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(Re)Imagining Flyover Fictions

edited by Cornelia Klecker and Sascha Pöhlmann

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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 US 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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Special Issue

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(Re)Imagining Flyover: An Introduction

Cornelia Klecker and Sascha Pöhlmann

ABSTRACT

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

KEYWORDS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

About the Authors

Cornelia Klecker is Assistant Professor and Deputy Chair of the Department of American Studies at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, and editor-in-chief of *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies*. She authored *Spoiler Alert! Mind-Tricking Narratives in Contemporary Hollywood Film* (2015), and co-edited, with Sascha Pöhlmann, *Flyover Fictions: Polarization in US-American Culture, Media, and Politics* (U of Nebraska P, forthcoming 2025). Her articles appeared in *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *The Journal of American Culture*, and *Journal of Film and Video*, among others.

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From the Capitol to the Heartland: Analyzing Congressional Rhetoric and the "Flyover Country" Narrative

Phillip J. Ardoin

ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolution and strategic use of the term "flyover country" in US congressional rhetoric from 1995 to 2024. Initially a benign geographic descriptor, "flyover country" has transformed into a potent symbol of cultural and political identity, particularly among Republican members of Congress. Through a comprehensive analysis of congressional speeches, committee hearings, and constituent correspondence, this research identifies an increase in the use of flyover rhetoric, especially during the Trump era. The study reveals that "flyover" is employed to evoke a sense of victimhood and marginalization among rural constituents, highlighting perceived economic and cultural disenfranchisement by coastal elites. The findings underscore the adaptability of political language and its role in shaping and reflecting socio-political divides in the United States. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of congressional rhetoric and the cultural and political undercurrents that influence US-American identity and discourse.

KEYWORDS

Flyover fictions, US Congress, US-American politics

Introduction

The term "flyover" originated in the 1970s, initially referring to Midwest America in a playful, self-deprecating manner, and eventually describing the vast expanse of the United States between the coasts. For some, "flyover country" evokes images of

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rolling plains and quaint small towns, retaining its Midwestern origins. However, over the last few decades, many politicians, particularly Republicans, have increasingly used the term as a powerful symbol of US-American identity and as a trope reflecting deep-seated anxieties about globalization, economic inequality, and cultural fragmentation (Klecker and Pöhlmann).

Originally a geographic term, "flyover" has evolved into a cultural and political symbol, reflecting deeper cultural and political divides in the United States (Harkins 113). The term "flyover country" has been regularly employed in political rhetoric, especially by Republicans, to describe regions of the US they represent (primarily rural and in the Midwest) and which they perceive to be overlooked by so-called "coastal elites." With the rise of Donald Trump and "MAGA Republicans," the politicization of "flyover" has intensified, transforming it into a tool for populist discourse, which often involves appealing to the concerns and values of "ordinary people," especially those who feel neglected by the political establishment. In recent years, the shift towards a victim narrative, where constituents in flyover country are portrayed as being oppressed by coastal elites, has become a popular strategy for Republicans as anti-elite rhetoric has become a staple of Republican politics. The increased use of the flyover trope has coincided with the Republican Party's growing support among rural US-American voters and the use of populist rhetoric. As noted by Klecker and Pöhlmann, pitting "real America" against what is perceived as "fake America" for political gain is not a new strategy and was employed years before the term "flyover" took hold in US politics.

While previous research on the use of flyover rhetoric has been limited to only a sample of essays, speeches, and commentary identified by previous scholars, this research puts forth a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the use of "flyover" within the United States Congress over the last 29 years (1995–2024). Specifically, all congressional speeches, committee hearings, and available constituent correspondence, which contain the term "flyover," are included in this analysis.

Examining this data, which includes all references to flyover in the Congressional Record, allows us to better understand if and how flyover rhetoric has changed over time and which members of Congress are most likely to employ it. Specifically, I examine whether the use of the term "flyover" has increased in the past decades. Also, is "flyover" more likely to be used by Republicans than Democrats? Is the term limited to rural and/or Midwestern members of Congress? Finally, how is the term employed in congressional rhetoric, and to what extent is the anti-elite and victim rhetoric of the Trump era reflected in flyover statements?

Congressional Rhetoric

Before analyzing congressional rhetoric, it is crucial to understand whether the words of members of Congress, including their committee testimony and constituent correspondence, genuinely matter to members or their constituents. Research strongly supports the significance of words, particularly those of our political leaders. Kenneth Burke highlighted the power of terminologies, arguing that language shapes our reality and guides behavior (187). Language creates both unity and division. Essentially, humans interact with the world based on their understanding, which is molded by the words they hear and use (187). More relevant to my analysis of flyover rhetoric, Benedict Anderson suggests that notions of community are "imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Due to distance and the limited view of individuals, words and imagination play a central role in constructing our communities, ourselves, and the political other (Anderson; Asen; Castoriadis).

Political rhetoric can supplement existing evidence or even persuade in its absence (Coker). Jenny Rice argues that many contemporary political debates rely on limited evidence, and individuals are often manipulated by rhetoric to support their ideas (6). For instance, politicians frequently use different metaphors to discuss the economy (Barnes and Hicks), crime (Thibodeau and Boroditsky), and healthcare (Schlesinger and Lau), with metaphors often being "essential to their persuasiveness" (Charteris-Black 2).

Ultimately, politicians can persuade voters to endorse particular candidates and policy options by using language strategically. Language that elicits emotional responses and personal connections is critical to electoral and policy success (e.g., Gross; Redlawsk; Slatcher et al.). These and other studies demonstrate that words (political rhetoric) matter to political success, often in non-obvious ways.

Floor Speeches and Correspondence

When examining the speeches of members of Congress on the chamber floor and in committee, it becomes clear that their words carry significant weight – or at least, members act as if they do. Members see committee hearings and floor speeches as key opportunities to send political messages to their constituents and interest groups, even though these moments are designed to gather and share policy-relevant information (Krehbiel). By taking stands on policy issues and shaping perceptions of themselves, their constituencies, and their party, members skillfully use these platforms to their advantage (DeGregorio; Huitt; Park). While only a very small minority of constituents actually watch or hear members' committee and floor speeches,

highlights are regularly replayed on local news stations and emphasized by members of Congress in their direct communications with constituents and during campaigns.

Congressional correspondence is another vital tool for members of Congress to communicate with their constituents. The sheer volume of mail sent by members of Congress highlights its importance. In 2016, US House representatives collectively spent $18.5 million on mail to their constituents, averaging $43,500 each. Interestingly, research shows that House members in competitive electoral districts sent 2.5 times more mail to constituents than those in non-competitive districts (McMinn). Although the literature offers mixed findings on whether increased constituent mail boosts a member's electoral security (Cover; Cover and Brumberg; Fenno; Parker; Parker and Parker), Parker and Goodman found that members who invest more in constituent communication are seen as significantly more representative and often reap electoral benefits (495).

Data and Analysis

This research investigates whether the use of the term "flyover" by members of Congress has increased over time. To understand this trend, I examined the Congressional Record from 1995 to 2024, identifying all congressional speeches, committee hearings, and constituent correspondence (Cormack) that referenced "flyover" between January 1, 1995, and June 1, 2024. The analysis begins in 1995 (104th Congress) since this was the first Congress since 1931 led by a Republican majority in the US House. 1995 was also the first year of Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich's leadership, which was marked by a significant increase in polarization in Congress and the number of Republican members representing southern and rural congressional districts.

Initially, 339 references were found but most referenced US military planes flying over campaigns, government functions, and sporting events. Surprisingly, over the past 29 years, there have only been 66 references to "flyover" in the context of "flyover country" or "flyover state" in the Congressional Record. As a point of comparison, the term "heartland," which is similar in context to "flyover," was referenced over 1,500 times by members of Congress in their speeches, committee hearings, and constituent correspondence during the same period (Congressional Record and Cormack). However, the use of "flyover country" has increased in recent years, from an average of just once per year between 1995 and 2015 to an average of four times per year since 2015 (Figure 1). As Cornelia Klecker suggests, the Trump era has significantly boosted the use of "flyover" rhetoric, aligning with Trump's and the Republican Party's increased focus on rural voters and their populist messaging.

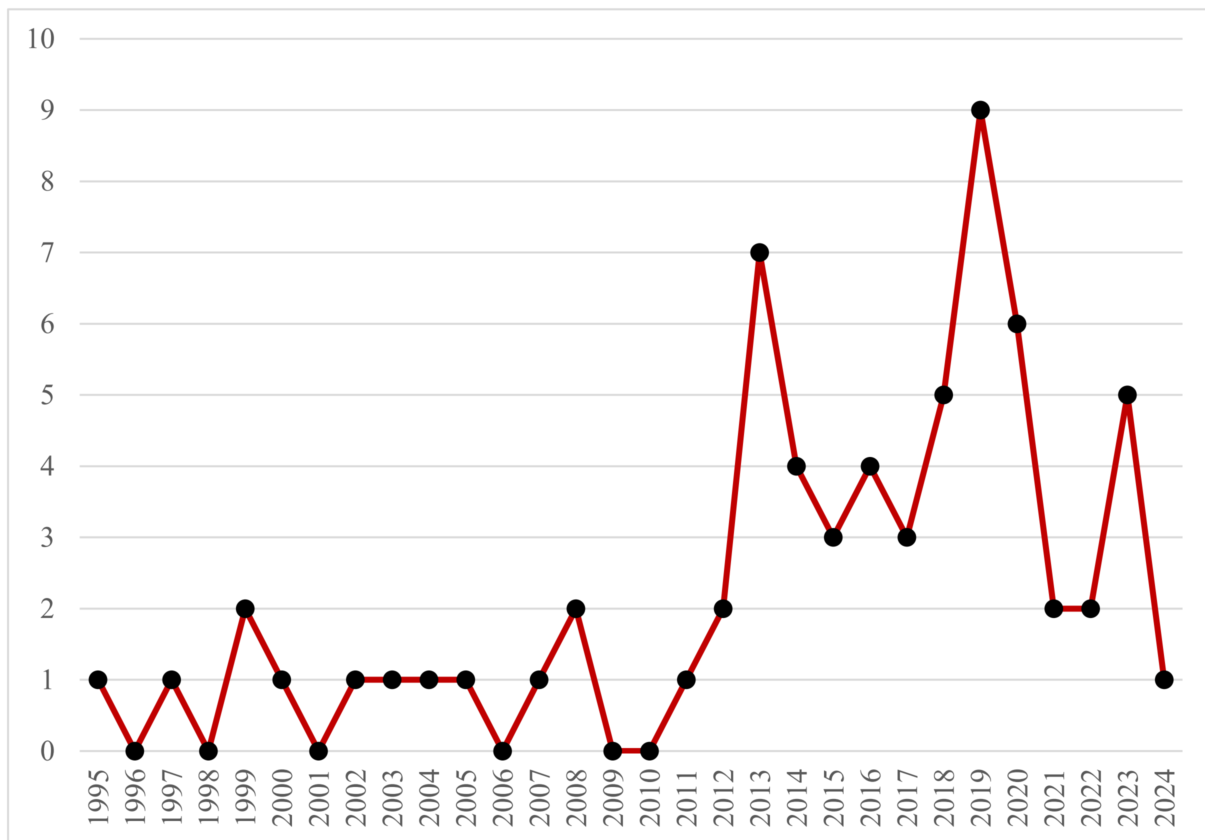

Figure 1: Congressional flyover references by year

Recent trends in congressional rhetoric reveal that the increase in references to "flyover country" is predominantly led by Republicans. Over the past 29 years, the congressional record shows 66 mentions of this term, with only six attributed to Democrats, specifically Representatives Marcy Kaptur (Ohio), Gwen Moore (Wisconsin), Cheri Bustos (Illinois), Emmanuel Cleaver (Missouri), and Senator Sherrod Brown (Ohio).[1] This data underscores a clear partisan divide, with Republicans significantly more likely to employ flyover rhetoric.

"Flyover country" is often linked to rural communities, which Republican members of Congress predominantly represent. This correlation suggests the demographics of their constituents, rather than partisanship, may explain why Republicans use flyover rhetoric more frequently. To investigate this further, we analyzed a random sample of "heartland" references in Congress over the past five years (Congressional Record, 2019–2024). Our findings indicate, while Republicans are also more likely to use the term "heartland" compared to Democrats, the difference is substantially less pronounced. Specifically, 60% of "heartland" references were made by Republicans, while

[1] Representative Cheri Bustos (Illinois) mentioned "flyover" country twice, while all other Democratic members of Congress made only a single reference to it.

Democrats made 40%. This "heartland" distribution reflects the actual difference in rural populations represented by the two parties in Congress (US Census), suggesting the higher use of "flyover" rhetoric by Republicans is driven more by partisanship than by constituent demographics. If "flyover" was simply used as a synonym for rural communities, as "heartland" seems to be for Democrats and Republicans in Congress, then the use of flyover rhetoric by Republican members of Congress as compared to Democrats would be closer to the 60/40 heartland split rather than the 91/9 split found in the data.

To quantify the extent of "flyover" language usage by members of Congress from rural communities, we compared the average rural population of their constituencies. In 2020, the average rural population for all US House Districts was 19.3% and 20.0% for all US states (US Census). However, for US House members who referenced "flyover," the average rural population was significantly higher at 33.9%. Similarly, US senators who used "flyover" represented states with an average rural population of 32.0%. This analysis clearly indicates that members of Congress who reference "flyover" are from more rural states and districts (Figure 2).

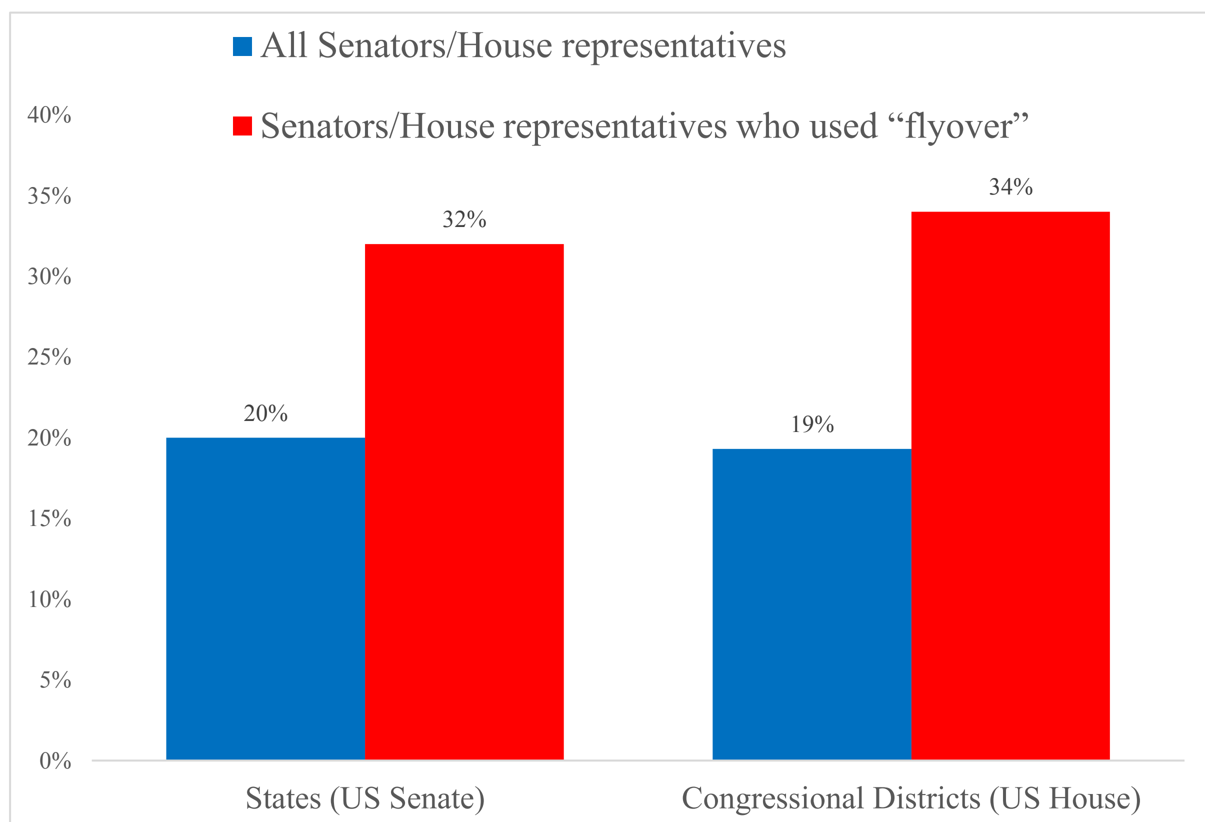

Figure 2: Percentage of rural population of states/districts represented by all senators/House representatives and senators/House representatives who used "flyover"

While the above analysis confirms that members of Congress who reference "flyover country" predominantly represent rural districts, the term originally referred only to

the Midwest. This analysis shows that members of Congress who reference "flyover" predominantly represent rural districts, which, of course, also exist in states on the coasts (such as Maine, Oregon, New Hampshire, North Carolina, and even New York).

To what extent do the members of Congress using the "flyover" reference represent "middle America" (i.e., all states without a coast)? Figure 3 illustrates the states and congressional districts represented by members of Congress who employed flyover rhetoric. Generally, those who used "flyover country" do represent "middle America." Notably, Missouri and Ohio have the highest frequency of references, with Missouri having eight and Ohio six. The few flyover references not from "middle America," such as North Carolina's 7th, Pennsylvania's 12th, and Louisiana's 3rd congressional districts, were from members of Congress representing very rural districts.

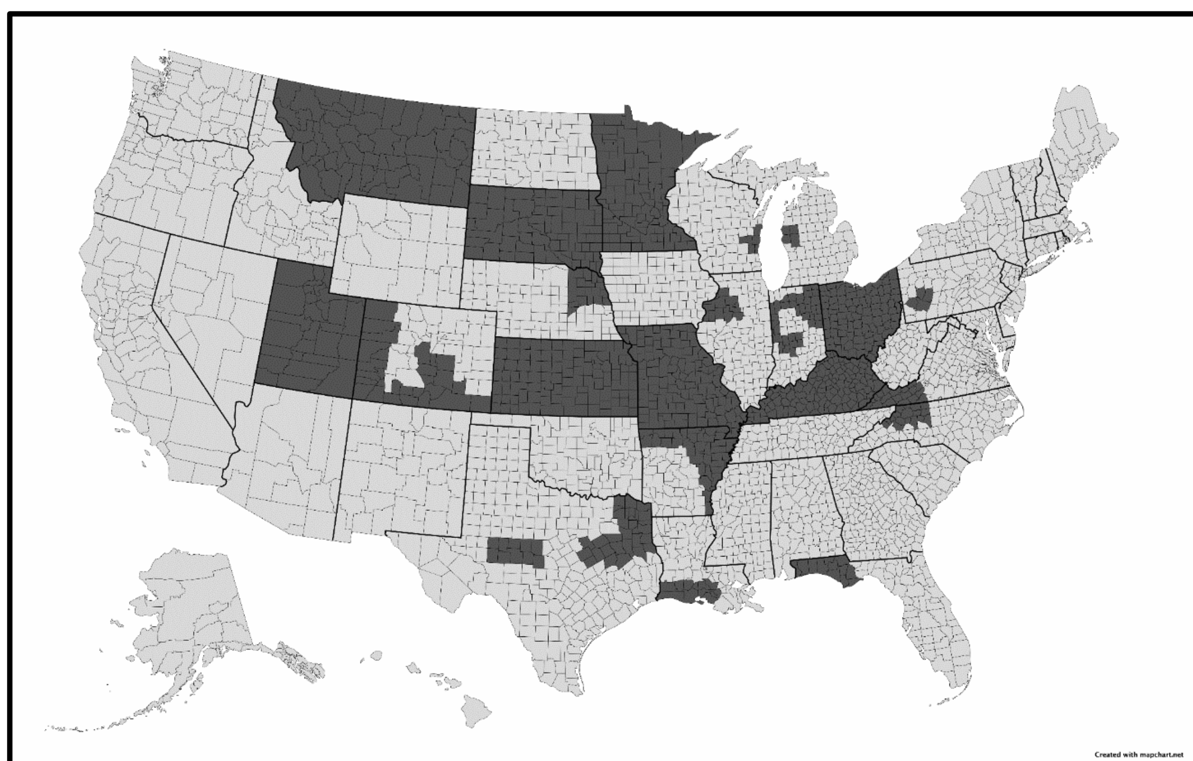

Figure 3: States and congressional districts represented by congressional members using "flyover"

Flyover Content Analysis

I now turn to a detailed content analysis of *how* members of Congress have employed the term "flyover." Previous research (Klecker; Harkins) suggests politicians have generally used this term to symbolize US-American identity, referencing the rural and Midwestern regions perceived to be overlooked by coastal elites. Furthermore, these studies argue that the Trump era has intensified the politicization of "flyover," transforming it into a tool for populist discourse.

Before delving into the content analysis, it is essential to note that "flyover country" was the most common variant in the Congressional Record representing 71% of the references. However, "flyover state" was also frequently mentioned (17%), along with other variations such as space, territory, zone, and America representing a combined 12% of flyover references.

My analysis of the 66 references to "flyover" in the Congressional Record from 1995 to 2024 aligns well with previous scholarly findings. The analysis identified two major themes. The first theme, representing more than 45% of the references, depicted "flyover" as a forgotten and/or ignored region of the nation. The second most common theme described it as exceptional, important to America, and embodying the nation's ideals. Additionally, the analysis revealed three sub-themes that resonate with the victimhood narratives identified by previous scholars (Klecker and Pöhlmann). These sub-themes were categorized as follows: (a) underappreciated/misunderstood (13.6%), (b) ridiculed/viewed as inferior (13.6%), and (c) cheated/provided fewer resources (12.1%). These findings are illustrated in Figure 4.

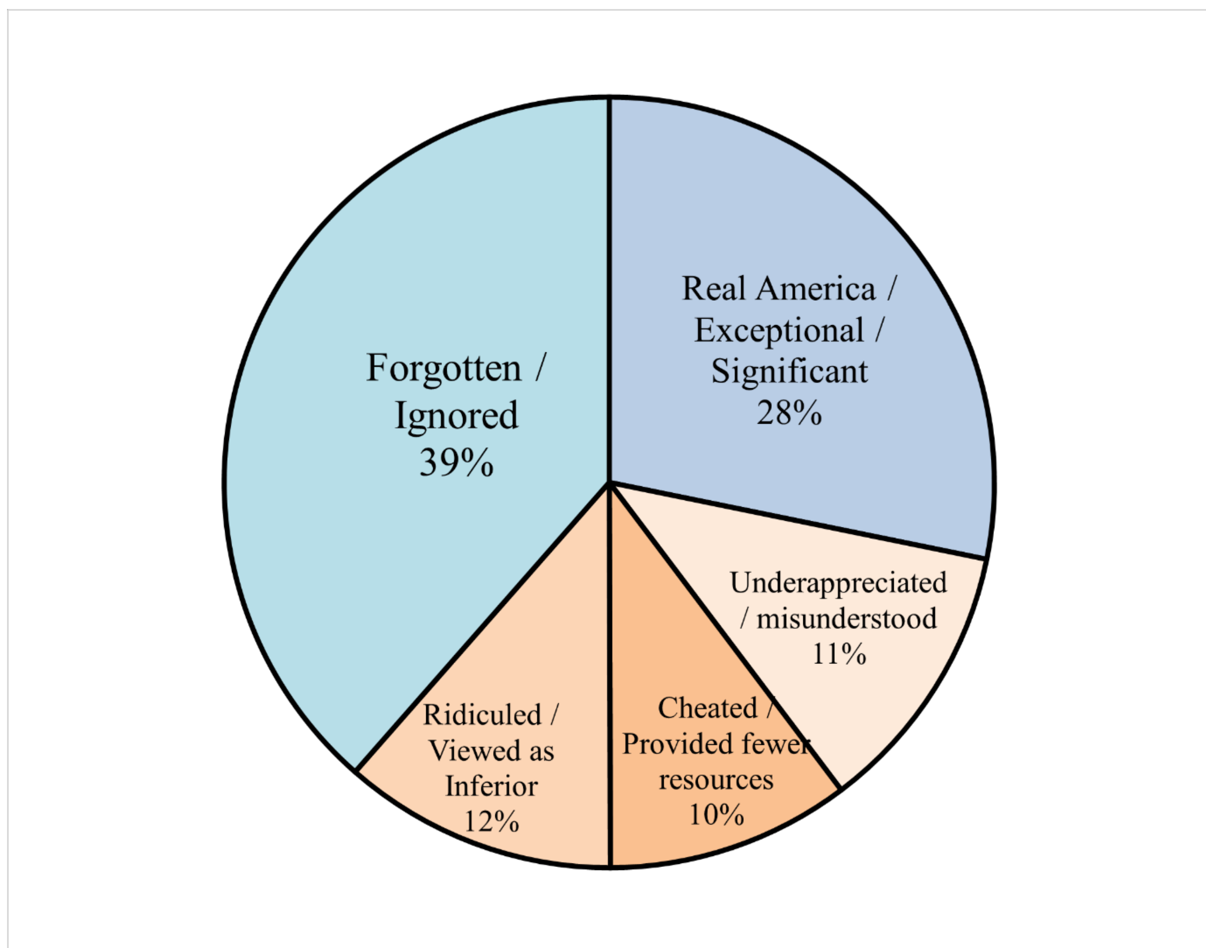

Figure 4: Themes of flyover references

Forgotten and/or Ignored

The most common use of the flyover term by members of Congress is to describe their communities and constituents as being forgotten or ignored by Washington, DC, and coastal cities. Members of Congress use the term to emphasize the need for greater attention and resources for their rural constituents. In the following statement, Congressman Louis Gohmert (Texas) uses flyover rhetoric as a rallying cry to advocate for additional healthcare funding to address the unique challenges faced by flyover communities:

> If people haven't gotten out from around this town and gone out and talked to doctors across the country, including doctors in what some would deem "flyover country," you find out the doctors say, if and when those cuts occur, we cannot stay in business; we'll have to close our doors. (Gohmert H797)

"Flyover country" is also used by Republican members of Congress to describe their districts, which are literally flown over by planes traveling between major urban centers, symbolizing how policymakers, businesses, and the media often ignore these areas. For instance, US Representative James Lankford (Oklahoma) uses flyover in the congressional committee statement below to highlight how most individuals simply fly over his district and how it may surprise them that some planes land there and find smart people.

> I come from a place that many in this town call flyover country. It may surprise you that planes actually land in flyover country. And when you get off the plane, do you know what you find? You find smart people. People who balance their budgets, serve their neighbors and love their kids. They are not helpless. (Lankford H2069)

Ultimately, these members of Congress use the term "flyover" to convey a sense of neglect and marginalization experienced by the country's rural and less populated regions. They often express frustration with the perception that policymakers in Washington, DC, overlook rural states and districts and regularly ignore them in favor of more populated urban centers.

Real America / Exceptional / Significant

The term "flyover" is also frequently employed by members of Congress to underscore various themes related to the United States, particularly the significance and exceptional nature of "flyover country," despite its perception as less significant. Members often depict their constituents and their "flyover" communities as places where common sense prevails, standing in stark contrast to the political and bureaucratic complexities of Washington, DC. A typical example of the flyover rhetoric is found in the following statement by Representative Chip Roy (Texas):

> Mr. Speaker, in this [sic] two weeks following Independence Day, you do a lot of thinking if you are, as I assume my friend was, part of an Independence Day parade. There are a lot of patriotic Americans out there, particularly in flyover country, who love their country and want to defend their country, and they just want their life back. That is it. They want that American Dream back. (Roy H3692)

Another excellent example by Republican senator Pat Roberts (Kansas) uses a sports victory to symbolize the resilience and determination of people from "flyover country," reinforcing their cultural identity and resiliency:

> Our celebration today is about the Royals, the joy of the game of baseball, but it is also about our identity as a city and a region. We were told that a small market team from flyover country would not be able to beat the New York Mets. We won because we kept the line moving – just like the Royals fans do in Kansas and Missouri every day – through a couple of decades of post-season drought, proving our team, our fans, our kind of game is the best in baseball. I know I speak for the fans all over our State and the hundreds of thousands of fans that gathered to enjoy and celebrate a victory for our team and, yes, for our region, too – and I think for our country. (Roberts S7755)

Ultimately, these members of Congress use "flyover" rhetoric to depict the communities they represent as embodying "real America," i.e., the true American spirit, with hardworking, self-reliant, and deeply patriotic people.

Flyover Country as Victim: Underappreciated, Ridiculed, and Cheated

The final theme emerging from the content analysis of Congressional "flyover" statements is the portrayal of victimhood, accounting for 33% of the discourse. This theme is divided into three subthemes: (a) underappreciation/misunderstanding, (b) ridicule or viewed as inferior, and (c) cheated or an inequitable distribution of resources. Flyover rhetoric identified within this theme emphasizes the lack of appreciation, misunderstanding, and ridicule experienced by regions often labeled as "flyover country/states." Ultimately, the analysis reveals that congressional members articulate that these central areas are not only geographically but also culturally and economically sidelined.

Underappreciated

The underappreciated/misunderstood subtheme reflects the sentiment that "flyover country" is not fully recognized for its contributions to the nation. Members of Congress argue that these states are often overlooked or undervalued by the rest of the country, particularly by coastal elites and urban centers. A recurring idea in these references is that these regions' cultural, economic, and social contributions are not adequately acknowledged.

Despite being labeled as "flyover," these areas are crucial for the nation's agriculture, manufacturing, and overall economy. Not only are flyover states viewed as

crucial to the success of the United States, but they are also often referenced as the "real" America, as opposed to the elites on the coasts. For example, Republican senator Kit Bond of Missouri highlighted this during a committee hearing on farm security and rural investment:

> The big city papers can take our food supply for granted, but those of us who live in flyover country – the real America between the two coasts – cannot, and neither can the consumers in this country and elsewhere, who are unwittingly the biggest beneficiaries of the hard labor and sacrifice of those who struggle on the farm. (Bond S3980)

Ridiculed

The ridicule/inferiority subtheme highlights the notion that "flyover country" is often subjected to ridicule or viewed as less sophisticated compared to coastal and urban regions. Politicians leveraging this rhetoric argue that the constituents and communities in these areas are unfairly stereotyped and marginalized. This includes references to elite or bureaucratic opinions and public discourse that depict these regions negatively. Republican congressman Jim Jordan (Ohio) provides a striking example of this rhetoric:

> They can't stand it, and they are never going to stop. And it is not just because they don't like the President. They don't like us. They don't like the 63 million people who voted for this President, all of us in flyover country, all of us common folk in Ohio, Wisconsin, Tennessee, and Texas. (qtd. in United States, House of Representatives 19)

Overall, this narrative underscores the perceived cultural and intellectual divide between "flyover country" and more urbanized coastal areas, emphasizing the need for greater recognition and respect for these often-overlooked regions.

Cheated

The subtheme of being "cheated" or provided fewer resources highlights the systemic disadvantages faced by "flyover country" in terms of resource allocation. Members of Congress argue these regions receive disproportionately less federal funding, fewer economic opportunities, and inadequate infrastructure support in comparison to urbanized or coastal areas. This perceived inequity is said to contribute to significant economic and social disparities. Republican representative Doug Lamborn (Colorado) exemplifies this sentiment in his critique of the INVEST in America Act, a major infrastructure bill championed by the Democrats:

> The Democrats' so-called INVEST in America Act is nothing more than the Green New Deal disguised as an infrastructure bill. Instead of working in a bipartisan fashion, Democrats crafted this partisan legislation, which will never become law, solely to cater to special interest climate extremists. This bill also further widens the disparity between

> rural and urban infrastructure by once again abandoning "flyover country," with seven times more funding going to infrastructure in urban cities. (Lamborn)

Collectively, these themes construct an image of "flyover country" as regions that are not only geographically but also politically and culturally marginalized. By highlighting these victimhood narratives, members of Congress aim to draw attention to the perceived injustices faced by their constituents and advocate for greater recognition and support.

Conclusion

Unlike previous studies that have focused on a limited sample of essays, speeches, and commentary, this research provides a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the use of flyover rhetoric in the US Congress over nearly three decades. By examining all congressional speeches, committee hearings, and constituent correspondence referencing "flyover," the study offers a systematic analysis of how this term has been employed in the Congressional Record by members of Congress since 1995.

The analysis of congressional rhetoric surrounding the term "flyover" reveals a profound and evolving narrative that underscores the deep-seated cultural and political divides in the United States. This study not only highlights the increasing use of flyover rhetoric primarily by Republican members of Congress but also exposes the strategic deployment of this term to evoke a sense of victimhood and marginalization among rural constituents. The findings suggest that "flyover" has become more than just a geographic descriptor; it is a potent symbol of identity politics, wielded to galvanize support and foster a collective sense of grievance against perceived coastal elitism (and/or Democrats).

Particularly striking is the shift in flyover rhetoric usage over the past three decades. Initially a benign term, it has morphed into a tool for populist discourse, especially during the Trump era. The data shows a marked increase in references to "flyover" post-2015, reflecting the Republican Party's intensified focus on rural voters and their populist messaging. This transformation underscores the adaptability of political language and its capacity to shape and reflect the socio-political landscape.

Moreover, the content analysis reveals that flyover rhetoric is not merely about geographic neglect but also cultural and economic disenfranchisement. Members of Congress use this term to highlight the perceived injustices faced by their constituents, portraying them as underappreciated, ridiculed, and cheated by the urban-centric policies of coastal elites (and/or Democrats). This narrative of victimhood is a powerful mobilizing force, strengthening the divide between "real America" and coastal elites or the other America.

In conclusion, the flyover rhetoric mirrors the broader cultural and political tensions in the United States. It reflects a growing sense of alienation and resentment among rural Americans, which politicians have adeptly harnessed for electoral gain. As the political landscape continues to evolve, such rhetoric will likely remain a critical tool in the arsenal of those seeking to champion the cause of the overlooked and the marginalized. This study sheds light on the dynamics of congressional rhetoric and calls for a deeper understanding of the cultural and political undercurrents that shape US-American identity and discourse.

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Murray Rothbard's Populist Blueprint: Paleo-Libertarianism and the Ascent of the Political Right

David Bebnowski

ABSTRACT

In his 1992 pamphlet "Right-Wing Populism: A Strategy for the Paleo Movement," libertarian economist and intellectual Murray Rothbard drafted a strategy that foreshadowed the rise of populist politics that was to come some years later. Central to his populist vision was the idea of a "paleo-coalition" consisting of "paleo-libertarians" and "paleo-conservatives" that he saw coming closer to power by addressing the masses directly. This, Rothbard proclaimed, would be possible if a presidential candidate were able to short-circuit the traditional media and appeal to disgruntled parts of the population, namely the "rednecks" and Middle America. With Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election in 2016, Rothbard's ideas seem to have become reality. This article draws on the concept of flyover to describe this special populist framework by analyzing libertarians' appeals and politicizable connections to an imagined "real people" and by historically tracing populism in US conservatism. Based on a discussion of the social functions of pamphlets as contentious formats that are interwoven into social conflict, a close reading of Rothbard's 1992 pamphlet shows the decisive political edge that populists were able to gain by employing the strategies for the "paleo movement."

KEYWORDS

Far-right, new right, conservatism, Ludwig von Mises Institute, neoliberalism, paleo-coalition, paleo-conservatism

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By the beginning of 1992, Murray Rothbard had become fascinated by the possibility of political change. In a speech in January of that year, the libertarian intellectual shared his observations and expressed the opinion that "[t]he radical Right is back, all over the place, feistier than ever and getting stronger!" (Rothbard, "A Strategy for the Right" 11; Ganz, "The Year the Clock Broke"). Exhilarated by these prospects, Rothbard put pen to paper and developed strategic considerations on what the Right needed to do to seize the moment and gain access to power. The scholar activist wrote a pamphlet that from today's perspective reads like a blueprint for the development of a global Right such as we have witnessed in recent years. Drawing on a term that has become ubiquitous in today's political debate, Rothbard labelled his vision "right-wing populism."

Reflecting back on a plethora of unsuccessful attempts to build a libertarian mass base, the intellectual outlined his approach to drawing constituents to the Right. The radical Right he envisioned was a "paleo coalition" of paleo-libertarians, free market ultras, and socially conservative paleo-conservatives who put "America First." In order to achieve this vision, Rothbard looked to attract a constituency that is only seldom described in favorable terms in political debate: He wrote, "[i]n a sense the strategy we are now proclaiming is a strategy of Outreach to the Rednecks," adding that "the 'rednecks' were the real people" ("Right-Wing Populism" 12).

Rothbard's identification of the "rednecks" as the "real people" follows the core operation central to every brand of populism: identifying part of the people as the "real people" and politicizing this distinction by siding with them against a more or less imaginary elite (Müller 21). What needs to be emphasized in these populist binaries, however, is their cultural appeal. One way of accounting for these aspects can be found in the *flyover* concept, which describes "a *cultural* concept" that "describes human relations to each other," and which refers "first and mainly to a *social* and *political* relation between two groups" (Klecker and Pöhlmann). Just like the term "redneck," flyover fictions delineate "the difference between the elites and the people according to central and peripheral places and their resulting cultural hierarchies." Using the term "redneck" in a favorable way, Rothbard weaponized a cultural hierarchy and was able to "*pretend* to be apolitical and 'merely' cultural," it was "not a question of power but a question of the proper way of life" (Klecker and Pöhlmann).

Rothbard was not the first to make use of such strategizing. In fact, this operation has a long history among US conservatives, whose populist aspirations have become increasingly visible since the 1950s. Since then, conservative and capital-friendly politicians have needed to embrace the working class in order to present themselves as being part of "the people." On this basis, it is easy to pit the people against the establishment or against any seemingly unhinged idealism of the Left. Rothbard's

libertarian thinking, however, points to the latest evolution of right-wing populism into the amalgamation of "the people" and ultra-capitalist politics as seen in the far-right politics of Donald Trump.

By focusing on Rothbard's pamphlet and on recent work of scholars and journalists, my aim is to describe the contours of the strategy behind this shift toward populism in the United States. Thus, by portraying the libertarians' appeals and politicizable connections to an imagined "real people," I will show that such strategizing has been a constant feature of conservative politics in the United States since the 1950s. Rothbard's text reflects these visions – and it embodies characteristics that are central to pamphleteering. A close reading of Rothbard's pamphlet shows how the intellectual attempted to merge libertarian ideas with visions for an emergent right-wing. The decisive political edge he outlined in his pamphlet is perhaps more in tune with our political moment than with the time in which it was written (Ganz, "The Year the Clock Broke").

Libertarians and the People

While the mounting challenge of populism has resulted in a vast body of literature on the phenomenon, the core theoretical elements of populism have undergone little change. Populism remains a relatively simplistic political dynamic, a "thin-centered ideology" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 6) that proponents adopt as a style rather than as a deeply rooted set of beliefs. At the core of populism is the imaginary of an antagonism between "them" and "us." While the "them" embodies a corrupted political elite or establishment, the "us" is the pure personification of the people and their common sense. This Manichaean binary is not restricted to a particular ideological worldview. Both constructions purposefully serve as blank spaces, or "empty signifiers" (Laclau), that can be filled with whatever might credibly be sold as representing the rift between the elites and the down-to-earth people.

These populist logics are fundamental to the distinct brand of politics that is libertarianism. This is all the more true since such beliefs are easily coupled with ideas about the true nature of the US-American creed. In fact, perhaps no other political ideology can be considered so specifically US-American as the libertarian ideology, given its firm insistence on civil liberties and its valorization of freedom of the people, of the will, of speech, and – above all – of markets. With its emphasis on the natural right to own private property and engage in free exchange, libertarian thinking seems compatible with the United States in its capacity as the world's capitalist superpower. However, few other non-anti-capitalist political groups position themselves in such strong opposition to the established structural foundations and workings of the US-American political system as libertarians do. This is because there is

one essential enemy of all libertarians, one that is interfering with private property rights in every sphere of life by means of taxation, by means of controlling currencies, of conscription, of centralized federal education and many more means besides: the state. As long as governmental power and restrictions on business or currencies are in place, libertarians will not only be able to stake a claim to fundamental opposition but will also be able to rely heavily on an ideology that creates antagonism by default (Boaz; Doherty; Rothbard, *For a New Liberty*).

By taking up such an antagonistic position toward the state and established politics, libertarians are able to put distance between themselves and other political contenders and occupy a space that is at a remove from the US political establishment. Additionally, libertarians can make use of this position to claim that they embody the true intentions of the founding fathers of the United States. The Libertarian Party is doing exactly that by fusing free market ideology with the purported vision of the founders, as can be observed in some of their rack cards. These are short agitative pamphlets or flyers that are distributed to interested political audiences (e.g. at political rallies) in order to convey the views of the party and mobilize or win over supporters. The rack card "What is?" recounts its origin story in a telling manner:

> The Libertarian Party was created in 1971 by people who realized that politicians had strayed from America's original libertarian foundation, with disastrous results. The new party's vision was the same as that of America's founders – a society where individuals are free to follow their own dreams in their own ways – with "liberty and justice for all." ("What is?")

Here, the party is usurping the founders' vision and simultaneously short-circuiting it with libertarian core beliefs. In this way, libertarianism is presented as the true embodiment of "Americanness."

The first sentence of the quote shows that talk of the country being founded on American principles opens up a narrative of political decay, which is a constant feature in conservative populism. Moreover, it provides a way to connect with the logics inherent to the concept of flyover. In fact, some libertarians make direct use of the catchword flyover in their rhetoric, as a now defunct podcast called the *Flyover Libertarian* shows. But even without direct reference to the term, libertarians' spatial politics reveal a tendency to locate their bases of operation at a remove from the Washington Beltway, "big government," and established politics in places that are often identified as part of the stereotypical "flyover country." This much was already clear at the inception of the Libertarian Party, which was founded in Denver, Colorado, and indeed the party's headquarters are still located in the "Mile High City." The state of Colorado is sometimes described as a particularly fertile ground for libertarian values due to cultural attitudes such as its Western "live and let live ethos"

(Burns 452). The internationally operating, culturally conservative libertarian think tank known as the Ludwig von Mises Institute, named after the Austrian economist, draws on similar anti-elite spatial politics by virtue of being located in Auburn, Alabama, a city of barely 80,000 inhabitants (Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism* 103). The fact that Auburn is located deep in the South adds an additional layer of unsettling meaning, and reveals crucial strategic differences between libertarian factions, given that the biggest libertarian think tank, the Cato Institute, is now based in Washington DC, after being founded in San Francisco in 1977. We will come to these differences later.

The political personnel of the Libertarian Party can also be connected to what have frequently been called flyover states. Their presidential nominees for the 2012, 2016, and 2020 elections, Gary Johnson and Jo Jorgensen, came from small cities in North Dakota and Illinois, respectively. The most influential donors for the libertarians, the Koch brothers of Koch Industries, were born in Wichita, Kansas, and continue to run their operations from there. Interestingly, even those politicians most commonly referred to as libertarians while running as Republicans also have some connections to the peripheral and now poverty-stricken states in the Rust Belt or Appalachia, which nowadays might as well be referred to as "hinterlands" due to their "distance from the booming cores of the supposedly 'post-industrial' economy" (Neel 17). Libertarian icon Ron Paul served as state senator of Texas even though he was born in a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His son, Rand Paul, was also born in Pittsburgh and became a senator of the Appalachian state of Kentucky in 2011. Lastly, the Republican free market advocate Paul Ryan, who served as Speaker of the House of Representatives and frequently identifies the libertarian saga *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand as his favorite novel, hails from Janesville, a small deindustrialized town in Wisconsin, whose first congressional district he went on to represent.

Populism and the Conservative Movement

As outlined above, the populist core logic is not constricted to the Right, and in the United States, the term populism has a long history. It was the People's Party, a left-leaning grassroots mass movement of impoverished and indebted farmers, that introduced the term "populists" into everyday political language in the 1890s (Frank). What spurred on right-wing populism in the 20th century were the New Deal policies implemented after the Great Depression in the early 1930s. The profusion of federal agencies ensuring a functioning economy and banking sector after the Great Depression and the simultaneous building of a social welfare net came under attack for being "big government" from economic and socially conservative interests (Phillips-Fein). Indeed, until the 1960s the New Deal coalition of Democrats, labor unions, and

racial minorities fostered its power (Patel 278), and conservatives were not able to employ populist tactics for their own ends. Populist right-wing figures such as Republican communist hunter Joseph McCarthy were examples of Richard Hofstadter's oft-quoted "paranoid style in American politics" (Hofstadter).

However, when Hofstadter published his analysis, he had already noticed that a successful right-wing populism was burgeoning (7). It was Arizona senator Barry Goldwater who was the first to receive support from a then emerging movement of "conservative grassroots" (McGirr), eventually becoming his party's nominee for the 1964 presidential race. Goldwater's "producerist" (Lowndes and HoSang) ideology, which pitted allegedly economically productive parts of society against unproductive ones, foreshadowed a fundamental principle of right-wing thinking in later years that married "normative conservatism" with libertarian laissez-faire economic thinking in an effective manner (McGirr 10). Simultaneously, this ideology tied in with the idea of economic independence as a fundamental part of "Americanness," an idea that dates back to the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer.

Adding to these efforts, the Republicans embarked upon their "Southern strategy," led by the segregationist governor of Alabama, George Wallace, which looked to target white voters who predominantly voted for Democrats (the so-called "Dixiecrats"). These measures effectively led to a "southern capture of the Republican Party" (Lowndes 6) that from then on exploited deep-seated racial resentments and sided with the segregationists' opposition to civil rights. Thinly veiled racist undertones were seeping into political language and policy proposals – racist "dog whistling" started to become a political tool (Haney-López 13).

All of these new developments paved the way for the successful conservative populism employed by later presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. Both of these California Republicans (or their staff) shared the ability to find words to express the antagonistic binary between the people and the elites. Against the backdrop of claims for civil rights and New Left mobilization in general, Nixon evoked the "forgotten Americans" and the "silent majority." From here it was just one small step to "middle America," a new and compelling term for this burgeoning Republican majority that conveyed to all those who felt themselves to be part of the "middle" an imagined sense of being constantly pressured by the economic and political elites and underclasses (Lowndes 133, 183). Populism had become a pillar of conservative politics and Ronald Reagan was able to employ the slogan "Let's Make America Great Again" to persuade voters to vote for him during his 1980 presidential election campaign.

Accompanying Reagan, rising Republican politicians such as Newt Gingrich now left the well-trodden bipartisan path of US-American politics for a "politics as warfare" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 149). This much more confrontational style attacked many

of the unwritten rules in American politics that had provided “guardrails” for its functioning and stability (97–117). Gingrich’s rise to the top of the Republican Party meant that the party moved with him and adopted his majorly confrontational political style. An overhauling of welfare under Democratic president Bill Clinton that further weakened the traditional bonds between labor and the Democrats was forced by Gingrich, who presided over a Republican majority in Congress.

This new strategy proved useful for conservative interests in the decades to come. Barack Obama’s time in office, in particular, saw how the antagonistic approach of the Republican Party eroded norms of mutual toleration. Forbearance gave way to hostility and political figures that had been placed on the radical fringes of American conservatism made their entry into politics. As early as Obama’s run for the presidency, radical actors such as Sarah Palin were becoming more influential in the Republican Party, and the right-wing Tea Party movement, which resorted to a political mix of extreme social conservatism and radical market policies, was able to shape the politics of the party. The Tea Party movement merged chauvinist resentment with free market principles under the familiar “producerist” umbrella (Berlet). It was no accident that libertarian-leaning Paul Ryan became majority speaker of the House of Representatives as the Tea Party gained influence.

The Tea Party appealed first and foremost to older factions of the petty bourgeoisie, who had witnessed a devaluation of their financial assets due to the financial crisis of 2008 and feared for their economic security, and this stereotypical “middle American” constituency closely resembled the supporters of Donald Trump in demographic terms (Kumkar). Trump himself kick-started his political career in the 2010s. During his two terms in office, Obama, unable to deliver on his campaign promises, became the target of openly racist attacks from an increasingly chauvinist Right that was fueled by a right-wing media ecosystem surrounding Fox News and the Republican Party. It was here, within the “Birther Movement,” which doubted that Obama had been born in the United States, that Donald Trump rose to political prominence. While the Republicans’ switch to antagonistic confrontation had eased Trump’s rise to the top of the party, his own populist strategy, however, more closely resembled the very ideas Murray Rothbard had developed decades earlier in his 1992 text “Right-Wing Populism.”

Libertarians, Intellectuals and Pamphleteering

Before addressing the content of Murray Rothbard’s 1992 text, it is important to reflect on its form. In analytical terms, Rothbard’s essay ought to be considered a pamphlet. As a literary form, pamphlets derive their status from their social function and political uses (Monot, “Pamphleteering”). This goes against the more common

assumption that seeks to define pamphlets principally by referring to questions of format (e.g. shortness, unboundedness, and inexpensiveness). Pamphlets are particularly deeply embedded in political battles and experience a surge in use during revolutionary times (Warner, *The Letters of the Republic*; Bailyn; Darnton). This literary genre always expresses some sort of protest, as George Orwell, an avid pamphlet collector, knew (7–8). With their writing, pamphleteers contest power and aim to antagonize people. Often highly polemical in tone, pamphlets admit no conciliation or middle ground; indeed they go all in for one side and one side only (Angenot). By setting some parts of the public against others, pamphlets make a bid to appeal to those who sense some sort of exclusion from the dominant discourse and thereby mobilize counterpublics (Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*; Fraser). Thus, in a play on the double meaning of the press and pressure, pamphlets, as printed matter, literally "press" (that is, pressurize) social orders and the political opponents of their creators in order to effect change (Bebnowski, "Mit Druckerzeugnissen Druck erzeugen" and "Die Umkodierung des Proletariats"). Rothbard's text has all of these qualities as well as an additional, decisive one: Pamphlets are "made" rather than written, as their status as pamphlets results from large-scale public perception, a sort of "popular literacy" or "popular philology," as Pierre-Héli Monot shows in his reflections on the form ("Poor, Nasty, Brutish and Short" and "Art, Autonomy, Philology"). Different observers have stressed this point. Journalist John Ganz writes that "every single neo-Nazi that came out of the woodwork in 2016 and 2017, [sic!] mentioned Rothbard, who was [a] Jew from the Bronx, as being a key figure in their journey rightwards" (Ganz, "Don't Cry for Argentina"). According to historians Quinn Slobodian and Dieter Plehwe, "right-wing libertarians" returned to the strategy he outlined in his pamphlet "innumerable times" (100).

That Rothbard became a pamphleteer is not uncommon for the libertarian tradition in which scholar activists such as this on-off college professor played a crucial role (Doherty 5). It may not be considered all that surprising that a series of important pamphlets that are at the core of the intellectual canon of early US Republican thought and that shaped the political views of the revolutionaries of 1776 are of fundamental importance to libertarians. The pamphlets in question are *Cato's Letters*, written between 1720 and 1723 under a pseudonym by two critics of the British political system, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. They maintained that financial corruption in tandem with increasing debts were threats to the independence of parliament as they would make legislators prone to manipulation (Bailyn 41–45). Rothbard was deeply entrenched in organized libertarianism in the United States and had helped to found the most important and influential libertarian think tank with money

from David Koch in 1976: the Cato Institute. The name of the enterprise had apparently been Rothbard's idea (Ganz, "The Forgotten Man").

This apparent bookishness helped to inspire a Rothbardian vision of revolutionary social change. A student of communist strategy and an avid reader of left-wing theory, this intellectual had a penchant for playing with historically charged concepts and figures and did not shy away from borrowing from the Left what he deemed useful for his aspirations. The economist possessed a strong sense of mission and was ready to take over the helm of the libertarian ship. But Rothbard soon radicalized his vision. And this is where the aforementioned strategic differences between libertarian factions come into play.

In recent years, the story of this trajectory has been told by historians and journalists alike (e.g. Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism* 99–116, "Anti-'68ers"; Ganz, "The Forgotten Man" and "The Year the Clock Broke"). After falling out with Cato leaders, the then 55-year-old economist left the institute and found a new sphere of activity in the Auburn-based and simultaneously more conservative and radical Ludwig von Mises Institute, which had been founded by Ron Paul's former congressional chief of staff, Llewellyn Rockwell. Rothbard and Rockwell developed a position they called paleo-libertarianism. This strand of libertarianism reflected a schism within the libertarian movement that had its roots in the 1960s. Unlike left-leaning libertarians, the faction surrounding Rothbard vehemently opposed ideas of human equality and instead relied on positions of unbridgeable racial and cultural differences (Slobodian, "Anti-'68ers"). Although it may have been difficult to say which ideological end of the political spectrum libertarianism leaned toward generally, the position of the paleos was more than clear, as Rockwell and Rothbard aligned themselves with the far right. From their point of view, in order to become successful, libertarians needed to "defend Judeo-Christian traditions and Western culture and restore the focus on the family, church, and community as both protection against the state and the building blocks of a coming state-less society" (Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism* 104). Their vision of "a capitalist anarchist future" required people to congregate in smaller entities, and it "was taken for granted that these little platoons would divide according to race" (105). Freed from tactical concessions to other parts of the libertarian movement, Rothbard outlined his visions. In January 1992, the *Rothbard Rockwell Report* (RRR), the newsletter put out by Rothbard and Rockwell and the "chief organ of the paleo position" (Slobodian, "Anti-'68ers" 380), published the decisive pamphlet "Right-Wing Populism."

A Right-Wing Populist Blueprint

Rothbard's intervention came at a time when Republican president George H. W. Bush had fallen out of favor in conservative circles. Approaching the 1992 presidential elections, Bush, in spite of his swift victory in the second Gulf War of 1991, had proven himself to be "uncharacteristically vulnerable" (Guan). All this was in spite of a general sense of triumph in the US, with the Cold War being over – and having been "won" by the US and the "West." The main reason for this was the economic recession that had hit in the summer of 1990 and rendered meaningless Bush's campaign pledge to not raise taxes. Furthermore, fulfilling a task inherited from his predecessor, Ronald Reagan, President Bush negotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canadian and Mexican leaders, thereby sowing fears among laborers of a loss in manufacturing jobs (Guan). Instead of being the usual walk in the park for the sitting president, therefore, the 1992 primaries of the Republican Party turned into a display of conservative fury against the party elite. The primaries featured an illustrious set of political contenders, such as the independent billionaire Ross Perot, former Nixon and Reagan speechwriter Pat Buchanan, and even the former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan David Duke (Ganz, "The Year the Clock Broke").

Murray Rothbard was exhilarated during the Republican primaries. The candidacy of Pat Buchanan, especially, had electrified him. Due to this candidacy, Rothbard even declared that he had found a new haven in the Republican Party again. This seemed largely due to the fact that Buchanan was a paleo-conservative and a member of the John Randolph Club. Founded in 1989 and headed by Rothbard, who named the club after a "nineteenth-century plantation owner and advocate of African colonization" (Slobodian, "Anti-'68ers" 380), its mission consisted of promoting alliances between paleo-conservatives and paleo-libertarians (Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism* 106).

It was around this time that Rothbard published his influential pamphlet. In it, by bemoaning the fact that David Duke had just dropped out of the presidential race, the economist made it unrelentingly clear from the outset that he was willing to support even the most odious candidate on the Right. After this unapologetic opening, Rothbard described what he saw as "right-wing populism." He went on to explain: "The basic right-wing populist insight is that we live in a statist country and a statist world dominated by a ruling elite, consisting of a Coalition of Big Government, Big Business, and various influential interest groups" (Rothbard, "Right-Wing Populism" 7). In true pamphletary polemical prose, Rothbard then set out to attack "the updated, twentieth-century coalition of Throne and Altar" (7). While the throne represented big business, the altar consisted of statist intellectuals who had become "part of the ruling class" (7). Because of this, the Right had to change course from attempting to convince intellectuals of their mission to a strategy of building libertarian cadres and

addressing "the masses directly, to short-circuit the dominant media and intellectual elite" (13). Strategically, "those groups who are most oppressed and who have the most social leverage" (8) were to be targeted. By tapping into age-old producerist sentiments on the Right, Rothbard stated that the true mission of libertarians rested in right-wing populism, as they needed to "expose and denounce this unholy alliance, and to call for getting this preppie-underclass-liberal media alliance off the backs of the rest of [them]: the middle and working classes" (8).

That Rothbard alluded to the middle came as no surprise. As far back as 1973, two years after the Libertarian Party was founded, Rothbard published his book *For a New Liberty*, which came to be known as "The Libertarian Manifesto." Alluding to the Communist Manifesto, in many ways the urtext of the manifesto genre (Puchner 2), Rothbard put to paper his commitment to a fundamental change in the inner workings of state and society – and notions of the middle were to play a key role.

Specifically, this libertarian intellectual had drawn a connecting line between his vision and the concept of Middle America that Republicans had introduced during the conservative populist swing in the preceding years. To Rothbard, Middle Americans were "that vast middle class and working class that constitute the bulk of the American population" who were suffering under "rising taxes, inflation, urban congestion, crime, [and] welfare scandals." And Rothbard was quick to add that Libertarians "can show that government and statism have been responsible for these evils, and that getting coercive government off [their] backs will provide the remedies" (Rothbard, *For a New Liberty* 391). As the historian Daniel Bessner has shown, it was here that a revolutionary strategy was taking root: "Middle Americans served the same role as Marx's proletariat. Like Marx, Rothbard maintained that a particular segment of society, alienated from the nation's power holders, were the agents of social change" (447).

At first sight, relatively well-off Middle Americans seem like an odd choice for a political shock troop. However, seen through the lens of flyover, Middle America – and the middle in general – is a good target for a populist strategy malleable enough to transport multi-dimensional anti-elite attitudes. One meaning of Middle America rests in its spatial dimension. In this sense, Middle America is the region between the oceans, far removed from the coastal elites. But Rothbard also pointed toward the middle as an expression of social class and status. As Cornelia Klecker and Sascha Pöhlmann make clear in their reflections, the term "flyover" combines spatial and economic dimensions in "a complex cultural metaphor of class relations in America" (15). Similarly to the flyover metaphor, the Middle therefore serves as a way to blur differences "so that class differences among the good Flyover people may remain unaddressed, not to mention issues of gender, race, or other aspects of identity" (20).

The ideal of belonging to the middle class adds more layers of meaning to this understanding. From this perspective, Middle America can be used to create an imagination based on averageness or representativity that is the exact opposite of elitism (23). Furthermore, by referring to the writer Sarah Kendzior, Klecker and Pöhlmann hint at an additional meaning that is connected to the flyover trope but can be seen as being part and parcel of the middle or Middle America: “I live in the middle, and when you live in the middle, you see things from all sides” (22). What this notion evokes is *common sense*, which is key to the American ethos as well as fuel for populist sentiment.

In this spirit, Rothbard outlined a tentative “right-wing populist program” in his text. In it his readers were able to find a range of talking points familiar in libertarian and conservative camps. The author perceived these to be outcomes of the prevailing system in the United States, a system in which he saw “no fundamental difference” to “left-wing populism” (“Right-Wing Populism” 6). Over the course of eight points, Rothbard proposed that right-wing populists had to “concentrate on dismantling the crucial existing areas of State and elite rule, and on liberating the average American from the most flagrant and oppressive features of that rule” (8). This evocation of the average American also drew on his assumptions about Middle America. What his agenda meant in more concrete terms was slashing taxes and welfare and abolishing those racial privileges that he perceived not only in affirmative action but also in the “entire ‘civil rights’ structure, which tramples on the property rights of every American.” The cops would need to be unleashed in order to “[t]ake back the streets,” which meant both coming down hard on criminals and clearing the “streets of bums and vagrants” (8–9). Rothbard arrived at the position of the ultimate libertarian fever dream of abolishing the Federal Reserve and destroying the banks. Rothbard made sure, however, to end on the conservative mainstay of defending family values. In his vision, this would necessitate a bid to “get the State out of the family, and replace State control by parental control. In the long run this means ending public schools and replacing them by private schools” (9).

If these points do not already sound eerily familiar in the wake of Tea Party attacks and Donald Trump’s presidency, the second to last point certainly does. “America First” was claimed by Rothbard to be a “key point” in his strategy. In pre-empting the political slogan of Donald Trump, Rothbard attacked the sorry state of the economy and appealed to the people, writing that “the average family” was “worse off now than it was two decades ago.” “Come home America,” wrote Rothbard in vivid terms, adding, “Stop supporting bums abroad. Stop all foreign aid . . . Stop gloabaloney, and let’s solve our problems at home” (9). The paleo coalition, then, had the goals of merging policies of law and order with free market principles in order to circumvent

state power, and employing racialized conservatism and unfettered patriotism to cut ties to international commitments.

But Rothbard did not stop at outlining a political program. Importantly, in the remainder of the pamphlet, and against the backdrop of strategies put forward by Cato and the Libertarian Party, Rothbard envisioned a path to power that stood in sharp contrast to these competing libertarian visions. To him, the Cato Institute's quest for influence by means of intellectual debate and established political networks – the "Corridors of Power" ("Right-Wing Populism" 9–10) – had resulted in cozying up to power. Rothbard deemed the Libertarian Party to have become politically irrelevant (10–12). He considered it a "happy coincidence" that the party's significance dwindled in the wake of the collapse of Communism. With the Cold War obsolete, hopes rose "that many conservatives would now rejoin us in an anti-interventionist, anti-global America First foreign policy" (12). These new allies were the paleo-conservatives, a much needed addition to the paleo-libertarians.

It was from here that Rothbard began to strategize. He anticipated a reversal of the intellectual trickle-down strategy, as outlined most prominently by another libertarian icon, the economist Friedrich A. Hayek, and as pursued by the existing Libertarian institutions (Slobodian and Plehwe 100). Rothbard did not seem to care much for institutions at all, as long as the "paleo-libertarian movement" proved able to be a "new, revivified reincarnation of the Grand Old Right of my youth" ("Right-Wing Populism" 12). And this was where the "strategy of outreach to the Rednecks" (12) came in.

In addition to "hippies" and "preppies" (rich and influential people, such as the Koch brothers), Rothbard identified the "rednecks" as the smallest paleo-libertarian constituency and saw the need to attract more of them if his vision were to be successful ("Right-Wing Populism" 12). The "rednecks" were a concrete social group that served as a stand-in for a political contingent driven by uncontrollable political resentment, as became clear from Rothbard's historical analogies. The strategist looked back in history and conceived of a role model for his cause, a man he saw as a right-wing populist: Joseph McCarthy. Indulging in a type of reactionary jouissance, the paleo-libertarian thinker described a feeling of excitement while talking about the former senator's actions in the House Committee on Un-American Activities: "there was a sense of dynamism, of fearlessness, and of open-endedness, as if, whom would he subpoena next? The sainted Eleanor Roosevelt?" (13). It is easy to dismiss Rothbard's vigilante-like fantasies, but what shone through in these passages first and foremost was his astute sense of the value of entertainment in politics. "Centrist politics, elitist politics, is deliberately boring and torpid," Rothbard proposed, explaining that "right-wing populist politics is rousing, exciting, ideological, and that is precisely

why the elites don't like it: let sleeping dogs lie" (13). The subtext was that the people, driven by their scorn for the establishment, would react; that the sleeping dogs would awaken.

It is especially eye-opening to read this paleo-libertarian populist vision through the lens of Donald Trump's political ascent because Rothbard was proclaiming a media strategy to reach the masses. He stated that McCarthy was willing and able to "short-circuit the power elite . . . and reach out and whip up the masses directly" ("Right-Wing Populism" 13). Moreover, what in Rothbard's estimation had ultimately stopped McCarthy were two issues Trump had no problem with later. First, McCarthy had had "almost no movement behind him; he had no political infrastructure" (13). Moreover, McCarthy "was, unfortunately, not suited for the new medium – television – that he had been using so effectively to reach the masses directly" (13). With far greater financial means at his disposal, and as the candidate of the Republican Party, Trump was starting out from a much more advantageous position. Moreover, this presidential candidate, who fully adopted a right-wing populist style, proved to be a wizard on today's equivalent of 1950s television: the new social media platforms that were specifically designed to reach the masses everywhere they went, and all by means of a quick swipe on their smartphones. Thus, seen from this vantage point, Rothbard was outlining a vision of directly targeting constituents that was to be realized with the ascent of social media in the 2000s.

In terms of intellectual traditions, Rothbard was in fact describing a revolutionary path to power due to his being steeped in Marxist thought. This was not only in terms of his firm class-analytical approach but also in terms of the strategy itself, with Rothbard drawing his insights from Lenin and quoting the Russian revolutionary's 1905 pamphlet "What Is to Be Done?" in the last section of his pamphlet ("Right-Wing Populism" 13–14). He argued that a true right-wing populist coalition was needed and saw it forming in the paleo coalition. Rothbard called for "charismatic political leadership" in order to effectively break the message to "the working and middle class directly" (13). Political entrepreneurship was needed to "forge a paleo coalition to split off heartland and paleo-conservatives from official and neo-conservatives" (13).

Toward the end of his pamphlet, Rothbard's vision reads like a plan for Trump's ascent – and his lasting popularity – in its reversal of calls for a grassroots movement. Grassroots activity was simply too boring and it would "never get off the ground, unless it is sparked, and vivified, and energized by high-level, preferably presidential political campaigns" (14). In order to achieve outreach to the "Rednecks" and win over the Middle American masses, Rothbard estimated that the new movement was in dire need of "a presidential candidate, someone whom all wings of anti-Establishment rightists, can get behind, with enthusiasm" (14). A quarter of a decade later,

this vision was to materialize. Having died in 1995, Murray Rothbard did not live long enough to see his ideas coming to fruition.

Conclusion: Unleashing the Right's Joy in Confrontation

In hindsight, Rothbard's pamphlet reads like a blueprint for the right-wing populist surge of the last decade. But Rothbard's ideas and strategy did not come out of nowhere, seeing as US conservatism had significantly shifted toward movement politics and thereby increasingly relied on a populist strategy since the 1960s. But like few others, this libertarian was able to connect his vision to newly emerging concepts such as Middle America – and he was also bold enough to appeal to the supposedly impulsive and vengeful lower reaches of US society, which he saw as being embodied in the "Rednecks."

On the brink of the 1990s, and perhaps spurred on by the collapse of the Soviet Union, contrary to the conservative mainstream that dominated the Republican party at that time, Rothbard was now willing to go further and propose a more radical strategy, the repercussions of which were to enduringly transform conservative politics. Even back then, with the open adoption of racialized science and the full-fledged attack on any "statist" political institution, the paleo movement had stepped away from acceptable democratic politics. As historian Quinn Slobodian shows, the paleo movement and its libertarian masterminds stood at the cradle of the Alt-Right that was on the cusp of branching out worldwide (Slobodian, "Anti-'68ers").

But it took almost another quarter century and great disillusionment with the political establishment in the wake of George Bush's and Barack Obama's presidencies, as well as an unrelenting barrage of mainly conservative attacks at the fetters of US democracy, for Rothbard's vision to gain political traction. As the writer John Ganz puts it in a paraphrase of a statement Rothbard made during his aforementioned speech at the John Randolph Club in 1992, the "clock broke" in that year, only to tell the right time again when Donald Trump ran for president (Ganz, "The Year the Clock Broke"). Furthermore,

> Trump was in part the product of his [Rothbard's] will, of his ideas, his prodigious body of writing, of the political alliances he built, of the intellectuals he trained and influenced, a lifetime of bile, spleen, and hate against what he saw as the establishment. (Ganz, "The Forgotten Man")

Murray Rothbard's 1992 pamphlet can be seen as a momentous document that envisioned profound political changes. As a pamphleteer, he picked up different political threads from within conservatism in order to weave together a new political fabric in the paleo coalition. For the as yet uninitiated, this text may have served as a stand-in for a political program due to its poignancy, unrelentingness, polemics, political

vehemence, and brevity. But there was more to it than that. Aside from outlining hard political strategy and scheming, Rothbard encouraged his readers to find excitement and joy in political confrontation. In a sense, Rothbard allowed his companions to become "trolls" and to indulge in the theater of provocation, of hitting and hitting back harder. All these strands were able to be combined into something new in the dual ascent of social media and Bonapartists such as Donald Trump. In his remarks on the then leading medium of television and his idea that audiences could best be targeted from the highest echelons of politics, from the presidential level, Rothbard envisioned the power of "short-circuiting" the well-trodden paths of party politics and antagonizing constituencies in an increasingly fractured demos.

The concept of flyover is particularly helpful when it comes to understanding the political logics at play in this complex and often antagonistic political landscape. This is because it allows us to dissect shifting political allegiances in a flexible and metaphorical way by focusing on intersecting dimensions such as culture and class and combining them with notions of spatial positions that signify hierarchical dimensions. In this regard, the flyover concept enables associative reinterpretations of social phenomena that can easily get lost in often stultifying traditional analyses of political partisanship and tradition.

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"Magic Dirt": Transcending Great Divides in Scott McClanahan's *Crapalachia*

Eva-Maria Müller

ABSTRACT

Scott McClanahan, rising star of the US Indie Lit world and "Poet Laureate of Real America" (Moran), writes miasmic chronicles of life in a West Virginian holler. In *Crapalachia: A Biography of Place* (2013), as in many of the tales he releases in Dickensian pace, McClanahan ties the fate of a place to the fate of its people and connects environmental destruction to the ruins of life. Where mountains are stripped away, happiness is not at home. McClanahan tells family stories of deforestation and disability, mining disasters and mental illness, structural poverty and opportunities denied. His stories are about the slow and fast deaths of forgotten people in forgotten places and he tells them with a ballistic sensibility that opens up new spaces to negotiate difference. *Crapalachia* is a threnody for a wounded region that complicates imagined hierarchies of center and periphery and blends the worlds of fact and fiction as well as tragedy and comedy. The semi-autobiography mines so deeply for privation that, at its close, it lays bare some of the most hopeful principles of American transcendentalism. In between personal hardships, local misery, national movements, and universal human experience, McClanahan has us see "Crapalachia as the center of the world" (35). This paper explores how the aesthetic, narrative, and stylistic strategies of *Crapalachia* help navigate the local, national, and global routes of fictions of disregard.

KEYWORDS

American Romanticism, Appalachian Studies, mountain literature

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The curious transgressions of incompatible geographies, cultures, and styles begin with the cover page of *Crapalachia*: *A Biography of Place* (2013), a semi-autobiographical book by West Virginian native Scott McClanahan. The author is hailed as "the Poet Laureate of Real America" by Nick Moran in a recognition that graces the cover of *Crapalachia*. The title's neologism and the red and black cover (see Figure 1) promise something unusual: something as delicate as it is bold, as funny as it is furious, and as realistic as it is imaginative.

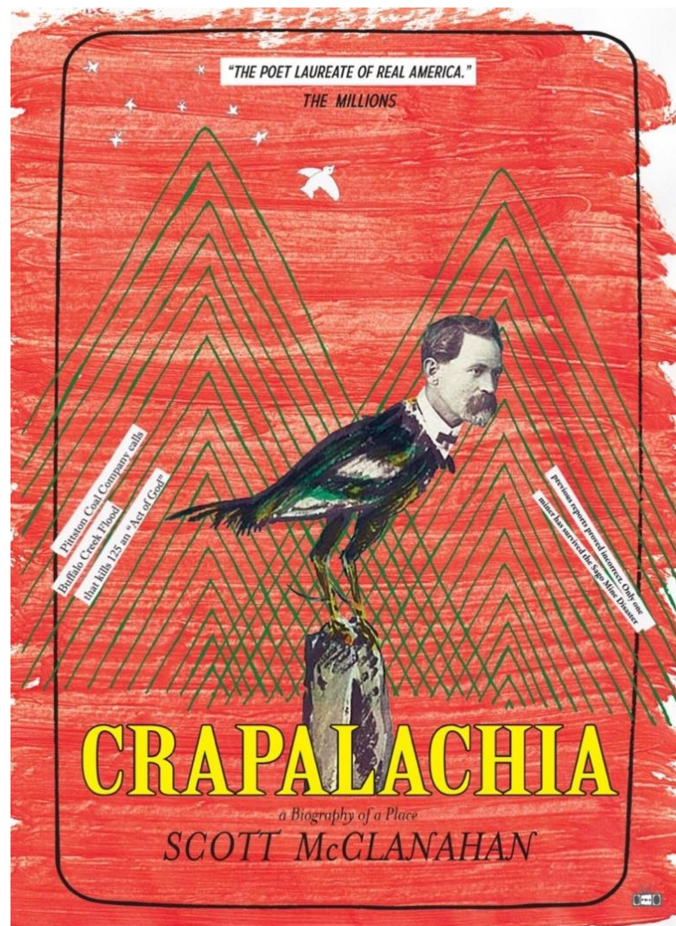

Figure 1: *Crapalachia*, book cover (2013)
Reproduced by permission of Two Dollar Radio

The cover image is a graphic montage centered around a political cartoon about a 1917 Australian coal strike: The figure of a raven's body with the head of John C. L. Fitzpatrick, secretary of mines, sitting atop a coal nugget or fence post conjures up Edgar Allan Poe. In the backdrop, abstract mountain-like lines form two peaks interspersed with quotes related to Appalachian mining disasters. The montage sits firmly on the coined word "Crapalachia" and shows a white bird soaring into the red, star-studded sky. The story explores the disadvantaged lives in overlooked America that the narrator, also named Scott, lumps together and punctuates with various phonetic

versions of "crap" and "shit" and mines with a sense of hopefulness that seeks to bridge the insurmountable barriers between lives lived on the margins and in the centers of this world. Most fascinating about the cover is that it relates the notion of an America either ignored or idealized to political protests from elsewhere. It conjures the ghosts of American Romanticism to offer new perspectives on flyover country. My interest here is precisely in this layering of flyover's regional, national, and global implications that complicate as much as they contain the binary logic that envisions the US along polar opposites. According to Anthony Harkins, the term "flyover country" emerged in print in the 1970s ("The Midwest" 98). This was a period when the Appalachian coalfields lost their role as the country's primary coal provider (Zipper et al. 1). Anthony Harkins further shows how commercial air travel and broadcast television co-created regional difference first along geographical then along cultural terms, dividing the country into two meta-regions ("The Midwest" 100): the "coasts" and "the rest" (102). Contrary to the flattening notion of flyover, "the rest" has many names in the American imagination. From 'rural America' to "mudville" (Averill 4) and "Shittown" (Reed),[1] the names all denote a place where nothing good happens. For McClanahan, the imbrication of geographical locale and cultural connotation that began in the 1990s are characterized by Crapalachia. His book ties the fate of a place to the fate of its people and connects environmental destruction to the ruins of life. It is a miasmic chronicle of growing up in rural America that follows Scott, a young man who lives with his grandmother Ruby, palsied uncle Nathan, and a host of other family and friends in a hardscrabble West Virginian holler, a narrow mountain valley. It tells family stories of deforestation and disability, mining accidents and mental illness, structural poverty and opportunities denied. McClanahan's tale is about boys skipping school and young men stealing from medical cabinets, helping older male relatives with toileting, and listening to radio preachers droning names of the diseased and dying. It is about the slow and fast deaths of forgotten people in forgotten places, told with a ballistic sensibility that opens up new spaces in which to negotiate the false dichotomy and flattening notions of flyover.

Crapalachia positions itself confidently against two kinds of flattening: the conceptual flattening that deems everything between east and west as the insignificant rest and the geological flattening of mountains through MTR mining. The text – as much an account of flyover as of extraction fiction – combines the two in a careful deconstruction (or demounting) of the divides that sustain flyover. *Crapalachia* has a great deal to tell us about how flyover was and can be envisioned. Building my

[1] *S-Town* is a 2017 podcast hosted by Brian Reed and created by the producers of *Serial* and *This American Life*. It centers around a crime committed in Woodstock, Alabama, that the central character refers to as "Shittown" and tells stories of isolation, white poverty, and sexual repression in rural America. The podcast was downloaded more than ten million times in the first four days after its release.

argument on the central position of landscape representations in the imagining of US-American national identity as well as interdisciplinary scholarship that highlights mountains' conflicting cultural history (Schama; Nicolson; Macfarlane) and their mediating role (Müller and Quendler), I focus on three aspects. First, I delve into how *Crapalachia* renders regional specificities of flyover in order to establish mountains as a useful concept in the discussion of fictions of disregard. Second, I mine with McClanahan for the great depths of flyover to arrive at the roots of American Romanticism and discuss the term's national and earthly ramifications. Third, I discuss how much McClanahan's writing on the margins of mainstream America reaches beyond a traditional US context to tell a global tale of opportunities denied. Together, the three sections foray into the dynamic textures of contrasts and connections of flyover and argue that the wondrous mountainous world of rural America and *Crapalachia*'s narrative and stylistic strategies help navigate the local, national, and global routes of fictions of disregard. My reading of McClanahan's text is prefaced by a conceptualization of the Appalachian Mountains as symbols for flyover.

Appalachia as Flyover

West Virginia is the ultimate flyover state – if the meaning is taken literally: Its location between major hub cities means that West Virginia has the highest flyover-to-destination ratio in the country, with almost two hundred times the number of flyovers than landings in 2021 ("Flyover States"). In 2021, West Virginia was also ranked among the five states with the lowest life expectancy and highest poverty rate (DePietro), suggesting a correlation between the conditions of being passed over and living in poverty. This connection is particularly pertinent in Appalachia, a region that incorporates all of West Virginia along with parts of thirteen other states. The region is defined by the oldest mountain range in North America and deemed "the poster child of poverty" (Applebome). Numerous scholars highlight Appalachia's unfortunate position in the US and see it first politicized and mediatized in mainstream American cultural, social, and political arenas in the poverty tours of the 1960s that may (or may not) have paved the way for thinking about the country in socio-geographical binary terms (Barcus and Brunn 29; Fackler 191). While scholars such as Wayne Flynt and Alessandro Portelli trace the dynamics back to the local color writers and missionaries of the nineteenth century, my investigation starts with the 1960s when the US, as Flynt claims, "confronted its own internal diversity as never before" (xii). The political parades in which presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson travelled to rural America, followed by a swarm of journalists and filmmakers, attempted to give poverty a human face (Bowler 239; Fackler 191). The unemployed coal miners of Appalachia were the ideal subjects of the 'War on Poverty' campaign.

Katherina Fackler demonstrates how the reporting of the era tended to depict them as symbols representing the entire region rather than contextualizing these people's lives within specific and often intricate cultural, economic, and political backgrounds (191).

An irony of the national perception of a poverty-stricken Appalachia is that these "mountains of misery" – as an eponymous article in *The New York Times* had it ("Mountains of Misery") – provided the natural riches for economic success. Throughout long periods of US history, Appalachia has carried a lion's share of the costs for national economic growth and seen the wealth of the region hauled out on coal trains. This has led to understanding Appalachia as an "internal colony" dominated by extraction and exploitation.[2] The region was the primary coal provider in the US from the 1800s to the 1970s, first through underground mining and then through mountain top removal (MTR), an especially destructive form of surface mining that involves blasting the top layers of mountains and has long-term environmental and social effects (Zipper et al.). Not only was Appalachian coal essential to the development of the US-American railway network, providing the basis for US industrialization and mobility, but as the key resource for the construction of the steel-skeleton tall buildings that dominate urban skylines to this day, Appalachian coal has quite literally built the face of urban America (14). The Appalachian coalfields kept their prominent position in national affairs even after the shift of US coal production to non-Appalachian areas. Their role as a political, if no longer economic, powerhouse became apparent during Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, which drew on US energy symbolism and connected MTR mining to notions of economic sovereignty (Harrison 734).

The ambiguous perception of Appalachia has been subject to intensive scholarly inquiry (Harkins *Hillbilly*, "The Midwest"; Fraley; Eller; Jones; Ledford and Llyod; Quendler and Robbins). Across disciplines, scholars agree that Appalachia bears the dual burden of being overlooked and subjected to the dynamics of Othering. This burden is evident in two distinct ways: First, Appalachia is positioned as an outsider in the mainstream American narrative, and second, it falls victim to binary thinking that reinforces the marginalization of the region. As a result, Appalachia is defined both in contrast to and within the broader US-American context, revealing its complex and paradoxical place in the national consciousness (Stewart 141; Jones 21). William Schumann sees Appalachia almost exclusively defined by distance (2), and Allen Batteau calls it

[2] Literature on Appalachia as an internal colony in the economic sense is extensive and has involved more nuanced reflections since the beginning of the twenty-first century compared to its origins in the 1970s (see, for instance, Eller; Fisher and Smith).

> a creature of the urban imagination. The folk culture, the depressed area, the romantic wilderness, the Appalachia of fiction, journalism, and public policy have for more than a century been created, forgotten, and rediscovered, primarily by the economic opportunism, political creativity, or passing fancy of urban elites. (1)

In the national perception of Appalachia as "an American 'other'" (Harkins, *Hillbilly* 5), Appalachia is either "America's best" or "America's worst": "a genetic and cultural reservoir of . . . noble poor rural white people of northern European ancestry who spoke Elizabethan English and lived a lifestyle like that of the colonial era" or "degenerate poor rural white moonshiners and feudists who spoke substandard English" (Ledford and Llyod xviii). Such a selective discourse presents Appalachians as either noble savages or savage brutes, portraying them as a dismal representation of human life in a remote place away from the coastal centers. This discourse contributes to the cultural dimension of viewing Appalachia as an internal colony. Several studies highlight that the cultural stereotyping of Appalachians as hillbillies serves to make the region available for plunder: Rebecca Scott relates "epistemologies of disgust and social distance" to environmental extraction (63), Jill Fraley sees stereotypes "wrapped up in efforts to dominate and oppress" (367), and Diane Martinez explains that the "vulgar characterization of the people of Appalachia as strange, dirty, violent, uneducated, and deviant plays a significant role in the exploitation of the region" (229).

Understanding Flyover through Mountains

The practice of Othering people native to a region in an effort to capitalize on its material and cultural riches is a fate Appalachia shares with mountain regions around the world. For example, the coal miners in Southern Wales are rendered along similar lines as the Appalachian hillbilly (Robertson; Hansell). Cultural Othering plays an equally concerning role in alpine tourist economies in the Rockies, Alps, Himalayas, and Andes. What becomes apparent, upon closer inspection, is that mountains share more than conspicuous stereotyping with flyover countries. They embody much of the cultural baggage of flyover and symbolize the multilayered conditions and conflicting ascriptions of being passed over.

First, mountains share with flyover a common cultural legacy as places approached with an equal amount of disregard, disapproval, and desire. For most of their geological history, mountains were conceived of as deserts and wastelands (Macfarlane 14). Up to the 1800s, they were rendered as formidable obstacles to be overcome and as great nuisances that made journeys unnecessarily painful and long. If not obstructing easy passage, mountains were maligned from a great distance, deemed "barren of life" (148), barren of culture, and useful only for natural resource extraction. With this in mind, the vast landmass that lies between New York and Los Angeles might

as well be a mountain. Second, mountains are thought of as places of exclusion, living up to their name as great divides that separate the cultural centers of the world. Before Grand Tourists[3] romanticized mountains during the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the Alps were a natural barrier between the cultural centers of Europe. During European colonization of the US, mountains were also synonymous with the division between the America populated by Europeans and the Western frontier yet to be conquered. Importantly, while major technological advancements of the travel industry and increasingly favorable representations of mountains in literature helped overcome the distance between cultural centers in Europe from the late 1900s onwards, in the US, the media and travel industry enhanced separation in the second half of the twentieth century, allowing, as mentioned above, the great national divide to be instituted in the first place. Third, flyover's dichotomous epistemologies neatly align with those of mountains. Mountains, like flyover, are culturally constructed along the binaries of rural/urban, nature/technology, tradition/modernity, stillness/mobility, and scarcity/abundance. Fourth, while mountains often symbolize separation, their boundaries are porous. They transgress much of the tension that arises from multivalent human projections onto landscapes. Standing firmly between heaven and earth, they master in-betweenness and, as powerful mediating forces and transnational spaces, help transcend some of the dichotomies inscribed onto place (Müller and Quendler 112). Finally, mountains provide an aerial perspective that is two- rather than three-dimensional. They disturb and expand the flyover gaze and position themselves against the flattening of distinct landscapes and cultures. McClanahan seems to have all these qualities in mind when he installs mountains as a key symbol in his narration of flyover and its regional, national, and transnational configurations.

The High, the Low, and Nothing in Between

The dichotomies that inform the concept of flyover shift from center and periphery to superiority and inferiority, bleeding into a high/low metaphor that has gained currency in flyover semantics to express class inequalities and economic hegemony. To speak about flyover in terms of high and low is in keeping with Sarah Kendzior, who employs a language of verticality to argue that the Great Recession had a significant impact on class inequalities in the US heartland and pushed people further towards the highest and lowest rungs of the social ladder (xiv). In *Crapalachia*, McClanahan exposes socio-economic inequalities experienced by those who remain on the ground

[3] Grand Tourists were young European men of means and status who embarked on a customary journey through continental Europe during the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries. This trip, known as the Grand Tour, focused on Renaissance destinations in Italy and was commonly undertaken in the company of a tutor or family member.

by mapping flyover's oppositions onto Appalachia's vertical landscape. The narrative employs mountains as potent symbols that reveal uneven power relations and their socio-economic ramifications. Nowhere is this more evident than when Scott's grandmother Ruby insists that "she was a farmer's daughter" and "didn't want to be associated with any coal-mining McClanahans who lived at the bottom of the mountain" (90) in a scene that marks the mined mountains as the ultimate symbol of flyover's class disparities. The physical removal of mountaintops takes away all chances of an elevated life and arrests those living at the bottom in social immobility. In a poignant scene, McClanahan emphasizes the stark contrast between the peak and foot of the mountain as symbolic representations of flyover. Scott says he "felt darkness" because he "had been deep in the hollers" and "knew glory" because he "stood on top of the more beautiful mountaintops" (70). The darkness at the bottom of the mountains alludes as much to the coal seams as to the devastating human cost of their extraction. Arguably, this mountain symbolism functions as an explicit critique to MTR mining and establishes a causality between blasted landscapes and disadvantaged lives. It suggests that stripping mountains equates to stripping people of opportunities.

In the act of removal, extractive as well as flyover fictions expose a discourse of negation, which is clearly expressed when the narrator drives through a holler and is struck by the absences he encounters. To demarcate the void created by the extractive industries, the narrative repeatedly employs the words "there wasn't" and "there weren't" (McClanahan 91–92). The text further marks absences through line breaks, ellipses, and unfinished sentences, creating a formal vacancy that renders visible the discursive construction of Appalachians along everything that is not – as unprivileged, unprosperous, unsophisticated, unhealthy, unsafe, uneducated, unemployed, and wholly unfortunate.

The text establishes early on that hollow and hard-luck lives are everywhere in Crapalachia (both the narrative and the place). Introducing the McClanahan family in the very first paragraph, the narrator highlights their names ending in Y ("why?") sounds (1). This immediately sets the tone for a story about people whose place in the world is constantly questioned. The story then delves into the various manifestations of this questioning, painting a bleak picture of a life defined by misery, poverty, and criminality. The pages are punctuated with long screams of "shit" stretched over lines and pages, evoking despair in various spellings and formats. The narrative's dedication to present and express long-standing patterns of misfortune continues in the chapter titled "First Chapter," which is in fact the fourth chapter in the book, thus hinting at flyover country's belatedness. The inevitability of tragedy is explicit in Scott's and Ruby's reflections:

> “. . . It seems like you can’t even go out of your house now without something horrible happening.”
> Then she thought about all the people she knew who were having bad things happen to them.
> She talked about the little girl who had her foot run over by a riding lawnmower and lost her toes. She talked about how I came to live with her.
> She talked about seeing her cousin, who was driving down the road and a rock slide crushed her to death.
> Then she talked about her friend who just had her deformed leg amputated and couldn’t get out of the house now.
> And then she looked like if you just left the house something bad would happen to you, hurricanes, earthquakes, and then she grew quiet with another look on her face like something terrible was going to happen to all of us one day.
>
> And you know what?
>
> It will…
>
> …if not tonight, then the next night. (13–14)

In the repetitive iteration of misfortune that befalls residents of Crapalachia, and which is presented in the form of an open list, the passage suggests a normalization of hardship. Whether yesterday, today, or in an anticipated tomorrow – the terror traps those living in flyover country, spatially, socially, and temporally. The notion of temporal arrest and the sense that “the rest of the world is moving while you remain still” (O’Gieblyn 6) is a staple of flyover semantics. It dominates ascriptions of “backward hillbillies” (Harkins, *Hillbilly*; Robertson 504) and establishes that flyover “is the past” (Averill 8) – a place where every new tomorrow only continues previous tragedies. It is a place where “the mountain collapse[s]” on people (McClanahan 28) every day, both literally and metaphorically, and ultimately a place where one is better off dead than alive.

Crapalachia suggests that flyover is not only about being passed over but also about passing away, as the presence of misfortune is only surpassed by the presence of death. The deaths that loom over the entire story are framed as ghosts of the extraction economy, which kills people quickly and slowly. To honor the lives lost in mining disasters, McClanahan lists how many thousands of men were killed each year from 1922 to 1941. As if to set the record straight, McClanahan juxtaposes the official numbers with those felt by the community, and he just as thoroughly keeps record of the slow deaths in the shadows of mined mountains. To evoke a sense of loss over lives cut short, the story repeatedly refers to the death of children. This occurs in instances when Scott learns that his great-grandmother lost “baby after baby after baby after baby after baby” (23–24) on a graveyard visit with Ruby. It occurs in family

tales that describe leaving an abandoned baby on the side of the road because the McClanahans could barely feed themselves (31). And it occurs in moments such as when Scott discovers that five of his grandfather Elgie's eleven children committed suicide (4).

The notion of lives cut short is further revealed by individual characters' longing for death in the hope of attaining a final moment of glory. Nathan cannot wait to die (McClanahan 63), and Ruby too "waited to die," "waited all those years" to have her life honored by the preacher (113). In fact, her last day could not come fast enough, and "she called everyday claiming she was dying" (23). She takes Scott to visit her future grave, to rehearse her funeral and install in her a sense that her life might have mattered. Flyover's principle that these lives do not matter continues into death, where the characters are not spared from becoming a laughingstock of the mainstream. At Nathan's wake, he is turned "into a cross dresser" and the music played during the event "sounded so bad" it "made you want to die" (67), reminding everyone that culture dies along with life in flyover country. If flyover semantics follow the logics of verticality, then rural America does not have much to contribute to an esteemed cultural landscape of the US, producing cultural representations that audibly fall short.

The omnipresence of death extends to the non-human in *Crapalachia*. Besides the obvious decimation of mountains, Scott encounters "dead deer on the side of the road" (66), a dying possum caught in a fence (146), and cats that might not be dead but look like they are surely "going to die any minute" (8). Scott's story is the story of flyover, a place where everything dies every day. Life's continuous loss, including the loss of hope that the American dream might eventually find its way into the West Virginian hollers, combined with McClanahan's rhythmic language, conjures a sense of Southern Gothic that evokes the ghost of Edgar Allan Poe from the book's cover. As a dead ringer for death itself, the raven-bodied poet supports McClanahan's critique of the myth of US-American progress. Much like Poe's stories of decay, McClanahan's tales of death in the mined mountains of Appalachia reveal a loss – the loss of flyover – that demands a reconfiguration of how to imagine community beyond the regional.

Hear America Singing in the Coalfields

The apparition of a Poe-like raven on the book's cover suggests *Crapalachia* may be read beyond purely regional contexts and connects flyover fiction to the national literary canon. The tale redirects our attention from flyover's aerial perspective into the abyss of forgotten America. Dictated by the downward movement of MTR mining, the narrative gradually erodes the binary order of flyover and helps free the term

from its regional constraints. It messes with the established hierarchy of flyover's highs and lows, exposes and subverts them, and essentially breaks down the conceptual mountains that divide the nation. McClanahan's narrative achieves this by dissecting the great divides and their socio-cultural guises. In a first instance, the tale shows a country that has fallen apart, but, descending further into the abyss, it also sees a country that is coming back together. McClanahan mines Appalachian soil to reveal the narrative's connections to American Romanticism.

The calls from Donna Haraway as well as Anna Tsing et al. to stay with the trouble (Haraway) and "pay attention to ruins" (Tsing et al. G2) are key to understanding *Crapalachia*'s deconstruction of binaries as part of the collaborative reimagination of flyover from within a place damaged by coal capitalism. Tsing urges us to forge relationships between human and non-human actors in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2019) and Haraway chooses compost as a master metaphor to turn dead matter into new life. Compost serves as a tool to break down binary divisions between life and death as well as between human and non-human entities. Rather than seeing them as separate, Haraway highlights their interrelatedness, challenging oppositional thinking and offering instead an ecological and relational perspective. Compost, she argues, consists of more than individual remains, parts of dead leaves, and billions of microorganisms. It teems with life and involves a myriad of symbiotic processes. It teaches us, as Haraway puts it, to "become-with each other or not at all" (4).

Compost, at once material, conceptual, and metaphoric, offers multiple nodes, nets, and pathways to connect the trouble in Appalachia with the trouble of a national imaginary that cannot conceive a sense of connection. Haraway sends her "Children of Compost" (134) to the Appalachian Mountains and sees people used and abused by the extractive industries reforming themselves in multispecies communities. Crapalachia is a compost coinage. The text mines the mountains for "magic dirt" (157). While the region may be "Shittown" in the national US-American consciousness, the dismissive ascription ends up producing the "shit that makes the flowers grow" (162) in the imaginative space of flyover fiction.

In celebrating the utterly regenerative energy of dead matter, McClanahan connects his flyover fiction to the US-American literary canon. He follows in the footsteps of Walt Whitman, who, as the great American poet of life and death (Aspiz 1), transforms dead matter into a living substance that nourishes the resurrection of a collective America. This is in keeping with Sascha Pöhlmann, who sees in Whitman's poem "This Compost" a celebration of the cycle of ruin and rebirth (11) and a transgression of binary oppositions: Whitman includes "mineral and organic existence, city and county, good and evil, Earth and the whole universe in order to create a total material and spiritual environment without dissolving its particularities" (12). The poem,

which M. Jimmie Killingsworth calls "the most remarkable nineteenth-century contribution to the poetry of ecology in America" (19), moves from the speaker's terror over a landscape troubled by death, disease, and decay to an exclamation of wonders over earthly healing powers. The poem captures the generative quality of compost chemistry in a convergence of scientific and eco-spiritual admiration. McClanahan's mountain crap, Haraway's children, and Whitman's sweet soil are all products of literary imagination and, as seed bags of change, harbor the potential to reimagine community. When mining is "tearing apart communities" (House qtd. in Harrison 751), then the literary imagination can reestablish, if not harmony, a certain sense of connection. In this sense, McClanahan's magic soil composes a highly productive imaginary space from a state of decay and division.

One way in which *Crapalachia* establishes a foundational theme of connection is through radically abandoning the orders of genre classification and chapter organization. It refuses to be labeled and instead plays with the spaces between fact and fiction, comedy and tragedy, poem and memoir, history and folklore. *Crapalachia* breaks with readerly expectations of narrative category and form and allows for interstitial narratives of flyover in the ensuing gaps. The strategy of bridging gaps and shaping connections is reflected at the chapter level: the last line of one chapter connects to the title of the next, so that in one instance, a chapter ends in the middle of an announcement of Nathan's home nurse, "*Her name was …*" (45, original emphasis), continuing with the title of the next chapter, "Rhonda" (46). Through such transfers, the text resists divisions at the narrative level and additionally blurs hierarchies between chapter headings and the running text. If one envisions each chapter of *Crapalachia* as a mountain, with the chapter title serving as its peak and the final sentence as its foot, then the text not only engages with the high/low metaphor of flyover but also takes on a deeper significance, reoccupying the space of mountaintop removal. As readers traverse the chapters, the collective effect of McClanahan's textual mountains helps reclaim the larger range of the Appalachian Mountains that connects communities across the nation.

The second way in which *Crapalachia* rebuilds connection from the ground up is that the narrative evokes the earthly and egalitarian interests of American Romanticism. *Crapalachia* breaks through the disparity between high and low culture by merging regional and national literary traditions and by seamlessly interweaving regional voices with nods to the US-American literary canon. With vulgar expressions, rhythmic staccato, and poetic repetition, McClanahan once more echoes the aesthetic of Walt Whitman. With the help of the poet associated like no other with American nationality, McClanahan turns Appalachian soil into a symbol of US-American unity. In *Crapalachia*, the metamorphosis of mountains from top to bottom goes hand in

hand with a metamorphosis of the relationship between American self and Other. Not unlike Whitman, McClanahan answers to disillusions about the US with an unparalleled optimism and deep ecological affirmation. And like Whitman, McClanahan is not an author of the past but one obsessed with new beginnings.

> I saw the graves filling up all around her and I saw how Grandma would be here beneath it one day and then Nathan and then one day Stanley, and then one day … me. So I saw her whisper, "Oh lordie," and claim she was dying like she always did.
>
> I wished we were already back home so I could eat some more peanut butter fudge. Nothing lasts.
>
> I snapped the picture and it was like she was already gone.
>
> It was like I saw that she was dying right then – real slow – and she knew the secret sound. It's a sound that all of us hear. It's a sound that sounds like this. *Tick. Tick. Tick.*
>
> AND NOW A MOMENT TO ONCE AGAIN REMEMBER THE THEME OF THIS BOOK.
>
> The theme of this book is a sound. It goes like this: *Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick*. It's the sound you're hearing now, and it's one of the saddest sounds in the world. (26)

The sounds and tastes of time passing and a life unlived could not be spelled out more clearly than in this passage and is deeply felt throughout the book. By emphasizing that the sound of time passing is heard by everybody, Scott further highlights the egalitarian quality of c*arpe diem*. The narrative as a whole functions as a paradoxical moment to seize the day. At the close, McClanahan offers a final, all-encompassing call to cherish time and makes it abundantly clear that

> [t]his book is a time machine. The words you have just read are the past. The next page is the future. Your beautiful, young bodies, and your beautiful, young faces are the present.
>
> The PRESENT... (169)

With this untampered proclamation to stay alive, *Crapalachia* challenges the allochronic discourse of forgotten America and demands for flyover a place in the present. The premise of every *carpe diem* is a reckoning with time's destructive powers. Yet the Latin *carpe* also signifies "pluck" and "harvest" as well as to "seize," providing the narrative with a form of extraction that provides rather than denies opportunities.

Flyover Multiplicities and Mountains Everywhere

Besides regional grounding and national narrative reconnection, the other key theme in *Crapalachia* is the transnational nature of flyover. The narrative routinely engages with Appalachia's position in the world to stipulate an upsetting of the flyover axis

that relegates Crapalachia to the bottom of the social ladder and to cultural inferiority. Toying with the mountain symbol, McClanahan's tale effectively transgresses borders to unfold the dual process of glocalization and the coal industry's multidimensional nature in a localization of networks and a globalization of places (Mihr). The text carefully mediates between a world that denotes the US and one that means the globe. This transition from a national to a global understanding happens as gradually as subtly in the otherwise explicit and fast-paced text and in both instances relies on the worldmaking of literary imaginaries. At the beginning of *Crapalachia*, the narrator invites us to "imagine Crapalachia as the center of the world" and "imagine skyscrapers rising from the mountains" (McClanahan 35). In this scene, Scott finds himself in a history class, contemplating the potential consequences of Virginia's continued prominence in US history. This highlights a distinctly US-American reimagining of the world that allows us to see in *Crapalachia* a postcolonial writing back to Appalachia's position as an internal colony. The repetition of "imagine" in the passage above underscores the remarkable ability of flyover fictions to envision alternative worlds. By superimposing urban icons onto rural ones, the narrative further transcends the dichotomies of flyover and its world-ordering principles and places the degraded 'rest' firmly at the center of the world. The global implications of this perspective emerge later in the text and become apparent via a reading that considers the fictions of flyover alongside economic realities. Matthew S. Henry understands Appalachia as a "node of the capitalist world ecology" (403), and similarly, McClanahan's ode to Crapalachia functions as a junction in the global economic network of coal capitalism, mirroring how "flows of commodities, capital, labor, and information always render boundaries porous" (Harvey 35). In this sense, economic entanglement suggests an acceleration of places coming together, reflective of the proximity of different mining peripheries and their recentralization. The montage on the book's cover invites a reading of *Crapalachia* as a universal story of opportunities denied in the service of a (neo)imperial resource-centered economy. It further invites consideration of resource-cursed regions in Australia and beyond, such as mining communities in Wales, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Bolivia. Most importantly, the cover sets the tone to "rearrange the world" (McClanahan 157). With West Virginia holding the record for having the most towns named after cities in other countries (i.e., Berlin, Athens, Calcutta, Geneva, Shanghai, and Cairo), Appalachia appears to be the perfect place from which to build a new global world order and *Crapalachia* the narrative space in which to negotiate divides within and beyond the traditional US-American context. Having followed Whitman's plea to begin a new America, McClanahan moves on to building a reconfigured world in which the forgotten individual is rooted in a

global collective, literally taking on Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous appeal at the End of *Nature* (1836) to "build, therefore, your own world" (94).

As suggested in the compost metaphor, Scott's new world involves a destruction of the old. The narrator starts removing the mountains that separate him from the rest of the world and takes on the mountain symbol at the book's close. He starts "digging at the mountain" and pushes "the shovel deep in the rocky ground" to "cut out clumps of dirt and stones hard as gall" (McClanahan 156). While the excavation undertaken by the mining industry increases the cultural and socio-economic distance between Appalachia and the world and arrests the region ever so tightly in global networks of extraction capitalism, Scott's digging is geared towards minimizing distance, maximizing liberation, and removing the bitterness of flyover. Scott digs at the mountain and packs the dirt and stones into plastic bags to distribute it across the world. He travels first to the big and small urban centers close to home, then to the economic and cultural centers of the country, before imaginatively expanding his travels to encompass the entire planet:

> I went to Pittsburgh, PA, and Chicago, IL; and Atlanta, GA. I went back to Pittsburgh, PA. I left my dirt there in the streets. I went back to Chicago, IL. I went to New York City. I went to Washington, DC. I went to Charlotte, NC. I went to Raleigh, NC. I went to Oxford, MS. I went to Ann Arbor, MI – the home of Iggy Pop and the ever beautiful Elizabeth Ellen. I went to Portland, OR. I dreamed of China. I dreamed of India, Berlin, Paris, London. I went to Seattle, WA. I went to New York City and I dropped my dirt. I went to New York City. I went to New York City for a third time. I went to New York City.
>
> I gave my dirt away to the people I met. I called it magic dirt and they laughed. They put it in flower pots and the flowers grew. I dropped the stones on the sidewalks. I told them I was going to make the whole world Crapalachia. (156)

Scott's repeated return to New York City as a crucial node of the flyover axis and his repeated action of dropping dirt on the streets and sidewalks signifies a flattening of flyover's cultural verticality that brings the urban and rural closer together, laying the dichotomies of flyover to rest. Hereby, the text creates a sense of connection in a troubled space that allows for McClanahan's magic dirt to evoke Walt Whitman's worldly gestures once again: "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles" (Whitman 77). Similar to the embeddedness conjured by the earthly rebirth in "Song of Myself" (1855), *Crapalachia* invites a transformation towards new possibilities and demands to pay attention to what is below. Scott anticipates "the whole world to become this place" and announces that he is "making the world [his] mountain" (157).

At the onset of the narrative, Scott's world ends at the US-American borders. At the close, his work turns the Appalachian Mountains into "the whole world" (157). The fact that Scott only dreams of traveling to Asia and Europe with his pockets full

of Crapalachian dirt does not diminish the imaginative possibilities of literary worldmaking referenced early in the text but it underscores them. While Scott might not physically embark on a global journey, the text foregrounds the role of storytelling to conjure new worlds in a self-referential stance on flyover fictions: The passage moves from recounting Scott's actions to placing emphasis on the act of storytelling itself. The scene concludes with a series of sentences beginning with "I told" (157) to effectively illustrate the worldmaking abilities of flyover fiction. *Crapalachia* is, in many ways, an ode to oral culture and Appalachian storytelling tradition (Portelli). In this scene, however, Scott decides to "write a book" (157) as a means of connecting not only lives within the narrative but also forging connections through the act of writing itself. One way of reading Scott's imaginary distribution of mountains across the planet suggests that the entire planet has started to look more like Appalachia. This levelling proposes that flyover is everywhere, that there is no place on this planet unaffected by uneven power structures and capitalism. A Whitmanian reading of Scott's efforts, in contrast, takes a more hopeful turn by establishing a connection between rural dirt and urban sidewalks. In both contexts, it introduces a downward-oriented focus. This invitation to look down affords an imaginative view of the world as a vast pile of compost, promoting an understanding and appreciation for human and non-human interconnectivity.

The sense of connection and leveling that McClanahan evokes in repositioning and multiplying flyover country by letting mountains fly challenges binary visions of the world at large. In addition to the deconstruction of the binary of coastal centers and the rest that defines flyover, the narrative unravels the great divides of rural/urban as well as nature/culture. In this sense, *Crapalachia* not only focuses on the trouble of flyover and the trouble of a damaged planet, but it speaks to problems that sit at the core of the Anthropocene: an understanding of the natural world as something remote from human livelihood (Cronon) and a perceived distance between regional action and global consequences (Nixon). Not only does McClanahan demonstrate that dualistic visions reinforce socially and environmentally irresponsible behavior, he articulates a large network of regional, national, and transnational pathways that connect binaries and places. To think of Crapalachian soil on the sidewalks of New York, London, and Paris, and to imagine flowers growing from their pots everywhere, is to imagine a world beyond separation. If flyover can stop being 'down there' and start being 'right here' – in West Virginian hollers as much as on the urban sidewalks of this world – then perhaps we can transcend great divides and learn to master the ongoing struggles and joys of sharing life on this planet.

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Eva-Maria Müller holds a PhD in English and American Studies from the University of Gießen, Germany. Her research is broadly situated at the intersection of postcolonial studies, interdisciplinary mountain studies, and the environmental humanities, with a particular emphasis on North American, British, German, and Austrian representations of the Rockies and Alps. In her research, she is generally interested in the relationship between representation and power. She was a postdoctoral researcher in the FWF-funded research project "Delocating Mountains" at the University of Innsbruck, co-editing a special issue on *Mediating Mountains* and contributing articles and book chapters on narratives of descent. She recently served as a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at Emory University and is the author of *Rewriting Alpine Orientalism: Postcolonial Readings in Canadian and Austrian Mountain Tourism* (Bloomsbury, 2024).

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"Out there in that cabin in the middle of nowhere in Montana": Narrating the Geographical and Mental Deviance of the Unabomber

Robert A. Winkler

ABSTRACT

In 1996, the mathematician-turned-terrorist Theodore J. Kaczynski, nicknamed the Unabomber, was arrested in his self-built cabin in the woods of Montana after having terrorized the nation for over 20 years. He had modeled his cabin after Henry David Thoreau's idealized *Walden* cabin. This article argues that the Unabomber's cabin in Montana, often considered a so-called flyover state, serves as the pivotal point for his geographical marginalization in the media coverage of the case. Its location in what is discursively constructed as a 'wilderness' makes it impossible to perceive his cabin through the perspective of the pastoral ideal – this imagined middle ground between nature and culture. The over-determination of this material form in its location apparently off the grid furthermore enables the othering and medicalization of Theodore J. Kaczynski. This article demonstrates that the media coverage of the Unabomber case displays these three tendencies which come together in the nexus *cabinsanity*, i.e., the conflation of pseudo-geographical, cultural, and medical discourses. Projecting cabinsanity, in turn, enables the dismissal of the Unabomber's critique of technologized society as delineated in his manifesto.

KEYWORDS

Unabomber, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, critical regionalism, pastoral ideal, ecophobia

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Introduction[1]

When Theodore J. Kaczynski – nicknamed the Unabomber – died in prison on June 10, 2023, the news quickly spread across the globe with virtually every major news outlet giving a report on his death. Today, the Unabomber is as much part and parcel of the US-American cultural imaginary as in 1996 when he was caught – and maybe even more so. The last years have witnessed a proliferation of cultural productions focused on his life, his infamous manifesto, and particularly his crimes. The spectrum encompasses products from the cultural mainstream, such as the 2017 Netflix miniseries *Manhunt: Unabomber* and the accompanying 2020 Netflix docuseries *Unabomber: In His Own Words*, independent productions, such as Tony Stone's 2021 fictional film *Ted K*, subcultural and underground references, such as the 1999 EP *Unabomber* by the death metal band Macabre, and avant-garde artefacts, such as James Benning's 2012 documentary *Stemple Pass*. The Unabomber has furthermore cemented his place in political discourse with his manifesto being the subject of and the inspiration for discussions, publications, and direct action campaigns in far-left, anarchist, and eco-extremist circles as well as among anti-tech radicals such as the Mexican terrorist group Individualistas Tendiendo a lo Salvaje (ITS), which translates to "Individualists Tending to the Wild" (Fleming; Barnett).

This article argues that the Unabomber's cabin in Montana, often called a flyover state, is crucial to the media coverage of the case as it serves as the pivotal point for his geographical marginalization. Its location in what is discursively constructed as a 'wilderness' preserves the pastoral ideal – this imagined middle ground between nature and culture – exactly by making impossible to perceive the Unabomber's cabin through this perspective. The over-determination of this material form in its location off the grid additionally enables the othering and medicalization of Theodore J. Kaczynski, which, in turn, supports the dismissal of the Unabomber's critique of technologized society. As will be demonstrated, the media coverage of the Unabomber case displays these three tendencies which come together in the nexus *cabinsanity*, i.e., the conflation of pseudo-geographical, cultural, and psychiatric discourses.

Before developing the conceptual framework of flyover fiction, critical regionalism, the pastoral ideal, as well as ecophobia and delving into the contemporaneous media coverage, let us briefly recapitulate the case of the Unabomber. In 1996, Theodore J. Kaczynski, a former professor of mathematics at the University of California, Berkeley – educated at Harvard and the University of Michigan – was arrested and brought to court for having injured 23 and killed three people with mail bombs between 1978 and 1995. Since he targeted mostly university and airport staff, he was nicknamed

[1] This article is critical of the media coverage of the Unabomber case, but this should not be misconstrued as being sympathetic toward him. I want to make clear that I wholesale reject and distance myself from his terrorist acts.

"Unabomber" – "university and airline bomber." Aimed at metaphorically and literally blowing up modern technologized society, the attacks were carried out while he was living in a self-built cabin without running water or electricity in Lincoln, Montana. In 1995, he blackmailed *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in an anonymous letter to publish his manifesto *Industrial Society and Its Future* – a fundamental and uncompromising criticism of technologized society – or the killings would otherwise continue. In cooperation with federal agencies, *The Washington Post* eventually published the manifesto leading to the Unabomber's identification and subsequent capture in his cabin. The most expensive and longest manhunt in the history of the FBI had come to an end ("The Unabomber").

From the onset of his capture and subsequent trial, the Unabomber's cabin has been the central subject of media coverage and public interest. This fascination reached its climax when the actual cabin was removed from its location and transported to Sacramento for the Unabomber's trial. Mark Wigley explains:

> For the first time, a whole building is to be presented as evidence in a court case. Architecture is brought to trial. A seemingly innocent structure is accused of sheltering the . . . infamous unabomber [sic] who had terrorized the nation for eighteen years. (123)

The cabin was prepared to be evidence in the Unabomber's lawyers' strategy to enter an insanity defense in order to spare him a death sentence, aiming to have him declared incompetent to stand trial (Higgins). Underlying this strategy is the assumption that someone's concrete living environment is suggestive of their mental state – in this case the actual decoration of a cabin's interior:

> The terrorist's lawyers wanted to exhibit the actual cabin to demonstrate his insanity. They rejected the prosecutor's conventional scale model, arguing that to be taken inside the brutally minimalist building was to be taken inside a deranged mind. (Wigley 124)

The Unabomber himself, however, rejected the cabin to be taken as evidence of his insanity in court because he wanted to demonstrate to the public that he was *not* insane in order not to discredit his anti-tech manifesto. The prosecutor, in turn, intended to show photographs of the cabin at the time of the Unabomber's arrest to argue that it was as tidy and "well organized as an all-too-sane calculating mind" (124). Eventually, a plea bargain was reached and the Unabomber received life in prison with no possibility of parole; he plead guilty in order to avoid the insanity defense his lawyers had pursued against his will, and so, after all, the cabin did not enter the courtroom to serve as major evidence.

As we can already see, discourses around the geographic and the mental are closely interwoven in the Unabomber case. The location of his cabin was no coincidence, as this article will suggest, neither for him in his acts of communicating his ideas to society – in both textual and terroristic ways – nor for this very society that

received and replied to these acts of communication through media coverage and public discourse.

Self-Presentation of the Unabomber

The Unabomber is not only the object of the media coverage surrounding his case but also a subject co-creating his public image. In the short depiction of the Unabomber's lawyers' strategy delineated above, we have already come across one facet of the medial construction of the Unabomber's cabinsanity, namely the foregrounding of his cabin and his mental condition. This nexus is equally a product of his 'communication strategies' in word and deed. In 1971, the Unabomber moved into his self-built cabin in Lincoln, Montana, where he lived intermittently for 25 years until 1996. Already in the 1970s, the very decade the bombing series began, he wrote a first short draft of what would later become his manifesto. Terrorizing from and writing in the periphery, the Unabomber would thus come to make Lincoln a place that matters because through the media coverage of the case, the location would receive a burst of attention from urban dwellers demonstrating that "[t]he cabin in the woods is actually at the center of the city. Far from disconnected, the terrorist ruthlessly exploited the ever-present intimate ties between isolated cell and dense urbanization" (Wigley 124).

Words and deeds, that is writing and killing, are inherently linked in the Unabomber case. In the manifesto itself, he writes in first person plural as FC, Freedom Club, and attempts to justify his terrorist acts: "In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we've had to kill people" (Kaczynski 65). Blackmail and murder are deemed necessary means to the end of spreading ideas. The reasoning goes that violence is an effective currency – if not an imperative – in the media ecology of late capitalism where the attention span appears to be continuously decreasing, sensationalism seems to be the dominant and inescapable discursive framework, and where people are constantly flooded with a surplus of information and news. As cynical and inhumane as this perspective is, by "linking blood and ink," as Jean-Marie Apostolidès pinpoints, the Unabomber did create attention and a massive amount of media coverage (Haven; see also "Jean-Marie Apostolidès on the Unabomber").

The Unabomber did win part of the public's appeal not only by linking blood and ink but also by activating the myth of the frontier. The (positive) reception of the manifesto, accordingly, is influenced by the fact that its radical theses became somehow authenticated by the author's simple form of life apparently on the edge of civilization. This framing of the Unabomber as a man of the wilderness finds its symbolic materialization paradoxically in the very moment he is caught and his

appearance strikingly contrasts with the representatives of the state surrounding him: “For most of us, the Unabomber is frozen in the image that gripped America on April 3, 1996: an unkempt, bearded recluse from the Montana wilderness, a man who by all appearances could have been a backwoods yokel or a hermit-saint” (Haven; see also “Jean-Marie Apostolidès on the Unabomber”). The cabin plays a central role for this reception as it materializes the conflation of life and work in a *log-cabin-existence*[2] that bestows some form of authenticity to the manifesto’s content and actually makes the “cabin itself . . . a manifesto, a puritanical polemic” (Wigley 123).

Theory Fourfold: Flyover Fictions, Critical Regionalism, the Pastoral Ideal, and Ecophobia

The age of Trump has seen a proliferation and politicization of discourses around the notion of flyover, a concept which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century and that signifies “complex connotations of being passed over or passing over, of being neglected or negligent” (Klecker and Pöhlmann). In their take on flyover, Cornelia Klecker and Sascha Pöhlmann delineate that the term initially often referred to the region of the US-American Midwest but soon came to signify *any* place between the metropolitan areas on both the East and West Coasts. It is the geographical interchangeability of flyover that constitutes both its ideological and fictional essence although flyover fictions thrive on the insistence on and perpetuation of apparently given geographical realities. “[W]ithin its dis-placed meta-region” flyover country accordingly “may surely still refer to the Midwest but just as much to the South or the non-coastal West, or to New Jersey for that matter, and also to places nobody ever flies over on their way from coast to coast unless something has gone really wrong” (Klecker and Pöhlmann). Contrary to what might appear to be the case, flyover country is not about a particular or fixed region but all about a simple yet widely shared conception that, according to Anthony Harkins’s pioneering work on the subject, “envisions the country as divided geographically and culturally between only two regions: ‘places that matter’ and ‘places that don’t’” (97). This pseudo-geographical hierarchization which only pretends to be geographical but is in fact cultural thus epitomizes Stuart Hall’s dictum of a “struggle over cultural hegemony” and recognition, which is waged on the “battlefield” of popular and mass culture (469). The struggle that flyover epitomizes is at its core about social, economic, and political power; it is, in turn, fictional insofar as it transcends the apparently objective

[2] The self-fashioning conflating of life and (philosophical) work in a *log-cabin-existence* (*Hütten-Dasein*) is epitomized in Martin Heidegger’s infamous rejection of the chair of philosophy in Berlin in 1934, at the time the most renowned appointment. He reasons in “Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?” why he preferred to stay in his cabin in Todtnauberg in the Black Forest (Sheehan 27–28).

rootedness in a particular territory to reveal its constructedness, its narrativity, its politics, and its symbolic as well as representational practices.

One crucial aspect of the fictional in flyover is its "double othering" that results in a triangular movement; the term is *not* primarily used by 'the elites on the coasts' apparently looking down upon the inhabitants of flyover country but by the ones feeling passed over and neglected themselves: "Flyover imagines others imagining us, and it constructs both us and them in the process – the purportedly ignored and those who purportedly do the ignoring" (Klecker and Pöhlmann). As we will see in the following, the media coverage of the Unabomber case follows the same logic.

Flyover fictions draw attention to how the concept of regionality is constructed and deployed, and they thereby resonate with similar critical practices in recent years that also destabilize and deconstruct the notion of "region." In the course of the transnational and post-exceptionalist turn in American Studies, "place," "space," and "region" have become focal points and categories of analysis, adding to race, class, gender, sexuality, ability etc. Stemming from architectural theory, the paradigm of critical regionalism has been explored and developed by Cheryl Herr (1996) and Douglas Reichert Powell (2007). Heike Paul summarizes the concept as follows:

> Critical regionalism (re)turns scholarly attention to the region and interrogates the discursive "production" and the role of regions in larger geopolitical constellations – often under the conditions of colonialism/empire and/or modernism, neo-liberalism, and globalization. Thus, it critically reflects . . . on a traditional paradigm of regionalism that was often invested in essentialist, at times romanticized and nostalgic notions of regional formations and identities. (398)

Critical regionalism thus aims at transcending the exceptional nation-state by laying bare how and why particular regions are tied to essentializing notions. The nation of the United States comprises many regions whose symbolic over-determination at times obfuscates the actual material conditions and environments on the ground. Take, for instance, the West or New England, both of which "have been so thoroughly allegorized that they 'appear to disappear' as specific locales and regions" (Paul 398). Following this, regions are socially, politically, economically, and culturally constructed and thus discursively co-produced, but they nonetheless have material substrates and literal groundings (398). This point distinguishes theorists of flyover from the critical regionalists: While the former construe that in flyover fictions the actual place is always a construct and thus a floating signifier, the latter conceive a factuality of "specific locales and regions" whose discursive co-constructedness can be laid bare. Both perspectives, however, are united in their interrogation of the 'commonsensical' insistence on the irreducibility of place and region. Before we can turn to the analysis of the media coverage of the Unabomber case, we need to take a look

at the particular region under scrutiny, i.e., the state of Montana in its discursive co-constructedness.

Gaining statehood as late as 1889, Montana is the fourth-largest state by area and the third-least densely populated state; its name goes back to the Latin word *montanea*, which means "mountain" or "mountainous country" (Malone et al.). Consequently, Montana is mostly famous for two things: nature and space. In the US-American cultural imaginary, Montana is accordingly constructed as flyover country exactly by laying emphasis on wild nature and open space at the expense of culture and civilization. This imagination of natural and sublime beauty is perpetuated in films such as Robert Redford's 1992 drama *A River Runs Through It* based on Norman Maclean's 1976 novella of the same name. Set in Missoula, Montana, the film depicts the joys and struggles of two brothers coming of age in the first half of the twentieth century. One of the film's most iconic images – also featured on the official film poster – depicts a fly-fishing Brad Pitt, who appears to be almost absorbed in the harmonic landscape. Four years before the capture of the Unabomber, the critical and commercial success of *A River Runs Through It* perpetuated in the cultural imaginary the association of the region with the pastoral ideal, this romantic trope projecting an idyllic scenery and entailing the promise of the good and simple life.

In the US-American cultural imaginary, the pastoral ideal epitomizes a balancing center in what Roderick Frazier Nash 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). These conditions or environments, in turn, fuel cultural imaginations of nature that range from a glorification of an untouched habitat to the demonization of a threatening wilderness. Speaking of the pastoral ideal in the same vein as the "middle ground," Leo Marx identifies it as a defining feature of the American literary and cultural landscape. He argues that the pastoral ideal is rooted in "the yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence 'closer to nature,' that is the psychic root of all pastoralism" (6) and distinguishes between two kinds of pastoralism: the first, sentimental kind, which expresses an immature desire for "a more 'natural' environment enter[ing] into the contemptuous attitude that many Americans adopt toward urban life . . . Wherever people turn away from the hard social and technological realities this obscure sentiment is likely to be at work" (5). According to Marx, the sentimental kind of pastoralism is underlying modern mass culture and consequently employed and exploited, an assessment that holds true for the life and times of the Unabomber's capture in 1996 where the "social and technological realities" have only become all the more indispensable and inescapable. Marx finds expressed his second kind of pastoralism, namely ambivalent negotiations of "the sense of the machine as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction"

(29) in classical works of US-American literature. A prime example of the pastoral scenery can be found 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). Within the framework of the pastoral, Thoreau’s cabin becomes an organic image comprised of both the forces of wilderness and civilization.

While Thoreau’s cabin stands in for the pastoral ideal, the Unabomber’s cabin – albeit located in a region which is perceived as primed for its materialization – becomes demonized as epitome of a threatening wilderness. Although fundamentally opposed, both cabin receptions hinge on discourses around the relation of wilderness and civilization. Marx describes the “urge to withdraw from civilization’s growing power and complexity” (9) in terms of a movement towards the symbolic garden and away from the artificial machine – whose intrusion is inevitable. Propagating a naive flight into nature, pastoral sentimentalism thrives on the fear of losing agency and control in an increasingly technologized society; we can, however, also identify its inverted moment and movement, namely a fear of losing the capacity of acting and mastering in the face of nature, a perception which is at work in the media coverage of the Unabomber and his cabin. In his 2018 *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, Simon Estok aims at complementing E. O. Wilson’s idealistic notion of biophilia as the love of and for nature by developing the concept of ecophobia, which he defines as a

> uniquely human psychological condition that prompts antipathy toward nature. . . . The ecophobic condition exists on a spectrum and can embody fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness (or some combination of these) toward the natural environment. (1)

Estok argues that natural environments are for the most part represented in and through images of terror since the end of the 20th century and that the concept of nature therefore again becomes something to be domesticated and subjugated: “Fear of the loss of agency and the loss of predictability are what form the core of ecophobia” (40).

Ecophobia as the fear of nature allows us – similar to a strange loop – to come back to the point we started from: flyover as “the feeling that culture is elsewhere” (Klecker and Pöhlmann). As delineated above, this elsewhere is intuitively understood in terms of an imagined hierarchy of cultures, as a perception that (high) culture is absent from the average everydayness of life in flyover country. Ecophobia, in turn, rejects the natural world out of the very same impulse, namely on the grounds of conceiving nature as the absence of culture and therefore as a danger. The various different yet intertwined constructions of the binary nature/culture afforded by our theoretical perspectives come now fully into view: The Marxian pastoral ideal harbors the

sentimental movement into nature to flee technologized civilization, which is constructed as harmful. In contrast, the ecophobic countermovement shuns nature out of the very same – only inverted – reason as nature here is construed as threatening. As a meta-frame, which “can imagine culture being elsewhere” (Klecker and Pöhlmann), both sentimental pastoralism and ecophobic discourses as well as artefacts are flyover fictions as they construct an absence of culture which is either hailed and aimed at or shunned and avoided. Equipped with a broad theoretical perspective we will now turn to the public discussions around the Unabomber and his capture.

Analysis: Select Media Coverage of the Unabomber Case

How, then, was the Unabomber depicted in the national media upon his capture and subsequent trial and what role did his cabin and its location in Montana play in the coverage of the case? In the following, I will analyze representative samples from various print media within the fourfold theoretical frame to lay bare the ideological functions of narrating the Unabomber and his case.

The first general characteristic to be identified in the depiction of the nexus cabinsanity is geographical marginalization. Montana, with its nature and space, is indeed neither geographically nor politically or culturally one of the centers of the United States as delineated above. The small town of Lincoln, in turn, is located in the southwest of Montana, had a population of 1,013 according to the 2010 census (“Lincoln CDP, Montana”), and “[a]t first glance, . . . seemed caught in a time warp – a place of 1930s tourist cabins and Mom-and-Pop diners where one could get honest-to-goodness milk shakes, made in a blender with real ice cream” (Chase 102–03). Rather isolated and on the margins of a state which is itself rather remote and passed over, Lincoln lends itself to the flyover imaginary: “And being on the major route between Great Falls and Missoula, it isn’t even as isolated as it once was, or as it still seems to visitors from New York or Los Angeles” (103). With its location on, or rather close by, a main highway, Lincoln is essentially a drive-by community in a flyover region.

This relative geographical marginalization becomes emphasized and functionalized in the flyover fiction of the Unabomber’s media coverage. ABC News, for instance, featured an image of his cabin after his arrest with the caption: “The cabin of suspected Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski, partially surrounded by white, plastic tape, sits at the end of a muddy, private road, hidden in a wooded setting about 300 yards from the nearest neighbor in Lincoln, Mont., April 6, 1996” (Shapiro). The article focuses on the perspectives of Steve Gomez and Brad Garrett, two FBI agents investigating the case:

> "The fact that he moved out into this desolate area – he wasn't on anybody's radar," said Gomez. A live bomb and a "wealth of bomb components" were found at the cabin, the FBI said, as well as "40,000 handwritten journal pages that included bomb-making experiments and descriptions of Unabomber crimes." Ted Kaczynski pleaded guilty in Jan. 1998 and was sent to a Colorado prison, the FBI said. The manifesto "was his undoing," said Gomez. Without that, Garrett added, "he may still be out there in that cabin in the middle of nowhere in Montana." (Shapiro)

Another example can be found in a *The New York Times* article from May 26, 1996 – a long psychologizing piece that begins almost poetically:

> It was just a dusty, cobwebbed cabin high in the Rockies, as remote as a cougar's lair. But it suited a man who had always been alone, this genius with gifts for solitude, perseverance, secrecy and meticulousness, for penetrating the mysteries of mathematics and the dangers of technology, but never love, never friendship. The furnishings were the fragments of his life: the books for companionship and the bunk for the lonely hours, the wood stove where night after night he watched dying embers flicker visions of a wretched humanity, the typewriter where, the authorities say, the justifications for murder had been crafted like numbered theorems. . . . Over the years since – nearly half his life – he found a kind of freedom as a backwoods hermit in Montana. (McFadden)

As these representative examples demonstrate, in the discursive production of Lincoln, the region is marked as geographically marginal, as "this desolate area." The flyover fiction of the media coverage thrives on a cultural hierarchy between the journalists writing about the Unabomber from an apparently objective position, and hence from "'places that matter'" (Harkins 102), vis-à-vis Lincoln, which is constructed as a non-place where "he wasn't on anybody's radar." A central feature in the medial construction of the Unabomber as being passed over is the particular depiction of his cabin "in the middle of nowhere in Montana" and "high in the Rockies, as remote as a cougar's lair" – a notion which can still be found almost 30 years later in the media coverage of the Unabomber's death in 2023 where the cabin's whereabouts are in a *The New York Times* obituary described as an "area . . . so remote that during an 18-day stakeout, one agent saw a cougar kill a deer" (Traub). This architectural form itself signifies an apparent outside or an underside "that precedes the arrival of culture" (Wigley 123) thus amplifying the particular flyover fiction of the cabin as doubly marginalized along the lines of Harkins's distinction between "'places that matter' and 'places that don't'" (97).

Narrating the Unabomber and his case mainly through the lens of geographical marginalization serves the ideological function to symbolically locate him out of time and space before the arrival of culture and with culture being elsewhere. The ecophobic affects mobilized in the process construct nature as potentially threatening and the Unabomber in his "dusty, cobwebbed cabin high in the Rockies" where "night

after night he watched dying embers flicker visions of a wretched humanity" as being a part thereof.

The second general characteristic in the medial construction of the nexus cabinsanity demarcates and delineates the Unabomber's geographical marginalization from the pastoral ideal. One of the chief witnesses of Marx's account of the intrusion of technology into the apparently unimpeded pastoral scenery is Henry David Thoreau and his iconic cabin. In 1854, he published *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, a reflection upon his two-year stay in a self-built cabin near Walden Pond, Massachusetts.[3] *Walden* has not only become a canonized classic of US-American literature but also the blueprint for various ways of life related to back-to-nature and environmentalists movements, which took and continue to take inspiration from Thoreau's flight into 'wilderness' and its underlying critique of society. Take for example his characterization of the massive changes brought about by the new transportation technology of the locomotive:

> Far through unfrequented woods on the confines of towns, where once only the hunter penetrated by day, in the darkest night dart these bright saloons without the knowledge of their inhabitants; this moment stopping at some brilliant station-house in town or city, where a social crowd is gathered, the next in the Dismal Swamp, scaring the owl and fox. The starlings and arrivals of the cars are now the epochs in the village day. (Thoreau 117)

Not surprisingly, Walden Pond attracts a huge number of visitors who come to see the actual site as well as a replica of Thoreau's cabin and 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). Consequently, the actual place and the actual form have transformed into an icon, as if the trope of the pastoral ideal becomes epitomized in and through Thoreau's cabin which comes to satisfy the desire of what Marx terms the sentimental kind of pastoralism. Not least due to the fact that a "number of journalists speculated that Kaczynski was inspired by Thoreau and had copied his cabin," a link has been established between his persona and Thoreau in general and their respective cabins in particular (Ault 104).[4] James Benning's 2011 short documentary *Two Cabins* and the accompanying publication *(FC) Two Cabins by JB* meditates on this possible connection by visually and textually

[3] Klecker and Pöhlmann reason that flyover fictions are characterized by hierarchies of mobility and a concomitant duality with some people remaining static and others just passing by. Correspondingly, "Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is a piece of nineteenth-century flyover fiction when he comments on how the railroad literally passes over *people*, and that the mobility of some is paid for by the immobility of many others (98)" (Klecker and Pöhlmann, original emphasis).

[4] Ault refers to Chase's biography of the Unabomber but fails to mention that the latter points to the connection of Thoreau's and the Unabomber's cabins rather disapprovingly, as, according to the one-dimensional media coverage, "[h]e was a back-to-nature nut who had built his shack as an 'exact replica' of the cabin Thoreau had constructed on Walden Pond in Massachusetts in 1845" (Chase 124).

juxtaposing his replicas of the two dwellings as well as texts by and about Thoreau and the Unabomber. In the media coverage of the Unabomber case, however, there is a notable tendency to emphatically deny any relation between the two cabins and hence to disavow any exploration of a possible genealogy linking Thoreau's cultural critique to the Unabomber's critique of technologized society.

A representative example of this tendency can be found in William Glaberson's *The New York Times* article from December 7, 1997, which was published amidst the Unabomber's trial. The article begins by referring to the above-mentioned strategy of the Unabomber's lawyers to present the cabin in court so that it gives silent testimony to his mental illness and his concomitant inability to stand trial. The author then points to the fact that this strategy has been reported upon as a kind of "'Thoreau defense'" (Glaberson) – invoking the general suspicion of people who turn their back on society to seek a life in radical solitude. Having thus suggested a possible connection between the Unabomber and Thoreau, the article, however, quickly dismisses it as irrational: "Any parallel between one of the country's most important philosopher-writers and a man whose lawyers say he was a delusional paranoid schizophrenic would clearly be flawed." After detailing the Unabomber's belongings stored in his cabin, the author turns to one of the potential jurors in the case and her response to the judge's question about her remembrance of the media coverage around the Unabomber's capture: "'That's what stuck with me was this old cabin,' she said. 'I wondered how anybody could live like that'" (qtd. in Glaberson). The article closes by stressing the differences between Thoreau and the Unabomber. In contrast to the latter, Thoreau would not have been an "archetypal hermit"; he would have "kept his cabin bare and orderly"; he (quite obviously) did not have several items in his cabin like "triggers, pipes and chemicals used to make explosive devices and one unexploded bomb"; and while Thoreau's cabin was "10 feet by 15 feet[,] Mr. Kaczynski's was only 10 by 12" (Glaberson).

The article is aptly titled "Cabin Fever; Walden Was Never Like This," as its agenda is to refute any connection between the Unabomber and Thoreau – although it considers it in the first place and thereby constructs the analogy itself. For the purpose of negating the association, the article implicitly parallels the strategy of the Unabomber's lawyers to declare him mentally ill. By detailing the subtle – and not so subtle – differences between the two cabins, the article justifies the rejection of the Unabomber's critique of technologized society, a critique that has indeed been linked to Thoreau's political agendas.[5] Furthermore, an apparent voice of the people is

[5] In a *The New York Times* editorial (albeit written before the Unabomber's identity was revealed), the renowned critic of technology Kirkpatrick Sale "acknowledged the legitimacy of Kaczynski's arguments, strongly noting their resonance with sectors of the public and connecting Kaczynski to a 'long political tradition,' including Dickens, Thoreau, Veblen, and Weber." He then goes on to speculate that the Unabomber was "'evidently disturbed' and 'obviously measurably unbalanced'" (qtd. in Sheptoski).

representatively brought into position to rhetorically wonder “how anybody could live like that” – and, one is tempted to add, “there” – while it was this very way of life and living that enabled Thoreau to write one of the most canonical works of US-American literature.

For Marx, the complex kind of pastoralism expresses the pastoral ideal as “middle ground” between the forces of ‘civilization’ and ‘wilderness.’ Thoreau, accordingly, describes his natural environment not as unspoiled ‘wilderness’ but as permeated and penetrated by technological forces which he neither outright condemns nor naively hails under the banner of progress. The Unabomber, in turn, was arguably all about the intrusion of technology into nature and human being’s natural condition. For him, any kind of pastoral is thus irretrievably lost under the weight of accelerated technology and over-civilization as unambiguously expressed at the beginning of his manifesto: “The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race” (Kaczynski 38). The media coverage that links – or rather denies a connection between – the Unabomber and Thoreau, however, ignores the complexities of the issue at hand by indulging in both the sentimental kind of pastoralism and ecophobic tendencies. It romanticizes Thoreau and his cabin while simultaneously representing “this old cabin” of the Unabomber and its natural environment exclusively in and through images of terror.

The depiction of the nexus cabinsanity thrives on a third general tendency that has already been implicitly detected as part of painting an anti-pastoral ideal, namely the phenomena of *othering* and a concomitant medicalization, i.e., publicly pathologizing the Unabomber and his cabin. In his article “Ideology or Insanity? Media Portrayal of Ted Kaczynski and Tim McVeigh,” Matthew P. Sheptoski comparatively analyzes the media coverages of the Unabomber and Timothy McVeigh, who bombed Oklahoma City’s Murrah Federal Building killing 168 and injuring 500 people in April 1995. In order to work out the dominant framing of the respective media coverage, Sheptoski points to the pattern of medicalization as “the process whereby conditions, behaviors, and actions come to be attributed to various forms of illness.” Accordingly, *The New York Times* and *Time* particularly depoliticized Kaczynski’s behavior, acts, and political ideology by explaining them in the framework of psychological abnormality. Furthermore, “Kaczynski’s rejection of the labels ‘mentally ill’ and ‘schizophrenic’ were taken as evidence of his illness” while both publications were more likely to ascribe a political motivation and ideology to McVeigh (Sheptoski). Very few articles painted a more complex picture by also pointing towards the content of his manifesto, but overall the Unabomber was interpreted *not* as “a disciplined terrorist with a political aim,” as stated on a 1996 *The New York Times* front page, “but a driven serial killer whose bombs fulfilled a psychological need” (Sheptoski). Some of

the articles, also in other publications, brought up the issue of the Unabomber's hygiene as apparent evidence for his mental illness. A *Time* piece on April 15, 1996, calls the Unabomber "'the hermit on the hill'" and adds that "'you could smell him coming,'" *The New York Times* states on May 26, 1996, that he was "'usually unwashed,'" and *Newsweek* on April 15, 1996, proclaims him to have been "'pathologically reclusive'" before his capture (qtd. in Chase 124).

These depictions are tellingly inaccurate, however. Kaczynski was not "the hermit on the hill" as his cabin was located in the Canyon Creek bottom; according to friends and acquaintances, he was not "usually unwashed" and "pathologically reclusive"; and his dwelling was not in a desolate area in "the middle of nowhere in Montana" but, to quote Alston Chase, "[b]y Montana standards, Ted's place, far from being 'wilderness,' bordered on suburban" (Chase 125). Chase identifies the news coverage of Kaczynski's capture as "pack journalism," arguing that almost no journalist had gotten close to his cabin and only very few locals gave the same interview to multiple outlets, which led to media coverage resembling each other (124). He concludes:

> In this way, the media built a stereotype, and the stereotype soon became fixed: Kaczynski was an "eccentric" who lived in the "wilderness." The man smelled. He ate road-killed coyotes. He didn't have visitors, never went out, didn't own a watch, never had sex, and wasn't interested in money. He wouldn't drink coffee with the boys. He rode a bicycle in winter. And he didn't talk much. Not having seen the inside of his cabin, they described it as "a mess." . . . [T]hese reporters from New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC, described Kaczynski's cabin – four miles from town and just off the Stemple Pass Road – as "wilderness." Not bothering to tell readers that in Montana, Kaczynski's lifestyle was hardly unusual, they painted it as bizarre. (123–24)

It is worth mentioning that Chase's evaluation of the media coverage operates within the framework of flyover as, by criticizing these "reporters from New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC," he reproduces the "complex triangular imagination of us imagining them imagining us" (Klecker and Pöhlmann). And he has a point – even if not all of the reporters may have been from these places, they still construct the cabin and its whereabouts as a 'wilderness,' a flyover space where culture is absent despite its relative proximity to 'civilization.' This discursive construction, in turn, parallels the reception of Thoreau's cabin as well, where Walden Pond is stereotyped as 'wilderness' even though it is within a reasonable walking distance to Concord and next to the railroad.

Chase goes on to conclude that depicting the Unabomber as this "freak" serves the ideological function to create a distance between "us" and "him." This distance prevents us from engaging with his critique of technologized society and veneration of nature to instead focus exclusively on his cabin and his alleged insanity (128).

Sheptoski similarly evaluates the media coverage as "'the medicalization of Ted Kaczynski'" which

> served a social control function in that his ideology and actions were not held out to the public as examples of politically motivated behavior from which like-minded others could draw. Were his actions not medicalized his ideas could have served as a cognitive tool or resource for those desiring radical social transformation. Because he was defined as psychologically abnormal or ill, however, his comments were not worthy of serious consideration. If *Industrial Society and Its Future* were written by a madman then we need not pay attention. In applying the label, "mentally ill," or "schizophrenic," Ted Kaczynski's ideas and his serious and scholarly critique of industrial society were neutralized. Mass media and the medicalization of deviance merge in the case of Ted Kaczynski, serving as a mechanism of ideological social control. (Sheptoski)

Sheptoski's assessment of "his serious and scholarly critique of industrial society" is questionable given both the manifesto's misanthropic stance and its non-adherence to academic standards[6] as well as, most significantly, the Unabomber's killing in order to get published. I concur with Chase and Sheptoski, however, in their assessing the media coverage of the Unabomber, which follows the logic of flyover fiction construing a causal relation between his cabin and his crimes. In the dominant framing, the mathematical genius Kaczynski became mad and transformed into the Unabomber only due to his literal and metaphysical rootedness in the cabin. And the cabin, in turn, is given so much discursive power only given its location in what is constructed as a geographically marginalized space where culture is absent, and which, therefore, in the public perception could not be further away from Concord, Massachusetts – this other famous cabin place where culture par excellence in the form of *Walden* was literally conceived.

Conclusion

In the public discourse around the Unabomber case, the cabin and its location in Montana serve as focal point for, firstly, its and his geographical marginalization, secondly, the preservation of the pastoral ideal, and, thirdly, the othering and medicalization of Theodore J. Kaczynski. These three tendencies characterizing the respective depiction of the Unabomber essentially conflate in the nexus cabinsanity, i.e., the entanglement of pseudo-geographical, cultural, and medical discourses. When the public learned about the Unabomber's log-cabin-existence upon the capture in 1996, his whereabouts authenticated – retrospectively – his critique of technologized society in and for some far-left, anarchist, eco-extremist, and anti-tech circles. In the general media coverage, however, the particular location was overemphasized

[6] For a discussion of the manifesto's content, intellectual sources, and political influence see Barnett and particularly Fleming.

to paint the picture of somebody living in a place that doesn't matter "out there in that cabin in the middle of nowhere in Montana" (Shapiro). The respective coverage, i.e., the flyover fiction of the Unabomber's cabinsanity, constructs his shelter and its location diametrically opposed to Thoreau and his cabin and hence not as a place reconciling the forces of wilderness and civilization and satisfying the desire of sentimental pastoralism. On the contrary, his cabin comes to epitomize the dark and threatening underside of civilization, a horror cabinet of sorts. The concomitant medicalization of Theodore J. Kaczynski depoliticizes his extremist words and terroristic deeds by depicting him as mentally ill and his becoming the Unabomber as a materialization of this very madness.

The Unabomber's critique of technologized society in both textual and terroristic ways was arguably prompted by technophobia, his fear of losing control and autonomy in the face of technological domination. At the same time, the media coverage of the Unabomber exhibits the very same affect, only in ecophobic terms, projecting the "[f]ear of the loss of agency and the loss of predictability" (Estok 40) onto the Unabomber and his cabin in the 'wilderness' of Lincoln. If Martin Heidegger is right and terror experienced as a trembling is the fundamental mood of our time,[7] then technophobia and ecophobia manifest as and through the frame of terror are two sides of the same coin in our contemporary being-in-the-world.

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[7] "Terror lets the human retreat before this, that the being *is*, while at first the being was just a being to him: that the being is and that this – beyng – has abandoned and withdrawn from all 'beings' and what appears as such" (qtd. in Mitchell 199, original emphasis).

and Resisting White Neoliberal Forms of Life in the US Hardcore Punk Scenes [1979-1999], WVT, 2021). Winkler has published widely, among other things on hardcore punk, whiteness studies, black heavyweight boxers, econarratology in Thoreau's *Walden*, literature and death, and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.

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