banks, governments, the police, and advertising agencies. "Profiling," she explains, continuing to draw parallels between data surveillance and literary techniques, "coincides with character development; surveillance reflects point of view," and "data points track as plot points in tales of political economy" (2). The problems inherent in profiling, Johnston suggests, all have their correlations in literary studies, new media studies, surveillance studies, critical race studies, and gender studies. The volume has baked them all together in its approaches to both its literary corpus and its case studies from internet users. For anyone working with literature, the book makes for a fascinating introduction to thinkers on new technologies such as David Lyon, Kirstie Ball, Rachel Dubrofsky, and Christian Parenti. For anyone working with new technologies, it makes for a great introduction to several terrific contemporary US-American writers.

Authors such as Egan and Rankine highlight how we co-construct reality with the private sector and its interests, a fact increasingly appearing as a theme in contemporary US literature. Meanwhile, private corporations often act like authors, creating stock characters from our collected data points. Mapping these onto pre-existing (of-

ten sexist and racist) hierarchies of human types, Johnston writes, exacerbates systemic discrimination. Johnston's sources extend to more traditional philosophers and critics. She adeptly uses Foucault's work on disciplinary power (exercised through its own invisibility while imposing compulsory visibility on its targets) to put a contemporary spin on pre-internet theory. Understandably, Johnston finds fictional narrators in the works she studies to often be unreliable, reflecting lapses and gaps, even with their "shiny new seductive pieces," "fragile gears," and "inflexible codes" (27), and she is apt to contrast such fiction to postmodern fiction of earlier decades. While postmodern protagonists often come to recognize themselves as fictional characters, here protagonists are more likely to begin to see themselves as fragmented, "traceable, fungible data sets" (27), exhibiting "not only the ubiquity but also the disturbing banality of being watched" (28).

Profiles and Plotlines includes a lengthy introduction with a wealth of secondary sources on the topic of technology's social and sexual injustices, and its chapters treating individual literary texts tend to repeat segments of the introduction, so it is rather slow going at first. A chapter on Egan treats *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), a series of loosely connected short stories. Johnston traces how the theme of watching in the story "Safari" moves from US-American tourists looking for animals on the plains of Kenya to their later developing software to manage crowd security via video footage (and notes the irony of Apple's search engine also being called "Safari"). Here, she draws astute attention to the ways contemporary technologies employ racist legacies of the colonial gaze, particularly as relates to racial profiling and visual recognition software. Surveillance technologies, Johnston suggests, "are not developed in a vacuum outside the context of social injustice" but are often "the vanguard of violence against gendered and racialized others" (40). Johnston reminds those familiar with Egan's work how ethereal her writing and dialogues are, illuminating ties between Egan's work and that of David Foster Wallace and Don DeLillo. Egan's characters' plans for video surveillance of Central Park in the early 2000s makes for eerie comparisons with the NYPD's more recent search for Luigi Mangione using the same CCTV cameras which Egan's work makes seem controversial, and which most New Yorkers now accept today as perfectly normal. One looks forward to what Johnston might make of Egan's even more technology-focused *The Candy House* (2022).

A chapter on Claudia Rankine focuses on "speaking affect to power" by "deconstructing the supposed neutrality of profile epistemologies by exposing their own embedded affects and the affects they attempt to exile" (77). Rankine, Johnston writes, focuses on the personal experiences which cannot be captured numerically, and on embodied, rather than digitalized memory. Reading Rankine through the lens

of Lauren Berlant and Naomi Klein, it seems that profiling works to make the present "look exactly the way it needs to in order to guarantee a very specific and singular outcome in the future" (Puar). Whether in algorithmic consumer profiling or police profiling, it produces outcomes, just as stop-and-frisk does not simply reduce crime but produces neighborhoods, social relations, personal futures, and data. Reading Rankine's work, Johnston concludes that "descriptions don't simply fit people; people in fact are fitted to descriptions" (84).

Johnston spends a good bit of time comparing William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003) with traditional realist and modernist novels, with their 'round' characters created from details. Gibson's characters, likewise created through such details, are, however, not individual but rather – to use Deleuze's 1992 term – "dividuals," i.e., codified, predictable, consumer-citizen workers. They are also (in an arguably rather gimmicky manner) searchable online via Google. Gibson's novel depicts efforts at constructing meaning as power struggles, tugs and tussles between technology users and technology's producers. Johnston hints that all the works she treats in her volume are, in their own ways, social (or even social realist) novels in the tradition of Upton Sinclair – only the forces of corporations we are up against today a century later obscure their workings even more tightly, increasing "the gulf between what the public knows and how they act" (94). "In a sense," Johnston writes, "it is the apparent disengagement and dullness of data collection that makes it seem benign" (99). Like Gibson's characters, we, too, as citizens of the twenty-first century, are trapped in networks whose own workings are often invisible to us, while, for those with it, power increasingly means not visibility but rather "the ability to escape attention and sidestep barriers" (109). Meanwhile, much as we may delight in personalizing our own social media in superficial ways, we are only offering ourselves the impression of being seen, "to offset the creepier feeling of being watched" (119). Johnston here is adept at drawing out patterns from the novels' plots to apply them to our own online experiences.

Johnston's chapter on Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) opens with references to Doreen Massey's analysis of the capitalist idea of economic growth and wealth redistribution. Hamid's novel, writes Johnston, critiques how the contemporary bildungsroman is often fitted to the neoliberal quest for material wealth, and our contemporary association of wealth with success, particularly if the wealth is seen as 'self-made.' Other critics have commented on the novel's clever use of second-person narration. Johnston adds to this body of analysis with the suggestion that Hamid's narrating and narrated "you" "unravels the notion of a 'sovereign' you to reveal the power structures it shrouds" (123), much as corporate images

shroud complex webs of shareholders, employees, and powerbrokers. Narrative techniques for this include images of "you" observable to others via variously positioned CCTV cameras throughout the novel, lists of "your" internet search histories, images from "your" laptop cameras, flight registries, and credit card records, which all characterize as they profile, whether in fiction or in our own real extratextual lives. The effect is something like an electronic (or Cubist) version of Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*. Creepily, Johnston writes, "what seems like coincidence as the narrator moves from one technology to another is actually a larger constellation of data collection" of which he is unaware (138) – the eeriness of which most of us have often felt online as we are fed targeted ads or suggestions by the algorithms we use (or, rather, which use us). Meanwhile, readers of Hamid's novel become like the drone operators it depicts, "our fleshy bodies . . . safely at a distance holding our books" (142).

A final chapter muses on Amazon's role in framing the US literary canon, as the most intimate aspects of reading itself become subject to digital surveillance. Johnston spends some time here outlining how the company originally constructed the cultural capital it has today, with Jeff Bezos himself seemingly relishing his role as a literary figure (148-49). Naturally, she points out the irony of the company's rise to being nearly the largest private US employer while not offering living wages, how the corporation uses data mining to surveille both its customers and employees, and its close ties to the CIA and US Department of Defense. Here, Johnston uses her skills as a literary critic to analyze public statements by Bezos and literary questions posed to Amazon's virtual assistant Alexa. More essentially, Johnston's conclusion suggests how our own reading patterns may change as we read on electronic devices tracking our progress, what passages we highlight, and precisely where and when we pause or stop. Johnston's work, here as elsewhere, points our attention to the fact that corporations such as Amazon do not simply use algorithms to better serve consumers but to actively shape our perspectives, indeed often perhaps limiting them while offering the illusion of broadening them. After all, Johnston points out, pleasing customers is of much less importance than engaging them. All this is not necessarily new information to most readers but brought together, it is enough to give us pause, even if Johnston has a rhetorical tic of repeatedly using "in other words," so that a good deal of the text are rephrasings of the same idea twice.

The instruments, as well as the ideologies, of meaning-making are challenged by the texts Johnston treats. Her critique of social media and consumer algorithms works especially well in her suggestions of how these phenomena mirror traditional literary techniques, with suggestions of how the literary works treated challenge "the dominant data discourse," and how they can depict "the often denied narrative dimension

of date profiling" (163). The monograph closes with some recent examples of positive uses of algorithms and social networking in social activist circles.

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Becoming bell hooks: A Story about the Self-Empowerment of a Black Girl Who Became a Feminist. By Aneta Ostaszewska. U of Warsaw P, 2023, 161 pp.

The latest publication by Aneta Ostaszewska, director of the Centre for Women's and Gender Research at the University of Warsaw, *Becoming bell hooks: A Story about the Self-Empowerment of a Black Girl Who Became a Feminist*, is an academic exploration of the life and intellectual evolution of Gloria Jean Watkins (1952–2021), better known under her pen name bell hooks. As the blurb on the last page summarizes, Ostaszewska's book examines the autobiographical dimension of hooks' literary oeuvre, for "it is a story about the 'biographical work' of a woman who creates herself in the course of writing her biography." By focusing her analysis on how the personal intersects with the political in hooks' development as an acclaimed feminist thinker, Ostaszewska investigates how the feminist theorist established her identity through the act of writing and the construction of her autobiography. The latter resulted in hooks' transformation from a Black girl growing up in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, into one of the most significant voices in contemporary feminist discourse. The central premise of Ostaszewska's publication, therefore, is that hooks' intellectual journey

was significantly influenced by her autobiography. The author, whose research is concerned with life writing and women's rights studies, considers the autobiographical process as a vital emancipatory tool that encouraged hooks to rewrite and reimagine her life story through her essays, books, and feminist activism. The original edition of *Becoming bell hooks* in Polish was published in 2018. The 2023 English edition was prompted by hooks' unexpected passing in December 2021 and is a revised, updated, and completed version of the 2018 edition (Ostaszewska 7).

Ostaszewska's introduction tackles a question that begs to be asked: Why write a book about bell hooks? The author describes her initial personal curiosity, which increasingly merged with her academic interest, in hooks as a person and her impact as an acclaimed intellectual and leading representative of (Black) feminist discourse in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Ostaszewska's approach was twofold: She was compelled to understand hooks' "biographical experiences through the lens of a female subject, and . . . [she wanted] to meta-analyze them using the concept of biographical work" (9). This idea was guided by her observation that "[a]utobiographical writing, especially feminist autobiographical writing, sets . . . [writers like hooks] on a path to emancipation and development" (9) and provides vital insights in the "process of becoming" (10). Furthermore, hooks' call to "speak with your voice" (7) that mirrors the postcolonial notion of talking back is prominently discussed in hooks' 1989 essay collection *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, which became a key directive for Ostaszewska in composing *Becoming bell hooks*. This meant for her to write from an engaged, feminist standpoint, which, with view to Ostaszewska, is strongly influenced by Rosi Braidotti's definition of it and Vikki Bell's concept of "feminist imagination" (10), challenging not only patriarchal social structures but also the androcentric traditions of academia.

Becoming bell hooks is divided into six chapters. The first two, "Autobiography as a Research Field" and "Biographical Work as a Tool for Self-Empowerment," establish the theoretical framework. In chapter one, Ostaszewska focuses on autobiographical studies and highlights their relevance for social research beyond its primary status as a literary genre. She particularly foregrounds the features and characteristics of women's autobiographical writing as the book centers around the person of hooks and her literary oeuvre (31–49). In her second chapter, the author introduces concepts such as biographical work and explores terms such as biographicity and *Bildung*, which are of vital importance in her discourse (52–56). Her aim is to show that biographical work provides rich insights for feminist research into the formation of subjectivity and self-empowerment, framed within an autobiographical narrative (13).

Both chapters lay the conceptual groundwork for the empirical analysis of her selected material in chapters five and six. Her literary corpus consists of hooks' autobiographical texts, which were published within less than a decade: *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989), *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996), and *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life* (1997) (62–64).

In chapter three, "The Research Approach," and chapter four, "Reconstruction of bell hooks's Biography," Ostaszewska examines "the importance of close reading in analytical work and reflect[s] on the role of feminist methodologies in biographical research" (15). At the end of chapter three, she pays particular attention to outlining analytical strategies used in the biographical method as proposed by French sociologists Daniel Bertaux and Catherine Delcroix (78–85). A detailed presentation of the empirical material, i.e., the selected three books written by hooks listed above, is provided in chapter four.

In the fifth and sixth chapters, "bell hooks as a Narrator, Biographical Subject and Observer" and "Reception and Criticism: bell hooks's Self-Empowerment," the author conducts an in-depth analysis of her corpus material, exploring the roles hooks' adopts as a narrator, biographical subject and commentator of her own life (108–25). Ostaszewska reflects on how feminist consciousness shaped hooks' self-discovery (132). In the sixth and final chapter, the author explores hooks' idea, which she outlines in *Wounds of Passion*, of "mapping a different destiny" (hooks x) through autobiographical writing. In this context, Ostaszewska argues "that the writing of an autobiography constitutes an emancipatory process and, as a self-empowering activity, enables the creation of an autonomous space for the expression of one's own voice, [and] hence [reflects hooks' directive of] 'speaking with one's own voice'" (14).

Ostaszewska concludes *Becoming bell hooks* with an "Afterword: To Read bell hooks," in which she makes analogies between hooks' autobiographical writing and the experience of women in post-communist Poland, focusing on empowerment through reclaiming one's agency and the notion of talking back. However, the parallels the author draws here require critical reflection, a fact she is conscious of, as she writes: "I was aware that it was risky to build any analogies between the situation of a white woman in Poland . . . and that of a Black woman in American society" (145). While this comparison is indeed insightful, it at times risks oversimplifying the differences between the experiences of Black women in the United States and women in a predominantly white, post-communist society. hooks' work is deeply rooted in her identity as a Black woman in the United States, shaped by the legacies of slavery, racism, and the intersection of race, gender, and class. Hence, her act of talking back

and reclaiming her voice was a vital tool for her in challenging systemic racial oppression. Ostaszewska's attempt to apply hooks' framework to the Polish context is valuable, still the racial and national specificities need to be considered and critically examined.

Another point of objection could be "that the events described by bell hooks and the memories that she recalled are considered to constitute 'autobiographical truth,' which means that . . . [Ostaszewska] did not question their authenticity, nor did . . . [she] attempt to verify them in any way" (145). Since a potential issue with autobiographical truth lies in the complex relationship between subjective experience, personal memory, and historical or factual accuracy, Ostaszewska opted for treating the three selected books by hooks' "as a narrative reconstructed of her own life, written under specific circumstances and for a specific purpose" (145). By making the decision to regard them as constructed narratives created in a certain context and with a clear intention in mind, it is implied that the author is aware of hooks' subjectivity and the relationality of her texts with view to the socio-political and historic zeitgeist at the time of their publication.

Becoming bell hooks provides valuable insights for researchers operating at the intersections of autobiographical studies, Black studies, literary studies, feminism, and sociology. It serves as an essential resource for those intrigued by transcending disciplinary boundaries between these research fields and who are eager to engage with complex, interdisciplinary perspectives. Ostaszewska's expertise and personal connection with bell hooks enrich her discourse, offering scholars a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of hooks' work, its reception, and its broader socio-political implications.

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Puerto Rico: A National History. By Jorell Meléndez-Badillo. Princeton UP, 2024, 312 pp.

In his book's prologue, historian Jorell Meléndez-Badillo mentions the migration of more than 835,000 inhabitants of Puerto Rico to the continental United States between 1940 and 1970. To "highlight the personal and intimate dimensions of this history" (xi), however, the author starts by telling the story of Carlos Alberto Nieves Rivera, a man who left the island with the intention of living the American Dream but finally came back to Puerto Rico. The publication's subtitle, "A National History," already indicates that the stories and histories collected by the author aim at depicting the island as more than just a "non-state" within a historically anglophone country but as a specific politico-cultural area with a unique identity. At the same time, the legal absence of state- or nationhood makes Meléndez-Badillo's account both tragic and optimistic, critical and provocative. For example, he asks himself and readers: "Does the cultural nationalism that was produced in the mid-twentieth century count as a legitimate form of nation-building?" (xiii). His approach to these kinds of questions is to identify diverse Puerto Ricos, coexisting at the same time, and to characterize the island as a liminal, more-than-geographical space of both self-determination and subordination. His prologue offers readers more questions than answers, but asking these questions seems highly relevant in order to fully grasp the complex histories of Puerto Rico.

Keeping in mind the lack of pre-colonial sources, it is not surprising that Meléndez-Badillo begins his historical observations around the time of the first European arrivals on an island known as Borikén. Spanish expeditions "brought with them Bibles, crosses, and germs" (2). While this statement could also have included the word "swords," it correctly hints at a tragic fact of colonialism: the transfer of diseases. The "first smallpox epidemic in America, in 1518, introduced the disease in Puerto Rico" (Rigau-Pérez 423). Dramatic population losses notwithstanding, indigenous Taíno groups fiercely resisted Spanish domination. While colonial sources show a "regime of terror sustained by labor and sexual exploitation" (7) already at the time of Columbus' second voyage to the Americas in 1493, there definitely were forms of Taíno agency. The author also brings up another important topic: numbers and names of Indigenous people found in Spanish documents refer to persons *within* the colonial framework. Many others, however, "took to the mountains to live outside the limits of the state . . . Disappearing from the archive and from history may have meant surviving the conquest's genocidal thrust" (13). The early colonial era also saw the

first African-descended people moving or being moved to Puerto Rico. By 1514, Antón Mexía had accumulated enough social and financial capital "to be the only Black person to own enslaved indigenous people" (15), a harsh reminder of the complexities of multi-ethnic colonial societies that defy a dichotomy of European rule versus non-European subjugation.

In chapters two and three, Meléndez-Badillo shows how Puerto Rico was increasingly integrated into global networks and affected by events such as the Haitian Revolution. With Spain having lost most of its American colonies by 1826, Puerto Rico gained importance as producer of sugar, coffee, and tobacco: "In that triad, sugar became king. Its production, however, depended on the uninterrupted continuation of the system of chattel slavery" (35). While the book shows the legal and administrative workings of colonial Puerto Rico and its connection to the Iberian Peninsula, one of its main strengths is the depiction of social realities *and* imaginations. In the mid-nineteenth century, *criollos* such as Ramón Betances strove for Puerto Rico's independence and "[r]evolutionaries in New York, the Dominican Republic, and Saint Thomas created an impressive communications network" (45). During this era, Spain was already "filled with young Puerto Rican intellectuals yearning for their idealized island" (52) who would play important roles later on.

In chapter five, Meléndez-Badillo deals with the War of 1898 and Puerto Rico subsequently coming under the control of the United States. While this period saw, for example, the merging of organized labor with partisan politics, thus strengthening regional identity, "most Puerto Ricans lived a precarious existence and the US occupation only heightened their insecurity" (68). Natural disasters regularly devastated the island. A hurricane in 1899 resulted in 3,400 deaths. As Meléndez-Badillo points out in chapter six, the period after 1898 saw increased religious tensions, as Protestant missions flocked to Puerto Rico to evangelize. At the same time, the island – "inhabited by an alien people, of a race diametrically opposed to the Anglo-Saxon in very many respects" (Henry 1475), as the US military governor stated in 1899 – was used "as a testing ground to control tropical diseases" (75) according to the principles of social Darwinism and eugenics. When the military regime ended in 1900, Puerto Ricans did not receive the same rights as citizens living in states such as New York, and the Supreme Court characterized Puerto Rico as "unincorporated territory" under the control of Congress. Only in 1917, the "Jones Act" made the inhabitants citizens of the United States. The first half of the twentieth century was a conflict-laden period for Puerto Rico. The Communist Party focused on organizing laborers and had strong ties to Moscow, while Nationalists also caused concern for US administrators. In March 1937, during a protest march against the arrest of Nationalist Party leaders,

shots rang out. 21 people were killed in what became known as the "Ponce Massacre." After the Second World War, in the context of global support for decolonization, Jesús Piñero became the island's first Puerto Rican governor, and, in 1952, voters ratified a constitution, paving the way for the island to become a United States commonwealth. As Meléndez-Badillo states, this new status also created a need "to craft a new idea of the nation" (112). The ruling *Partido Popular Democrático* (PPD) embraced the image of Puerto Ricans as mixture of Spanish, African, and Indigenous heritage, but, quite obviously, European culture (i.e., "civilization") was highlighted.

Meléndez-Badillo then dedicates chapters nine and ten to Puerto Rican experiences in a bipolar world and to the issue of migration. The booming United States economy needed workers, while "modernization" efforts in Puerto Rico uprooted traditional networks. In the early 1970s, the island was hit by the oil crisis and its repercussions. "The local agricultural industry all but disappeared, leaving thousands of people without steady income" (131). Chapter twelve, focusing on Puerto Rican politics during the 1990s and early 2000s, might be one of the weaker parts of this otherwise fascinating book. The large number of names, acronyms, and political positions will likely confuse many readers. At the same time, the chapter is too short to provide any really deep insight – even though the author manages to forcefully point out the island's problematic political status, embodied, for example, by Obama-era Supreme Court decisions shattering "any lingering illusion of Puerto Rico's sovereignty" (173) or the so-called PROMESA bill, a bankruptcy law dealing specifically with the island's enormous debt and establishing a presidentially-appointed oversight board.

The two subsequent chapters undoubtedly stand out as highlights. Dealing with Hurricane María (in 2017) and its aftermath, as well as the 2020 earthquake, Meléndez-Badillo, in an emotionally gripping manner, depicts federal mismanagement, popular protest, and political conflict. The disasters "exacerbated social problems that many people had been living with for years. And . . . people could not depend on the local or federal government" (201). The book ends on a somewhat somber note. It speaks of a defunded education system, widespread corruption, and challenges connected to migration. However, the idea of different Puerto Ricos "being imagined *aquí o allá* (here or there)" (217) can also be interpreted as an optimistic approach acknowledging the possibility of safeguarding Puerto Rico's identity in the past, present, and future as well as for Puerto Ricans in different places.

Puerto Rico: A National History provides fascinating insights into the island's complex history, considering political, economic, cultural, and social perspectives. Meléndez-Badillo has to be commended for an approach that integrates Puerto Rico into the history of the Spanish Empire, the Caribbean world, and the United States, while

at the same time never losing sight of the unique mixture of realities and imaginations that ultimately define the island, its history, and its people.

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