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Special Issue

American Studies in the Classroom: Arts, Culture, and Critical Pedagogy

edited by
Ingrid Gessner and Angelika Ilg

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About

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

Aims

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

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Special Issue

American Studies in the Classroom: Arts, Culture, and Critical Pedagogy

Edited by Ingrid Gessner and Angelika Ilg

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Introduction: American Studies in the Classroom – Arts, Culture, and Critical Pedagogy

Ingrid Gessner and Angelika Ilg

ABSTRACT

This introduction situates the special issue's central premise that artistic and aesthetic practices offer powerful pedagogical tools for critical inquiry in American studies. Framed by the field's interdisciplinary traditions and its ongoing epistemic transformations, the introduction reflects on how classroom practices can foster analytical, emotional, and ethical engagement with cultural materials. It also highlights the political stakes of teaching US history and culture in a moment marked by curricular debates, book bans, and renewed challenges to critical scholarship. The articles collected here present innovative approaches that expand the interpretive possibilities of American studies pedagogy across classrooms, analog and digital media, as well as public spaces.

KEYWORDS

Interdisciplinarity, public scholarship, aesthetic education, poetry, photography, film

Context and Scope

American Studies in the Classroom: Arts, Culture, and Critical Pedagogy developed out of the 2024 annual conference of the Austrian Association for American Studies titled "Education, the Arts, and American Studies," which took place at the University College of Teacher Education Vorarlberg. In the three keynotes and in the eighteen workshop sessions, presenters and participants explored topics that pushed the boundaries of how we think about and teach American studies.

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The thematic scope of the conference program allowed for a comprehensive exploration of how the arts and cultural analysis function as pedagogical and political tools in contemporary American studies. We engaged with topics ranging from "Poetry Pedagogy in Transnational American Studies" to "Creative and Activist Approaches in the American Studies Classroom," and from "Archives, Museums, and Public Education" to the challenges of "Teaching Race and Gender: New and Practical Approaches." We also delved into pressing contemporary issues such as "AI Ethics and Media Literacy," reflecting on how digital media and AI technology are reshaping education. The transnational perspective of American studies was illustrated in a session in which scholars from Israel, Romania, and the Netherlands expanded the range of our conversations even further. Historical contexts were emphasized in discussions on "Education and the Arts in 20th-Century America," alongside with current approaches to "Native American and Indigenous Studies Pedagogy" and the critical investigation of "Indigenous Presences and Absences." Digital engagement was the focal point in a session dedicated to "American Studies and Digital Media Activism," and interdisciplinary approaches were represented through discussions on "Sonic and Aesthetic Approaches to Teaching American Studies" and "Teaching Design and Visual Culture."

With this special issue, we present a selection of conference presentations developed into articles to further critically interrogate the field from the perspective of the classroom. Within this space, American studies provides students and faculty with the intellectual resources and analytical skills necessary to apprehend and reshape the world. At the same time, classroom practice connects the discipline with the rich cultural materials it studies. Americanists identify and decipher relationships between cultural systems and texts that range from cave drawings to buildings and machines, from films and photographs to videos and memes.

Likewise, the editors and contributors to this issue understand the arts as a broad category encompassing the creation and expression of human imagination across both analog and digital formats. This includes the visual and performing arts, literary and musical forms, as well as public art and community-based creative activism.

This special issue emerges from the epistemic transformations that have shaped American studies as a discipline. The field originated as an interdiscipline designed to bolster narratives of US exceptionalism which sought to establish a unified understanding of American culture. Beginning in the 1960s, however, the rise of social and political movements organized around shared identities and experiences prompted a significant shift. Scholars increasingly embraced diverse perspectives in approaching and teaching what it means to be American. In their groundbreaking collection of essays *Teaching American Studies: The State of the Classroom as State of the Field*,

Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello, Joseph Entin, and Rebecca Hill aptly capture the key methodological and political shifts in the field as follows: "In the 1990s, at the time of the last wave of the academic culture wars, American Studies announced itself as a champion of multicultural education and called for American Studies curricula to cast off American exceptionalism, become transnational, explicitly connect academic and community-based work, and consider the relationship between the field's history and US imperialism" (Duclos-Orsello et al. 2).

Historically, American studies has been an interdisciplinary field that engages diverse perspectives on education while embracing innovative approaches to its multifaceted subject matter. In many ways, this has made the discipline one of the most dynamic sites of intellectual engagement within the academy, as it fosters critical perspectives on culture and power, and connects academic inquiry with broader social debates. Jay Mechling famously described American studies as a way of thinking – a particular "cognitive style" (1; 6–10) – while Adam Golub referred to it as a distinctive "habit of mind."

At the same time, emotions have long played a central role in cultural constructions of "America." Scholars associated with the "emotional turn," such as Lauren Berlant (*The Female Complaint*; *Cruel Optimism*), Sara Ahmed ("Affective Economies"; *The Promise of Happiness*), and Ann Cvetkovich (*An Archive of Feelings*; *Depression*), have reaffirmed feelings as a productive lens for cultural analysis.

Taken together, these perspectives raise an important pedagogical question: How can we teach students to think – and perhaps even feel – like Americanists? How can reflective, contextual, and aesthetic engagements with the arts encourage students to step outside familiar frameworks of experience and experiment with new ideas and perspectives?

For scholars and educators, addressing these questions means reflecting critically on what, why, and how we teach. It also requires considering how knowledge produced within academic institutions can be shared beyond them in ways that support critical thinking and creative expression, particularly in challenging political and social contexts. The call for papers for the conference already drew attention to developments in the United States, including legislation regulating curriculum content (for instance, debates surrounding Critical Race Theory and intersectionality), book bans in US public schools and school libraries, and growing parental control over educational practices, including organized involvement in school board governance, challenges to classroom practices, and influence over student services. Only a month after the conference concluded, the urgency of these discussions intensified further following the results of the 2024 US presidential election and the new realities of the second Trump administration.

Against this backdrop, the projects presented in this special issue implicitly and explicitly call on readers to reflect on their responsibilities as educators and cultural interpreters. The contributions highlight the urgency of fostering critical engagement with US history, politics, literature, and media at a moment when educational spaces themselves have become contested terrain.

Intersections: Themes and Methods across the Contributions

The articles collected in this special issue explore artists' conceptualizations and visualizations of the "histories of 'America'" – a feature that Nassim W. Balestrini highlights in her contribution to this issue – as well as artists' engagements with historical events both past and present. Across different media – including narrative fiction, poetry, photography, and film – the contributions examine how artistic practices illuminate complex historical and cultural processes. The issue showcases a range of educational projects that successfully integrate the arts and creative practices into the teaching of American studies. Together, these projects highlight the importance of incorporating creative approaches more fully into school and university curricula – not only to offer students a more holistic learning experience but also because of the potential of artistic practices to generate new forms of knowledge. In this vein, contributors Steven Hoelscher and Stephanie Zeller cite Harriet Hawkins's reminder that scholars should recognize the value of creative practices "beyond their affective and subjective experience" and consider their potential "to create conditions for intersecting research and the world in ongoing ways" (9).

Several contributions describe projects designed to engage broader publics and to connect academic research with communities beyond the university. This public dimension is particularly evident in the cultural work discussed in the articles by Hoelscher and Zeller as well as by Balestrini. The Ansel Adams photography exhibition examined by Hoelscher and Zeller attracted thousands of visitors, exemplifying what Hoelscher calls "public-facing scholarship." Balestrini's article, in turn, discusses Joy Harjo's Poet Laureate project *Living Nations, Living Words*, which introduces a wider public to the multifacetedness of Native American poetry. Both contributions also highlight the crucial role of maps and mapping practices – whether in relation to Indigenous poetry or environmental photography.

Several contributions in this issue address the growing role of multimedia formats and digital technologies in the teaching of American studies. Projects discussed in the articles incorporate short films (Gamböck-Strätz), online archives (Balestrini), and digital tools such as geographic information systems used in the GIS-companion developed for Hoelscher's and Zeller's photography exhibition. In doing so, the issue responds to both the opportunities and the challenges facing the discipline in an era

marked by digitalization and the reality of AI-powered technologies. Furthermore, the projects examined by Balestrini as well as Hoelscher and Zeller demonstrate two important advantages of digital formats: They expand the reach of scholarly work and make cultural content accessible to wider audiences. Harjo's online iteration of her project, for instance, can be understood – in the words of Balestrini – as "a kind of digital monument."

Each contribution in *American Studies in the Classroom* proposes innovative pedagogical approaches that foster students' ability to identify and interpret connections between texts – both written and visual – and the broader cultural systems in which they circulate, a core objective of American studies. Collectively, the articles demonstrate strategies for encouraging critical thinking and cultivating an awareness of cultural interconnections.

The methodologies and approaches explored in the contributions include, among others, "investigative aesthetics." In the respective article, Juliane Gamböck-Strätz draws on Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's argument that aesthetic experience directs "students' attention toward complex phenomena and problems, rather than prescribing how they have to understand certain problems and how, ultimately, they must deal with them" (128). Such an approach encourages an attitude of sustained inquiry rather than fixed interpretation. Shelley Fisher Fishkin's contribution demonstrates how literary texts can serve as entry points for engaging with contested narratives through multiple methods of critical analysis. Vanessa Vollmann's article introduces the pedagogical technique of "paneling" as a way to facilitate classroom discussions about Critical Race Theory and to generate productive counterdialogues around literary texts. All of these approaches encourage an attitude of sustained inquiry rather than fixed interpretation.

Overview of the Contributions

The article that opens this special issue, Nassim W. Balestrini's "Indigenous Poets as Cartographers of Crisis and Memory: Joy Harjo's Poet Laureate Signature Project *Living Nations, Living Words*," examines the conceptual scope and pedagogical potential of Joy Harjo's poetry project during her tenure as US Poet Laureate. Balestrini analyzes both the digital mapping project on the Library of Congress website and the printed anthology, paying close attention to the differences between these formats and their respective modes of engaging readers. By foregrounding the work of poets such as Deborah A. Miranda, Kimberly Blaeser, Laura Tohe, and Craig Santos Perez, the article demonstrates how Indigenous poetry reimagines cartography as a form of cultural and historical intervention. Harjo's project highlights that Indigenous poets and Indigenous mappings of land long preceded the literary and spatial narratives that later

came to define the United States. In doing so, it invites readers to reconsider the beginnings, components, and implications of the histories of "America" and of "American" poetry. Balestrini argues that the project charts possible paths toward a future in which Native poets' engagements with memory, trauma, and place reshape dominant understandings of US-American cultural history.

In "Can Literature Come to the Rescue when History Is Under Siege? How One Novel Can Be a Trojan Horse to Engage Questions Some Politicians Don't Want Us to Ask," Shelley Fisher Fishkin addresses the increasingly restrictive climate surrounding the teaching of US history. Drawing attention to legislative measures in numerous states that seek to limit classroom discussions of racism, Fishkin explores how literary texts can provide a way to open precisely the conversations such policies attempt to suppress. Focusing on Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), the article offers a close reading of the character of Jim, arguing that Twain portrays him as a figure endowed with intelligence, creativity, empathy, and moral insight. Through comparative analysis that includes Ralph Wiley's screenplay *Spike Lee's Huckleberry Finn* (1997) and Percival Everett's novel *James* (2024), Fishkin challenges longstanding critical interpretations that reduce Jim to a product of minstrel stereotypes. The article also highlights Twain's personal familiarity with African American communities and the narrative complexity created by the novel's child narrator. Ultimately, Fishkin contends that teaching *Huckleberry Finn* can function as a powerful pedagogical strategy for engaging students with contested histories at a moment when such discussions face renewed political pressure.

Vanessa Vollmann's contribution, "Paneling to Avoid 'Deer in the Headlights' Moments in Class: Critical Race Theory Counterdialogues in a Seminar on Percival Everett's Novel *James* (2024)," proposes an innovative teaching method designed to facilitate discussions of structural racism in the classroom. Vollmann argues that traditional teacher-centered approaches often prove inadequate when addressing emotionally charged topics, as they may elicit silence, discomfort, or polarized responses from students. As an alternative, she introduces the pedagogical technique of "paneling," a guided exercise in which students collaboratively create panel discussions featuring composite characters who enter into dialogue with one another. This method channels students' creativity while allowing them to explore complex issues through narrative experimentation. Drawing on her experience teaching a seminar that read Everett's *James* as a counterstory to Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Vollmann demonstrates how paneling enables students to develop counterstories themselves that critically engage the discourse surrounding structural racism. The method fosters cross-racial communicative skills, encourages careful attention

to language, and creates a classroom environment in which students can discuss sensitive issues more confidently and productively.

In "Investigative Aesthetics in the American Studies Classroom: Approaching 9/11 through Alejandro González Iñárritu's *11'09"1: September 11*," Juliane Gamböck-Strätz explores the pedagogical potential of aesthetic inquiry as a method for engaging with complex historical events, such as the September 11 terrorist attacks. Gamböck-Strätz argues that aesthetic inquiry enables learners to explore artistic visual and cultural materials more independently, encouraging them to question dominant narratives and to recognize the interplay between knowledge and power. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and others, the article emphasizes that aesthetic experience can direct students' attention toward the complexity of cultural phenomena rather than prescribing predetermined interpretations. By approaching Iñárritu's short film through this method, Gamböck-Strätz demonstrates how investigative aesthetics can foster sustained inquiry and deeper engagement with the cultural memory of 9/11, thereby reinforcing key methodological commitments of American studies.

The final contribution, "Pictures at an Environmental Exhibition: Reflections on the Art of Photography Curation," by Steven Hoelscher and Stephanie Zeller, reflects on the scholarly process of curating a major exhibition devoted to the environmental photography of Ansel Adams and related photographic traditions. Combining analytical discussion with a narrative walkthrough of the exhibition, the article examines how photographs by Adams, as well as by his predecessors and successors, have shaped influential visual narratives of the US-American landscape. Hoelscher and Zeller highlight the capacity of photography to influence viewers' perceptions of environmental history and to illuminate the intertwined histories of nature and culture. At the same time, the article foregrounds the intellectual work involved in conceiving, researching, and mounting an exhibition, arguing that curatorial practice constitutes a form of scholarship in its own right. By adopting a non-propositional approach that encourages viewers and students to draw connections across images and historical contexts, the authors demonstrate how exhibitions can function as powerful pedagogical spaces for critical observation and interdisciplinary learning.

Taken together, the five articles in this special issue demonstrate the vitality of American studies as a field that continuously reexamines its pedagogical practices and intellectual commitments. While the contributions differ in their methods and spatial contexts – from website, to classroom, to museum exhibition – they share an interest in experimenting with forms of teaching and emanating knowledge that invite teachers and students to engage critically with cultural artifacts and the historical narratives and structures that shape them. At a moment when the role of

education itself is being publicly debated and contested, the projects presented here underscore the importance of classrooms that remain open to inquiry, dialogue, and intellectual risk. By foregrounding the interpretive possibilities of the arts and the analytical strengths of American studies, the articles gathered in this issue suggest ways in which teaching can foster both critical awareness and imaginative engagement. In doing so, they reaffirm the classroom as a space where scholarly reflection and social responsibility meet.

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Angelika Ilg taught in the English Department at the University College of Teacher Education Vorarlberg in Feldkirch, Austria, where she co-organized the AAAS conference (2024) and contributed to its associated publication project. She received her teaching degrees in the subjects English and Classical philology and her doctoral degree from the University of Innsbruck, where she held a pre-doctoral position carrying teaching responsibilities at the Department of American Studies. Her dissertation on the literary work of the US-American novelist and short-story writer Elizabeth Spencer was awarded the Siemens Prize. Angelika Ilg's studies and research have taken her to the State University of New York at Buffalo on a Fulbright scholarship,

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Indigenous Poets as Cartographers of Crisis and Memory: Joy Harjo's Poet Laureate Signature Project *Living Nations, Living Words*

Nassim W. Balestrini

ABSTRACT

Joy Harjo's signature project as US poet laureate was published as an intricately designed online experience and as the eponymous printed anthology *Living Nations, Living Words*. While both versions feature the same poems, they differ in several respects. This article elucidates the argumentative gist of the project's online and printed versions and briefly discusses poems by Deborah A. Miranda, Kimberly Blaeser, Laura Tohe, and Craig Santos Perez. Harjo's project prefigures routes towards a future in which Native poets' conceptualizations and dynamic engagement with maps, historical trauma, and collective and individual memories will allow all readers to revise their understanding of the beginnings, components, and implications of histories of "America" and of "American" poetry.

Keywords

Contemporary Indigenous poetry, Native cartographies, memory and forgetting

As the 23rd Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (2019–2022), Muscogee Creek author Joy Harjo created the online project "Living Nations, Living Words" and the eponymous printed companion anthology *Living Nations, Living Words*. The digital version, which is (at the point of writing this article) still

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accessible on the Library of Congress website, features maps, visual images, introductory and explanatory texts, 47 poems, and audio files. The printed anthology contains the same poems, but it differs from the online version in several respects. Following remarks on cartography, crisis, and memory, I will elucidate the argumentative gist of the online and printed versions, including the differences between them. In closing, I will discuss four poems by Deborah A. Miranda, Kimberly Blaeser, Laura Tohe, and Craig Santos Perez. As I hope to show, Harjo curated the materials of her signature project with Indigenous principles of map-making and map use, and of remembering and forgetting in mind.[1] Rather than simply speaking up against settler-colonial mapping traditions, her project prefigures routes towards a future in which Native poets' conceptualizations and dynamic engagement with maps, historical trauma, and collective and individual memories will allow all readers to revise their understanding of the beginnings, components, and implications of histories of "America" and of "American" poetry.

Cartography – Crisis – Memory

According to Martin Brückner, Ralph Waldo Emerson diagnosed a "cartographic turn" when he argued that the "American map" served as "the nation's moral compass, directing the lives of its citizens, realigning their social orientation to each other" (Brückner 1). Emerson, of course, based his claims on the legacy of colonial mapping practices. These representations encoded an understanding of specific spaces as possessing symbolic and pragmatic meanings, ranging from ostensible ownership of land, slaves, and natural resources to infrastructure, transportation, and even the presence of diseases (3–4; see also Bernstein 5, 7). Consequently, Brückner proposes researching the "social and economic networks" (10) of maps from the mid-eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries because, so far, these artifacts have been predominately read from a reductively map-immanent perspective.[2]

While Harjo might partially agree with Emerson's assessment, she selects a point of departure that challenges the notion of maps/mapping as a Western prerogative. Native mapmaking is a highly differentiated phenomenon: Maps can have multiple practical or cultural purposes (Bernstein 9, 42), and they can be tribally specific (9) or combine multiple mapping traditions, especially when employed to negotiate between

[1] Regarding my use of terms for the original inhabitants of the Americas and for their descendants, see Harjo's statements in one of her memoirs: "The collective term for indigenous nations was, and still is for some of us, 'Indian,' 'American Indian,' and colloquially sometimes 'skins.' The term 'Native American' came into prominence out of the academic realm in the late eighties. I've resisted it and prefer the term 'Native Nations' or 'Indigenous' or even just 'Native'" (*Poet Warrior* 219). I will follow Harjo's example and employ the terms Indigenous and Native interchangeably.

[2] See also Bernstein 9 et passim. For an extensive descriptive overview of the materiality, design, occasions, and themes of Native maps (including terrestrial, celestial, cosmographical, and other examples) organized according to regions of North America, see Lewis, especially the table summarizing his findings (175).

different groups (41–42). Although Harjo also includes Western historical and contemporary maps, she highlights Indigenous conceptualizations through which readers can perceive linkages between re-thinking the intellectual and emotional implications of map design alongside the poet laureate's spatially and historically contextualized selection of poems by Native writers.

One relevant conceptualization is that, instead of a topographical focus and consistently applied scales, Native maps use visual characteristics that emphasize "the significance of both context and history" (Johnson 106). Context may be indicated by stressing "*relationships* among geographical features and locations" (Johnson 107, original emphasis), while the temporal dimension of spatiality indicates "a set of connections from time immemorial" (Goeman, "(Re)Mapping" 300; see also Kelderman 44 and Lewis 180). Such Native maps show "movement, rhythms, and ecology" (Johnson 110), i.e., the consequences of human manipulations of natural environments. According to Abenaki scholar Lisa Brooks, their dynamic dimension recurs in understanding maps as "interactive guides" that "convey particular conceptualizations of Native space" (xvi). Readers consult maps in order to actively "locate themselves within the geographic and social terrain" (Brooks xvi). A comparable interaction occurs with regard to verbal texts because, analogous to maps, such invite "participatory" reading (Brooks xxv; see also xxviii). In this sense, writers are mapmakers (9, 12). According to Mishuana Goeman (daughter of enrolled Tonawanda Band of Seneca, Hawk Clan), who describes "continuous, ongoing storytelling" as the basis "for creating a strong, sovereign Native spatial discourse" (Goeman, "(Re)Mapping" 300), stories and maps need to be seen as part of past, present, and future experiences and of thinking within three-dimensional space.

Endowing maps with historical depth highlights that, when contemplating the experiences of Native nations, the term crisis cannot be reduced to the everyday usage of the word. Rather than indicating a high point in a dramatic series of events or a development on the cusp of pivoting either towards disaster or improvement, a more recent understanding of crisis as constantly teetering on the brink of change (with a strong tendency towards a bleak outcome) is more to the point (Balestrini et al.). Analogous to the distinction between weather events and the aggregated data that constitutes climate, Native Americans have lived in and with a condition of crisis caused by European colonization and its ongoing aftermath. For them, crisis does not constitute a break with their situation, but instead "*crisis* is the *norm*" (Susen 113, original emphasis). Beyond that, it is useful to consider Rob Nixon's ecocritical notion of "slow violence" (2) imposed upon the Global South by industrial nations. Such violence extends over interminable lengths of time; it occurs in places and affects people who are not prominently featured in Western media; it participates in strategies of obliterating the past, present, and future of suffering populations from the minds of the

materially fortunate. Nixon's concept features parallels to Lauren Berlant's notion of "slow death" as a process of sapping strength from individuals and groups to an extent that paralyzes their agency (see Berlant 95). In the context of this contribution, this raises the question of the role that poetry might play within such a bleak predicament.

The interdisciplinary field of memory studies offers multiple nodes of connection to poetry that engages with recollections, historiography, and socio-politically determined ways of construing so-called mainstream attitudes spread via educational and cultural institutions. These considerations within memory studies are also central to Harjo's poet laureate project, among them: understanding literary representations, first, as acts of addressing how the past and the present intersect (Erll 2); secondly, as comprising the full range from individual to collective memory (Erll 2, 5); and, thirdly, as comments on the "social (people, social relations, institutions), material (artifacts and media), and mental aspects (culturally defined ways of thinking, mentalities)" of memory (Posner paraphrased in Erll 4). The third category includes Pierre Nora's concept of the *lieux de mémoire* and Jan and Aleida Assmann's notion of *kulturelles Gedächtnis* (Erll 5). It is also worth remembering that Maurice Halbwachs, who coined the phrase *mémoire collective* about a century ago, argued that history and memory should be distinguished, as he considered history an abstraction distinct from memory's specific lived presence. Pierre Nora theorized *lieux de mémoire* as situated between history and memory (Erll 6), but more recent scholarship promotes the study of "different *modes of remembering* in culture" (7, original emphasis). All in all, memory studies has shifted its attention to dynamic processes (Erll and Rigney 3, 14).

These developments offer a useful point of departure for reading poems not as a reservoir of content that might be more pleasurable to imbibe than historiography but rather as artifacts whose meaning-making integrates aesthetic features and contextual knowledge. Harjo's and other Native writers' poetry demonstrates the necessity of considering Indigenous conceptualizations of memory by themselves or alongside Western notions. The point is not only to avoid reading Native poets through an exclusively Western lens but also to learn from and integrate Native perspectives into memory-studies approaches to literary texts.

Aleida Assmann argues that "[w]hen thinking about memory, we must start with forgetting," which may be "active" or "passive" (97) and which requires analysis of how institutions foster specific forms of keeping the past visible in the present (98). In literary scholarship and in academic curricula, processes of creating and maintaining canons and archives are pitted against forgetting. Should readers of this article boost the sales of Harjo's poetry anthology and the number of visits to the project

website, then they will actively foster awareness of how some Native poets engage in making their respective past visible in the present and in carrying it into the future.

Summarizing Diana Taylor's observations "on the power of Western archives over indigenous performance in the Americas" (A. Assmann 105), Aleida Assmann appreciates that Taylor opens Western eyes to Indigenous forms of knowledge transfer, for example, by elucidating the power of oral literatures and of "indigenous embodied practice" (Taylor qtd. in A. Assmann 105). Harjo's poetry certainly references culture-specific oral traditions; at the same time, her work fully harnesses print culture, recording technology, and digital culture for the same purpose. In fact, like numerous Native artists and scholars, Harjo argues in favor of a complementary (rather than a dichotomous) understanding of the oral and the written (see Brooks xxi–xxiii; Goeman, "(Re)Mapping" 300).[3] She joins other writers who employ "Indigenous cultures as sources of knowledge" and implicitly "reject the imposition of European (and Euroamerican) knowledge as a paradigm for reading Native texts" (Johnson 104). This does not, I argue, preclude seeing Harjo's poet laureate signature project as a work that incorporates three kinds of memory that Jan Assmann defines as cross-cultural phenomena: "individual" (or "inner" and "subjective") plus "communicative" (as in "social") and "cultural" memory (109). Not only do various poems in Harjo's signature project address fictional or autobiographical recollections, but they also poignantly grapple with the social roles and relational characteristics of how memories are negotiated in specific contexts. They, moreover, challenge and revise "cultural memory" which "is shared by a number of people" for whom it forms "a collective, that is, cultural, identity" (J. Assmann 110). Importantly, Harjo consistently highlights that Indigenous poets preceded non-Indigenous American poets, just like Native understandings of mapped spaces on land that came to be known as the United States existed first.

"Living Nations, Living Words" / *Living Nations, Living Words*

An overview of the poet laureate tradition provides useful context for understanding Harjo's project. Analogous to large-scale debates about poetry as a socially and culturally relevant art form, launching and maintaining a poet laureateship has been fraught with controversy regarding its commensurability with US national self-definition. Promoters of appointing a national poet intended to devise a position congruent with a republic rather than a monarchy, so as not to simply emulate European feudal models. While the position originated within the legislative branch of Congress and while the White House has occasionally featured the designated poet for official

[3] See also Matt Cohen and Jeffrey Glover's comments on how Western notions of a supposedly linear (and thus, ostensibly, progress-oriented) evolution from oral to written cultural self-expression dominated twentieth-century thinking (1) in terms of "teleologically organized stages of development" (2).

purposes such as inaugurations, it is the Librarian of Congress who selects a poet for a one-year term that is frequently extended to two or three years. Between 1937 and 1985, the appointee bore the title of "Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress"; in December 1985, the US Congress changed it to "Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry" (Public Law 99–194, Title VI, sec. 2). Even though the poet's duties have shifted towards an increasingly large-scale public presence and towards nationwide projects, combining the time-worn, yet controversial designation "poet laureate" with the more recent notion of a poetry consultant can also be read as acknowledging that the former expression has, after all, been a salient part of the US cultural imaginary for a long time. Put differently, the designation "poet laureate" contributes to the visibility and recognizability of the position more than the low-key title of "consultant in poetry."

Despite doubts about the cultural congruency of having a federal poet laureate in a democratic nation and apprehension regarding low-quality art compromised by political subservience (Jacobsen qtd. in McGuire 333; see also McGuire 196, 431–32), poets laureate have also been appointed at the state, county, and municipal levels since 1915.[4] Media interest in poets laureate and their activities throughout the United States has grown since the mid-1990s (Schuessler; Onishi), presumably because their predecessors had primarily served as reference librarians and poets-in-residence, whereas the poet laureate consultants have been more strongly associated with outreach programs.

The Library of Congress website introduces Joy Harjo as "the first Native American poet to serve in the position [of poet laureate]" and as "an enrolled member of the Muscogee Creek Nation" who "currently lives in her hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma, and is the nation's first Poet Laureate from Oklahoma." Her response to the appointment is also quoted:

> What a tremendous honor it is to be named the U.S. Poet Laureate . . . I share this honor with ancestors and teachers who inspired in me a love of poetry, who taught that words are powerful and can make change when understanding appears impossible, and how time and timelessness can live together within a poem. I count among these ancestors and teachers my Muscogee Creek people, the librarians who opened so many doors for all of us, and the original poets of the indigenous tribal nations of these lands, who were joined by diverse peoples from nations all over the world to make this country and this country's poetry. ("Joy Harjo: U.S. Poet Laureate")

Harjo pours new meaning into the 500-year-plus gap of keeping Indigenous poetry mostly invisible to non-Native populations. She repeatedly asserts that her paternal

[4] For a list of previous and current state poets laureate, see Armenti and "Current US and State Poets Laureate." California was the first state to appoint a poet laureate; nine states followed in the 1920s. Three states do not have a poet laureate position at all, while in other states the position is vacant. In addition to the federal and state levels, poets laureate serve specific populations (e.g., Laura Tohe is the Navajo nation poet laureate), while others have been appointed at the county or city levels.

tribal culture has been sustained through well-established patterns of instruction by the twice-mentioned "ancestors and teachers." Widening the scope from her Muscogee Creek cultural legacy to "the indigenous tribal nations of these lands," she follows up with a comprehensive statement about Native poetry history. Although she acknowledges the significance of post-contact librarians (whether Native or not) as contributing to her own and other poets' intellectual and emotional development, she makes unmistakably clear that most Americans are non-Indigenous settlers. Their poets, like other immigrants, "joined" the original Native nations on what 'became' US soil, but they did not found American poetry per se.

"Living Nations, Living Words" includes works by 47 contemporary Indigenous poets. For the website, Harjo collaborated with the Library's Geography and Map Division and its American Folklife Center to produce "an interactive ArcGIS Story Map and a newly developed Library of Congress audio collection." The online educator guide was developed with an advisory committee, including members of the National Council for the Social Studies, the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Indian Education Association ("Living Nations, Living Words: A Guide for Educators"). Additionally, the poetry anthology was published as an analogue book by Norton. Harjo focused the third year of her poet laureateship on making her project widely known. Referring to the year 2020 and the horrific COVID-19 pandemic, she is quoted as saying:

> This has been a challenging year for the country, for our earth. Poetry has provided doorways for joy, grief and understanding in the midst of turmoil and pandemic . . . I welcome the opportunity of a third term to activate my project and visit communities to share Native poetry. The story of America begins with Native presence, thoughts and words. Poetry is made of word threads that weave and connect us. ("Joy Harjo Appointed")

Connectedness

On the Library of Congress website, Harjo introduces her project as an opportunity to learn about Native poetry and to connect with already interconnected poets who look back at a long history of variegated forms of artistic self-expression. I repeat the root word "connect" here because Harjo emphasizes the relational function of the arts and appeals to the addressees' desire to get to know something with which they are not yet familiar. By implication, you can only relate to what you know:

> As the first Native U.S. Poet Laureate, I decided that my signature project should introduce the country to the many Native poets who live in these lands. Our communities innately shared and share poetry from before the founding of the United States to the present.
>
> We understand poetry to be a living language – whether it is in our tribal languages, or in English, or another language. We use poetry to mark transformations, as in love

> letters, elegies, or epithalamium. Poetry can be useful for praise and even to help deter a storm. Or poetry is a tool to uncover the miraculous in the ordinary.
>
> We are intimately involved in our communities, which may be on our reservations or in the cities and often both. We are like everyone else. Some of us stay rooted. Others travel and even live internationally. This holds true for our individual approaches to the art of poetry. . . .
>
> Keep in mind that each of the featured poets has many poetry ancestors as well as young poets who have or will follow in their footsteps. There are connections between all of the poets in "Living Nations, Living Words" – and connecting influences between these poets and many, many other Native poets who do not appear here, and many, many American and world poets from the present and generations before.
>
> As you explore, you too will be connected. (Harjo, "Living Nations")[5]

This is Harjo's clarion call to literary historians, canon and curriculum designers, and readers of whatever ilk: Indigenous poetry metonymically represents the cultural output of Native nations since long before European settler-colonialism to the present; it has been trans- and international *avant la lettre*; and it remains vibrantly dynamic because poetry is alive, marks change, has pragmatic features, and because it appeals to us rationally and emotionally. Most of all, it connects people within mapped spaces and beyond; and this is an experience that readers who engage with poetry will share. Harjo's approach reads like a response to Brooks's question of "What happens to our view of American history when Native narratives are not just *included* but *privileged*? . . . What happens when the texts of Anglo-American history and literature are participants in Native space rather than the center of the story? What kind of map emerges?" (Brooks xxxv, original emphasis). According to Mishuana Goeman, Harjo uses poetry as a strategy of "[r]eclaiming Native cartographies" (Goeman, "The Tools" 90); a crucial element in this endeavor is to create "a map of possibilities connected to human agency and relationships" (95). This strategy, which Goeman identifies in one of Harjo's poems, is expanded in "Living Nations, Living Words" and assumes reciprocity between poems and maps.

In the introduction to the section "Explore the Story Map," Harjo delineates her understanding of mapping and maps, and of how they relate to Native poets' work. Interconnectedness recurs here, as does the emphasis on maps' variegated forms and functions. Harjo mentions map-making by means other than paper and pencil, such as drawing in the sand, weaving, basket-making, singing, and writing poetry.[6] Changes

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[5] This invitation to connectedness resembles Brooks's address to her readers, hoping that her book will result in "embedding you, the reader, in the text to foster a participatory conversation between us and this world we share" (xxv).

[6] See Johnson's analysis of Harjo's poem "A Map to the Next World," which mentions a map drawn in the sand and which encourages the speaker's granddaughter to create her own, individual map (Johnson 112). Sand as a medium highlights the importance of memory during the reading process (Goeman, "The Tools" 100).

and varieties of technological channels notwithstanding, maps have accompanied humans to the present, and their historical depth is as important as their methods of spatial representation and their practical purposes, such as providing orientation in physical and metaphysical realms. Silently assuming that non-Native readers are unfamiliar with Native maps and Native poetry, Harjo points out the consequences of cultural invisibility, as in the centuries-long history of denying Native peoples' humanity, let alone their artistic achievements. Native poets have hardly been represented on the literary-historical map of American poetry, even though they, "[l]ike other living American poets . . . use the tools of knowledge and creativity to ride the waves of language" (Harjo, "Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples Poetry"). Rather than being, as the stereotype goes, stuck in one place, in the past, and limited to a backward-glancing local culture, they use English (and, to some extent, Spanish) as a lingua franca or "crossing place." This metaphorical, language-based meeting point for Native cultures emphasizes cross-cultural mobility, which adds to connectedness "by genealogy, by land, even by instinct."

Further scrolling reveals a map of our planet strewn with small icons (resembling inverted drops) across the fifty states constituting the US.
The first set of instructions includes the following statements:

> **In this map, you can begin anywhere.**
>
> Each location marker reveals a Native Nations poet and features an image, biography, and a link to hear the poet recite and comment on an original poem.
>
> This body of work forms the foundation of a **"Living Nations, Living Words" online collection** in the Library of Congress's American Folklife Center.
>
> Each of the 47 Native Nations poets . . . selected an original poem on the theme of **place** and **displacement**, and with four touchpoints in mind: **visibility**, **persistence**, **resistance**, and **acknowledgment.**
>
> Each also chose where they wished to place themselves on this map.
>
> (Harjo, "Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples Poetry," original emphasis)

This very brief introduction already indicates that this map on the website is not simply ornamental but that it makes visible self-chosen locations of individual poets affiliated with specific Native nations; that it complements verbal and visual with aural components; that it features the poets through audio recordings not only of their poems but also of their comments on the poems, thus providing them with artistic/performative and sociopolitical, cultural-historical, and analytical voices. We also learn that this map lays the groundwork for an archival project and that the theme of "place and displacement" links up with agency through self-directed local attachment (casting the poets as co-mapmakers), through demonstrating the persistent presence of Indigenous nations, and through demanding acknowledgment

of all of the above. The notion of being a visitor on the project's website is a poignant reminder of depictions of online activity in that perceiving and processing visual, verbal, and auditory material resembles moving through three-dimensional space. Also, each visitor is free to choose a point of departure and a path, rather than being directed.

Importantly, Harjo presents a typology underlying the poets' self-location: first, having been born and having lived much of one's life on a reservation; secondly, selecting a location that has resulted from displacement; and, thirdly, crossing various kinds of borders. The first type appears bland, but its link to horrific histories of dispossession and discrimination becomes particularly clear when considered in relation to the description of the second type which highlights the treacherousness of political terminology. As Harjo explains, so-called "relocation programs" ("Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples Poetry") were geared towards eliminating Native cultures, killing Indigenous peoples, and usurping their land. The biting sarcasm of calling the Trail of Tears of the 1830s "[o]ne of the best-known relocation projects" speaks for itself and belies the seeming objectivity of the 1890 *Map of Indian Territory and Oklahoma* (United States Bureau of the Census) seen as a backdrop. Harjo counters this map's erasure of the suffering and deaths of 'relocated' populations with concrete examples of contemporary poets whose forebears experienced being uprooted. Thinking beyond earthly mobilities and boundaries, the poet b: william bearhart, who passed away before the project was completed, is quoted as having questioned whether place should be associated with beginnings or endings (see Harjo, "Living Nations"). His question may also be read as asking whether borders on earthly territory or, rather, between the physical and the metaphysical should continue to dominate our thinking.

In the following, I will share my findings regarding Harjo's strategy in walking website visitors through the basic premises of the map. Despite the option of starting wherever one wants by randomly clicking on a small drop-shaped icon, which makes a poet's picture and biographical description pop up and which provides a link to audio recordings of poems and commentaries, Harjo's textual commentary gently guides those who keep scrolling. She affirms the significance of certain cosmologies and cultural practices of nation-specific thinking without coming across as prescriptive. Readers who continue to scroll downward will experience the Muscogee Creek cosmological path of moving counterclockwise from East to North, West, and South, which is a structure that Harjo also uses in her first memoir, *Crazy Brave*. This sequence leads visitors through developmental stages of "becoming" (East), "testing and teaching" (North), "endings" and "leaving" (West), and "gathering together for celebration" (South) (Harjo, "Living Nations"). Harjo undermines the impression of a geographically straightforward sequence with side remarks that merge spaces and

temporalities (as in: “Then we go South, or maybe we are already there”), proposing that the viewer/reader will “see that directions are overlays with soft, shining borders when it comes to memory and relationship.” The remarks on Native nations’ historical experience have a similarly disruptive effect as the above examples of denying simplistic conceptualizations of place, direction, time, and movement. For instance, cultural symbols such as the “East,” which are frequently associated with positively connoted terms like “becoming” and “sunrise,” are undermined through Native peoples’ experiences of immense suffering through colonization, appropriation, and lacking appreciation: Haudenosaunee/Iroquois and Muscogee systems of government “inspired the American democratic government even as these Nations were diminished by acts of history.” In the case of the “North,” the impact of settler colonialism comes across through the poem by the Montana-based writer Heather Cahoon. Her poem addresses, among other things, the destruction of Indigenous languages and the immensely difficult efforts to revive them. Harjo’s remarks on the “West” reflect how her experience of living on the Hawai’ian islands introduced her to maps centered around the Pacific Ocean. Mentally shifting from *terra firma* to an oceanic point of departure forced her to study “wind patterns and water currents instead of the circle made by directions.” This perspectival change (from a Muscogee Creek to a Hawai’ian outlook and process) prefigures the above-quoted remark about the “South” as destination or current location, which makes sense when Harjo expands this area to include “the Southwest, or Texas, or . . . the Southeast of the Muscogee peoples.” While the Muscogee Creek were among the tribes that were forcibly removed to what eventually became Oklahoma, they are still connected to their ancestral home through, as the preceding paragraph implies, “memory and relationship.” Such doubleness of locations and times replaces consistent borders with mobile layers.

Similar to the thought-provoking descriptions of the four directions in temporal and spatial terms, the closing section indicates possible shifts in mapping processes: “Now, we have a map. And you have learned you can begin anywhere. Know that this is only a thin portion of destinations, with few representations of the scope of Native Nations poets, and poetry of place. However, it is a beginning” (Harjo, “Living Nations”). Thus, we have *one* map, not *the* map. We can also reflect on the reading process and on what remains invisible. Emphasizing the contemporary relevance of the map as object, process, and experience, Harjo explains: “The mapmaking represented by this map comes at a crucial time in history, a time in which the failures to acknowledge, listen [to], and to consider *everyone* when making the map of American memory has brought us to reckoning” (original emphasis).

These closing remarks turn “Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples” into a map-ological, meta-cartographic, multisensory, hypertextual, centuries-

embracing, and dynamic mapping *process* that becomes a point of departure rather than a definitive destination. Harjo expresses her affinity with this map by juxtaposing typical Western maps, which indicate divisive features such as "political boundaries" and verbalized topographical phenomena and place names, with her project's map which provides "a sense of place in the continuum of beauty." If we read this "continuum" as a stand-in for poetic language inspired by something that precedes and transcends our limited human-ness, then the map can neither be finite nor prescriptive. Practicing what she preaches, Harjo addresses readers: "Now I urge you to make your own maps" (Harjo, "Living Nations, Living Words"). Such individual maps could follow completely different representational goals and show myriad kinds of interconnections that interweave space and time.

Harjo's revisionist poetry-mapping project incorporates the intertwined layers of "individual" (or "inner" and "subjective"), "communicative" (as in "social"), and "cultural" memory (J. Assmann 109), and it ties particularly the latter two components to identity formation and to the problem of active-versus-passive memory and forgetting, of archive and canon. And, as indicated earlier, the circumstance that we can access Harjo's project as a digital and as an analogue anthology, on the one hand, confirms the viability and validity of Indigenous oral traditions and embodied practice, while, on the other hand, it equally demonstrates the need to increase the visibility of Indigenous poets in print and in innovative as well as sufficiently funded, institutionally backed (see J. Assmann 114), far-reaching, and long-lasting digital formats (see Balestrini forthcoming).

Shifting Borders, Mobile Mapping

Bearing out Harjo's remark on shifting borders quoted above, the 2021 printed anthology and the online version of her signature project place some poets within different geographical categories. For instance, Heather Cahoon, the above-mentioned Montana-based poet featured as an example of the "North" on the website, appears in the section entitled "East" in the printed book. In fact, the significant divergences between the digital and the print versions demonstrate how maps can, will, and even must differ from one another, depending on the vantage point and the principles that direct their production or use in a specific moment.

Sarahmay Wilkinson's book-cover design includes a map from the Library of Congress that displays (former) locations of major Indigenous nations. The word Muscogee is seen written across their original homeland in the south-east, that is, in the area they occupied before forced removal in the 1830s. Other than that, the book version does not contain any cartographic visuals. In which sense does it, then, engage in mapping?

Harjo's introduction ("Introduction" xiii–xvii) includes some of the same sentences as the introductory texts for the digital project. Other parts are markedly different. After asserting that Indigenous nations currently have and must necessarily retain the right "to define who is a tribal member," she mentions that the "more than 573 federally recognized Native nations and other legitimate state-recognized tribal entities" (xv) continue to produce an immense number of poets. As a result, the poets selected for the anthology "become representative of a much deeper and wider field of poetry" (xv).

Harjo's explanation of the anthology's structure begins with the following sentence: "The poems here are not organized around geography. We could begin anywhere on the map, for each place might be the navel place of a creation story, somewhere in the middle of the story, or a place of departure" (xv). A reader who has already explored the digital mapping project will then recognize one of Harjo's cartographic principles: Locations and variants of paths that connect them are abundant. This also applies to organizing poetry according to specific trajectories.

As explained earlier, the poets decided which geographical location on the digital map would be the entry point for readers to access their short biographical notes, poems, and commentaries, both as audio and as written verbal text. The printed anthology does not replicate the four-part structure and the counterclockwise pattern. Instead, the three sections of the book proceed from "East, or Becoming" (xv) via "the Center, or North–South" (xvi) to "Departure, or West" (xvi). These categories evoke the effect of a linear westward track. But as Harjo does not use geographical principles to define East, North, South, and West in the book, the just-quoted sequence is clearly not the westward movement of Euro-American historiography. Instead, figurative strains that circle around the project's thematic clusters determine the distribution of poets within the tripartite anthology. Rather than equating temporal linearity from beginning to middle to end with an East-to-West movement in three-dimensional space, the poet laureate replaces geographical determinism with a shared world of history, thought, emotion, and vision which centers on the main "theme of place and displacement" and the "four touchpoints" of "visibility, persistence, resistance, and acknowledgment" (Harjo, "Introduction" xiv).

In the printed anthology, "Becoming/East" includes 17 poets, "Center/North–South" features 16 poets, and "Departure/West" showcases 14 poets. Harjo's radical re-interpretation of directional markers as figurative emblems becomes clear when one takes a look at the states (according to each poet's chosen place on the digital map) in relation to how Harjo groups the poets in print. The poets in all three sections (see Figures 1 through 3) are spread throughout the US. This distribution contravenes settler-colonial ideas of stable regions and of simplistically assuming that one geographical place encompasses all facets of belonging:

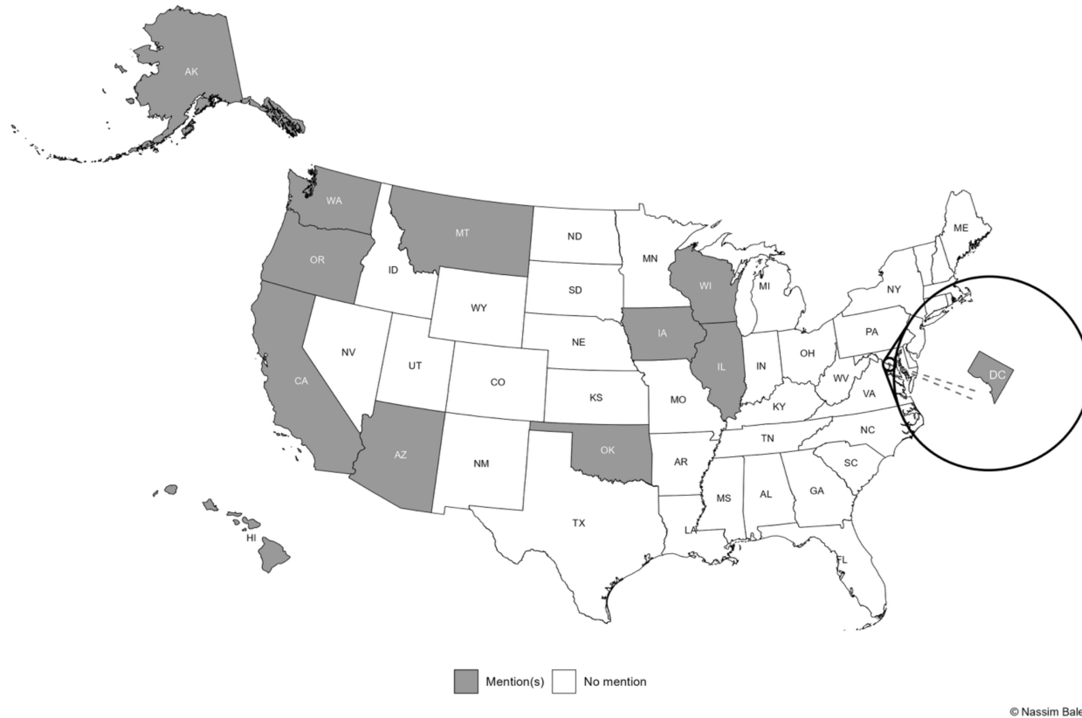

Figure 1: Printed anthology, “Becoming/East”

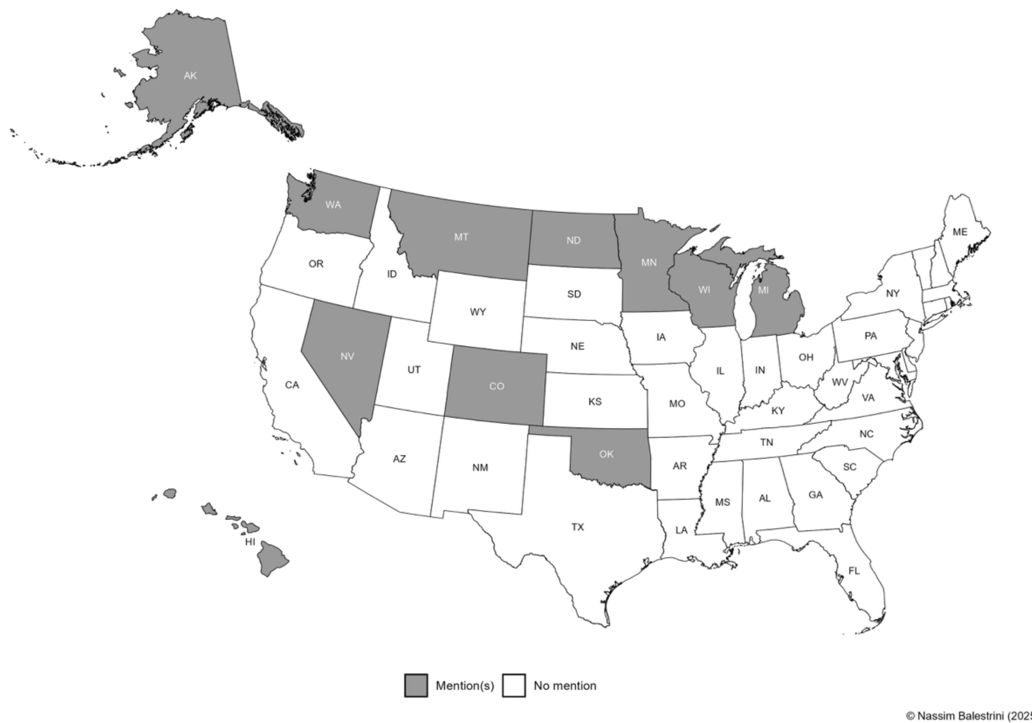

Figure 2: Printed anthology, “Center/North–South”

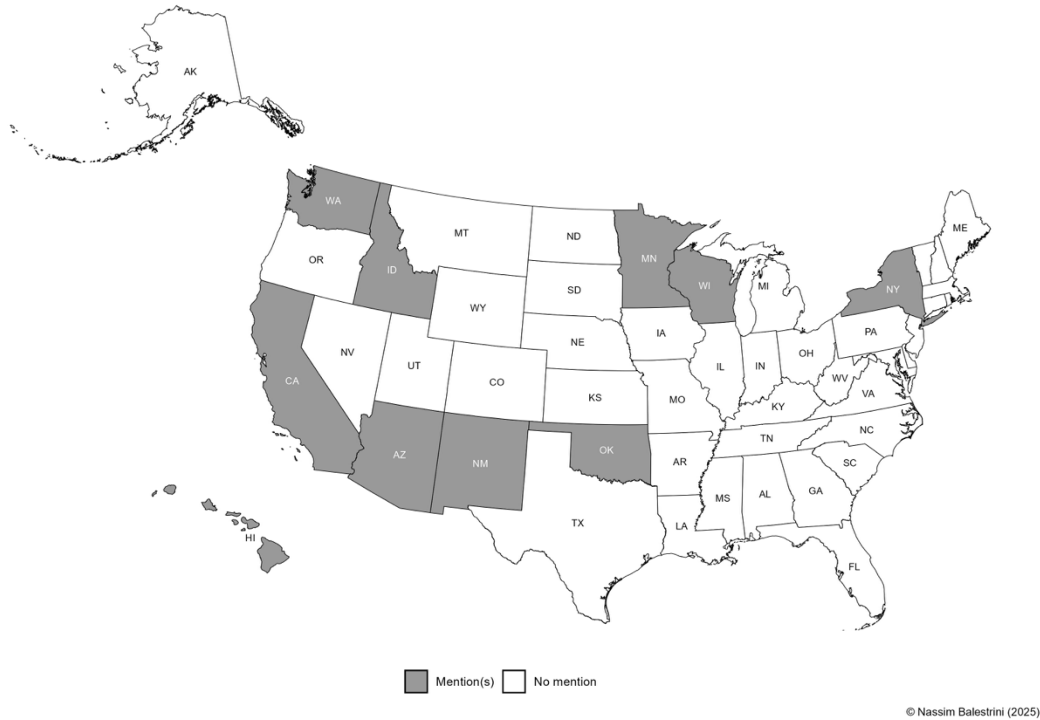

Figure 3: Printed anthology, “Departure/West”

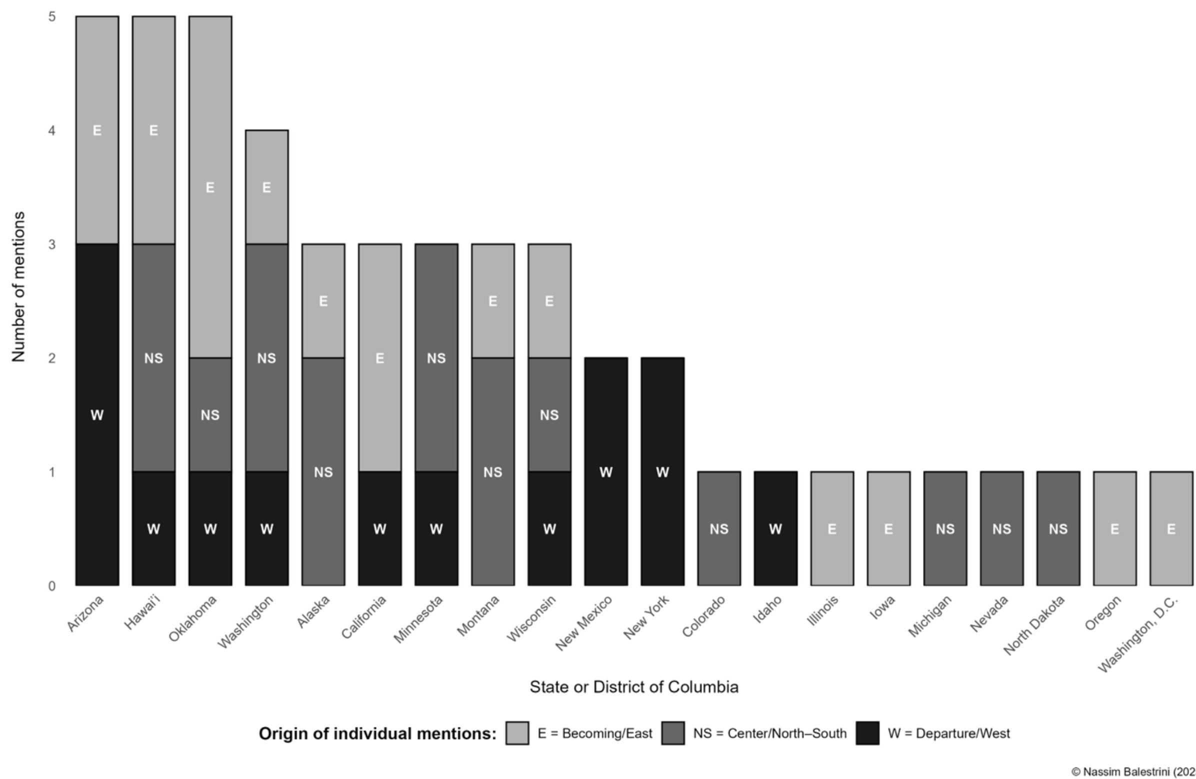

Figure 4: Printed anthology, distribution in the three sections

As Figure 4 demonstrates, some states (i.e., entities which are not the product of Indigenous tradition or culture) occur in two or even three sections. Hawai’i, one of the

non-contiguous US states, is featured in the East, North–South, and West sections, thus counteracting any notion of islands isolated from or less relevant than the so-called US mainland. Oklahoma, most of which was named "Indian Territory" from 1834 until attaining statehood in 1907, also occurs in all three sections and even thrice in the category of the East. In contrast to the settler-colonial federal terminology of territory versus state as found in the above-mentioned 1890 *Map of Indian Territory and Oklahoma*, Harjo engages in autobiographically inflected counter-mapping. As she grew up in Oklahoma and lived in Hawai'i, the prominence of these two states emphasizes her personal perspective.

When readers think about how the printed anthology's three sections relate to specific poets and poems, they cannot but cease to rely on Western cartographies' foregrounding of material locations, settler colonialism, land ownership, and political institutions. Not representing Indigenous people at all or not representing them on their own terms produces a particularly engrained and devastating form of cultural genocide (Jortner): Although "[a]cts of forgetting are a necessary and constructive part of internal social transformations[,] they are . . . violently destructive when directed at an alien culture or a persecuted minority" (A. Assmann 98). In the context of US history, categorizing Indigenous peoples as "alien cultures" would privilege a singularly derogatory perspective. The process of mapping that Harjo envisions and practices makes such destructive strategies visible and replaces them with relational, interconnected perspectives geared towards creating a new collective memory informed by Native cosmologies. She thus transfers to the mapping project what she has been doing in her poetry: "[I]nstead of focusing on Indigenous erasure and absence in Western mapping, Harjo appropriates the language of a map to speak to the consequences of forgetting and of its detriments to tribal continuity" (Goeman, "The Tools" 101).

Goeman's point confirms Jan Assmann's argument that "[t]he participation structure of cultural memory has an inherent tendency to elitism; it is never strictly egalitarian" (116). On a more hopeful note, his discussion of "the media of cultural memory" results in recognizing "a more or less pronounced tendency . . . towards a form of intra-cultural diglossia" (116), which brings mainstream and non-mainstream "traditions" (116) into conversation. To my mind, Harjo's signature poet laureate project launches such a dialogue. It is, thus, not surprising that the poet focused the third year of her laureateship on sharing her project in public events across the United States, as seen in the extensive list of engagements found on her personal website (Harjo, "Past Events").

But what will happen in the long run? How can Harjo's project become part and parcel of a widespread understanding of literary history? How could this goal be achieved? In distinguishing between the mechanics of the "**canon**" and the "**archive**"

within "cultural memory," Aleida Assmann lists the terms "select, collect," "working memory," "museum," and "monument" as "active" as opposed to the terms "accumulate," "reference," "memory," and "store house" as "passive" remembering (A. Assmann 99, original emphasis). Harjo's project involved selecting poems, many of which address current working memories. These are promoted as a small canon that is indicative of a much larger body of works. While the poems are not stored in a museum, the Library of Congress as a material place and as the provider of the project's website serves as a location of sorts that contributes to active remembering. This online location is a kind of digital monument, albeit one that is not made prominently visible in durable material form comparable to carved marble or inscribed bronze. Because Harjo's tenure as poet laureate is over, the active forms of remembering have shifted to the side of passive remembering. It is now up to others, among them scholars and teachers of American literature, to contribute to fostering active remembering of the poems and the resources provided as contextual material.

Case Studies and Closing Thoughts

The following four examples featured in the signature project address the heavy historical baggage linked to cartographies of space and time, and to conceptualizations of the United States as a settler-colonial nation that has thrust Native nations into a condition of perpetual crisis rather than opportunity. They bespeak poetry's power within dynamic processes of memory-building as a means of dealing with crisis as a condition and of indicating possible futures.

Deborah A. Miranda, who has Chumash ancestors and is an enrolled member of the Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen Nation of the Greater Monterey Bay Area, selected Carmel, California, as her location on Harjo's online map. In the book version, Harjo placed her in "Becoming/East," the first of the three sections. The four-part poem "Indigenous Physics: The Element Colonizatium" (Miranda, "Indigenous Physics" 25–30) imitates an argumentative scholarly paper. As Miranda says in her recorded commentary,

> the tone, the voice, is very didactic, it's like an insecure professor's lecture to undergrads – maybe deceptively so – or maybe it's a kind of futuristic report from an Indigenous scientist who seems to be trying to talk the talk of Western science, give that Western jargon to his audience, or her audience, around this newly discovered element of the periodic tables – 'Colonizatium.' (Miranda, "Deborah A. Miranda")

In the course of the poem, speculative statements about the chemical element's characteristics, especially its estimated half-life and toxicity, metaphorically comment on Native history. In the "periodic table of traumatic elements" (27), the pun on "periodic" strengthens the figurative link between the atomic make-up of our environment and the repetitiveness of history. This "periodic table" implicitly

includes elements which may be im/materially stable or unstable, that is, consistently remembered or vanished in the fog of forgetfulness. Like invisible radioactivity which continues to cause harm for extensive periods of time far beyond an obvious catastrophic event and like the complexity of discarding its toxic waste, traumatic experiences affect (but do not need to determine) the future well-being of generations.

Although the poem's persona employs Western scientific terms, she promotes a hitherto ignored approach to gauging the metaphorically radioactive element, arguing that "Deep Science of a pre-Colonial origin" (27) provides "Indigenous elements": "Story, Dance, and Song" (27) as well as "Dreaming" (28). While these elements cannot single-handedly inaugurate a post-colonization period, they can "*hasten the decay* of Colonizatium" (29; original emphasis), which the persona perceives as process analogous to "De-Colonization" (30). Not surprisingly, in her commentary, Miranda links her enthusiasm for Indigenous futurisms with Gerald Vizenor's concept of "survivance" (see Vizenor vii).

Locating herself in Mesa, Arizona, and featured in the section entitled "Departure/West," Diné (Navajo) poet Laura Tohe engages with the traumatic 1860s relocation of her people. Her poem "Within Dinétah the People's Spirit Remains Strong" (194–99) contextualizes this experience within a global history of what the persona calls "death marches." The four-part structure leads readers from a creation story via prophecies and experiences during early colonization to the 1860s death march and finally the return to Diné territory. Part of the poem's assertive tone (which commences with the title) resides in using the Native nation's language without providing full translations. The dedication following the title explains why: "*These words are for my people, the Diné, who endured colossal hardship and near death and continue to endure*" (194, original emphasis), as the missing punctuation at the end of the sentence emphasizes.

Tohe's use of anaphora and enumeration evokes the sweeping attempts at an all-encompassing perspective found in nineteenth-century poems such as Whitman's "Song of Myself." But her references to US-American myths like "Manifest Destiny" foreground murder and land-grabbing, and they link Native peoples' experiences with those of other oppressed groups, as shown in the allusion to Abel Meeropol's early-twentieth-century anti-lynching poem "Strange Fruit" (196). Similar to Harjo's focus on far-ranging interconnections, Tohe depicts a specific tribal history in relation to large-scale history and a worldview that rests on a premise she shares with the poet laureate.[7] This outlook inheres in the motivic phrase "In Beauty" used throughout the poem and in each of the last six lines (199); it expresses a positive attitude towards creation and aesthetic power and proposes future existence. A central concept in Diné (Navajo) philosophy is hózhó, "a state of wellness, balance, peace, and harmony,

[7] For a more detailed discussion of Harjo's use of Navajo cultural concepts, see Balestrini (forthcoming).

culminating in beauty" (Watchman 30; see also Goeman, "The Tools" 108).[8] This concept provides the basis for understanding Tohe's poem as an argument in favor of channeling human activities in order to realize the benefits of hózhó.

Placed in the section on "Center/North–South" in the printed anthology and self-located on the online map in Mahnomen on the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota, Anishinaabe poet Kimberly Blaeser's "Poem on Disappearance" addresses pre- and post-1492 (in)visibility. The speaker of the poem gives instructions as to what and how an unnamed mapmaker must "draw," repeating this imperative seven times. Although the opening stanza's depiction of "our continent" in "1491" initially includes Native principles such as mapping "trade routes, languages, seasonal migrations" (Blaeser 134), these dynamic elements linked to mobility and communication are quickly replaced by settler-colonial upheaval. In the wake of "discovery" and "displacement," the mapmaker's drawing instrument must suddenly work "quickly now as if pursued" but nevertheless must face the fact of "disappear[ance]" (134). The representation of "nothing," "emptiness"/"empty," "absence," "void," "missing, missing" (134), "missing, . . . murdered" (135) leads to the "new continent" being discerned as "nothing" (135). The semantic field centered around absence and loss refers to the deaths of Native peoples then and now, the destruction of fauna, the sterilization of women, the surging number of MMIW (murdered and missing Indian women); in sum, the disappearance of Indigenous presence resembles stone-weighted corpses "sinking into every river on the map" (135). As the poem ends with the mapmaker being confronted with "nothing" when trying to depict a post-1492 'new world,' Blaeser rewrites the *vacuum domicilium* that settler-colonists used as a justification for murdering or 'relocating' Native nations in the first place, and for robbing their land and livelihood. While the pre-1492 land used to be fully and dynamically alive, colonialism has made Indigenous peoples invisible in multiple ways, which include dominant map-making practices. As Adam Jortner points out, in the majority of maps found in college-level history textbooks commonly used in the United States, Indians are absent. When they are mentioned, they are never shown as actors but only as being "acted upon" and only "to be remembered for their surrender" although maps that show their territorial claims do exist (Jortner 80).

The fourth and final example takes readers to the organized, unincorporated US territory of Guåhan (Guam), to California, and to Hawai'i, which is the current place of residence of Craig Santos Perez, who chose this as his location on the digital map. In the printed anthology, Santos Perez is featured in the first section, "Becoming/East." This placement feeds into Harjo's point that any given map may use a specific center and that a mapmaker's/map user's vantage point influences their chosen path. Santos Perez's well-known poem "Off-Island CHamorus" (15–16)

[8] I would like to thank Dr. Christoph Straub for alerting me to Watchman's essay.

transforms autobiographical experience into a lyrical reflection on momentary crisis and on crisis as an ongoing condition, on maps and invisibility, on empty spaces in mainstream collective memory, and on the responsibilities that teachers have as individuals whose words can strongly impact students' intellectual and emotional development and self-perception. Having come as a 15-year-old from Guåhan to California, the speaker struggles with his high-school teacher's offensive and gruff injunction to "[p]rove" his place of origin "exists" (15). When he realizes that the Mariana Islands, of which Guåhan is the largest one, are not shown on the classroom map, the adolescent says that he comes "from this / invisible archipelago" (15). In the poem's retrospective reflections, the autobiographical speaker comes to the conclusion that "home is an archipelago of belonging" (16). This metaphor confirms the central strategic move of Harjo's signature project, namely, to emphasize the dynamic and complex nature of situating oneself through material locations, worldview, emotional attachments, and a sense of relationality.

Four examples cannot do justice to an anthology of 47 poets. Nevertheless, they may inspire readers of this article to delve into the entire collection and to engage with the poets' audio recordings and comments. As one individual among the majority of students and colleagues who are non-Indigenous people living in Europe, I find that we should raise awareness of projects such as "Living Nations, Living Words" and the printed anthology because they were and are being developed, as Joy Harjo puts it, "at a crucial time in history, a time in which the failures to acknowledge, listen to, and consider everyone when making the map of American memory has brought us to a reckoning" (Harjo, "Introduction" xvii). This "reckoning" serves Native and non-Native communities. Goeman's following remark on Harjo's poetry applies to the poet laureate signature project as well: "Whether space is restructured through traditional memory or through new relationships to landscapes, for many Native communities this activity is a move toward self-determination" (Goeman, "The Tools" 105). At the same time, the emphasis on relations among geographical locations and their histories facilitates "crossing rigid borders among individual communities, Native and non-Native" in order to "(re)map socialities that will materially and mentally sustain future generations" (Goeman, "The Tools" 105). This perspective overlaps with Harjo's recent reflections on her half-century experience of writing. She argues that poets "make word trails that could lead to justice" (Harjo, *Catching the Light* 31) and that "Indigenous artists must be part of the leadership in the revision of the American story" (119). A central component in creating verbal trails that promote fresh perspectives and that make previously erased perspectives visible again is that poets "are called to remember what matters" (39) and to succeed in the paradoxical feat of "[c]atching light in the dark" (3). Harjo's signature project expertly balances these requirements by acknowledging centuries of crisis and of cultural

achievements, by providing glimpses of possible paths forward, and by asserting the sought-for impact of Native Nations' poetry for Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers.

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Can Literature Come to the Rescue When History Is Under Siege? How One Novel Can Be a Trojan Horse to Engage Questions Some Politicians Don't Want Us to Ask

Shelley Fisher Fishkin

ABSTRACT

Under pressure from right-wing Republican politicians, more than half of US states have passed measures designed to discourage teachers from teaching their students about the role that racism has played in the United States' past and present. This article argues that teaching Mark Twain's 1885 novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has the potential to let teachers to do an end run around that ban. It distills arguments I make in my 2025 book, *Jim: The Life and Afterlives of Huckleberry Finn's Comrade* (Yale UP). Recognized as a cornerstone of the United States' literary heritage, this celebrated canonical novel written by a very dead, very white male author is a book that can be a Trojan Horse enabling us to open our classrooms to issues these politicians do not want discussed. However, the novel has long been challenged by progressives who charge that it bolsters the racism that it supposedly attacks. This article argues that Jim, the main Black character in the book, has been sold down the river for nearly a century and a half – unjustly demeaned, denigrated, and dismissed as "minstrel show" stereotype. Paying him the attention that he deserves opens up new ways of understanding the history of race and racism in the United States and offers distinctive insights into the challenges of representing Black intelligence, emotion, and creativity in a world that denied their existence – a challenge shouldered not only by Twain himself but also by scores of writers, Black and white, who followed.

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KEYWORDS
Racism, censorship, slavery, Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Jim*

Teaching the United States' past and present in all its complexity has never been an easy task – but the very project itself is increasingly under attack today in US K-12 classrooms and universities. Under pressure from right-wing Republican politicians, more than half of US states have passed measures designed to ban teachers from teaching their students about the role that racism has played in the United States' past and present, with advocates saying, in effect, "that education must emphasize only the positive aspects of American history" (Remnick; see also PEN America, "Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement" and "Banned in America: State Laws"). This article argues that teaching Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* can enable teachers to evade these gag orders, opening their classrooms to precisely the questions the bans are designed to banish. Teachers' fear of being prosecuted for teaching lessons that explicitly discuss racial oppression has resulted in fewer discussions of racism in the classroom and have even discouraged some aspiring teachers who care about teaching accurate versions of the United States' past to reconsider their decision to become teachers in the first place (Kelly et al.). An organization called Citizens for Renewing America run by Donald Trump's former budget director issued a "Toolkit" for "Combatting Critical Race Theory" (CRT) in the community arguing that CRT teaches "that individual racism, cultural racism, and institutional racism overlap to form a system of racism that is present through all of society." It states that "Social Justice scholars think anti-racism" requires "people to constantly reflect upon the ways in which we are all complicit in racism" (Citizens Renewing America) and that this approach should be banned by law.

But teaching *Huckleberry Finn* can allow teachers to circumvent the right-wing ban on teaching the role of racism in the United States' past, a topic that they are often forbidden to address on its own. Recognized as a classic, a cornerstone of the United States' literary heritage, this celebrated canonical novel written by a very dead, very white male author is, in short, a book that can be a Trojan Horse enabling us to open our classrooms to issues these politicians do not want discussed. Teaching this iconic text responsibly *requires* that scholars and educators bring the history of US-American racism into our classrooms. Making sense of the novel *compels* us to understand Jim's condition as an enslaved person in antebellum Missouri; it demands that we examine the ways in which interlocking institutions in US society from the church to the law to the scientific establishment

conspired to reinforce the racism that underpinned that condition. Examining that de facto conspiracy shines a light on the broad contours of institutional racism that the right is determined to bury or deny. Twain's searing satire can bring the history of racism in the United States into the classroom in engaging and powerful ways.

But while conservatives want to ban from the United States' classrooms an accurate view of the chapters of the past that this novel engages, progressives have challenged the book's presence in the classroom for other reasons. They charge that it bolsters the racism that it supposedly attacks. Those who want the book banned view Jim, its central Black character, as a figure out of a minstrel show, an emblem of the author's alleged racism. To the contrary, however, this article argues that Jim is a compelling challenge to minstrel stereotypes and racism itself. Jim is a smart, self-aware, and enormously admirable man who is hemmed in on all sides by a morally bankrupt society determined to keep him enslaved. Huck does not see him that way, but Twain did. Indeed, the whole point of the novel was to challenge the legitimacy of a society that treated Jim the way it did. Although the novel is narrated by a boy who, like young Sam Clemens, did not question the justice of the world in which he lived, it was written not by Huck but by a Mark Twain who, by 1885, was ready to challenge norms he had accepted as a child (Fishkin, *Jim* 234–38).

Sadly, over the last 140 years, more often than not, critics viewed Jim instead as a character who embodied stereotypes drawn from minstrelsy, seeing him as a very limited comic foil to the white[1] child at the story's center. There have been some notable exceptions, most recently, my own book, *Jim: The Life and Afterlives of Huckleberry Finn's Comrade*, which builds on the work of earlier critics who did not mistake Huck's view of Jim for Twain's. These include Sterling Brown, Jocelyn Chadwick, Ralph Ellison, Robert Paul Lamb, Hilton Obenzinger, Stephen Railton, Forrest Robinson, Neil Schmitz, David Lionel Smith, and Ralph Wiley. But the majority of the authors of the 40,000 books and articles written about the novel do not give Jim his due. In short, Jim has been sold down the river for nearly a century and a half.

Jim has been hiding in plain sight. He is more complex and multilayered than meets the eye. Paying him the attention that he deserves opens up new ways of understanding the history of racism in the United States. And it offers distinctive insights into the challenges of representing Black intelligence, emotion, and creativity

[1] The practice of capitalizing "Black" but not "white" has become increasingly common in recent years. As Alexandria Neason observes, "to capitalize Black is to acknowledge that slavery 'deliberately stripped' people forcibly shipped overseas 'of all other ethnic/national ties.'" (Neason qtd. in Wong). The Associated Press justified its decision to leave "white" lowercase by noting that "[c]apitalizing the term white, as is done by white supremacists, risks subtly conveying legitimacy to such beliefs" (Wong).

in a world that denied their existence – a challenge shouldered not only by Twain himself but also by scores of writers, Black and white, who followed.

Unlike slaveholding on the large cotton, rice, sugar, and indigo plantations of the Deep South, slaveholding in Missouri was small-scale, with most households owning or renting a handful of slaves to raise wheat, corn, barley, rye, oats, flax, hemp, and fruit; tend hogs and cows; mind children; and do carpentry, cooking, cleaning, washing, gardening, and ironing (Burke 26; Dempsey 26–29; Epps 46–53). Jim's principal duty is handling the cattle. As an enslaved man in antebellum Missouri, Jim has the same rights as the cattle under his care.

As Twain notes in his autobiography, in his youth "the local pulpit taught us that God approved of [slavery], that it was a holy thing" (Twain, *Autobiography*, vol. 1, 2010, 212). It was a world in which enslaved people were prohibited from learning to read or write and where their speech, mobility, social interactions, and deportment were constrained at every turn. It was a world in which both runaways (and anyone who helped them) were severely punished, and those who apprehended them could get rewards of thousands of dollars. Twain was born into this world in 1835. Fifty years later, he would become the first white male writer to portray a slave determined to be a father – and a surrogate father – even to a white child. Indeed, Jim is one of the first fully-drawn Black fathers in US-American fiction.

The precarity of Jim's situation and his hesitation about speaking his mind, even to a child like Huck, becomes clearer to students when they are told that in this world a slave could receive up to thirty-nine lashes just for directing insulting language at a white person (Dempsey 12). When Huck callously toys with Jim's very real grief and relief after the two are separated during the fog and then reunited, Jim's decision to shame and rebuke Huck by calling him "trash" is all the more remarkable, given the penalties that existed for insulting a white person.

Slave traders were a familiar, intimidating presence in Twain's hometown of Hannibal, Missouri, where every enslaved person lived with the awful knowledge that someone they loved could be taken from them suddenly, at any time. Twain vividly remembered "seeing a dozen Black men and women chained to one another, once, and lying in a group on the pavement, awaiting shipping to the Southern slave market. Those were the saddest faces I have ever seen" ("Jane Lampton Clemens" 49). Jim's terror at the prospect of never seeing his children again and being unable to protect them becomes more believable when we are reminded that this was a world where parents could be sold away from their children on a whim. Narratives from enslaved people such as Mary Armstrong, Emma Knight, Charlie Richardson, and Bill Sims preserved in the Missouri State Museum (Armstrong; Knight; Richardson; Sims) make this clear as does the slave narrative of William Wells Brown (33–34).

Jim is determined to save himself and those he loves from the potential terrors that fate might hold for them. His principal goal in life – that which drives everything he does from the moment he realizes Miss Watson is planning to sell him – is to seek his own freedom and that of his family. Jim's passionate pursuit of this goal comes from his awareness of the harm he and his family face by remaining enslaved. Given the intense shame Jim feels over having hit his daughter for not "minding" him before he realized she was deaf, the potential violence she might face while enslaved likely helped fuel his determination to secure her freedom, as well as that of her brother and mother.

Testimony gathered from Missouri slaves amply attests to what they had to endure. Mary Armstrong recalls, for example, that her owner "whipped my little sister what was only nine months old, … jus' cause she cry like all babies do, an' it killed my sister;" Emma Knight's father was "put on a block and sold 'cause de master wanted money to buy something for de house" (Knight). When Twain's father won a verdict against a man named William Beebe who owed him money, he had the sheriff seize an enslaved nine-year-old girl and sell her at public auction to satisfy the judgment (Dempsey 83). Jim's steely determination to buy or steal his wife and children out of slavery comes from living in this precarious world.

"In those old slave-holding days," Twain recalled, "the whole community was agreed as to one thing – the awful sacredness of slave property" (*Autobiography*, vol. 1, 1924, 101). It is easier to understand how all of society's institutions endorsed the legitimacy of slavery when we know that enslaved people accounted for a significant portion of the community's wealth and were taxed just as other property was taxed, with the revenue thus raised helping to fund state and local governments. Indeed, in 1847, in the county that includes Hannibal, such assessments accounted for more than ten percent of state taxes that were collected (Dempsey 78).

It is important for us to understand what transpired in Missouri after the thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution ended slavery following the Civil War in 1865 if we are to appreciate what happens in the last portion of the novel. The widely misunderstood period of Reconstruction was, in fact, a time when the formerly enslaved began to enjoy some political and civil rights. But the crucial presidential election of 1876 changed that. It was a tie between the Democrat Samuel Tilden and the Republican Rutherford Hayes. The Congressional commission authorized to hammer out a compromise that allowed Hayes to take office, basically giving the anti-civil rights Democrats everything they wanted – including in effect withdrawing all the federal troops that had been safeguarding the rights of Black people in the South. It ushered in a retreat from civil rights and a restoration of power to the former Confederate States. It was a period historians now recognize as a time in which conditions

akin to slavery were reestablished through sharecropping, lynchings, the convict lease system, and various violent forms of intimidation that effectively prevented Black people from exercising the rights they had been granted by law. As W. E. B. Du Bois would put it, "The Slave went free, stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery" (30). This, of course, is exactly what happens to Jim in the novel. The last third of the novel is increasingly recognized as Twain's satire on the breakdown of Reconstruction, a satire on how his country botched the enterprise of freeing the slaves.

How did those who inflicted this pain on their fellow human beings in the antebellum era and beyond justify their actions? One key factor is that the so-called scientific establishment of the day reiterated in treatises, articles, and books what it viewed as an established truth: that Black people were inferior to white people. Thomas Jefferson laid down the tracks for the racist ideology that would thrive for over two centuries and that is with us to this day when he wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that Black people were unintelligent, uncreative, and insensible to pain. Although we know today that Jefferson was completely wrong on every front, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this ideology remained to a large extent the conventional wisdom in both the academy and in the society at large. It justified keeping African Americans disempowered and dependent on whites (see American Antiquarian Society). It allowed many white Americans to accept their own place in their world as right and natural, and to resist Black equality with vehemence, violence, and cruelty.

The powers that be today in Tennessee, Alabama, Florida, and dozens of other states do not want students to learn about the shameful history of slavery or how the nation eroded the rights that had been granted to the formerly enslaved after the end of Reconstruction. But Twain's novel embodies and illuminates that history in fresh and powerful ways, perhaps as only a work of art can. Teaching this classic novel responsibly *demands* that teachers bring this history into their classrooms. The right-wing forces that have banned the teaching of history that might make some students feel bad are not about to ban an iconic work of US-American fiction by a celebrated white male author. But while *Huckleberry Finn* may not be challenged from the right, it faces censorship from the left – from well-meaning individuals who identify as progressive who misread the novel as bolstering the racism that it attacks.

Since the late 1950s *Huckleberry Finn* has been frequently banished from US-American classrooms. Although its repeated use of an offensive racial slur often figures in these bans, the characterization of Jim is often just as central. Students at the University of Massachusetts in 1966 protested the presence of Jim in their

classrooms arguing that they found his character “embarrassing” (“‘Huckleberry’ ‘hit’”). In 1994, Texas State Senator Royce West, who had sponsored a bill in the legislature that would have prevented any state funds from being spent on *Huckleberry Finn*, told an interviewer that parents did not view Jim as a positive role model for their children (qtd. in Fishkin, *Lighting Out* 114–16). In 2003, the book was challenged near Seattle, Washington, because, as one student put it, Twain portrayed Jim in a manner that was “degrading and denigrating toward African Americans” (Mitchell). In 2019, two New Jersey General Assembly members initiated a resolution to prevent the book from being taught in the state, because it “can cause students to feel upset, marginalized, or humiliated” (Anandanayagam).

Jim’s presence in US classrooms has been challenged in Arizona, California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and elsewhere. The parents and others behind these challenges argue that the book promulgates racist stereotypes rather than undermining them. They charge that Jim is a character drawn from minstrelsy and claim that he is presented in a manner that demeans, diminishes, and denigrates him – that shows him as a proper object of ridicule. But Jim is not drawn from minstrelsy and Twain does not present him as an object of ridicule. Challenging this canard turns out to be more important today than ever before.

As Eric Lott has shown, blackface minstrel shows were a theatrical practice that embodied a contradictory blend of “love and theft” from Black culture by white working-class US-Americans. Born in the 1830s, these shows became the most popular entertainment form in the nineteenth-century United States. They were revues featuring short burlesque skits, sentimental songs, and raucous dancing. The actors were usually white men, their faces “blacked” with burnt cork portraying ludicrous Blacks who were bumptious and boastful, fatuous fools who deserved to be objects of derision, but who were also able to make fun of the upper classes in ways that working-class audiences found appealing. Although early minstrel shows sometimes featured subtle instances of antislavery sentiment, by the time Twain saw his first minstrel shows in Hannibal, St. Louis, New York, San Francisco, and elsewhere, they had come to be undergirded by the pretense “that slavery was amusing, right, and natural” (Lott 4). The Black characters who appeared in minstrel shows were variously stupid, proud, gullible, ignorant, confident, passive, lazy, and impervious to pain. After the Civil War, most minstrel shows featured a deep nostalgia for the bygone plantation era, celebrating it in story and song. Minstrel shows – along with ubiquitous post-Civil War fiction that treated the vanished antebellum world as akin to Eden – helped white Americans forget the brutality inflicted on slaves in that world and

helped them ignore the continuing injustices and indignities imposed on Black Americans in the present (Berret 37–38).

The argument that Jim's character is based on racial stereotypes can be summarized like this: Minstrel shows demeaned Black people. Twain had fond memories of the minstrel shows he saw in his youth (Berret 37–38). Therefore, he crafted Jim in the demeaning image of the stage Negro of the minstrel stage. Many critics since the 1950s have viewed Jim primarily through the lens of the minstrelsy, claiming to identify echoes of minstrel-show dialogues, minstrel-show humor, and minstrel-show language in episodes involving Jim in *Huckleberry Finn.*

But we have to remember that Twain recognized that what minstrel shows presented had little to do with reality. As he wrote in 1873, three years before he began writing *Huck Finn*, "[t]he so-called 'negro minstrels' simply misrepresent the thing. I do not think they ever saw a plantation" (Twain, Letter to Tom Hood). He recognized that minstrels used "a very broad negro dialect." Why would he use that exaggerated form of speech in a book in which he tells us that he crafted the "Missouri negro dialect' (and other dialects) "pains-takingly and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech" (Twain, *Adventures* xxxiii)? Although Twain had enjoyed minstrel shows, he viewed them as fundamentally *artificial* concoctions created as a stylized form of entertainment. The distance between Black life and representations of it on the minstrel stage has been the focus of many scholars in the late twentieth century who have argued that "blackface performance was a fantasy of northern white performers, largely from middle-class homes who knew little or nothing of black life" (Lhamon 6). If "the so-called 'negro minstrels' simply misrepresent" the world of antebellum slavery, as Twain said they did, Twain had no reason to base the book's central Black character on the foolish clowns of the minstrel stage. There was no need for him to draw on these artificial concoctions when he had a plethora of authentic real-life models on whom he could draw.

The myth that Black people were stupid was blasted out of the water for Twain by an erudite guide he met in Venice during his first European tour, who was far superior to all the other guides on the trip. Throughout the trip documented in *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain voiced a steady patter of complaints about the stupidity, arrogance, and irritating manner of all of the tour guides the group met but this one (8). The guides constantly repeated boring, pointless anecdotes and were always trying to get the tourists to buy things (Twain, *Innocents* 65–67, 118–23, 163–64, 183). But in Venice he met a guide who was the child of South Carolina slaves, who knew his art history cold, and was bursting with learned insights into Venice's paintings, architecture, and history. His enslaved parents had come to Venice when he was an infant.

Twain wrote that "[h]e is well educated. He reads, writes, and speaks English, Italian, Spanish, and French with perfect facility; he is a worshipper of art and thoroughly conversant with it; knows the history of Venice by heart and never tires of talking of her illustrious career. He dresses better than any of us, I think, and is daintily polite. Negroes are deemed as good as white people in Venice, and so this man feels no desire to go back to his native land. His judgment is correct" (Twain, *Innocents* 240–42). One would be hard pressed to find as admiring a description of any Black person by any white writer in 1869. The terse four words with which this passage concludes sum up the travesty of the ideology of white superiority. The Black guide in Venice is not "as good as" any of the white guides Twain has encountered on the trip: He is vastly superior to them. His very existence made the "stupidity" myth dissolve into thin air (Fishkin, *Jim* 40–42)

The myth of Black stupidity was also challenged for Twain by his friendship with a man possessing one of the greatest minds of the century: the eloquent Frederick Douglass, whom Twain met through his father-in-law, who had helped Douglass escape slavery. And it was challenged as well, by his friendship with George Griffin, a remarkably smart man who worked as a butler in Twain's home in Hartford – but was also his sounding board, billiard companion, and literary advisor. In addition, there was Twain's friendship with a man named John Lewis, a tenant farmer in upstate New York, where Twain and his family spent summers. Lewis's quick thinking helped him save members of Twain's family from certain death when he managed, against all odds, to stop a runaway horse about to crash the carriage in which they were riding (Fishkin, *Jim* 42–50).

In addition to stating that Black people lacked intelligence, Jefferson maintained that they lacked imagination and creativity. Twain's rejection of this belief was undoubtedly fueled by his acquaintance with two enslaved men, Daniel Quarles, and a slave named Jerry. Quarles was a gifted, legendary storyteller whom Twain had the privilege of listening to every summer evening during his childhood stays at his uncle's farm (Twain, *Autobiography*, vol. 1, 1924, 389; see also Jim's Journey). Throughout his career as a writer, Twain aspired to have the same impact on his readers that Quarles' storytelling had on him. The enslaved man named Jerry introduced Sam Clemens to the possibilities of satire as a tool for social criticism decades before he chose the pen name Mark Twain. Jerry preached wonderfully insightful and inventive sermons from his master's woodpile for an audience of one: Sam Clemens himself. Fifty years later, Twain would write that listening to each satirical tour de force that Jerry came up with had convinced him that Jerry was the greatest man in the country (Fishkin, *Jim* 59–62).

Jefferson had also asserted that Black people did not feel emotions as white people did. But Twain had been exposed to enough Black suffering and grief to disabuse him of this idea as well. Mary Ann Cord, the cook at Quarry Farm, where Twain and his family spent summers after his marriage, told the moving story of being separated from her last child on the auction block and reunited with him after the war – a story so powerful it inspired Twain's first contribution to the *Atlantic Monthly*, "A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I heard It." Twain was also familiar with the pain conveyed in the slave narratives that he read (Fishkin, *Jim* 50–56).

In short, at a time when the reigning racial ideology of the day maintained that Blacks were mentally inferior, Twain knew personally a number of very smart individuals whose very existence undermined that belief. At a time when a leading encyclopedia denied that Black people felt pain just as white people did, hearing Mary Ann Cord eloquently describe her grief at being separated from her children stood as a powerful antidote, as did examples from Twain's reading and personal memory. And at a time when the culture largely dismissed Black creativity as inconsequential, Twain's personal memories of Daniel Quarles, an unmatched storyteller, and of Jerry, an impressive satirist, acted as a counterweight (see also Fishkin, "African Americans").

But while Twain had good reason to recognize these myths as myths, Huck, the narrator of his novel, does not. Huck largely buys into these myths and stereotypes of Black people, as Twain himself did when he was a child. But the adult Twain who wrote this book does not. A reviewer in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1885 shortly after the novel was published understood this, noting that "[r]unning all through the book is the sharpest satire on the ante-bellum estimate of the slave" (qtd. in Fischer 24). Alas, most – but not all – reviewers over the century after the novel came out and beyond have tended to confuse the perspective of the book's narrator with that of its author and assumed that Twain, as well as Huck, believed that the stereotypes outlined here reflected reality. Most critics failed to appreciate that Twain was trying to undermine these racist assumptions rather than embrace them.

The individuals I have described demolished for Twain the myth that Black people had no ability to think rationally, imagine creatively, or feel pain and grief, and each contributed in distinctive ways to Twain's characterization of Jim. In addition, three of them were fathers of daughters who mattered deeply to them; Twain himself was such a father when he was writing the novel. Twain's personal knowledge of these smart, creative, and feeling individuals factored into his crafting Jim as a character who himself is highly intelligent and highly imaginative, and who feels pain and betrayal deeply.

Twain had no need to draw on a form of popular entertainment shot through with nostalgia for the slave South as a key source for a book that mounted a devastating critique of that world. The "racial counterfeit" that was the minstrel show (Lott 38) – with its premise of Black stupidity, its nostalgia for the world of slavery, and its speech as exaggerated and broad as its over-the-top costumes and makeup – was not the key source for Jim that many have claimed it was. Seeing Jim as the stereotypical flat, passive, fatuous "stage Negro" of the minstrel show requires that we overlook the many occasions when he demonstrates knowledge, skill, agency, empathy, intellect, and understanding – as well as the extent to which he can openly show these qualities to white people. Every scene in which Jim is charged with embodying stereotypes drawn from minstrelsy may alternatively be seen to highlight Jim's perceptive strategies for self-preservation and self-empowerment (Fishkin, *Jim* 77–108), as even a handful of examples can demonstrate.

In the scene in which we meet Jim, in chapter two, for example, Huck and Tom decide to steal a couple of candles from the widow's kitchen. They find Jim sitting outside under some trees near the kitchen door; they fail to answer when he asks who is there and are sure he has not spotted them. When he starts to snore, they assume he is asleep. They sneak by, steal the candles, and leave a nickel on the kitchen table for them. Then Tom decides to play a prank on Jim by hanging his hat from a tree limb. When the boys leave, Jim palms the nickel. Afterwards, Jim tells a wild, over-the-top story claiming that witches bewitched him, put him into a trance, and rode him all over the state. "And the next time Jim told it he said they rode him down to New Orleans, and after that, every time he told it he spread it out more and more, till by the end he said they rode him all over the world, and tired him most to death." Jim hung the five-cent piece around his neck and claimed that it was "a charm the devil give to him with his own hands and told him he could cure anybody with it and fetch witches whenever he wanted to. . . ." Slaves would come from all over and give Jim gifts just to get a glimpse of that charm and hear him tell the story of how he got it (Twain, *Adventures* 3–8).

Chadwick Hansen wrote in 1963 that "[t]he Jim of this first episode is a recognizable type-character, the comic stage Negro. . . . We are free to laugh at him, that is, because his ignorance is so sub-human that he cannot feel mental pain" (46). Similarly, Fredrick Woodard and Donnarae MacCann wrote in 1985 that "[t]he swaggering buffoonery of the minstrel clown is represented early in the novel when Jim awakes and finds his hat in a tree (one of Tom's tricks), and then concocts a tale about witches and the devil. . . . Jim and the other slaves have the superstition-steeped minds that give the whole scene a minstrel flavor" (145). But we get a different

reading of this scene from Ralph Wiley, David Lionel Smith ("Huck, Jim"), Robert Paul Lamb – and Percival Everett.

Wiley's reading is a remarkable blend of criticism and creative writing: his 1997 screenplay *Spike Lee's Huckleberry Finn* (Fishkin, "In Praise"). Wiley, a brilliant Black satirist and sportswriter who coauthored all of Spike Lee's books with him, wrote this screenplay in the hope of persuading his friend Lee to produce it. Although Lee did consider the project seriously, the film was never made. However, Wiley allowed scenes from the screenplay to be published for classroom use, and they have been performed in US classrooms now for more than two decades (Fishkin, *Jim* 346). In Wiley's screenplay, Huck tells the story, as he does in the book, and the voice-over narrator speaks Huck's words – but the camera shows us the scene as Jim sees it. In this first scene with Jim, in Wiley's screenplay (as in the novel) the boys fail to be quiet as they sneak up on Jim: "I fell over a root and made a noise," Huck tells the viewers (Twain, *Adventure*s 6). Wiley notes in the stage directions: "Only a fool would not have seen the boys. So Jim pretends to be one" (qtd. in Fishkin, *Jim* 347).

Most people who heard a noise in the dark that they could not identify would keep listening in silence until they heard it again. They would not announce, "Well, I know what I's gwyne to do. I's gwyne to set down heah…ahh!... and listen till I hears it agin" (Wiley qtd. in Fishkin *Jim* 347). The latter behavior – announcing that you are going to listen – is the kind of thing one would say to humor children who think they have managed to hide from you when you know perfectly well where they are. Wiley assumes that Jim is not actually asleep, that he is aware of what is going on around him. Why else would Twain have Huck tell us that "I fell over a root and made a noise" as they are sneaking up on Jim? Or why, the next moment, would he have Huck struggle with not being able to scratch an itch? (Twain, *Adventures* 6). The boys are making a racket, and Jim has heard them.

Interestingly, Percival Everett reads this scene in a similar way in the opening paragraphs of his 2024 novel, *James*, although rather than humoring the children, he is simply behaving as they expect him to behave: "The moon was not quite full but bright, so I could see them as plain as day, though it was deep night." James performs a stereotypical role because "it always pays to give white folks what they want" (Everett 9). But while Twain has Jim spin a brilliantly creative story about witches and the devil with creativity and confidence, Everett's James here simply performs the stereotype – he pretends to actually *have* the "superstition-steeped mind" (Everett 10) that Woodard and MacCann accused Twain of giving Jim. Both Jim and James recognize that white people expect them to be superstitious. But Twain's Jim turns that expectation to his advantage, even managing to get paid for his performance and "most ruined for a servant" (Twain, *Adventures* 6) in the process. He shows himself

to be just as smart as Everett's James even if he does not carry on imaginary conversations with Montaigne and Locke.

Jim's wild tale about being ridden by witches and having seen the devil allows him to sidestep potentially dangerous questions about how he got the nickel. David Lionel Smith observes, Jim has "cleverly exploited the conventions of 'Negro superstition' in order to turn a silly boy's prank to his own advantage. . . . By becoming, in effect, an author, Jim writes himself a new destiny. . . . [I]t is intelligence, not stupidity, that facilitates Jim's triumph" ("Huck, Jim" 109). Huck does not see Jim's creative achievement here for what it is – much as he has trouble seeing Jim for who he really is. A number of critics have the same problem.

Another example is the scene where Huck and Jim discuss King Solomon. Woodard and MacCann call this exchange "minstrel-like repartee" (145). However, Neil Schmitz observes that "Jim has instinctively recognized in Solomon the figure of the slave holder, the white Southerner, who regards the Negro as chattel," recalling "his own children – all the black families, dismembered on the block" (32). Frederick Douglass heard Twain give a reading of the "Sollermun" dialogue in the Congregational Church in Washington, DC, on November 24, 1885, and came backstage to say hello and chat afterwards (Cardwell 22; Lorch 475; Paine, vol. 2, 785). Would Douglass, who deplored minstrel shows and all they stood for, have embraced Twain's performance with the enthusiasm he did if the key number in it involving Jim had struck him as redolent of a minstrel show? Jim is unlettered and ignorant, but he is still smart, and his unexpected response to Huck's tale of Solomon's "wisdom" makes us like and respect him, not ridicule him.

The scene in chapter 15 where Huck and Jim become separated in the fog is another section of the book in which some scholars find echoes of minstrelsy. Jim falls asleep on the raft in despair when he believes Huck is dead. When Jim wakes after the fog and sees Huck next to him, he is overjoyed. But Huck plays a practical joke on Jim and insists that he must have been dreaming. After trying without success to get Huck to admit he is lying, Jim pretends to interpret the alleged dream, as Huck seems to want him to. But when Huck points to the trash that has washed up on the raft during what was clearly an actual storm, Jim waits five minutes and then rebukes him sternly, leading Huck to apologize. Like many critics, Betty Jones sees Jim in this scene as a "sadly comic victim" who is completely fooled by Huck's prank (155) while Woodard and MacCann see him here as the stereotypical "head-scratching darky" (145).

In Wiley's view, however, Jim is not actually fooled by Huck's prank. Wiley believes that Jim – frustrated by Huck's refusal to admit the truth – decides to give him what he is asking for: a clownish, over-the-top, stereotypical performance. In Wiley's

screenplay, the stage directions tell Jim to affect a stronger dialect at this point, as he pretends to be the easily manipulated dupe that Huck wants him to be. This idea is not Wiley's invention, it is Twain's. Twain has Jim call Huck "Boss," a name he has not used before but that would be at home in a minstrel show: "Well, looky here, Boss," Jim says. Jim addresses Huck with this deferential name *twice* in this scene but nowhere else in the book (Twain, *Adventures* 103).

In Wiley's view, Jim behaves in this scene as any parent would who wants to lead a child to admit they are lying: He carefully reconstructs what happened during the night, step by step, giving Huck the chance, many times, to confess his prank – without success. Jim is then silent for a full five minutes as he weighs how to teach this stubborn, insensitive child what was wrong with his behavior. The child needed to be taught a lesson, but he was a white child, after all, and it was not clear how Jim might go about doing that. In Wiley's screenplay, when Jim drops the deceit and points to the trash on the raft, he says,

> You was los' en I didn' k'yer no mo' what become er me en d'raf'. En when I wake up en fine you back agin, all safe en soun'. . . . en all you wuz thinkin' 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. (*points to detritus on the raft, speaks calmly, clearly).* . . . **Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed** (qtd. in Fishkin, *Jim* 351, original emphasis).

The combination of Jim's affecting a heavier dialect to play the fool that Huck wants to make of him and the long pause he takes before he chastises Huck conveys how self-aware and perceptive Jim actually is during this scene. Wiley sees Jim as a father giving a rebellious adolescent the tutelage he desperately needs but has never had.

Other critics, as well, recognize the significance of Jim's response in this scene. Stephen Railton, for example, writes, "'[d]ignity' is too abstract a word for Huck's vocabulary, but Jim's answer is as authentically noble as any speech in Shakespeare." "What Jim insists upon here," Railton continues, "what Huck is made to see as the darkness brightens, is simply [Jim's] manhood. Because he is black, no one else in the novel even suspects it exists" (398). Huck does learn the lesson.

There is also a problem when it comes to cultural and literary sources that are supposedly the roots of scenes involving Jim. The plays of William Shakespeare, for example (a writer with whom Twain was obsessed all his life and especially during the period he wrote *Huckleberry Finn*) turn out to be a likely source for portions of the book involving Jim that critics claim to be derived from minstrelsy (Fishkin, *Jim* 108–09). African spiritual traditions are the most likely source for other scenes allegedly shaped by minstrelsy (Fishkin, *Jim* 84–85). And *The Big Bonanza,* a book that Twain's friend William Wright (who wrote under the pen name Dan DeQuille) composed in part in Twain's home shortly before Twain wrote the novel is also the

probable source for two other scenes often attributed to minstrelsy (Fishkin, *Jim* 109–11). Meanwhile, a section involving the white king and duke, as it turns out, probably does have roots in minstrelsy (Fishkin, *Jim* 76). While minstrelsy was one likely source that shaped aspects of the book, it was not the key source for scenes involving Jim.

Similarly, minstrelsy was not a key source of Jim's language. As I demonstrate, Twain went to great pains to distinguish Jim's "Missouri Negro dialect" from what we might call "minstrelese" – the kind of, in Twain's words, "very broad negro dialect" (*Autobiography*, vol. 2, 294) found in minstrel shows (Fishkin, *Jim* 111–26). Twain listened attentively to Black speakers and carefully tried to capture key characteristics of their speech on the page. In an 1874 letter to William Dean Howells, for example, he had written, "I amend this dialect stuff by talking & talking & *talking* it till it sounds right" (Twain, Letter to William Dean Howells). Reading Black dialect makes many readers uncomfortable, bringing with it, as it does, all the racist baggage of minstrelsy and caricature. But Twain did not see it that way: He saw it as part of his effort to convey the reality of a particular Black man's world with accuracy and nuance. While most of Twain's white contemporaries who wrote Black dialect did so for comic purposes, Twain did not. Mary Ann Cord (as well as other Black speakers he knew) had taught him that Black dialect was as capable as any other dialect of anything that so-called "standard English" could do (Fishkin, *Jim* 52–56).

For example, in order to demonstrate the capaciousness of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to convey important information, in 1882 Twain wrote his publisher, James R. Osgood, a letter detailing kinds of editorial judgments he was willing to accept in a manuscript he was about to send. "The letter would be unremarkable were it not for the fact that Twain decided to write it entirely in what Osgood would have recognized as Black dialect" (Fishkin, *Jim* 112–13). Furthermore, Twain emphasizes the care with which he crafted Jim's speech in the "explanatory" that opens the book: "In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary 'Pike County' dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork; but pains-takingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech" (Twain, *Adventures* xxxiii).

Twain crafted Jim's speech with great care. In his notes for the novel, Twain had told himself, "Let Jim say putty for 'pretty' and nuvver for 'never'" (Twain manuscript qtd. in Doyno 122). But, as Victor Doyno observes, when Twain was revising the emotionally powerful scene in which Jim expresses his guilt over having hit his deaf daughter for not doing as she was told before he knew she was deaf, Twain first followed the rule he had come up with for Jim's speech, writing "de chile nuvver

move!," but then crossed out "nuvver" and substituted "never" – a "highly unusual modification of dialect form to standard language" (122). Jim says "never" instead of "nuvver" a second time in this passage (122). After Jim describes yelling "*pow*! Jus as loud as I could yell," Twain has Jim say, "'*She never move!* O, Huck, I bust out a-cryin', en grab her up en my arms en say, 'Oh, de po' little thing! de Lord God Amighty fogive po' ole Jim, kaze he never gwyne to fogive hisseff as long as he live!' O, she was plumb deef en dumb, Huck, plumb deef en dumb – en I'd ben a-treat'n her so!'" (Twain, *Adventures* 202). In the left margin, near "She never move!," Twain had written, uncharacteristically, a note to the copy editor in pencil: "'This expression shall not be changed'" (qtd. in Doyno 122). Twain always has Jim say "never." In minstrel shows the word "river" appears as "ribber," and the word "give" appears as "gib." But Jim never says "ribber" or "gib" but always "river" and "give" (Fishkin, *Jim* 116–18). There are dozens of other examples of the pains Twain took to differentiate Jim's speech from "minstrelese" (Fishkin, *Jim* 116–21).

Several scholars have studied in depth the Black English Twain writes in this novel. For example, after a systematic study of Jim's use of thirty-one specific features of African American Vernacular English, Lisa Cohen Minnick concluded that "Twain incorporated features that have been identified with African American speakers in the scholarship, and he did so in a way that reveals his understanding of . . . the phonology and grammar associated with black speech." In Minnick's view, "the evidence that Twain actually uses the depiction of Jim's speech to disparage him is simply not found in the text of the novel" (66–67, 73). After undertaking a similar study, Anne Lea Ryan concluded that "Twain portrayed Jim's dialect realistically and respectfully and did not intend to create racial controversy through the use of his dialect" (16). But both Twain and Jim seem to have fallen victim to a phenomenon Holger Kersten has observed, writing about nineteenth-century US-American literature: "Critics assume that the selection of dialect as a literary medium implies derogatory if not racist intentions" (95). While that assumption may be correct in some cases, it is not relevant here. Whether we focus on the lexicon, grammar, or orthography of Jim's speech, Twain wanted to make sure that Jim most definitely did not sound like someone in a minstrel show. His many corrections in the manuscript – even his marginal instructions to the copy editor – all bear this out.

The assumption that minstrel shows were the most significant influence shaping Twain's creation of the main Black character in the novel is both facile and misleading. Sterling Brown understood this in 1937, calling Jim "the best example in nineteenth century fiction of the average Negro slave. . . . And he is completely believable" (*The Negro* 68). This comment is all the more significant given that Brown was widely known to be "bluntly honest and unhesitant to confront racists insult for insult," as

David Smith reminds us ("Black Critics" 119). Some thirty years later, Brown's words would be echoed by Langston Hughes, Milton Meltzer, and Charles Eric Lincoln, who called Jim "one of the best portraits in American fiction of an unlettered slave clinging to the hope of freedom" (Hughes et al. 235). Critics' obsession with viewing Jim through the lens of the minstrel show reveals their own limitations rather than Twain's. I, too, initially misunderstood and misread Jim, making comments published in the 1990s about his having a "diminished voice." In 1993, I referred to his voice as "cramped within boundaries as confining as his prison-shack . . . It is not a voice with which any student, black or white, whose self-esteem is intact, would choose to identify for very long" (Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?* 107). I reject that view completely now and say so clearly in my new book (Fishkin, *Jim* 124). I also disagree with the idea that students would not want to identify with Jim, as chapter seven of my book, devoted to Jim in the high school classroom, makes clear (Fishkin, *Jim* 9–10, 311–37; see also Nogowski).

I argue that Twain saw Jim as intelligent, responsible, quick thinking, and mature – as someone as smart and resourceful as, say, George Griffin or John Lewis. Twain also saw Jim as a parent who cared about his children as much as Mary Ann Cord cared about hers and was as pained as she was when she was forced to be separated from them. And Twain saw Jim as a creative storyteller as talented as Daniel Quarles or Jerry. Twain crafted Jim as a smart and resourceful figure, as a man with intelligence and agency, as a creative storyteller, and as a caring father weighed down with guilt about his own children who deals with that guilt by protecting two children who are not his own. But many readers have trouble seeing past the racist stereotypes ubiquitous in Twain's world and still present in our own (Fishkin, *Jim* 66–67; see also Nogowski). Teachers should not teach this novel if they are unprepared to grapple with the history it engages and the irony through which it does so – with Twain's decision to satirize racism by telling the story through the eyes of a child too innocent to call out the flaws of the racist society in which he lives.

However, teachers who do feel equipped to do this should not be stymied in this effort by challenges from the right *or* from the left (Fishkin, *Jim* 341–56). I include in my book an appendix of "Notes for Teachers" designed to simplify the challenges of teaching the novel (Fishkin, *Jim* 341–56). *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* offers a critical lens on the United States' complex history, challenging readers to confront uncomfortable truths about racism and societal norms; it has the capacity to engage them in profound discussions of race, morality, and empathy. At a time when teaching the accurate history of US-American racism is under attack and when a book that can illuminate that history and do much, much more is often banned, the issues addressed in this article are more important than ever.

Keeping this extraordinary novel in our classrooms can help students appreciate how racism distorts our understanding of the past, of the present, and of each other. This novel can illuminate in fresh and powerful ways the brutal nature of the racist road-blocks (subtle and unsubtle, intentional and unintentional, small and large) that pre-vent so many from living their best lives.

Huckleberry Finn evokes – perhaps as only a work of art can – both the boldness of founding a nation on the ideals laid out in the Declaration of Independence and the brazen hypocrisy that allowed those ideals to be violated so fully from the start. It is perhaps unsurprising that the persistence of racism in our world has fostered a myopia that has prevented so many from recognizing Jim's full humanity until now. Jim's astute ability to weigh the complexities of any situation is, indeed, remarkable – as is his compassion, his sense of justice, his creativity, his generosity, strength, and integrity – and his refusal to let a world that denies that he is even human con-strain his ability to love. Twain's daring experiment of presenting Jim through the eyes of a child with such a limited understanding of what he is seeing assumes that we, as readers, will understand things that Huck never did. Even at the time he wrote this novel, Twain trusted his readers to see through the whitewashed history of the United States' racist past that was being presented as truth and that has continued to be foisted upon each new generation ever since. He trusted them to read the story he placed before them and to recognize the phenomenon that he would later call the "lie of silent assertion" – "the silent assertion that there wasn't anything going on in which humane and intelligent people were interested . . . and are engaged by their duty to try to stop" (Twain, "My First Lie" 440, 441). Do we have the courage to honor that trust, to be the readers he hoped we could be? The jury is still out.

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Paneling to Avoid 'Deer in the Headlights' Moments in Class: Critical Race Theory Counterdialogues in a Seminar on Percival Everett's Novel *James* (2024)

Vanessa Vollmann

ABSTRACT

There is much anxiety swirling around when three forces meet on the first day of class in a new semester: a new topic, a new group, and a new educator. "Paneling" is a guided group-work teaching tool that counters this uncomfortable atmosphere. It also equips every student with expertise within an academic framework at the very start of the semester, which can be helpful if a course addresses sensitive topics.

This article describes paneling in a literary studies course that considered Percival Everett's 2024 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *James* as a Critical Race Theory (CRT) counterstory to Mark Twain's 1884 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, hypothesizing that Everett's novel equips the character James with the agency he is deprived of in the original text. This assessment is underscored by Twain's extensive use of the n-word and the complexity of navigating it in classrooms today.

A CRT reading of both novels, and particularly dealing with the unspeakable word, necessitated that students have an astute understanding of the concepts of structural racism and sexism before engaging with coursework. Therefore, the panels were (1) The Magical "Negro" Trope, (2) CRT and The Deconstruction of DEI, and (3) The N-Word and Bookbanning. By the end of session four, the students were well prepared to engage with the course subject after actively participating in group work and in plenary presentations about the concepts surrounding systemic intersectional oppression, while being aware of fragile and defensive reactions that may characterize such discourses in a predominantly White space.

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KEYWORDS
CRT, structural racism, n-word, counterstory, group work

“When shall we three meet again in thunder, lightning, or in rain?
When the hurlyburly’s done,
When the battle’s lost and won.” (Shakespeare 7)

Silence and Anxiety on the First Day of Class

As educators, we all know the feeling of anxiety swirling around the classroom on the first day of class in a new semester: a new topic, a new group, and a new lecturer. The students do not know each other yet, they are not sure of the lecturer’s expectations and style, and they are generally concerned about not being “good enough.” The most common reaction to such anxiety is silence. However, awkward silences are contrary to teaching objectives that include eliciting, pair and group work, or plenary discussions; instead, this silence creates “deer in the headlights” expressions on many a student’s face starting from the first session. This is especially true when the topic of a course might additionally prove personally and emotionally taxing for students. An example of such a topic is the discourse around structural racism, which was central to a literary studies course I taught in the winter semester 2024/25 at the University of Passau, Germany. This is a small university located approximately 200 kilometers from Munich, near the borders of Austria and the Czech Republic, and the majority of its students hail from rural Bavaria. The course was part of the English teacher training program at the American studies department, which meant that English was mostly the students’ second or third language; additionally, there was no native English-language speaker in the classroom except for me. The classroom was predominantly White[1]; I am a German woman of Color. The students in this course were early academics in their second or third semesters.

In a majority White rurally-coded young class setting in a majority White university, the students’ intuitive awareness of the centrality of race and racism in Percival Everett’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *James* in this classroom was immediately tangible when the students understood that *James* is literally a “counterstory” to Mark Twain’s 1884 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the perspective of the Black enslaved protagonist Jim (aka James). The term counterstory here means the Critical Race Theory (CRT) method of using storytelling to “name a type of discrimination” (Delgado and Stefancic 51) for minority communities that has been overlooked or left out of the dominant narrative. Since the novel by the White author Mark Twain is

[1] “White” is capitalized in this article in line with capitalizing the terms “people of Color” and “Black.” All three refer to racial groups.

often still labeled as one of the great American novels despite its frequent use of the n-word, a literary studies course on the counterstory to this epic by an African American author was bound to unpack just how intrinsic structural racism can be to canonic storytelling.

To my mind, traditional, lecture-based approaches are often insufficient for teaching sensitive and complex topics such as structural racism; therefore, this article proposes the teaching tool of "paneling," a structured and guided creative group work tool that reduces student anxiety, encourages participation, and builds the critical competencies required to engage with racialized literary discourse. This is supported by the conversational tone adopted in this article, an intentional methodological and pedagogical choice grounded in three key considerations. First, it reflects Aja Y. Martinez's 2020 trailblazing scholarship that added several tenets to the six CRT principles established in the 1980s. In them, she emphasizes the importance of accessibility and seeks to resist overly elitist academic language in order to engage broader audiences beyond the academy. Second, the teaching tool of paneling is effectively a guided group exercise that fosters the in-class creation of conversations in the respective panel groups, which are then "performed" in front of the rest of the class. The task, therefore, being inherently dialogic, centers conversation as a means of knowledge production, and the chosen informal tone, in turn, reinforces this epistemological stance. Third, given the article's practical focus on classroom implementation, the conversational register enhances clarity and usability, making the pedagogical strategies more readily transferable to teaching practice. A memory log of one such "conversation" in a panel from the *James* course is provided as an example at the end of the article. This conversation, authored by the students in the panel, focuses especially on fragile and defensive reactions that are often part and parcel of a racism discourse, particularly in a White-majority context. In this case, the conversation structure highlights MAGA rhetorical tactics.

My assumption going into the *James* course was that most students had probably not yet practiced critical thinking while exploring a racialized text, and that there might be a lot of insecurity about appropriate terminology for discussing structural racism in a literary text. This is why I chose to introduce key concepts needed to understand the systemic nature of racism early in the semester. Paneling in this way channels students' creativity in a playful manner. This type of group work allows for a creative student-centered guided exercise in sessions two through four, replacing the traditional lecture format and enabling students to exchange ideas and practice arguments in a relatively safe space as they get to know each other. It allows every student to acquire some expertise in at least one academic framework necessary to begin grasping the notion of structural racism early on.

In the first session of the course, the students are divided into groups of four or five, which I call panels, and each panel has a name.[2] The readings I assign in this session are mandatory, with the objective that the second session begins with every student having prepared a different text. The second session, then, is a guided in-class panel-preparation session in which the educator assists each panel group individually. This second session has two objectives: (1) The students individually summarize their texts to each other and critically position them. (2) The students come up with a creative way to present the concepts they have read about to all the other panels in a presentation of about ten minutes in plenary. These presentations take place in sessions three and four. This way, the students become consciously and oftentimes playfully aware of the scope of knowledge needed to navigate a critical discourse and analysis of structural racism in a literary text while acquiring a solid set of cross-racial social skills that they can practice throughout the rest of the semester. They also get to know each other, which is an additional boon to all other pair work and group work in the course.

***James*, the N-Word, and Critical Race Theory**

When *James* was published in 2024, against the backdrop of Donald Trump's second presidential run against Kamala Harris, a woman of Color, it felt like a pertinent moment to investigate Twain's prolific use of the word "nigger" in the novel, used all of 211 times. This frequency is significantly different from his use of the racial slur in the novel's prequel, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, published in 1876, in which Twain used the word only nine times. Some scholars, among them Shelley Fisher Fishkin, argue that Twain recognized that the term "embodied and enabled society's racist norms" and that he "makes those norms the object of his lacerating satire in order to push the reader to recognize and reject them (vii–viii). And yet, argues this article, even if students today were to understand both Twain's satirical objective and the fact that Huck does not *intend* to be racist in the novel, this does not lessen the *harm* the use of such a term can cause in a classroom. In this context, I consider it important to reflect, especially from a pedagogical perspective, on whether a novel that uses the n-word so often should continue to be considered one of the canonical novels required to teach the history of slavery and to critically assess this aspect of US history at all. The question that I ask as an educator and as a woman of Color is whether we should continue to insist that a novel be read in courses, when, at the same time, readers will not be able to speak about what they are reading, simply because the n-word *is* unspeakable and distressing to hear in a classroom, not only but especially for people of Color. If we are really interested in Jim's voice in the

[2] In the *James* course, we had three panels: (1) The "Magical Negro" Trope; (2) CRT and the Deconstruction of DEI, and (3) The N-Word and Bookbanning.

world Twain created, maybe it is time to reconsider focusing on the voice Everett gave this character 140 years later instead.

Everett's expansion of Twain's character Jim in *James* gives the character Jim/James a voice in a story that centers his (Black, grown-up, enslaved, male) experience in a way that Twain's characterization of Huck's "friend" Jim does not (as this narrator is a child). *James* follows the original story for a long time before it takes a most compelling turn. In Everett's novel and in contrast to his character in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, James' language also comes replete with a different set of grammar and vocabulary, depending on whether he is talking to White or (enslaved) Black people; he is a complex literate and knowledgeable character; he calls on the writings of Locke, Montesquieu, and other enlightened thinkers; he is a philosopher, a friend, a father, a husband, and also a man who endures the physical mistreatments and the horror of being a pawn in his own life that being an enslaved person meant.

Two things are true about *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: For one, it was controversial from the moment it was first published, albeit for different reasons than now. And secondly, while it remains controversial in our day, it has also retained a high rank among the recommendations of what should be taught in high school over the past 40 years, as observed by Leonard and Tenney in the 1990s ("Introduction" 1) and Fishkin in 2025. In a statement on her website around her new book *Jim: The Life and Afterlife of Huckleberry Finn's Comrade* (2025), Shelley Fisher Fishkin points out that "Jim . . . is viewed as an emblem both of Twain's alleged racism and of his opposition to racism; a diminished character inflected by minstrelsy and a powerful challenge to minstrel stereotypes; a reason for banning Huckleberry Finn and a reason for teaching it" ("Events and News"). This continued controversy over the decades, along with the reception of the novel in spaces of learning, made it obvious to me that there was no question that teaching *James* in a classroom would have to include extensive knowledge of terminology regarding the racism discourse and the systematicity of structural racism, not only in contemporary US society but also in our own European social contexts.

Robin DiAngelo argues that talking about racism often triggers defensive reactions in predominantly White spaces, which classrooms in Austria and Germany generally tend to be. She explains that White people who had not been taught cross-racial skills lack "the ability to sit with the discomfort of being seen racially" (7). They are just not practiced in it, being, as they are, usually part of dominant society. The triggers, she argues, can be found in the good/bad binary frame in which discourses around racism often take place. Becoming triggered around the racism discourse happens when we do not see racism as structural and built into the systems of our society that we navigate every day, but as "simple, isolated, and extreme acts of prejudice

[that are] intentional, malicious, and based on conscious dislike of someone because of race” (71).

In my experience, the vast majority of students who sign up for an English language course, the description of which cites the investigation of the novel *James* by the African American author Percival Everett as a counterstory to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by the White author Mark Twain, will be interested in the topic from a specifically *not-racist* point of view as opposed to a racist point of view.[3] Even so, this is still indicative of a tricky situation as DiAngelo argues that, viewed through a good/bad binary lens, the common assumption is that racists will be seen as “bad” (72). On the other hand, “not racists” will probably be linked to terms such as “progressive, educated, open-minded, well-intentioned, young” (72).

Students in a course that negotiates the perception of structural racism in a literary text, such as *James*, but who do so through a good/bad binary lens and not with an awareness and understanding of structural racism, might, therefore, be operating from one or more of the following claims or their paraphrases recorded by DiAngelo:

- “I was taught to treat everyone the same” (77);
- “I don’t see color” (77);
- “My parents were not racist, and they taught me not to be racist” (83);
- “I lived in [Nigeria] and was a minority, so I know what it is like to be a minority” (78);
- “Focusing on race is what divides us” (86);
- “My family is multiracial” (78).

While people’s – and by extension – students’ intentions might be good when uttering such phrases, doing so can perpetuate a colorblind attitude.[4] This is problematic in a discourse on racism, even if the claims are true, because the key point is not whether they are true or not. DiAngelo points out that “all these claims ultimately function in a similar way: they all exempt the person [talking] from any responsibility for or participation in the problem. They take race off the table, and they close (rather than open) any further exploration” (78). If this is pointed out to a student who has not yet internalized the systematicity of racist structures but is working from a good/bad binary perspective, it will naturally lead to a defensive reaction in a person whose self-perception is that she/he/they/* are *not racist*. This is especially true for someone who is not skilled in navigating situations in which they experience racial discomfort. And being critically challenged on a well-intentioned claim as described

[3] The term “not-racist” is in line with Ibram X. Kendi’s scholarship. He uses it to describe someone whose *intentions* are not meant to support or who is not in favor of racist structures. His definition of being “anti-racist,” on the other hand, means to take part in pushing back against systemic racism through one’s *actions* (10–11).

[4] The term “colorblind” means the idea of dealing with racism by treating every person in the same way, regardless of their race (Delgado and Stefancic 170). Acting this way can “lead . . . to negating the existence of systemic disadvantages” (Vollmann 30).

above surely counts as a situation in which one is prone to feeling discomfort. The problem here is that the defensive energy "will go . . . to deflecting the charge, rather than reflecting on [one's own] behaviour" (72). This then, argues DiAngelo, "makes it effectively impossible for the average white person to understand – much less interrupt – racism" (72).

In a course with fifteen to twenty-five new students who know neither each other nor their lecturer, this dynamic is posited here as particularly counter to an engaging, open discussion culture. Quite the contrary, it leads to awkward silences. This is often simply because students are just too scared to say the "wrong" thing. Sometimes it is just a matter of clearing up terminology in a frame that does not feel threatening or accusatory. In the first session, some students simply do not know what the "right" word is to call a Black or Brown person and have trouble navigating the question of how "bad" the n-word really is. On the one hand, people do not want to feel language-policed; on the other hand, nobody wants to be considered a racist either – except racists, of course. But it is nonetheless possible that students might use racist language or claims if they are not equipped with the appropriate terminology and scholarly tools.

One recurring example illustrates this point: In most English-language courses on racism that I have taught at German-speaking universities, there has always been at least one student who insisted that the course (and I, most importantly, as his educator) understand that, when *he* uses the German word "Neger," it is not *meant* in a "bad" way.[5] I consider this a great opportunity to teach how the *intent* of the person wielding inappropriate language does not trump the harmful impact of the term he is insistent on using. This usually leads to a fruitful discussion in the classroom.

The complexity of teaching about structural racism in a predominantly White space also marked the atmosphere in the first session on *James*. In my experience, it is nearly impossible to confront students openly with this complex topic and introduce guidelines, frameworks, or definitions to support them in their quest without triggering fragile reactions. The traditional teacher-centered approach, which this article counters, would have been to introduce the concepts of CRT and "Intersectionality" in the first session and ask students to read about them in their first reading assignment. On their own, they would therefore have had to engage with the six complex CRT tenets that scholars developed in the 1980s to better understand how systemic racism and sexism are entrenched in US legal, social, and political structures, among them intersectionality. This would surely have led to an awkward silence during the session following the reading.

[5] In my experience, this point has only ever been brought up by students whose pronouns are he/his.

Another way to teach critical thinking through a CRT lens without eliciting fragile reactions or awkward silences is to forgo a teacher-centered approach altogether in the first few sessions. In smaller groups, it is often easier for undergraduate students in their early semesters to openly address any insecurities they might have in grasping the *systematicity* of structural racism as opposed to individual offensive racialized acts. Also, the concept of intersectionality is quite challenging to grasp in and of itself, as it speaks to how every person has a set of parameters, some of which carry social privileges and some of which carry disadvantages. Some students might not be aware of their own privilege or lack of it at the beginning of this course. Another reason they might feel triggered is that the subject of racism is so sensitive that the concepts of "structural racism" may be considered common knowledge in the mainstream cultural and social discourse. And yet, based on what students over the years have shared with me, the assumption that "one should know this" is so widespread that most students are reluctant to admit the limits of their knowledge and awareness and, as a result, stay silent. It is only once they have established that it is "safe" to share any such "lack" with their peers and their educator that a discussion has a chance of becoming fruitful and effective. This is why creating a safe space where making mistakes is not a concern needs to be a top priority.

The in-session panel work in the second session of my *James* course was based on Aja Y. Martinez's scholarship, in which she proposes to use CRT both as a methodology *and* as a method. She uses critical race methodology to challenge "master narratives" of White privilege (26). Regarding the format of paneling in this seminar, this master narrative is considered to include not only racial privilege but also such structural advantage that is based on gender, namely "male privilege." In a patriarchal society and a predominantly White setting, "master narratives" at the intersection of race and gender continue to be the default starting point even for critical discourses. As this course reflected critically on Everett's *James*, it was Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that was considered the master narrative.

To counter such a perspective through a CRT lens, Martinez posits that the additional tenets of "accessibility" (18) and "experiential knowledge" (15) are needed. "Accessibility" means taking the ideas of critical thinking out of the academic ivory tower and making them available to both those who are systemically affected and those who are oblivious to systemic structures of domination because they belong to the privileged and advantaged group and might not even be aware of it. By "experiential knowledge," she means that it is important that literary texts relating the experience of racism through CRT counterstorytelling should also be created *by* POC, who live the experience, rather than only *about* POC by people who do not experience racism personally, as they are not people marginalized by their racialization – i.e., White people. The pertinence of this is underscored by the fact that much of the civil rights

and antidiscrimination scholarship predating the birth of CRT in the 1980s was dominated by White and male scholars, as Richard Delgado so aptly points out (46).

The method by which Martinez challenges male and White master narratives is with the CRT tool of counterstory. By writing counterstories, she argues, we can tell "stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (26). Here she draws on Plato's dialogue structure and creates composite characters. Composite characters are fictional figures who speak to one another and unpack complex topics in an accessible format. For example, one of these characters could be a mentor figure with expert knowledge on the matter, who engages with a mentee figure, answering questions and rebutting or accepting challenges in a rhetorical back-and-forth. This is where the idea of Martinez's CRT expansion and the tool of paneling to avoid "deer in the headlights" moments and silences in class come together: The students create fictional characters in their respective panels, and these characters talk to each other. This is also where Martinez's "experiential knowledge" tenet is addressed: In a predominantly White classroom, the students in the panels can invent composite characters who are POC and/or women and then push back against dominant master narratives about these characters. By the end of the fourth session, each student will not only have acquired some expertise in a concept through their own engagement but will also have been exposed to their peers' thoughts and the educator's feedback on that work. All this creates a student-centered, safe environment in which students feel less insecure about making racist or sexist "mistakes" but instead openly ask their peers or their educator about terminology or even conceptual understanding.

Understanding that racism does not mean "simple, isolated, and extreme acts of prejudice" (DiAngelo 71) but refers to a "system of privilege based on race" (Wellman qtd. in Tatum 87) is not easy and will require repeated explanation and discussion. It is my experience that only when students feel safe enough to make mistakes without running the risk of being condemned as a racist or a sexist, do they actually ask the questions that might feel uncomfortable or even divisive. In fact, it can be helpful for the conversations between the composite characters that one or two are designated racists or sexists (with a disclaimer) and act out these (fictional) roles to underscore an argument.

It is here that some points of ethical soundness need consideration when it comes to having students roleplay racist, sexist, racialized, or gender-based characters or having predominantly White students (also) play the role of a Black or Brown person or a male student that of a woman. There is, of course, a near-unavoidable risk that students base their roleplaying on reductive stereotypes. I address any such infractions openly during the feedback session held in plenary right after the panel presentations. In the very relaxed atmosphere, it no longer triggers fragile reactions when I point out the use of harmful stereotypes – the session is usually very receptive, and the discussion is open

and respectful. My sense is that perhaps mistakes are indeed unavoidable learning experiences that are made in the actual experience of *practicing* abstract concepts.

To my mind, because the students are obviously not playing themselves and have put forward a disclaimer, they are able to critically assess how "their" character perpetuated racist/sexist tropes while at the same time formulating an informed and reflected academically and ethically sound position against the fictive composite character they created. In the few instances in which a student is clearly placing racist and sexist stereotypes in a panel presentation to offend other participants in the session, I have asked the student to leave my classroom.

Panel Assignments in Session One

In session one, I explain to the students that they will all be assigned to a panel. My experience is, as students have often later told me, that this terrifies them because they have not heard the term before and, as early academics, felt they should have. When I point out that all they have to do for the moment is divide the texts assigned to the panel among themselves, they tend to relax for the most part. In my experience, this first mandatory reading assignment should not exceed 10–15 pages[6], as it helps ensure that most students have read their respective texts by session two, fostering a qualified exchange of views that keeps students engaged and not overworked at the beginning of a semester, "hooking" them into the course. This is especially important at my university, since the American studies department does not mandate attendance. We follow a modular system, which means that students need to pass four modules to pass the course. In my courses, paneling is the first module, making up 20 percent of the final grade and effectively ensuring attendance at the beginning of the semester. In our system, "*not* hooking" students in the first session can lead to empty classrooms all semester.

At this point, I ask students to indicate which panel they are interested in taking part in with a show of hands, ask them for their names, and sign them up. Sometimes the panel of their first choice is already "full" by the time it is their turn, but I have never yet experienced pushback when I ask them to fill up another panel instead. When everyone has been assigned a panel, I ask the students to physically group in their panels to figure out who will be preparing which text. At this stage, the students

[6] The reading assignments can also be videos or podcasts that have been uploaded to the session's online learning platform. For the *James* course, they included Fabio Cineas's "Critical Race Theory, and Trump's War on It, Explained," Kimberlé Crenshaw's "The Urgency of Intersectionality," Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, Trip Gabriel's "He Fuels the Right's Cultural Fires (and Spreads Them to Florida)," Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham's "The Power of Black Magic and White Salvation in Film," Tyler Austin Harper's "A Bloody Retelling of *Huckleberry Finn*," James S. Leonard and Thomas A. Tenney's "Introduction: The Controversy over *Huckleberry Finn*," Avi Selk's "The 'N-Word' Makes *To Kill a Mockingbird* a Favorite Target of Bookbans," and Olivia B. Waxman's "Why Toni Morrison's Books Are So Often the Target of Book Bans."

do not yet know how panels work or what they will be doing in class in the next session. What they do know is that they will work with the other students assigned to their respective panels and that they need to come to the session prepared, i.e., have read their assigned text, or else they will not be able to participate in module one. In this way, paneling is one method of ensuring that, at least in their respective panels, they have learnt each other's names and most probably exchanged contact details with at least three or four other students in the first session, which is especially helpful for introverted or shy students who might otherwise go through an entire semester without exchanging a word with the person sitting next to them. My experience is that the original panels end up sitting next to each other for the remainder of the course and form quite a tight-knit connection by the end of the semester. To my mind, this is connected to how intense the work in session two is and how much fun they eventually have with their presentations in sessions three and four – even the very shy students often end up speaking up.

Panel Objectives and Presentation Options in Session Two

In the second session, I explain that every panel will present a specific academic framework in class. Two classrooms for a group of twenty are ideal for this session; this allows panels not to sit too close together and enjoy enough privacy to talk freely about their panel projects. Weather and setting permitting, one or two of the panels might even venture outside after the educator has introduced the panel objectives. The main task for each panel is to find a way to bring information about its topic closer to the rest of the class, because what they work out in session two will be presented to the rest of the respective class in the sessions three and four.

Following Martinez' concept of CRT counterstorytelling, the students develop the composite characters who will then present their topics as a "story" in a way that the audience remembers them. Most importantly, in setting up the panel work, the educator needs to reiterate that students should try not to be themselves and underscore how it is often easier to talk about a complex subject if they make up a personality. The students are instructed that they can be super creative or that they can decide not to be creative at all if it suits the mood of the panel best. They can use music and pictures, but they do not have to. It is important to stress that this will not influence their grade. Often, students in their panels seem overwhelmed at this point of the introduction to panel work, so it is imperative for the educator to remind them that, because they have done the required reading, they all have some expertise they bring to the table, and this expertise will probably differ from the knowledge the other students have as they have each engaged with a different text before coming to class. The educator is there to guide them through this session, the majority of which the panel will spend deciding how exactly they are planning to present.

Panel presentations can have a variety of forms – they can be a presentation, a roleplay, a scripted panel discussion, a debate, or an easygoing conversation between fictive friends. In my experience, students rarely give a presentation, but if they do, they can narrate and moderate the presentation as a group. A more creative option involves putting together a roleplay. One simple possibility I always suggest here is to use the format of a talk show, e.g., *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* One of the students serves as the moderator introducing the format and issues disclaimers that might be necessary, one is Jimmy Kimmel, and the remaining students are his guests who then engage in a controversial discussion.

In one session, a few semesters ago, a panel "invited" the critical race and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the concept intersectionality in critical thinking and is one of the founders of CRT, to the show. The other guest was the conservative US journalist activist, Trump loyalist, and CRT critic, Christopher Rufo. The discussion between the fictionalized Rufo and Crenshaw characters was about whether his interview on *Fox News,* which aired on 2 September 2020, had led to Executive Order 13950 (22 September 2020) issued by President Trump that "banned" CRT. In the interview, Rufo had called out Trump to issue an executive order about the abolishment of CRT from diversity training. Executive Order 13950 was based on a Memorandum dated 4 September 2020. In this Memorandum, CRT was framed as "being an integral part of diversity training at all levels of government-funded measures focused on gender and race equality" (Vollmann 9). In fact, CRT had never been that but had always only ever been taught at a graduate school level to investigate structural racism in an academic framework. Highlighting the coincidence of the correlating dates of Rufo's interview, the Memorandum, and the Executive Order made the discussion on the divisiveness of anti-CRT measures very accessible and easily retainable to the other students in the room. In this way, discussing CRT and using it as a framework for their final papers became quite popular. The students in this panel expressed to me that it had allowed them to engage with a highly complex and controversial academic lens in a space that had felt safe enough for them to develop their own thoughts and implement them in their academic work.

A panel presentation can also be a scripted panel discussion in which a moderator asks questions, and the different characters act out their roles. Of course, the roles depend on the panel topic. I often introduce another of CRT's counterstorytelling tools, namely, a time machine. This allows students to not only "invite" contemporary guests to our classroom but also gives historical voices from the past a space to speak their truths, especially in cases in which they were silenced in historical storytelling. In a literary studies course in the winter semester 2023/24, in which we were investigating Maryse Condé's 1992 *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem,* a panel used this format to present individual "witches" who were accused in the 1692 Salem Witch Trials.

This meant a student in the character of the historical Tituba came to class to tell her version of the story. As Tituba was a Black woman, this allowed the introduction of a distinction between the terms "sexism" and "misogyny" based on Kate Manne's scholarship (78). It was also a frame to introduce the students to Moya Bailey's concept of "misogynoir" (1), which refers to misogyny that only women of Color are affected by at the intersection of race and gender.

In a panel debate in the *James* course, the beginning of which is included as a memory log in this article, students discussed the necessity of upholding DEI measures to counter systems of injustice that are based on structural inequalities in US society. This led to a robust debate that became highly entertaining when two students from the audience joined the discussion – they were "undercover" panel members. One of the undercover panelists was someone who identified as being a White male, financially privileged legacy student from an Ivy League university – the demeanor of the student in character was entitled, loud-mouthed, and rude. This character stated that he was "fed up with the woke indoctrination of liberal ideology." After he was not able to "convince" the Black female scholar who was a guest on the show through his bullying language, he began insulting her personally in a loud voice. In this way, he was mimicking rhetorical strategies used by DEI critics in the MAGA movement.

The setting of a panel presentation can also be a coffeehouse or a bar. In a course about Toni Morrison's 1987 *Beloved* and Sue Monk Kidd's 2001 *The Secret Life of Bees* in the summer semester of 2023, one panel explored the concepts and systemic structures of the legacy of slavery and segregation at the intersection of gender. The students went into character as a group of women who were meeting for a cup of coffee. While the characters they portrayed were all women, they represented differently privileged members of society at the intersection of race. One was a rich White woman who cried and thought Black women were just always "too aggressive," which led to a discussion of Bailey's misogynoir stereotype of the "strong Black woman" (2) and Robin DiAngelo's concept of "white women's tears" (131). This panel, too, had been instructed to consider how to increase their peers' understanding of intersectionality and was very successful in doing so.

The "Six Thinking Hats" Technique

After the educator has explained the objectives and options the students have regarding the creation of their panels, they have thirty minutes for brainstorming using Edward DeBono's "Six Thinking Hats" method. The metaphor of six different conceptual hats is introduced by the educator through a visual on a slide, and the students spend five minutes per hat discussing their topic, guided by the concept of the respective hats:

- The White Hat (facts): Students gather facts and information about their topic. “What do we know?”
- Yellow Hat (positive thinking): The panel focuses on the positive aspects of the ideas. They discuss potential benefits, advantages, and opportunities for each concept. “Why is it a good thing to talk about this?”
- Black Hat (critical judgment): They start critically evaluating the ideas on the table. They identify potential risks. They weigh the pros and cons of each idea and highlight any drawbacks or challenges. “How might this go wrong?”
- Red Hat (emotions and intuition): This is where everyone openly expresses their gut feelings and emotional responses towards the topic at hand. They discuss their personal inclinations and share their enthusiasm or concerns about specific concepts. “This concept makes me feel …”
- Green Hat (creativity): The students share creative ideas without criticism. They generate diverse ideas, such as viral videos, interactive social media campaigns, and experiential knowledge.
- Blue Hat (process control): Panels summarize the key insights and guide the discussion toward the most promising ideas.

The six thinking hats technique is helpful for creative problem-solving and decision-making. The lecturer guides the panel work, provides (creative) input where it is needed, and answers questions for about thirty minutes. This is the most intense phase of the session for the educator who rotates between panels, giving input, answering questions, and pitching suggestions where and when needed.

In the next (and final) thirty minutes of the session, the panel groups make decisions on how they are going to bring their thoughts on the subject into a format that one can present, who will be doing what and when, and actually start scripting the project. In this phase, the educator needs to assess which group needs more guidance, and which group has come up with enough creative ideas and is happy to be left to their own devices. There are always slight differences in how engaged the participants in each panel become with each other and the topic, and it is sometimes a good idea to offer concrete advice by reminding them of the different options available for their presentation to help them make a decision.

When approaching a panel group that feels “stuck,” the educator can sit down with the students and ask what they have so far; sometimes it might even be necessary to make a specific suggestion as to different characters they could invent for a roleplay, for instance. Once the facilitator has given the panel an extra nudge, they usually pool their academic resources, draw on the reading they have prepared, and figure it out. In all the times I have been teaching using paneling, I have never yet come away from this session without a panel having figured out how creatively or not creatively they will be presenting their topic. After about sixty minutes, each group has a solid

structure for its presentations. Students then have the rest of the week to finish their panel presentations.

A CRT Quartalogue from the *James* Seminar

The creative text below is my memory log of a presentation in the panel “CRT and the Deconstruction of DEI Measures” by students presenting to their peers in the third session of the *James* course in the winter semester 2024/25. In this way, it is considered a counterstory in accordance with Martinez’s scholarship on CRT.

The students put up three chairs in front of the class. Sitting in the middle chair, the student representing the composite character of the moderator of a talk show introduced herself and then her guests, who represented other fictive composite characters. The other students in the room and I were this fictive talk show’s audience. Two other students were also part of the panel, but they were “undercover” in the “audience.”

“Welcome, everyone,” says the moderator, “to our special edition of *Make America Diverse Again*. Today, we are thrilled to have on the show the journalist and activist Christopher Rufo and Prof. Kerry Smith from the Liberal Arts College X. Christopher Rufo is an ardent supporter of deconstructing DEI measures. He has been an activist and writer about this topic, also regarding the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. We all know him from his many appearances on *Fox News*. Welcome, Christopher. It’s great to have you on the show.”

“Thanks for the kind introduction, it’s great to be here!” nods Christopher Rufo to the audience.

The moderator looks to her left and introduces her second guest. “I’m also so pleased to welcome Prof. Smith from the University of X, which is a Liberal Arts College in Texas. Prof. Kerry Smith teaches Critical Race Theory in a graduate program there and is likewise an activist writer. As a queer Black woman, she is critical of any policies that thwart social justice initiatives. Welcome, Kerry, it’s great to have you on the show. And thank you for taking the time to travel from Texas to our studio here in Washington.”

Smith nods and smiles, “It’s great to be here. Thanks for the invite!”

“Right, then,” says the moderator. “Let’s get started. My first question goes to Kerry–”

“Can I say something first?” interrupts Rufo. “It’s just that I think before we start asking questions, we should make our standpoints clear–”

Kerry Smith raises her eyebrows at this rude interruption.

The moderator retains her composure and says to Rufo with a confident, steady, stern voice, “Actually, it’s my job here today to decide how this discussion is set up.

Please wait your turn." She pauses and faces Smith, "Prof. Smith, could you share your thoughts on why you believe DEI measures should not be dismantled, and in what way you think teaching Critical Race Theory to children cannot be considered reverse racism or ideological indoctrination?"

"Sure," nods Smith. "Happy to clarify. Critical Race Theory is a methodology that is *never* taught to children. It's like saying that a children's book with a moral message is teaching Aristotle. Some newer children's books deal with the injustice of racism, but this has nothing to do with CRT–"

"Sure, it does!" shouts Rufo. "It should be considered illegal to brainwash children with the idea that racism exists everywhere. It only serves to make children ashamed of their heritage. That's not okay. You, as a mother and a woman, should know better!"

"Please let Prof. Smith finish, Christopher. You will have your turn in a minute. Prof. Smith?"

"Yes, thank you," sighs Kerry Smith. "Critical Race Theory has its roots in Critical Theory, based on the Frankfurt School of thought from the 1930s. These scholars were investigating the power structures that led to the empowerment of the Third Reich. In the 1980s, legal scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw applied this investigation to the legal system in the US, which was still perpetrating legal injustices, although the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s had happened, and the equality of all men and women regardless of their races, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, and ability was considered equal before the law. So–"

"Exactly!" shouts Rufo. "If everyone is equal before the law, why the hell do we need DEI measures? That's exactly my issue! Let's get rid of all these unfair measures! It's making it super hard to be a White man in America these days. This wokeness is destroying our society!" Rufo has raised his voice again.

"Well," counters Smith calmly, "we need DEI because, due to the history of America, there is no such thing as a level playing field when it comes to systemic privileges. We need people who have been structurally excluded to become more included. That's what Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion – DEI – means, after all. How can anyone be against that?! It's based on the idea that not everyone has the same set of privileges and disadvantages from the get-go. And those are just facts. And this has to do with our history, with the legacy of slavery and segregation under Jim Crow laws–"

Rufo throws his hands up in the air. "Not slavery again. It's not always about race, *professor*!" Rufo's emphasis on Smith's academic title is indicative of the disdain he feels for liberal education. He continues in a loud voice, "And slavery ended over 150 years ago, get over it. You people always make everything about slavery and segregation. There are poor White people in the US, too, you know!"

Smith raises her eyebrows and takes a deep breath. "Ignoring these legacies is just revisionist history. There is a reason the average African American household has less access to wealth. It's not because people have worked less hard. It's because the system was set up for centuries to benefit them less. An example is the historical subtly racist loan practice, in which loans, for instance, in the 1950s were either offered to African Americans at different rates or banks simply did not loan money to African Americans, period. It was not written in the bylaws anywhere, but this was a legacy that – at least in the South – was part and parcel of the modus operandi of most bank executives. Who, by the way, happened to be predominantly White men. That's structural. And that is only one example of a racially motivated structural financial disadvantage that has repercussions to this very day. Think of access to generational wealth like home ownership, for instance–"

"To me, that is just a lot of ideological bull," interrupts Rufo. "This idea that America has always been racist is the most unpatriotic thing I have ever heard. You are trying to destroy the very idea of America, professor. It's what institutions like yours do. It's not about learning anymore. It's about teaching ideology!"

A voice from the student body audience pipes up. "Yes, exactly! Finally, someone is speaking the truth. I've just had it with you people who are wasting American taxpayers' money. DEI *is* reverse racism!"

The moderator signals to the interrupting character (who is part of the panel), "Excuse me. This is not something we do here on the show. Please let the guests talk, and there will be time for questions later."

"You know what, lady?" shouts the interrupter. "I'm done with people telling me what to say. This is America. We have freedom of speech. Do you even know who I am? My name is Max Hall Jr. III. You all know my father."

The audience reacts with a murmur. They have understood that this disruptive "audience member" is actually part of the panel. Students smile at each other and the teacher (me), who was also not aware of this setup. From their body language, it becomes clear that the student audience understands that the panel is acting out an overbearing, entitled, and aggressive expression of White male privilege.

"Sir," says Prof. Smith. "There is no such thing as reverse racism!"

"Of course there is," shouts Rufo. "Black people can be racist, too!"

Kerry Smith shakes her head. "Let's be clear on definitions here. It's important to make a difference between prejudice and racism. Beverly Tatum teaches us that "people of color can and do have racial prejudice. However, if one defines racism as a *system* of advantage based on race, the answer is no. People of color are not racist because they do not *systemically* benefit from racism" (90, emphasis added). So reverse racism does not exist–"

"Oh man," cries Rufo, placing his face into his hands. "You university people – always about the definitions! Let's not forget America is a meritocracy. Seriously, you need to be fired. Do you even love your country?"

In a demonstration of MAGA rhetorical tactics, the disrupting figure and the fictionalized Christopher Rufo figure then drew the attention of the moderator away from the subject altogether in the final moments of the presentation.

The panel demonstrated successfully how, in contemporary political debates, facts and expertise are often no longer effective when brute force and bullying take the upper hand over a respectful exchange of opinions. When the panel presentation finished, a smattering round of applause was evidence of a convincing "performance." As a result, the class discussed in more detail the concepts of misogynoir, CRT, fragility, and privilege in a critical analysis of the individual roles of the characters until the end of the session, fifteen minutes later. Even when we had to vacate the classroom for the next session, the discussion continued in the hallway.

Student-Generated Knowledge and Comfort in the Classroom

Paneling fosters a secure pedagogical environment in which students can articulate and critically debate controversial perspectives, particularly on sensitive subjects such as structural racism. It equips them with appropriate terminology and foundational expertise, enabling sustained critical engagement with the course material going forward. Notably, the effectiveness of this format does not depend on explicitly introducing its meta-objectives.

Because panel presentations are integrated into sessions three and four, students engage with source materials collaboratively before presenting in plenary early in the semester. This shared vulnerability and close interaction enhances group adhesion and preparedness. Consequently, by the end of session four, students are well equipped to navigate the complexities of sensitive discussions, replacing initial uncertainty, the "hurlyburly," with productive inquiry and dialogue.

In a period in which critical thinking itself has been increasingly contested – particularly under the second Trump administration and with CRT as a focal point – its instruction seems more urgent than ever. This urgency applies equally to educators from minority backgrounds working within predominantly White institutional contexts, as well as to their White colleagues in similar environments. Paneling, as a pedagogical approach, facilitates the establishment of a relational proximity between educators and students, thereby fostering trust within what is often a sensitive discursive space. Simultaneously, it enables educators to articulate their own positionality in relation to the subject matter, which in turn strengthens their perceived credibility and supports an engaging classroom atmosphere for the rest of the semester.

Moreover, the creation of learning environments in which students are permitted to make mistakes while developing their critical thinking skills has become increasingly important. This need is further amplified by two intersecting developments: the rapid proliferation of AI tools in academic settings and the heightened public discourse around so-called "wokeness," alongside growing right-wing opposition to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. In this context, my experience interacting with students is that they often feel pressure to produce fully formed, linguistically precise responses to complex questions. Paneling mitigates this pressure by offering a space in which students can explore and articulate their perspectives on critical issues without the immediate apprehension of evaluation or judgment. Such opportunities for open-ended intellectual engagement are central to the aims of the humanities, where the cultivation of reflective, dialogic, and exploratory thinking remains foundational, after all.

About the Author

Vanessa Vollmann holds a doctorate in American studies and master's degrees in international relations and English studies. She teaches literature and cultural studies at the University of Passau, Germany. In her work, she analyzes power structures in US society, examining how social narratives emerge and are suppressed at the intersection of race, gender, class, and history through feminist and Critical Race Theory lenses. Her most recent research focusses on the Broadway musical *Hamilton*, the history of witch hunts, the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, the politicization of Taylor Swift and Beyoncé's art, Percival Everett's *James* as a counterstory to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the history of violence in the US, and the country music genre as a cultural practice.

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Investigative Aesthetics in the American Studies Classroom: Approaching 9/11 through Alejandro González Iñárritu's *11'09"1: September 11*

Juliane Gamböck-Strätz

ABSTRACT

This article introduces and explores the implementation, potential, and challenges of investigative aesthetics, a methodology established by the interdisciplinary Forensic Architecture Network, as a specific didactic method in the realm of aesthetic education in the American studies classroom, more specifically in the teaching or, rather, learning of 9/11. Investigative aesthetics is particularly suited to the hermeneutic inquiry of 9/11 because, as Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman emphasize, it is an anti-hegemonic approach to knowledge-production which acknowledges that the "capacity for collective sensing and sense-making" enables a collective to "work towards a renewed, careful, but politically powerful conception of truth practices" (4). By employing a multiplicity of methods, skills, and literacies, the methodology is inherently interdisciplinary. However, as its implementation also poses challenges, the article discusses the use of Alejandro González Iñárritu's short film in *11'09"1: September 11* (2002) as an accessible and low-threshold version of investigative aesthetics. By staging eleven minutes of (almost) visual silence, the film neither fits the dominant narratives and iconography of 9/11 nor lends itself to easy interpretations. Instead, its analysis requires a critical holistic, transnational approach, a reflection of presences and absences, a consideration of material involvements, and an openness of the learners to attune their senses to perceive and experience the film as an aesthetic object. The short film exemplifies the effects of shifting the sensibilities and of playing with different modes of perception, thus allowing the learners to simultaneously encounter the effect of 9/11 footage while also critically engaging with its aftermath.

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KEYWORDS
Forensic architecture, aesthetic education, teaching 9/11, media studies

"The anti-hedonistic quality of art is the tendency that experience of it leads away from the subject."
—Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetics* 239

In her 2017 *Manifesto for Slow Science*, Isabelle Stengers addresses future directions for institutional knowledge production that counter the accelerating tendencies in scientific practices and calls for a recognition of the interrelations inherent in the emergence of knowledge, present and absent positions, questions, and material involvements. By putting her "trust . . . in the plurality of reclaiming operations and the ways in which they may connect, weaving relations with and learning from each other" (139), she envisions knowledge production as a democratic, materialist, and pluralistic practice that remains critically aware of power-knowledge nexuses, thus demanding that researchers explore their object of study holistically. Her book, however, does not just respond to a desire to frame scholarly practices and outline axioms that should govern knowledge production, but her approach is also driven by the timely questions of citizen science – questions of how the knowledge that is produced in the infamous "ivory tower" should also be accessible and publicly understandable (1).[1] Besides these desiderata of academic practices that Stengers brings up and that might resonate with many researchers whose work is increasingly influenced by the pressures of competition and innovation, Irina Bauder-Begerow and Stefanie Schäfer note that contemporary teaching at universities in countries of the European Union is urged by politics (and economic spokespersons) to focus more strongly on the development of key competences, those competences that comprise the oftentimes only vaguely framed dimensions of "comprehensive knowledge, transferable skills, and individual attitudes for a whole number of professions within a new paradigm of lifelong learning" (11).[2] Ideally, university teaching should thus be able to meet and

[1] Stengers explicitly argues that these public "matters of concern" – a phrase borrowed from Bruno Latour, which he uses in distinction to "matters of fact" – "incorporate[] . . . the idea that there are situations that concern us before they become objects of preoccupation or choice, situations which . . . demand that 'we feel concerned'" (3). Still, they are neither always politicized nor necessarily "arbitrary or contingent expression[s] of political engagement" (3). I do not fully agree with this assessment as the political has always been intimately entangled with the personal as well as the research conducted at universities. As much as one might like to adhere to an ideal of an impartial science, current political developments and political interferences with higher education and scholarship in the United States and elsewhere prove that holding on to such an ideal might not only be idealistic but outright dangerous.
[2] The Council of the European Union has identified eight key competences for lifelong learning in its eponymous framework in 2018: literacy competence, multilingual competence, mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering competence, digital competence, personal, social and learning to learn competence, citizenship competence, entrepreneurship competence, and cultural awareness and expression competence (European Commission).

bridge all these challenges. While such a demand might represent an ideal that cannot – and maybe also should not – be met at all times,[3] there are certain topics that are especially prone to competence-oriented teaching in the American studies classroom, and the analysis of "9/11 texts and their negotiation of global, multi-cultural, many-voiced and plurisemiotic discourses," as Bauder-Begerow and Schäfer state in their introduction to the collected volume *Learning 9/11* (13), represents such a topic.

Moreover, these propositions for good scientific practices and teaching resonate well with the basic propositions of American studies, of the discipline's self-understanding as being democratic (Sielke 77), transnational (Pease; Waller), and interdisciplinary (Sielke 59). While there have been intensive debates about the methods of American studies, *teaching* American studies – and in doing so fostering these propositions – has not been (so much) at the forefront of academic scholarship (Oppermann 324), even though its significance for knowledge production is also encapsulated in a notion that most teacher-scholars would probably agree with, namely, as Uwe Küchler explains, that "[t]eaching is increasingly understood to be a context-sensitive form of learning, an exchange rather than a one-sided offer" (24).

Based on these preliminary considerations, this article explores the potential of aesthetic education in the American studies classroom, arguing that aesthetic education will help to implement more deeply the basic propositions of American studies. In doing so, my argument chimes in with the work of scholars such as Erica Fretwell and Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, who argue that aesthetic education should be considered a form of sensitivity training as it attunes the learners towards heightened forms of perception. This article will explore the implementation, potential, and challenges of investigative aesthetics, a methodology established by the interdisciplinary Forensic Architecture Network and particularly cultural studies scholar Matthew Fuller and architect Eyal Weizman, as a specific didactic method in the realm of aesthetic education in the American studies classroom and specifically in the teaching or, rather, learning of 9/11. As the negotiation of the historical event's cultural, political, historical, national, and transnational meaning cannot be disconnected from the devastation of that day, teaching 9/11 and its aftermath continues to pose a challenge. Investigative aesthetics, as I will discuss, is particularly suited to the hermeneutic inquiry of 9/11 because, as Fuller and Weizman maintain, it "seeks to challenge established formations of power over always complicated questions of truth" (19) by "develop[ing] both a focus on the political dimensions of sensation and feeling as they

[3] Bauder-Begerow and Schäfer in reference to Marlène Iseli's article "Schüsselkompetenzen im Studium – Eine erfreuliche Begleiterscheinung?" note that the question of the training of key competences in university education is oftentimes rather settled on as a "pleasant by-product" than an intended learning outcome (12). Reservations regarding key competences might also result from a widespread distrust towards the forced implementation in higher education and an ongoing debate over the transformation of the humanities to cater to economic demands (Chur 54, 56).

are crystallised in specific incidents, and also the experimental multiplication of what counts as sensors and sensing" (201).

In this article, an introduction to investigative aesthetics sets the stage for examining how its possibilities and limitations shape its use in the American studies classroom. Finally, I will argue that Alejandro González Iñárritu's contribution to the film *11'09"1: September 11* (2002) provides learning opportunities that connect to Stengers's ideas, train key competences, and implement an accessible and low-threshold version of investigative aesthetics. By staging eleven minutes of (almost) visual silence, the film neither fits the dominant narratives and iconography of 9/11 nor lends itself to easy interpretations. Instead, its analysis requires a critical holistic, transnational approach, a reflection of presences and absences, and a consideration of material involvements just as much as an openness of the learners to attune their senses to perceive and experience the film as an aesthetic object.

Investigative Aesthetics

According to Fuller and Weizman, investigative aesthetics is an anti-hegemonic approach to knowledge production which acknowledges that the "capacity for collective sensing and sense-making" enables a collective, or commons, to "work towards a renewed, careful, but politically powerful conception of truth practices" (4). It has developed as a sub-methodology of forensics, which focuses on the holistic analysis of objects that are given an evidential value in a court of law. In forensics, simply put, the object of analysis (such as a bone or an instrument allegedly used in the commission of a crime) assumes the role of an actant that is, figuratively speaking, "telling" the experts about its role in a crime. These experts then not only take the role of examiners, but they also function as translators who build an interpretive bridge between the language of the object and the audience (Keenan and Weizman 38–39).[4] Hence, forensics is concerned with technical procedures and examinations that can generate new narratives from the object of study. Still, it is not just a technical and scientific procedure, but it bears political, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions and intricacies (Keenan and Weizman 13). This intersection renders it also valuable for aesthetic education in the American studies classroom.

While a common modern use of the term of aesthetics implies that this branch of philosophy is concerned with matters of beauty, investigative aesthetics builds on the ancient Greek conception of *aisthesis* as the theory of the sensual, embodied perception of the world. Closely related to processes of cognition and particularly significant

[4] In *Mengele's Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics*, Keenan and Weizman sketch the evolution and workings of modern forensics by outlining the case of Josef Mengele's skull. In an attempt to trace Nazi criminals in the 1980s, an interdisciplinary team of experts examined a skull that was presumed to be that of the deceased Mengele. Keenan and Weizman not only trace the team's collaboration in their attempt to find out the truth, but they further point to this case as the birth of modern forensics.

in the ways that subjects come to know and act on the relations in the world, perception represents the subject's access to reality, its unmediated, embodied way of encountering the world. As Gumbrecht notes "[l]ived experience or *Erleben* presupposes that purely physical perception (*Wahrnehmung*) has already taken place, on the one hand, and that it will be followed by experience (*Erfahrung*) as the result of acts of world interpretation, on the other" (Gumbrecht 100, original emphasis). Reconciling perception and experience and exploring this connection mark central concerns of investigative aesthetics as well as of aesthetic education.

Basing investigative aesthetics on *aisthesis* and relating it to its roots in forensics, Fuller and Weizman argue that the methodology is therefore not concerned with questions of beautification but with the "careful attunement and noticing extending to the elaboration of precise means of sensing and sense making [sic]" (12), of registering instances of sensual, embodied perception that intervene with the usual, everyday experience of the world. Importantly, turning towards aesthetic experiences and paying close attention to perception can be very effectful as aesthetic experiences hold a destabilizing potential. As Michael Staudigl writes, taking such a phenomenological perspective bears the potential to "articulate the as yet mute experience . . . without all too soon incorporating it into preconceived conceptions, definitions, or essential determinations" (9, my translation). This disruptive and knowledge-destabilizing potential is also fundamental to Fuller and Weizman's concept of investigative aesthetics which "uses technology but interrogates the politics of the very technology it uses; it uses multiple platforms to represent things publicly, but queries the limits and politics of these fora of representation; it involves knowledge production while keeping a critical eye on the power-knowledge nexus" (17).

Investigative aesthetics considers media products as textures that produce information. Fuller and Weizman acknowledge that the way one uses these products affects the access, understanding, and interpretations that are produced. Emphasizing the situatedness of experience and perception, they continue to argue that digital technologies offer opportunities to modify the products so that these speak differently or more clearly to sensibilities of noticing. This "involves tuning into and interpreting weak signals and noticing unintentional evidence registered in visual, audio, or data files or in the material composition of our environment" (13). Investigative aesthetics thus describes process-oriented practices that pay attention to the "multiplicity of situated perspectives" (6).

In practice, the Forensic Architecture Network – a transnational collective of interdisciplinary scholars working on projects based on investigative aesthetics – reviews concrete sites of human rights violations. Recent investigations include reconstructions of historical events, such as the German colonial genocide in Namibia, but also cases concerned with ecological disasters, such as the 2023 chemical fire at the

Marathon Refinery in Garyville, Louisiana, and the Beirut port explosion in 2020, as well as analyses of recent war incidents, such as Israel's ongoing military campaign in Gaza following the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack. One of the latest investigations in the United States deals with the murder of June Knightly by a right-wing activist at a Black Lives Matter protest in Portland, Oregon, in 2022. While the gunman was charged with the murder and sentenced to life in prison in 2023, what sparked additional interest of the researchers were conflicting claims made by the police and witnesses. Police falsely claimed in public statements that "June died during a 'confrontation' between 'armed protesters' and 'an armed homeowner'" (Trafford et al.). In doing so, the police falsely held the protesters to be partially at fault. The research network's analysis of video evidence clearly revealed an unprovoked attack on unarmed protestors. This evidence was also examined by the police, which resulted in the release of an armed guard who, after shots were fired, rushed to the scene and stopped the attacker by wounding him. However, the police did not correct the initial, false version, which would publicly bring justice to the victims, for three years (Trafford et al.).[5] This and many more case studies are openly accessible online. On the Forensic Architecture Network's website, the network not only publishes the results in the form of a written report and a video, but they also comprehensively trace their analytic methods. In the case of the murder of June Knightly, Robert Trafford et al. used a combination of 3D modelling, fieldwork, and situated testimony.

The cases presented on the Forensic Architecture website reveal that investigative aesthetics employs a multiplicity of methods, skills, and literacies, always depending on the case at hand. The methodology is inherently interdisciplinary and can only work by relying on a network of experts. Hence, it encounters the object of study inherently critically, contesting dominant narratives and expanding considerably the analytical perspective by tuning in, amplifying, and multiplying the sentient surfaces of the object of study (Weizman and Lund 232) so that shifted sensibilities might grant new knowledge. In doing so, this approach resonates with basic ideas that American studies scholars also bring to their classrooms: approaching texts and cultural products critically, being open to listening to the intricacies of the material, engaging with the object of study democratically, interdisciplinarily, and decolonially. Even though there can be barriers hindering implementations in some areas, investigative aesthetics as a form of aesthetic education can enrich and energize our classrooms on multiple levels.

[5] A *Guardian* article argues that this late apology and correction was the result of increased public attention after the publication of the Forensic Architecture Network's investigation (Mackey). As their results were not only published on their website but also by *The Guardian*, presented in an exhibition in Portland from February to May 2024, and discussed in multiple public lectures, one can indeed assume that the public attention pressured the police to publish their statement on YouTube on January 29, 2025.

Aesthetic Education in the American Studies Classroom

Based on an approach that relates aesthetics to the theory of the sensual, embodied perception of the world, aesthetic education elementally indexes, according to Fretwell, "learning to perceive" or more advanced "learning to differentiate 'details in the qualities of things' through the micro-operations of perception" (144). As Fretwell outlines, the genealogy of aesthetic education as a form of literacy training is closely tied to humanist philosophy and to romanticist endeavors of cultivating self-possessive personhood through a sensationalist epistemology (145). However, a turn to aesthetics does not need to be grounded in humanism but it also allows to exceed the realms of clearly delineated and hegemonic "-isms."

Aesthetic education enables the learner to viscerally experience the material, and it therefore allows for stepping back from established, dominant power dynamics. Also emphasizing the significance of aesthetics, Kandice Chuh introduces the concept of illiberal humanisms, which refers to "subjugated or disavowed humanisms" (xi) that have been outcast from "bourgeois liberalism and its cognate epistemologies" (xi). Illiberal humanisms, she argues in *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, originate from a centrality of aesthetics which here – in contrast to the common use of the aesthetic in liberal humanism as a classifying, hierarchizing category – "refers to the relationships among the senses and the processes and structures of value making by which certain sensibilities become common sense and others are disavowed, subjugated, or otherwise obscured" (xii). Chuh advocates for

> bring[ing] forward an understanding of human beingness to be defined not by discrete and self-possessed individuality but instead by constitutive relationality; they [illiberal humanisms] are the displacement of the primacy of the visual characterizing the epistemologies of bourgeois liberal modernity by the generation of rationalities that make sense through visceral multisensory experiences of the world; they afford the emergence of a critical taxonomy that features encounter without conquest and entanglement in lieu of terms and concepts inhering in knowledge paradigms that hold the political and cultural, and economic and artistic as discretely bounded realms; and they facilitate the articulation and elaboration of epistemes thoroughly incommensurate with the developmental geographies and temporalities of bourgeois liberal humanism. (xi)

Aesthetic education bears an important political dimension through which the "reality-formation routines of hierarchical power can also be broken" (Fuller and Weizman 202).[6] Simultaneously, it also holds the potential of community building, of the

[6] Supposedly contrasting, Gumbrecht argues that "the combination of aesthetics with ethics, that is, the projection of ethical norms on to the potential objects of aesthetic experience, will inevitably lead to the erosion of the potential intensity of the latter. In other words, to adapt aesthetic intensity to ethical requirements means to normalize and ultimately dilute it" (102–03). Still, it is crucial to note that Gumbrecht writes about the aesthetic experience of artworks – or rather of objects that are not part of our usual everyday experience – and, in saying so, turns towards a potential inclination to politicize art. Investigative aesthetics, on the other hand, advocates for amplifying the sentient surfaces of objects in order to allow investigators to perceive it differently or more holistically. This change in perception can change how we process and ultimately interpret the object of study.

formation of a commons, as Fuller and Weizman emphasize. They argue that "commons are produced through communication between a collectivity that emerges around the problem and the activity of making sense of the world" (204). Around aesthetic experiences, they continue, commons can form: "Creating such an epistemic community means recognising and bringing together, debating, a plurality of experiences and means of sense-making" (209). Investigative aesthetics thus marks a practice that can fulfill multiple functions, all of which are also crucial in citizenship education: collaboration, democratic processes of community building through the formation of knowledge, cultivating individual agency as well as key competences needed in the process of knowledge formation, critical openness to knowledge acquisition, and the disruption of established knowledge and power dynamics.

Proceeding from these general, preliminary considerations, it is pivotal to consider the specific potentials and challenges of implementing investigative aesthetics in the American studies classroom. First, aesthetic education in general can help learners to (re)connect with the material or phenomena Americanists analyze. Allowing learners to *sense* the material outside of, at times, rigid frames of interpretation and symptomatic readings creates an individual, embodied relation to the material. As Gumbrecht notes, instead of reducing complexity to make topics digestible, aesthetic experience draws the "students' attention toward complex phenomena and problems, rather than prescribing how they have to understand certain problems and how, ultimately, they must deal with them" (128). This open encounter with the material might spark interest, train concentration, further the exploration of the layers of the material, and can grant a more sustainable learning success. This aspect certainly also includes what Jay Mechling calls a "reference to play." In his discussion of an operational definition of an "American Studies Thinker," he outlines this figure's comfort in "playing with ideas and perspectives," an ability and aspiration that allow for an open, unbiased engagement with the object of study. Moreover, this notion of openness to play not only relates to the side of the learner, but it also includes the instructor and points to an important aspect of the teacher's self-understanding encapsulated in the supposed paradox surrounding how many teacher-scholars encounter "problems" that Randy Bass outlines:

> One telling measure of how differently teaching is regarded from traditional scholarship or research within the academy is what a difference it makes to have a "problem" in one versus the other. In scholarship and research, having a "problem" is at the heart of the investigative process. . . . But in one's teaching, a "problem" is something you don't want to have, and if you have one, you probably want to fix it. . . . Changing the status of the *problem* in teaching from terminal remediation to ongoing investigation is precisely what the movement for a scholarship of teaching is all about. (original emphasis)

Offering a problem-centered, process-oriented, and open approach to the material thus also requires teachers to allow for open and unbiased findings and requires them

to leave potentially comfortable tracks concerning the objects of study, methods, theories, and interpretations. At the same time, this encourages teaching to be viewed as a scholarly activity in which the teacher is not necessarily an expert on the issue and classrooms are understood as spaces that foster critical reflection, dialogue, and renegotiation of scholarly research and objectives as well as a reflection of the role of pedagogy. As Oppermann elaborates, this includes a systematic reflection of all aspects that impact one's teaching – thus also structural, inter-personal, social, and environmental aspects that at times exceed the immediate classroom but still impact learning – and a commitment to consider these aspects as part of the scholarly practices of knowledge generation in American studies (327–28). This allows one to critically question established or routine classroom practices and to continuously (re)establish "what it means to do American Studies" (332).

A second potential of a turn towards aesthetics lies in the attention on questions of *how* texts and media products produce knowledge and how they are embedded in power-knowledge nexuses, leading to a critical, decolonial use and negotiation of these objects. In a time of "alternative facts," fake news, deep fakes, AI chatbots, and LLM-based apps such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, and Perplexity, it is pivotal to include critical media studies also in American studies classrooms in order to enable students to handle media products such as texts, images, and videos responsibly and critically. Aesthetic education is an important tool in preparing learners to meet the challenges of our time and of the future. While this includes the sub-competences of media literacy that represent a reflexive, critical awareness of the "dual function of media as a means of manipulation and self-empowerment" and thus as a "social sphere of action" (Volkmann 153–54, my translation), investigative aesthetics also ideally helps to develop practical skills that involve digital competence, like the "ability to use, access, filter, evaluate, create, program and share digital content" as laid out by the European Commission (10).

Therefore, third, the implementation of investigative aesthetics attends to and trains multiple, contextually contingent types of literacies. The method's multimodality can hold the potential to speak to the learners' skills that might usually not be addressed in a regular American studies class. Depending on the group of learners, some students might be able to work with digital technologies, to modify media products, as well as to tune into and amplify signals. Even if this is not the case, investigative aesthetics can further the collaboration and cooperation of different disciplines, bringing together classes in American studies and informatics, for example. Such a collaborative project certainly bears the potential of both sides benefitting from each other's skill set and insights, and the use of learning methods such as group and project work has proven to be generally beneficial to the learning success. Moreover, the interdisciplinarity and the training of multiple literacies, among them

digital, media, and data literacy, can pave the way towards the realization of digital American studies classrooms.

While there are thus many reasons that might call for an integration of aesthetic education generally and investigative aesthetics more specifically, there are also recognizable difficulties. The multiplicity of literacies ideally requires the teacher to be well-trained in various literacies and in different subject areas, or to be at least able to guide an advanced and literacy-diverse classroom in a process-oriented, open exploration. Collaborations with other disciplines, on the other hand, require significant preparation and investment of time and resources of all participants. However, even if the collaborations themselves are not time-consuming, there are always challenges in working with digital archives as these need to be explored rather extensively beforehand. While the digitization of cultural materials[7] has opened up new research possibilities in the past years, there is also, as Ingrid Gessner and Marc Priewe stress, "the danger of dilettante scholarship that is lurking in digitized and secondary material" (47). As Werner Sollors notes, there are (supposedly) many "shortcuts to research results" in the digital realm (15). While these "shortcuts"[8] have facilitated in the past decades how we do research, they also determine the type of research conducted and the methods used. Not only do we have to bear in mind potential biases, limitations, and manipulations of the archives' creators and "acknowledge that the choice of what is digitized influences research, often forcing researchers to resort to materials that are comparatively easier to access and use" (Gessner and Priewe 47), but we also need to remember the necessity of confronting learners with "the actual materiality of our objects of study (and the experience of them)" (47). Thus, while the digital realm certainly grants access to a myriad of archives, it can neither represent the entire picture nor a holistic, embodied experience. Taking these considerations into account is also crucial in preparing a project based on investigative aesthetics. It is clear, however, that oftentimes rigid, discipline-centered, and time-pressed institutional conditions further affect such endeavors negatively. Preparing for a class that works with investigative aesthetics requires extensive, time-consuming preparation. In an academic system that rewards scholarly publications more than teaching (such as in Germany or Austria), many teachers – especially those depending on short- or fixed-term contracts while also pursuing a professional qualification or those in positions with a heavy teaching load – might simply lack the personal resources or, understandably, prioritize other commitments over experimental teaching methods.

[7] Gessner and Priewe note the importance of acknowledging that much of this work has been conducted invisibly, oftentimes unacknowledged and even uncompensated. While we can profit from the work of these "unsung hero archivists," their operating oftentimes outside of long-term financial and institutional support can have a detrimental effect on the preparation of digital objects (46).

[8] While one is quick to think of "shortcuts" such as generative AI here, Sollors, writing in 2019, also includes tools that we nowadays would consider indispensable for our research, such as digitized libraries, text and image searches, and word processing software (15–16).

Another difficulty pertains to general potential limitations in availability of material and digital infrastructure. Hence, it might at times be difficult to access material that would further the investigations of a course project due to financial or logistical reasons or to get access to hard- and software needed to engage with certain media products. In their "Notes on the State of Digital American Studies Scholarship, Publishing and Teaching," Gessner and Priewe also emphasize that the digital infrastructure at German universities cannot compare with US-American universities and colleges, even small ones. This, of course, has had an important impact not only on scholarship in the digital humanities but also on implementing technology-based teaching methods in American studies classrooms in Germany (45–46). Overcoming this gap, they argue, not only requires individual willingness but also institutional commitment to invest money, time, and energy to build this infrastructure and train scholars (46).

Despite these limitations, I want to advocate for the benefits of aesthetic education in the American studies classroom. The following case study offers an example that could be adapted for classroom use since the analysis of the short film functions as a form of sensitivity training without relying heavily on technology. While it does not capture the full depth of first-hand experimentation and exploration that are characteristic of more advanced investigative aesthetics projects, it nonetheless shows that some of the approach's benefits can still be realized.

Case Study: Alejandro González Iñárritu's Short Film in *11'09"1: September 11*

Even twenty-five years after the deadliest terrorist attacks in human history, which caused the deaths of nearly three thousand people and injured tens of thousands, many people are still struggling to comprehend the devastation. The images of planes striking the Twin Towers and the subsequent devastation have become some of the most widely circulated images of the twenty-first century. Rewatching the live media coverage is still considered haunting by many, even though, as Rob Kroes notes, "there are those who doubt whether any single image is able to stand out from the others through its power to capture the essence of what happened" (1). This perception of the inadequacy of media products also reflects in many critics' observations that 9/11 changed our understanding of reality altogether, as Silvia Schultermandl notes (183). Similarly, in the press sheet for *11'09"1: September 11*, Iñárritu reflects on his first impression on September 11, 2001, when he also thought that "fiction was killed by reality" (qtd. in Kirsner and Herrmann 266, my translation). Merely rewatching the footage and the media coverage, one not only realizes the cinematic quality already attested on that day (Scheffer) but it also becomes clear that the photographic record has shaped the perspective on 9/11 decisively. Susan Lurie comments on the

selection of published images and the associated censorship of horrific visuals of death and dying people in the media in the weeks after 9/11. Following Susan Sontag and Barbie Zelizer, she observes that this was not only due to paying respect to the victims but also reflected “a nostalgia for a spectatorship made safe” (Lurie 47). As Sontag argues, such a spectatorship was set out to uphold the “patriotic faith” (47) that these atrocities take place elsewhere, i.e., in places of the third world but not on US-American soil (70–71). Many photographs and videos published after 9/11 have crafted a careful image of heroes and victims, sanitizing the sheer horror of it, thus contributing to the conception of what Gross and Snyder-Körber call a “standardized, tendentious visual narrative” (369). Therefore, Bauder-Begerow and Schäfer explain, in the classroom, “9/11 functions as an object of learning but is already present as a subjective memory or individual awareness, and as a field of cultural knowledge in the minds of both the learners and the teachers” (8).

Given the representative inadequacy of individual media products, such as images, texts, films, and poems, as well as the privileging and repression of the widely circulated visual imagery, teaching 9/11 requires the inclusion of diverse perspectives. As a well-documented, mediated, and aestheticized event that has been the subject of a great number of oftentimes accessible media products, doing so is not only very feasible but the topic also lends itself, as Bauder-Begerow and Schäfer argue, to integrating training in key competences as well as working with methods of aesthetic education such as investigative aesthetics.

Because of the complexity of the event, the number and variation of available texts, as well as of the ensuing questions regarding forms of representation, there are a great number of possible approaches to teaching and learning 9/11. I agree with the editors of *Learning 9/11*, who argue that the topic is particularly suited to implementing methods of problem-based learning that engage with the “procedural nature of cultural meaning-making and encourage inquiry into the processes and strategies of reality-formation” (Bauder-Begerow and Schäfer 8). Bringing together aesthetic education and the negotiation of 9/11, exploring the innumerable videos, reports, poems, blog entries, etc. that were early and oftentimes immediate responses to the attacks and that can still be found online, would work not only for a potential class project through which learners could explore the understanding and narrativization of that day, but they could simultaneously improve their media, data, and digital literacy in researching representations of this momentous event in recent US-American history. As outlined in the previous chapter, however, this can also entail several challenges, some of which can be worked around as I will show in the following case study. Iñárritu’s short film in *11’09”1: September 11* exemplifies the effects of shifting the sensibilities and of playing with different modes of perception that I have described as a key concern of investigative aesthetics. In doing so, it, in line with Weizmann and

Fuller, "develop[s] both a focus on the political dimensions of sensation and feeling as they are crystallised in specific incidents, and also the experimental multiplication of what counts as sensors and sensing" (201).

11'09"1: September 11 is a joint, international film project by eleven filmmakers – Samira Makhmalbaf (Iran), Claude Lelouch (France), Youssef Chahine (Egypt), Danis Tanović (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Idrissa Ouédraogo (Burkina Faso), Ken Loach (Great Britain), Alejandro González Iñárritu (Mexico), Amos Gitaï (Israel), Mira Nair (India), Sean Penn (United States), and Shōhei Imamura (Japan) – that is composed of eleven short films, each eleven minutes, nine seconds, and one frame in length. Initiated by the French film producer Alain Brigand shortly after the terrorist attacks, it, according to Birgit Däwes, gave all directors the opportunity to respond to 9/11 in individual short films "that would reflect each director's reaction from his/her own national, cultural, and historical perspective, including their own memory and language" (295), thus also neither asking them to create a coherent story nor to fit their perspective into dominant (visual) narratives surrounding 9/11. As Däwes acknowledges, *11'09"1: September 11* therefore takes a transnational perspective (299). This "[t]ransnationalism involves a loosening of boundaries, a deterritorialization of the nation-state, and higher degrees of interconnectedness among cultures and peoples across the globe" (Duncan and Juncker 8).

Still, however, the film has also received criticism for its deterritorialization and recontextualization of 9/11. Andreas Jahn-Sudmann criticizes Brigand's approach and his demand towards the directors to reflect on their own cultural background in their shorts and notes that this already restricts the creative and narrative possibilities: "Brigand's demand . . . to establish a connection to one's own culture through the film is so invasive that certain forms of cultural reflection and narration are excluded in the first place" (128, my translation). Moreover, public criticism of the film around the time of its publication was much harsher. Published in 2002, when the dominant US-American discourse around 9/11 still highlighted the aspects of trauma and heroism, many of the short films take a rather critical transnational position towards the aftermath of 9/11 and the US-American exertion of influence globally. Mira Nair's film, for example, shifts the attention to the increased and continuous discrimination against Arab, Muslim, and perceived Muslim communities in the United States. Ken Loach's film, on the other hand, questions the extent of US-American influence in global politics by paralleling the terrorist attacks with another historical event of that day in 1973, namely the coup against the socialist Chilean government. Unsurprisingly, the critical, controversial, and at times almost polemic perspectives that the shorts draw were criticized as anti-American (Tambunan 227).

Iñárritu's short film also shifts the perspective on 9/11. It does, however, not so much achieve that by telling a specific (counter-)narrative but by playing with the

audience's perception of the event, or, as Schultermandl notes, by triggering the viewers' perspectival adjustments (186). Iñárritu himself explains that his mise en scène aims to establish eleven minutes of "visual silence": "I chose to confront people with their own images, their own fears and feelings about what had happened, allowing them to experience catharsis" (qtd. in Clemente). Thus, the film recasts *how* the event is experienced through visual media and might ultimately ethically challenge the audience, as Shuri Mariasih Gietty Tambunan also argues (228).

Characterized by its collage-like documentary style, Iñárritu's contribution, Däwes claims, "defamiliariz[es] . . . well-known images . . . [and] disrupts the numbing effect that these images have achieved through endless repetitions, forcing audiences into a fresh perspective on apparently well-digested events" (297). The short opens with a black screen and silence. The silence is broken by a crescendo of many people speaking frantically. While many, if not most, viewers might not recognize the language spoken, Alison Young identifies it as "voices belonging to the Chamulas Indians of Chiapas Mexico, . . . chanting a prayer for the dead" (41). Added to this almost dizzying soundscape is the ticking of a metronome which further adds to the haunting atmosphere created by the swelling sounds and the black screen. Only after two minutes, the visual silence is broken for the split of a second when the viewer is confronted with the image of a person falling from the Twin Towers. This scene coincides with the ticking of the metronome emphasizing its effect. Yet, as it is shown for merely a split second, the viewer is barely allowed to think about this confrontation but is left startled and again confronted with a black screen. Continuously, the soundscape transforms, and the chants are mixed with original recordings of the planes flying and crashing, live reporting of that day (in multiple languages), sirens, the sound of human beings hitting the ground, and victims' last messages on answering machines. The visual silence is repeatedly broken by footage of falling people,[9] and these flashes not only happen in shorter intervals, but they also grow longer. At one point (01:12:30), the audio of the reporting seems to align with the footage of reporters responding to the sight of people falling from the towers. After that, different soundtracks overlap again until the visual silence is complemented by audio silence (01:15:22). While the audio silence continues, we see flashes of the towers collapsing, followed by a crescendo of chants and classical (film) music. Until the end, there is a black screen and the music that counters the fairly haunting atmosphere the film established up until this point. It rather creates a hopeful soundscape that is complemented by the gradual transition of the black into a white screen. As the screen brightens, the viewers see a sentence in Arabic that is accompanied by its English translation

[9] While I write of falling and not jumping people here, I do not use that vocabulary as an assessment. Certainly, people made the decision to jump from the towers, and these actions have afterwards been interpreted as brave acts of free will. Still, I neither can nor want to evaluate the victim's motivations in such a horrific situation and will therefore use "falling people" without intending to comment on agency.

after some seconds: "Does God's light guide us or blind us?" (01:17:47). Eventually, the sentences are dissolved in light as the voices of the prayer chants grow louder again.

The film plays with the experience of absence, foregrounding sound, and just sparsely confronting the audience with images of falling people and the towers collapsing. In doing so, it shifts between sound, visual footage, and absence. By only occasionally showing visual footage, the film creates a feasible tension as the audience does not know what to expect, when visuals will appear and what they will represent. What is shown is also telling. While the live coverage of people falling from the towers as well as Richard Drew's famous photograph *Falling Man*, published in several newspapers including *The New York Times* on September 12, 2001, were certainly perceived as haunting by the audience on 9/11 as well as in the immediate aftermath, imagery of falling people was quickly censored. Excluded from further dissemination (Kroes 5), the images were, however, never erased from public memory (8). Simultaneously read as a representation of the sheer horror of that day as well as an emblem of national pride, of, as Jared Gee argues, "the profundity of a man choosing to use his power, his American freedom, taking rebellious yet patriotic command of the terrible situation" (448), the photograph of the falling man allows for multiple interpretations, "hold[ing] national and even religious symbolism" (449). Gee outlines that Drew's title *Falling Man* is not only a reference to Adam's biblical fall but it also "refer[s] back to the theological origins of US politics that structure[] the US and Europe," situating it within a series of religious discourses that justify retribution (451). He continues to note, however, that Iñárritu's use of the footage of falling people counters these dominant US-American interpretations as the film "resists the media spectacle of 9/11 and narratives of security, refusing nationalist symbolism, censorship, and discourses for intervention" (449).

11'09"1: September 11 lends itself to being incorporated in an undergraduate as well as a graduate seminar on discourse, representations, and the aftermath of 9/11 within the field of American literary and cultural studies, but it can also fit seminars that cover broader scopes and topics (such as a topical class on US imperialism, a more theory-oriented class on the construction of counter-discourses in US-American culture, or a seminar in film studies). Within these courses, engaging with the film can offer several different advantages and lead to different learning outcomes which are dependent on the respective seminars, the overall course content and structure, and the intended learning objectives.

In one scenario, the short film could be used to introduce the representation and discourses surrounding 9/11. In this way, the film functions as a first access to 9/11 for students who are now usually too young to draw on a first-hand memory of the day and who, at least in the European classroom, oftentimes do not possess much

information about the historical event and the cultural memory of 9/11. By watching the short film, they are invited to *perceive* and *experience* the event viscerally before diving deeper into the more guided or narrative forms of representation they will likely encounter in the course of the seminar. Such an inductive approach as well as the openness and collage-like style of the short film support learners in individually reflecting on their aesthetic experience and experimenting freely with associations. Simultaneously, the almost enigmatic nature of the film, which, in part, results from its play with presence and absence, its creation of an unconventional, transnational soundscape, and its use of the bilingual quotation at the end, invites collaborative forms of learning (such as pair/group work or class discussions) while simultaneously appreciating initial personal responses. As the short film does not lend itself to ready-at-hand interpretations, learners will have to find ways to discuss and negotiate their affective experiences in order to make sense of the film.

In another scenario, the film could be introduced once students have already acquired some knowledge about 9/11, its aftermath, and associated dominant discourses. In this scenario, the film might enable the students to critically question and expand the knowledge that they have already acquired. Here, it can also be a useful tool for questioning and reconfiguring the dynamics and effects of different forms of representation of the event. This potential also results from contextualizing the photograph/video of the falling person and analyzing it in relation to its medium of publication. As noted above, photographs/videos of falling people circulate within ethical tensions that emerge from the aestheticization of about-to-be-dead bodies and the political use of their images (see also de Vries 119). Photographs of falling people, such as Drew's, have been used to give a poetic and heroic spin to the sheer horror of their dying. Leon Wieseltier, for example, describes the man depicted in Drew's *Falling Man* as follows:

> His physical integrity is extraordinary. He is standing in the world but the world is upside-down. He does not appear to be wounded. He seems composed, a stoic in the air, except for the tails of his white shirt, which hang from his trousers like snapped wings. His hands are smartly at his side, his legs look as if they are marching. It is almost possible to make out his face. It is an African American face, a full, tender face. I do not see panic on the man's countenance. I see thought. . . . I suspect that his eyes are open. His direction is clear.

His poetic thoughts on the photograph turn the falling man into an almost mythical creature. The horror of his dying does not corrupt his composure. Even in his dying moments, he represents the US-American virtues of determination and bravery. Moreover, falling people seem to be frozen in time as the actual moment of death is not captured. As Barbie Zelizer notices, such a depiction suggests "the remote possibility that . . . it was 'all just a bad dream'" (qtd. in de Vries 120). Wieseltier's is just one exemplary response that indicates how pictures of falling people are repurposed,

partly to cloud the horror of the event but also to provide different ways of deriving meaning from it. In this regard, Nadia de Vries points to the relation between the digital image and the corporeality of the deceased. She argues that the uses of images of falling persons do not necessarily result in a detachment from corporeal reality but rather in an abjection: "If the corporeal reality is abjected from the image in the way that Kristeva describes, the image that arises from this abjection is imbued with a new significance. Perhaps this abjection is not necessarily a dehumanization of the depicted body in question, but rather, an affective *repurposing* of that same body" (121, original emphasis). By reframing the footage of falling people, staging them within a set of visual silence and a peculiar, transforming soundscape, Iñárritu's short film affects the audience. This can in a next step also initiate discussions of (ethical) questions that result from the tense relation between (corpo-)reality and representation/symbolization. In this way, students in the American studies classroom can not only critically explore the effects of media and their relation to reality, but they can also engage in complex discussions of the ethics of representation and potentially question their own affective responses and ethical frameworks.

Conclusion

Even though Iñárritu's short film does not provide students with the opportunity to experiment first-hand with applying the methodology of investigative aesthetics, it represents an artistic expression of the basic notions encapsulated in this methodology wherein the formation of knowledges and aesthetics find new modes of coexistence. This is achieved by recombining different media and texts, and thereby, similarly to Fuller and Weizman's suggestions, "tuning into and interpreting weak signals and noticing unintentional evidence registered in visual, audio, or data files or in the material composition of our environment" (13). This can ultimately effect changes in the perception of these media by shifting and cultivating sensibilities. As Fuller and Weizman emphasize, investigative aesthetics aims at "challenge[ing] established formations of power over the always complicated questions of truth" (19). Likewise, the short film confronts transnational relations as well as national narratives.

Iñárritu's short film expands discussions in the American studies classroom on the representation of and knowledge formation surrounding 9/11. Engaging critically with Iñárritu's film can cultivate the ability to negotiate ethical positions through one's ability to sense. Moreover, it potentially allows for forming a collective by participating collectively in an aesthetic experience, comparable to Fuller and Weizman's idea of an investigative commons. Furthermore, the short film integrates 9/11 in transnational discussions, as does the complete film. Breaking with cinematic conventions and confronting and thereby initiating a reconsideration of the archive of 9/11, it also functions to cultivate media literacy. Even though merely working with

this film does not give the learners the chance to perform investigative aesthetics actively, it, contrary to comprehensive investigations, relies on very few prerequisites and can easily be integrated into any American studies classroom. Still, the sheer force of the film, its "confrontational" and unconventional nature, and its call to the senses represents an aesthetic experience that can yield critical investigations of this material.

While the film can represent a reasonable and effective compromise to achieve several objectives of investigative aesthetics, it only touches the actual potential that this methodology can have in the American studies classroom. Through its multimodality and its inherently interdisciplinary, decolonial, and democratic nature, it can facilitate the training of multiple key competences, including some that are oftentimes not at the center of education in American studies classrooms. Investigative aesthetics could not only energize our teaching, but it also implements the requirements set out by politics. At this point it only remains to hope that politics will also set up the structures that foster the implementation of creative, technology-based, and interdisciplinary methods.

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Pictures at an Environmental Exhibition: Reflections on the Art of Photography Curation

Steven Hoelscher and Stephanie Zeller

ABSTRACT
During the 2023–24 academic year, we worked together at the Harry Ransom Center, a major humanities research center and museum at the University of Texas at Austin, to organize "Visualizing the Environment: Ansel Adams and His Legacy." The exhibition, which ran from late August 2024 through early February 2025, presented Adams's photographs in a broad historical and geographical context that drew from our shared but distinct perspectives. During the process of working on this exhibition, we have often reflected on the experience of conceiving, researching, and presenting photographs in a way that is both visually striking and intellectually invigorating – in short, on the art of photography curation. In this article, we share some of those reflections, as we discuss the relationship between creative work, scholarship, and museum collaborations. Critiquing an exhibition is not the same as creating it, even though we have sought to bring our scholarly experience into our complementary roles as exhibition curator and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) creator.

KEYWORDS
Museums, Ansel Adams, public humanities, GIS

Reflection One

The first time I encountered the photography of Ansel Adams wasn't in a museum gallery but during a college course. I remember the moment, in 1985, well. The course,

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Wilderness and the American Mind, introduced me to that critical, contested concept through a wide range of memorable texts. In good American studies, interdisciplinary fashion, we dove into writing by Henry David Thoreau, of course, but also by the novelist Willa Cather, the poet Gary Snyder, the biologist Rachel Carson, the historian William Cronon, the philosopher Carolyn Merchant, the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan – and the photography of Ansel Adams. As much as anything that I read in that course, the 35 mm slides that I viewed affected me in far-reaching and unpredictable ways. I became aware, probably for the first time, of photography as an art form. But my fascination with Adams's photographs was deeper and, I think, more interesting than that; rather, I was seeing images that inspired me, that moved me, that made me want to explore the natural world in a way that art previously hadn't. (S. H.)

During the 2023–24 academic year, we worked together at the Harry Ransom Center, a major humanities research center and museum at the University of Texas at Austin, to organize "Visualizing the Environment: Ansel Adams and His Legacy" (Figure 1). The exhibition, which ran from late August 2024 through early February 2025, presented Adams's photographs in a broad historical and geographical context that drew from our shared but distinct perspectives. Trained in history and geography, Steven Hoelscher is Faculty Curator of Photography at the Ransom Center and Stiles Professor of American Studies and Geography at the University of Texas at Austin, while Stephanie Zeller, a PhD candidate in the Department of Geography and the Environment also at Austin, has training in studio art, computer science, and Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Our specific roles may have been different (Hoelscher served as the exhibition's curator and Zeller created the companion GIS), but we were collaborators throughout, sharing ideas, reading each other's work, providing critical feedback.

During the process of working on this exhibition, we have often reflected on the experience of conceiving, researching, and presenting photographs in a way that is both visually striking and intellectually invigorating – in short, on the art of photography curation. It is notable that, for one of us, the earliest encounter with Ansel Adams's photography came via an academic setting and in the context of cultural and environmental history. For the other, Adams's photographs were so pervasive that they had become part of the cultural ether.

Since then, we have both learned a lot about Ansel Adams, and we have a much better sense of why his photographs can move people so profoundly. We came to understand how his work both fits into the canon of photographic history and serves as an inspiration for the environmental movement. And we have seen the magical power of Adams's fine art prints: how they, more than any other format like a

computer screen or an oversize poster, present his photographic images in exquisite detail.

Figure 1: Entrance to exhibtion "Visualizing the Environment: Ansel Adams and His Legacy" at the Harry Ransom Center, September 2024. Photograph by Steven Hoelscher/Ransom Center.

In this article, we share some of those reflections, as we discuss how our exhibition was created and describe its contents. Previously, we have assisted with collection acquisition, campus and public outreach, development and public programming; we have taught classes on photographic history, and we have studied and written about that history. But creative work that is directly in the realm of public humanities – like curating an exhibition, which draws on traditional humanities scholarship, yet imparts its findings in very different ways – is another matter. Creating an exhibition is not the same as critiquing it, though we have sought to bring our scholarly experience into our complementary roles. The first part of this article explores the fertile terrain between criticism and creation, as it simultaneously reflects on the experience of conceiving and mounting an exhibition; this includes discussing the relationship between visual art and spatial data. In the second part, we provide a narrative walkthrough of the exhibition itself. Along the way and at different points in the article, we each reflect on our personal experiences of creating this exhibition. Altogether, we hope that this article sheds light not only on the interdependency of photography and American environmental awareness, but also on how scholars can productively contribute to a timely discussion.

Reflection Two

I can't recall the first time I encountered Ansel Adams's photos of Yosemite. They are so ubiquitous, so connected to the identity of that place in the American imaginary, that disentangling my personal experience of one from the other seems impossible. Moon and Half Dome *merged seamlessly with my mental image of the valley, and not until I wandered through Cook's Meadow, squinting up at the great hunched slab of granite, did I truly understand the transmutation of aesthetic experience that Ansel had accomplished through photography. There, in front of me, was the object of Ansel's obsession, and though I felt the gut-punch of wonder and unsurpassed beauty, I could not replicate the emotional experience of looking at* Moon and Half Dome, *the image. Reconciling these aesthetic attitudes substantially altered my then-limited view of the role and purpose of photography. Ansel had captured not only Half Dome, the object, but also Half Dome as a character, exerting a kind of timeless agency on the surrounding place. (S. Z.)*

From Cultural Critic to Cultural Creator in the Museum

Organizing an exhibition on the photography of Ansel Adams presents immediate opportunities and challenges. The prints themselves, exquisitely wrought by Adams in his personal darkroom or by an assistant working under his direct supervision, show his work as we know the artist wanted and in a manner that continues to command attention. His photographs of "pristine" nature – captured with razor-sharp focus – display subtle gradations of light and dark, with deep recessions of space. Often created with a grand, operatic vision of an ideal natural world, they remain some of the most iconic environmental images of our time (Figure 2).

Within both the history of photography and of American popular culture more generally, overstating Adams's significance is difficult. But, as images – reproduced for decades on countless calendars, postcards, and posters – they have so flooded the visual marketplace to become commonplace. Moreover, they have been exhibited so frequently and in so many of the world's leading museums that the question immediately arises: how to present them anew, and in a way that make them feel fresh and meaningful? Our approach has been to lean into our expertise as historical and geographical scholars.

Unfortunately, that is not as easy as it sounds. The road from cultural critic to cultural creator can be challenging, for the goals and approaches can be different. Though the Academy and the Arts were once entwined, functionally and culturally – as in the Salons of Paris, London, and Vienna – today they diverge along a schism of criticism and practice. This separation serves an important practical purpose: With some distance from the work, scholars are better able to critique; conversely, without

the specter of critique, artists are more able to focus on the work. The separation improves both criticism and practice, allowing them to bolster each other. The double edge of these positive effects, however, has become sharper in recent years. Academic critics often face reproach for an excess of deconstruction, losing track of the freedom of play many see as a necessary condition for producing good art, including the creation of exhibitions.

Figure 2: Ansel Adams, *Yosemite Valley, 1933,* printed 1970; Gelatin silver print. 19 x 24.7 cm (image). Harry Ransom Center Photography Collection, 2015:0036:0001, Gift of Stephen and Joyce Latimer Hunt. © Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust.

For scholars engaged in exhibition curation, the critic-creator divide is therefore a site of both possibility and tension. To explore this relationship further, consider how geographic knowledge is negotiated *through* works of art that feature spatial content. In her recent survey, Harriett Hawkins finds that this negotiation is not merely incidental but necessary. “We need,” she argues, “to appreciate how the sites of science (here read geographical knowledge making) are being redefined and contested by these relations between creativity and research” (7). Tension often anchors in what Hawkins calls “the appreciation of geographical research methods as forms

of both reportage (of an existing world), and of world-making" (9), where scientific and creative practices blend.

This can leave the curating scholar in a difficult position. Rigorous research practices, particularly in the social sciences such as geography, are often understood to be in opposition with the creative arts. Hawkins argues, however, that we should consider the value of creative practices *beyond* their role in engaging the affective and sensory dimensions of subjective experience. Rather, these practices should be appreciated for how they might epistemologically reorient us toward the dynamic relationship between researcher and world. This empirical shift, she says, "replaces what we could think of as an extractive model – a going out into the world, collecting data and returning to write up/report – with an experimentalism that uses creative practices to create conditions for intersecting research and the world in ongoing and emergent ways" (Hawkins 9).

Hawkins is not alone in troubling and reorienting the gap between cultural critic and cultural creator. Indeed, many aesthetic theorists have long championed the moral and social merits of creative practices which go beyond the affective and the sensory. Art, after all, is about more than just beauty; it "challenges us, changes our worldview, mobilizes us toward a certain action, nurtures valuable sensibilities like sympathy, generosity, and respect, and, last but not least, helps move a society in a certain direction" (Saito 80; see also Till 99). These features of the fine arts, as we understand them, are not necessarily in opposition to academic work but can be mutually amplifying (Barad 77). In moving from exhibitions that emphasize passive appreciation of artworks and objects to exhibitions that foreground critical inquiry and experimentation, scholars might challenge the artificial divisions that too often separate creative practice from the work of scholarly research.

Hawkins describes this shift in methods as a "non-propositional approach." By that, she means that "the exhibition does not seek to be a presentation of findings or a final statement on a topic, but rather where the relation between curator, exhibition, audience, and social context is an active site of knowledge production" (Hawkins 213). Rather than advancing a fixed interpretation on the exhibition objects and materials, a non-propositional method allows museum visitors to develop a plurality of equally valuable readings. This effectively engages visitors in a negotiation between the diversity of subjective experience and the concrete particulars of the objects on view.

We found this approach to be a fruitful way to conceive our work on the exhibition. But there was another divide to bridge, perhaps best described by Peter Vergo in his seminal *New Museology.* Based on both his experience as a critic of exhibitions and a creator of several, he distinguishes "aesthetic exhibitions" from "contextual

exhibitions." The former presents historical or art objects with little additional information – knowledge formation regarding the objects is largely experiential. The latter includes heavy interpretation of each display, which is framed by "informative, comparative and explicatory" material (Vergo 48–49). While research-oriented exhibitions would tend to follow the contextual format, we sought to make ours *both* aesthetic and contextual. We tried to demonstrate how Vergo's two approaches can work together to create impactful displays that are also simultaneously non-propositional. Preceding any approach, of course, are the objects themselves.

Conceiving an Exhibition: Research and Concept

Exhibitions at a humanities research center rightfully emphasize the center's collection, which for the Ransom Center are substantial. Through the generous gift of Joyce Hunt, and her late husband Steve, the Ransom Center greatly expanded its holdings of Ansel Adams's photographs (Figure 3). With this important acquisition, beginning in 2015 and concluding in 2024, the time seemed right to consider an exhibition dedicated to his work. But several questions remained: How would such an exhibition contribute to our understanding of this artist? To be engaging and to provide a fresh perspective on seemingly well-known material, an exhibition (whether aesthetic or contextual or non-propositional) needs a perspective; that is, it needs an angle. Unlike a scholarly article, the exhibition's position would be presented through visual juxtaposition, sequencing, and limited text. A question that immediately arose was, how, in practice, could we deploy a non-propositional approach to the creation of our exhibition?

To answer this question, a first step – as with any scholarly project – was to do a literature review. We read widely, not only the vast primary and secondary source materials by and about Ansel Adams but also the content and perspectives of previous exhibitions. From that research, we learned how opinionated Adams was, what a prolific writer he was, and how articulate a spokesman he was for what he was doing.[1] One concept stood out from his own writing and became the theoretical focus of our exhibition.

Over the course of his long career, he often spoke about "visualization" as central to how he made photographs. In his book, *The Negative*, Adams puts it this way: "[T]he first step toward visualization – and hence toward expressive representation – is to become aware of the world around us in terms of the photographic image" (2). This resonated with us as a way to describe his artistic vision, but it also became clear

[1] Some of the most important scholarship on Adams, which informed our thinking include Senf, Alinder, Szarkowski, and Spaulding. An important, recent exhibition, *Ansel Adams in Our Time*, which appeared at the Fine Arts Museum of Boston and the de Young Museum in San Francisco, provided inspiration for ours.

that Adams was providing a potential framework to describe a general picture-making process. In fact, this early research revealed that what we found most interesting about Adams was how his photography was part of a broad continuum that extends from the nineteenth century to the present. This insight built on Hoelscher's article in which Adams was part of a long history of visualizing the US-American environment ("American Environmental Photography" 305). His photographs were extraordinarily influential, but they also and more interestingly became a point of departure for many photographers who deployed the concept of visualization quite differently. Beginning with Adams as our conceptual starting point, we were interested in how photographers have shaped multiple visual narratives of the US-American environment. This includes both those who came before him and whose legacy he embodied and transformed, and those who came after and who worked in the long shadow cast by his exceptionally influential career.

Figure 3: Joyce Hunt in her Austin, Texas, home before her 2024 donation of photographs to the Ransom Center. This followed donations in 2015 and 2018. January 2024.
Photograph by Steven Hoelscher/Ransom Center.

The next step, also familiar to scholars, was to draft a proposal that would be reviewed by a team of experts, both internal to the Ransom Center and external in the form of blind peer review. This required consolidation of the thesis and

parameters of the exhibition and an argument for its original contributions; it needed to demonstrate how it would differ from other exhibitions; it had to set forth its objectives, intended audience, and learning outcomes for student visitors; it also had to include a budget. The plan of work would also identify preliminary items from the collection to be considered (Figure 4), as well as possible loans; it would highlight objects that might need extensive conservation work; and it had to reflect on design elements, education, and outreach.

Figure 4: Reviewing and researching possible exhibition objects in the Ransom Center's photography archive. The shown materials are from the Rephotographic Survey Project Photography Collection. November 2023. © Mark Klett. Photograph by Steven Hoelscher/Ransom Center.

Mounting an Exhibition: Planning and Design

Once the final selection of objects had been made – a process that took roughly nine months – we finalized a checklist for the exhibition that contained the artist's name (and very brief bio), dates of creation, title, dimensions, credit lines, accession number, and thumbnail image of the object. The checklist of nearly 100 objects in the exhibition is a key working document for a curator – like a detailed chapter outline for a book that you are writing. The checklist, which was coded into a spreadsheet, underwent more than 100 revisions and was necessary for both organizational and creative purposes.

The writing for this exhibition took a very different form than the genres that scholars are more familiar with, notably research articles, critical essays, or books. Different also was the readership, which was much broader than for a typical academic work. We had to make it accessible for the visiting public, who may not know anything about Ansel Adams, but who care about the environment, while also making it interesting for those with detailed knowledge of photography. The two new genres we had to quickly master – wall text and captions to go with the object's label – had to be concise and avoid academic jargon. More than anything that we have ever written, the exhibition's text was put through the editorial wringer, and we think it is all the better for that painstaking work.

Some of that work included editing Adams's own writing and then presenting those words in audio format. Much of what is known about Ansel Adams's photographic approach is based on his reflections and published work, including his 1983 *Examples: The Making of 40 Photographs*. This book is especially revealing as Adams describes, often in considerable detail and with poetic insight, the different factors that led to the creation of some of his most iconic photographs. After securing permission from the Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust to include excerpts from ten descriptions, we edited them for length and had them read by Dr. John St. Lawrence, a historian and university colleague. Visitors would later be able to access these recordings by QR codes attached to labels in the gallery and beyond, via our companion GIS, which we describe below.

While we were writing, we were simultaneously engaged with several other components of exhibition planning and design. One of the most important focused on designing the layout of the galleries. Spatial constraints limited the number of objects we could include, but the three connected galleries also provided a kind of built-in organizational structure. Our colleague at the Ransom Center, Mary Alice Harper, became a true collaborator in helping create mockups of each gallery wall. Our work together ensured that our goal of creating something with both visual interest and

scholarly depth, something that was provocative and non-propositional, could be achieved (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Mary Alice Harper with gallery mockups of the locations and spacing for each of the exhibition's objects. January 2024. Photograph by Steven Hoelscher/Ransom Center.

While our budget and timeline limited the number of works beyond the Ransom Center collections that we could bring into the exhibition, we believed it necessary to include an example from the photographer whom we felt best exemplifies the complicated nature of Adams's reach. Richard Misrach, one of the most influential photographers working today, is well known for his large-scale photographs of US-American landscapes, especially those landscapes that have borne the brunt of environmental change. When Hoelscher conducted an oral history interview with Misrach for the Archives of American Art, the photographer spoke eloquently about how Adams was a powerful influence but also how his own work moves in a very different direction (Hoelscher, "A Collision" 481). We were delighted when Misrach offered to loan us a print. When combined with another loan by environmental photographer Robert Polidori, Misrach's photograph significantly enhanced the exhibition's visual argument about the multiple ways that sensitive photographers can visualize the environment (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Ransom Center Registrar Ester Harrison, who oversaw the loan of Richard Misrach's, *Burnt Forest and Half Dome, Yosemite*,1988. May 2024.
© Richard Misrach. Photograph by Steven Hoelscher/Ransom Center.

During this period, we also began working with Ransom Center colleagues from Preservation and Conservation, who studied every object in minute detail to determine if its condition was sufficiently stable to be shown and, if so, under what conditions. Lighting in the gallery and length of time that an object can be on display before causing damage were central concerns. This is a very technical area, where chemistry reigns supreme. During our four, two-hour-long Conservation Assessment meetings, we also made decisions about frame and matting size/color, as we considered the tone of each photograph, and where it would be placed in the gallery (Figure 7). Colleagues took detailed notes, recording the relative degree of fragility and special lighting considerations for each object.

This information was vital for the installation itself. Led by the Ransom Center's Creative Director, Leslie Ernst, we had already made decisions about the colors, fonts, and images that would create the exhibition's "identity." Putting all this together in the gallery – the layout's spacing and grouping, wall texts and labels, lighting, cases for ancillary objects, and the framed artwork itself – felt enormous (Figure 8). Fabrications had to be made for several objects, and everything had to be installed securely

to protect against theft and with proper lighting. But once the walls had been prepared, the installation proceeded rather quickly over a two-week period. Although Hoelscher visited the gallery daily and continued to make curatorial decisions that persistently arose, the work was largely out of our hands and accomplished by the Head of Exhibition Services, Rob Hay, and his team (Figure 9). Part of our daily review included overseeing the installation of the vinyl artwork and text that had been created by an offsite vendor (Figure 10). It also involved fruitful discussions with Ashley Park, Head of Communications and Marketing, about strategies for outreach and media.

Figure 7: Conservation analysis of each exhibition object. From left to right, Rob Hay, Heather Hamilton, Diana Diaz-Cañas, and Erica Nunn-Kinias. March 2024.
Photograph by Steven Hoelscher/Ransom Center.

Figure 8: Hoelscher with Associate Director of Exhibitions, Erica Nunn-Kinias, preparing one of the exhibition's object cases during installation. August 2024.
Photograph by Ashley Park/Ransom Center.

Figure 9: Head of Exhibition Services, Rob Hay, and Chloe Gise, Preservation Technician, measuring and setting light for each object in the galleries during installation. August 2024. Photograph by Steven Hoelscher/Ransom Center.

Figure 10: Affixing vinyl artwork and lettering during installation. August 2024. Photograph by Ashley Park/Ransom Center.

Well before the exhibition's installation, we discussed how to enhance visitors' experiences. We thought that a geographic rendering of the locations and settings for the exhibition's pictures might be a helpful way for visitors to deepen their understanding of environmental photography. With his concept of visualization, Ansel Adams unwittingly provided us with both the exhibition's organizing concept as well as a way to think about a potential online enhancement. "Visualization" is not only an expression that Adams used to describe his (and other photographers') creative process. It is also a term employed by contemporary geographers who use GIS to view and manage information about geographic places. "Visualization," in GIS, is a way of displaying spatial data as maps or three-dimensional spaces. Rather than a traditional exhibition catalogue, a GIS companion would allow viewers to explore the exhibition's photographs in a unique and lasting way.

Expanding Beyond the Gallery Walls: The Integration of Visual Art and Spatial Data

The initial concept of a GIS exhibit companion grew out of our recognition that maps can be an integration point between visual art and spatial data. Since we were interested in putting gallery objects in visual conversation, it followed that integrating the geographic concept of place, historical context, and aesthetic description in a digital, interactive space could enhance the exhibition. A wealth of recent scholarship in creative geographic praxis supports this idea: namely, that using maps as a connection between visual arts and spatial data can be enlightening for viewers. Kelly et al., for example, note that "[m]aps have the potential to not only act as representations of phenomena, but to be active participants in the production of knowledge." Art and geography, in this view, are not opposed, but rather mutually reinforcing ways of intervening in and probing at existing technological systems (Kelly et al. 382).

ESRI's (Environmental Systems Research Institute, Inc., a US-based geographic information system software company) StoryMap web-based program is perhaps the most popular, widely available, and easy-to-use option for interactive digital mapping. Its popularity has increased as its user interface has become more accessible, and its capabilities have expanded to include real-time data display, dashboards, 3D imagery, animation, and user-driven exploration (Cope et al. 1–9). The software allows users to quickly and easily integrate a map created in ArcGIS (ESRI's widely-used cloud-based GIS and visualization software) with a seamless web page, which in turn permits site visitors to interact directly with the mapped data. The program emphasizes storytelling, as it presents spatial data in an engaging, media-heavy format. Several studies have demonstrated the advantages of the StoryMap software, showing that it can enhance spatial thinking, creativity, and learner engagement with the

subject matter; that it encourages inquiry-based, student-centered learning; and that it promotes digital literacy in the context of understanding the characteristics of the environment (Tusam et al. 643–55; see also Gieseking 641–48).

Incorporating such a GIS into the visitor experience struck us as an ideal way to help make our exhibition more non-propositional, open-ended, and educational. When Ansel Adams and his predecessors, contemporaries, and successors photographed the environment, they were thinking about landscapes not only as geographic spaces but also as visual variables – forms that could be manipulated within the picture-plane to produce a compelling image. But the extent to which photographs are "visualizations" can be difficult to conceptualize without some point of comparison. Here is where the exhibition GIS proved helpful. The GIS could geographically contextualize each image, both on a large, aerial scale, and on a personal, perspectival scale. This approach would allow viewers to orient themselves *both* spatially *and* bodily relative to the images.

Our GIS took the form of a comprehensive web interface, which included an interactive aerial map of every photo location. We began the project by systematically reviewing our image archive, grouping photographs by region and period. Many of our photographs depict now-recognizable landmarks, predominantly in the Western United States – especially California – and most are named for their locations. Using these titles as guides, we navigated between Google Earth Engine's 3D model and ArcGIS to locate the approximate viewpoints from which each photo was taken, placing markers at each point along with corresponding metadata. This method worked well for recognizable landmarks but, as we soon discovered, was far from straightforward, especially for many of Adams's peers.

It also included interactive, three-dimensional visualizations, which were displayed alongside the photos themselves. Such a GIS, we hoped, would encourage website users and museum visitors to explore beyond the image in two complementary ways. First, we wanted viewers to see more clearly the extent of artistic choice and dark room manipulation that contributed to the final photograph. And second, we hoped that viewers would better understand the raw material the artist encountered: the range of *potential* images, the composition of the surrounding landscape, and how one *particular* image emerged through the artist's applied skill. Users would be able to walk through the entire exhibition online in a narrative structure at once guided and non-propositional.

The GIS component, as we envisioned it, would encourage viewers to consider photography not only as a tool for documenting the environment but also as a creative process. It would allow them to make a visual and temporal comparison between the original image and the current appearance of the same location (Figure 11). Our goals

were to help viewers reflect on how photography can both obscure and reveal nature-culture histories, and to consider what sits outside the picture plane that we do not see in the photograph. Overall, this portion of the exhibition project aimed to engage with the relevance of spatial, historical, and cultural context – not only in scholarly work but also in the applied arts (Zeller and Hoelscher).

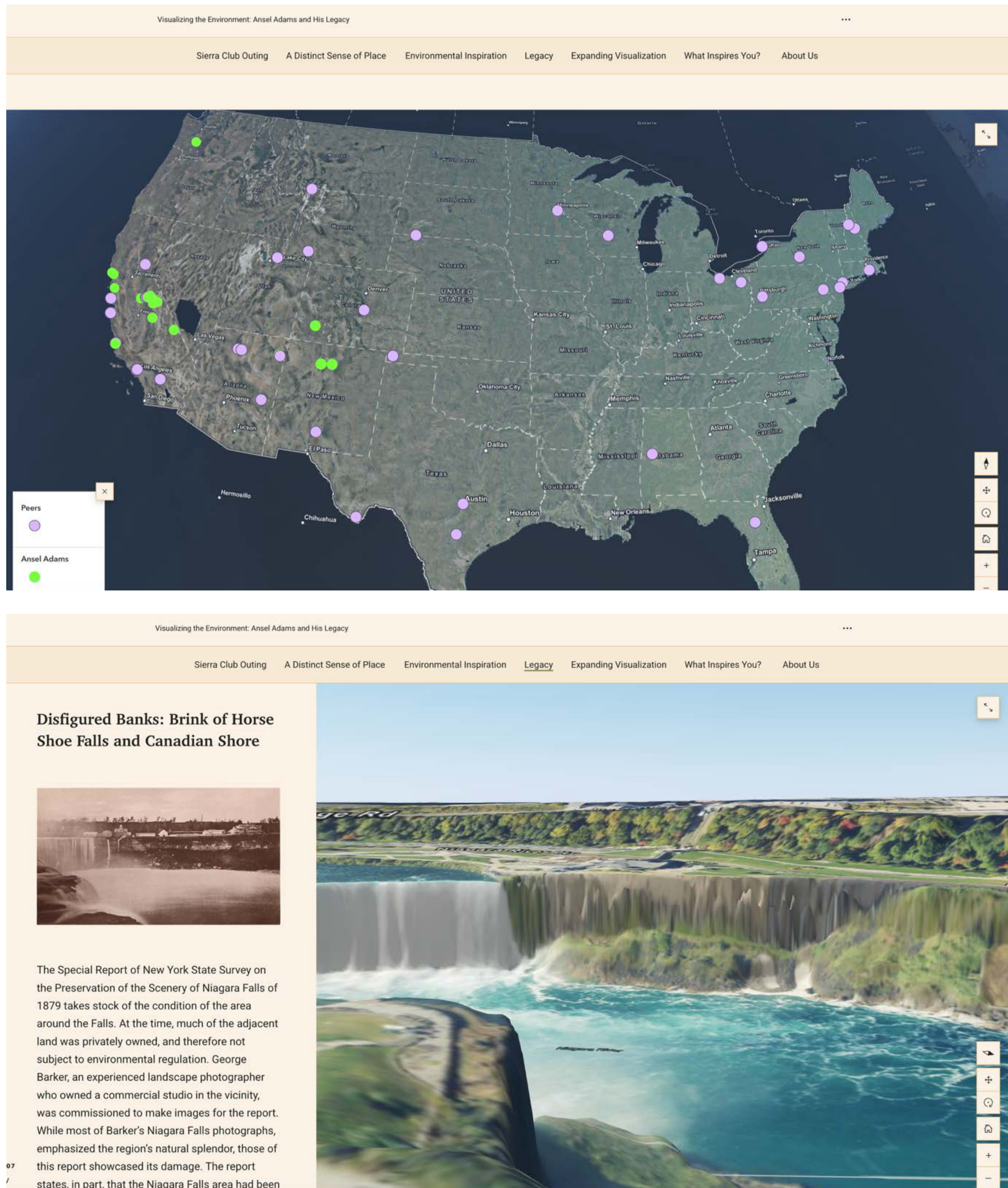

Figure 11: Map of locations for photographs in exhibition and GIS StoryMap of one site. The full exhibition companion may be viewed at: Ransom.Center/GIS.

Reflection Three

In art school, I learned that any creative project, especially those involving technology, will almost always require more negotiation with the material than one might initially expect. In other words, the path from the idea to its actual manifestation is rarely linear. This rule certainly held true for the GIS companion. Wrestling with the StoryMap software to produce not only a specific set of interface-focused outcomes but also an aesthetic and design that matched both that of the exhibit and *the various display and rights requirements imposed by each individual image, was a sufficiently challenging start-up. Through many meetings and cooperative effort, we managed to produce a satisfying compromise between our early aspirations and ESRI's software. I assumed, hubristically in retrospect, that the next step – locating the photo locations in virtual space – would be relatively straightforward, particularly for Adams's work. I quickly came up against a now-familiar yet still-disorienting feature of the modern world: In an age of overwhelming, instantaneous information access, I could find very little* geographic *data on the images in our exhibition. How strange! One would imagine, as I certainly did, that images with place-based content would be especially likely to have figured in geographic inquiry. Instead, I was pushed to engage in methods that looked and felt like traditional, archival, and field-based work but entirely within the digital "space." The result turned out to be both instructive and enriching in unexpected ways. The method itself mirrored the core ethos of the exhibition: that creative work and scholarly research can be mutually constitutive. (S. Z.)*

Pictures at an Exhibition: A Gallery Walkthrough

Our exhibition was divided into three sections, each with its own gallery and different photographic approaches: Ansel Adams himself, those photographers who came before him and whom we might consider the legacy that influenced him, and those photographers who subsequently expanded his visualizations of the environment.

Gallery I: Ansel Adams

Our exhibition began with Ansel Adams and an early project that is both formative and seemingly unusual (Figure 12). His 1929 *Sierra Club Outing* is an initial example of a format that he came to value greatly: a portfolio of unbound photographic prints. Comprising a series of original, fine prints, painstakingly produced in the darkroom by Adams (or, in later years, by an assistant under his direction), portfolios became Adams's preferred means of distributing his pictures. They were also crystallizations of his artistic vision. Critics view his portfolios as some of the most intimate expressions of his work (Szarkowski, *Portfolios* x). With prints of a portfolio, Adams intended for them to be viewed slowly and close-up, a goal we also adopted. Most of

the twenty-five photographs from this 1929 portfolio were taken during the Sierra Club's annual "outing" – a month-long hiking and camping trip in the mountains surrounding Yosemite. One year earlier, Adams had been appointed the trip's official photographer, his first commissioned assignment. In many ways, it resembles a kind of personal experience of a hiking trip, showing scenes in camp, along the trail, and from an ascended mountain peak.

Figure 12: Exhibition introduction and first gallery wall dedicated to Adams's 1929 *Sierra Club Outing* portfolio. On the far right is Adams' 1927 *Monolith, the Face of Half Dome*, which most scholars agree is his first masterpiece. Photograph by Steven Hoelscher/Ransom Center.

The portfolio also shows two contradictory formal/stylistic impulses: bold shapes and clean lines that celebrate a modernist sensibility, while the matte, slightly textured paper gives the pictures an almost hazy appearance. Adams would soon turn the corner on such experiments, but the one photograph from these early years stands out: the 1927 masterpiece, *Monolith, the Face of Half Dome* (print on far right of Figure 12). The photograph represents an important early milestone in Ansel Adams's long career. Standing on a granite shelf 4,000 feet above the Yosemite Valley floor, Adams used a red filter to deepen the tone of the sky to almost black. The result was what he later described as his "first true visualization" in which he "had been able to realize a desired image: not the way the subject appeared in reality, but how it felt to me and how it must appear in the finished print" (*Examples* 5).

After this introductory section, we divided the Adams gallery into two related sections. The first focused on Adams's visualizations of the place that came to mean

more to him than any other: Yosemite National Park. He first visited Yosemite in 1916 and, as he often said, the encounter changed his life. “I *knew* my destiny,” he wrote many years later, “when I first experienced Yosemite” (*Autobiography* 67). The place became his spiritual, social, and economic center, and for the rest of his life he returned as often as possible. Like many middle-class Americans, the fourteen-year-old Adams brought a camera on that momentous 1916 trip: a Kodak Brownie, his first camera. The pictures he made – snapshots intended to serve as mementos of a memorable family vacation – might not be considered “art,” but they reminded him of a location that became central to his professional and personal life.

Over the years, Adams developed a deep sense of place with Yosemite that became the foundation for his photographic work. The high mountain peaks, wildly rushing waterfalls, changing atmospheric conditions, and lush valley floors became the source material for a new way of making environmental visualizations: landscapes of pictorial patterns, shapes, and gradations of tone that evoked Adams’s own deeply personal affiliation with the place.

While Yosemite remained important throughout Adams’s long career, he also photographed landscapes beyond the iconic California national park, presented in our second Adams section. Travels throughout the American West, including to other national parks, provided opportunities to expand his photographic subjects. By the early 1940s, with the benefit of these new experiences, his visual approach changed considerably, becoming what is now recognized as his mature style.

In this new approach, Adams departs from the warm, intimate look of his 1929 portfolio, creating instead a more dramatic visualization of the environment. A sense of awe and astonishment became signature qualities of his photographs. He was drawn to environments that showcased visible weather patterns like theatrical clouds and snowstorms; to landforms that emphasized intense effects of light and dark; to waterways and forests that, in very different ways, contained a dynamism and sense of energy.

For Adams, focusing on the pristine quality of such environments kept the impact of people on the natural world at a distance, largely removed from the scene. And, of course, his photographs have nothing to say about the original inhabitants of this land, or their forceful removal. This was quite intentional, and this critical choice had a profound effect on his work. In his photographs, Adams transformed what he saw in the environment into what he hoped would be an inspirational work of art. “A great photograph,” he believed, “is one that fully expresses what one feels, in the deepest sense, about what is being photographed” (qtd. in Schaefer 3). What Adams felt was an intense, some might say mystical, experience of being in the natural world. Our non-propositional approach encouraged viewers to connect their own thoughts,

feelings, and experiences of being in the natural world with the photographs before them.

Translating those feelings into political action eventually became a key, complicated element of Adams's work. The constructed, artistic nature of his photographs did not stop Adams from enlisting them for environmental purposes. In his brand of environmental photography, aesthetics can be a political tool. Adams said, with great conviction, that "[r]esponse to natural beauty is one of the foundations of the environmental movement" (*Role of the Artist in Conservation* 5), a quote that adorned one of our gallery's walls. It was certainly on vivid display in his 1960 book, *This Is the American Earth*, to which we devoted a substantial display case in the middle of the gallery.

Published by the Sierra Club and distributed by New York publishing giant Alfred A. Knopf, the book was the culmination of a six-year collaboration between Adams and curator Nancy Newhall. The book, exquisitely printed and bound at a large 14 × 11 format, was the first in the Sierra Club's exhibition format series. It follows a chronological narrative, beginning with biblical creation to contemporary America beset by environmental destruction. Newhall's text, an environmental manifesto in free verse form, provided a narrative structure that paralleled the photographic images. Adams and Newhall selected 43 of his own photographs, nearly all of which showed his characteristic focus on the beauty of the natural world. The other half of the book – forty-one photographs in total – drew from the visual archives of thirty other photographers. Rather than end with apocalyptic destruction, it concludes with a plea to conserve "the crucial resource": the US-American natural environment (Adams and Newhall 72).

This Is the American Earth proved to be remarkably successful, selling approximately 75,000 copies. With the financial support from the industrialist and conservationist Max McGraw and the McGraw Foundation, the Sierra Club sent copies of the book to all Members of Congress, as part of a campaign to pass the Wilderness Act. 184 newspaper editors and editorial writers received a copy as well. When the Wilderness Act was passed four years later, it seemed to demonstrate that photography could play a crucial role in environmental activism (Adams, Archival Materials).

Gallery II: Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Legacy

Ansel Adams's environmental visualizations exemplify the photographic practices of two centuries. On one hand, he mastered the techniques and equipment of nineteenth-century photography, with its frequent use of large-format cameras and the creation of individual prints for public distribution. At the same time, he became an articulate twentieth-century spokesman for photography to be treated as a fine art.

Bridging these two centuries was Adams's belief in the power of photographic visualization to inspire reverence for the natural environment, a view that set him apart from most of his nineteenth-century precursors. Many of their photographs, by contrast, focused on presenting topographical or commercial views of the landscapes (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Entrance to the exhibition's second gallery, beginning with a photography of Adams at work by his colleague Cendric Wright (left), and dedicated to the photography legacy that Adams drew from. Featured here are photographs by F. Jay Haynes and Timothy O'Sullivan. © Cedric Wright Estate. Photograph by Steven Hoelscher/Ransom Center.

A good example of the topographical views are those photographs intended for railway companies to advertise scenic wonders along their lines (Figure 13, center photograph). In 1876, F. Jay Haynes, for example, began his work for the Northern Pacific Railroad, providing publicity photographs and stereoscopic views of sights along the railway and construction activities. This commercial work caught the attention of the superintendent to the recently created Yellowstone National Park, who offered Haynes the position as the park's first official photographer. His job was to provide a comprehensive survey of the park's astonishing, seemingly alien features that had only been drawn and written about. Beginning in 1881, Haynes spent considerable time in the park capturing its notable sites, including Minerva Terrace.

Around the same time, between 1867 and 1879, four "Great Surveys" were commissioned by the US government to provide geographic information about newly acquired land in the American West (Figure 13, right photograph). Organized by the US War Department, each employed photographers such as Timothy O'Sullivan to

document environments that might require military intervention. Central to that project was the forceful colonization of contested land, a point vividly described in the text to accompany his 1873 photograph of Cooley's Park in Arizona's Sierra Blanca Range:

> It is only within the last few years that the whites, except in large bodies, have been able to enter the Sierra Blanca region, on account of the hostile Apaches who were at home there. In the early part of the year 1873 they were finally subjugated by General Crook, in a continuous war of several years. After their conquest they were put under discipline upon different reservations, on one of which the accompanying picture is located. There, through the agency of General Crook . . . , they have been instructed in the various arts of peaceful self-support . . . Up to the present date, however, the fruits of their labors have not been sufficient for their sustenance, and they have been dependent on the Government for supplies of food (O'Sullivan, plate 9).

Only by reading the extensive caption adjacent to this picture does it become evident that photography, far from a neutral source of documentary illustration, was a principal technology of what US historians today identify as settler colonialism (Blackhawk 4–5). Rather than making this point through didactic text, our non-propositional approach provided the detailed caption next to the O'Sullivan photograph, allowing viewers to come to their own conclusions about the relationship between photography, the environment, and war.

A slight variation, our second example, were government entities working in collaboration with corporate interests, such as the California State Geological Survey in 1865. When Carleton Watkins became the official photographer, he was not taking pictures of Yosemite (which would later make him famous) but rather documenting the industrial-economic fallout of the gold rush. One image from 1871 of the North Bloomfield Mining and Gravel Company work site, which operated a hydraulic gold-mining outfit at the Malakoff Mine beginning in 1866, provided reference for the company's then-enormous size, expense, and output. When viewed today as part of his larger body of work, Watkins's mine photographs stand out as early testaments to dramatic environmental change (Watkins; see also Palmquist 46).

Third are photographs intended for individual and corporate businesses to satisfy middle-class demands for visual information about US-American environments, especially in the mass production of stereographs. William Henry Jackson, whose long career focused largely on environments of the American West, stands out as exemplary. This included Colorado, where he opened a commercial photography studio in Denver in 1879. Before that, he worked for the Union Pacific Railroad and several US surveys of the West, such as the 1871 survey led by Ferdinand Hayden, which played a prominent role in establishing Yellowstone National Park. Jackson produced scores of stereographs but also photographs of a rather different genre. In his youth,

Jackson was trained as a painter, a skill he brought to this photograph of the gateway to Pikes Peak (Figure 14, left photograph). For a brief period, before the invention of new processes to create color photographs, artists such as Jackson hand-painted their prints to make them more "realistic" and appealing to potential clients.

Figure 14: A portion of the nineteenth-century gallery dedicated to individual and corporate businesses to satisfy middle-class demands for visual information about American environments, especially in the mass production of stereographs.
Photograph by Steven Hoelscher/Ransom Center.

Gallery III: Expanding Environmental Visualizations

We located a third portion of the exhibition in what we called the contemporary gallery. We began by noting how, that very summer, the US Postal Service commemorated Ansel Adams's work with the release of sixteen Forever stamps featuring his photographs. This is only the latest testament to his enormous impact on US-American visual culture. But his immeasurable influence on both the photographic and environmentalist worlds began early – and did not go unchallenged. Even at the beginning of his career, as Adams was developing his recognizable style, other photographers visualized the environment in quite different ways.

For many contemporary photographers, Adams's legacy represents both a debt and burden. Contemporary landscape photographer Mark Klett describes how Adams helped both raise environmental consciousness and prove that photography could be a powerful medium for that project. At the same time, by removing evidence of the human impact on the earth, Adams presented a romanticized vision of a lost world, an aesthetic with few contemporary adherents. Klett puts it this way: "The

landscape is not so much a paradise to long for (some say a paradise lost) as it is a mirror that reflects our own cultural image . . . The reality of place is quite different than what one sees in an Ansel Adams photograph" ("Legacy of Ansel Adams" 72).

Trying to visualize the environment in ways that represent myriad realities of "place" has become a hallmark of photography in recent decades, and is in many ways a direct critique of Adams. The photographs on display in the contemporary gallery illustrating this key point took on many forms and address a wide range of topics, including destruction and degradation, change over time, the connection of home to place, historical memory, and aesthetic beauty. In nearly every case, rather than separating cultures and societies from the environment, contemporary environmental visualizations explore their connection. They visually exemplify historian William Cronon's once-controversial, now-famous dictum that wilderness is the wrong nature to get back to (7).

We focused on several of these environmental, photographic interventions. One seminal example originates with the Rephotographic Survey Project during the late 1970s (Figure 4). Organized by Mark Klett, he and four colleagues traveled to the same locations documented by photographers of the nineteenth-century surveys of the American West. There, they made new photographs at those sites. For Klett and his colleagues, "'rephotography' meant accurately repeating the original image's camera position, the visual composition, framing, time of year, and time of day of the original photograph while also acknowledging the participation of the photographer in making [aesthetic] choices" ("Rephotographic Survey Project", see also Klett et al.). The results say a great deal about how environments have changed over a hundred years of human interaction, and how visualizations are always cultural products.

One striking example is Rick Dingus's rephotograph of A. J. Russell's original photograph of Hanging Rock (Figure 4). So much has changed that the landscape on the far side of the overhanging rock appears not only unfamiliar but somehow physically improbable. "I was most interested in using repeat photography to investigate not just how the camera could help us record the world changing through time," Dingus said, "but also to examine how both the photographer and the medium of photography distort the world by rendering it as an image" (Dingus).

Roughly ten years later, South Texas native Sharon Stewart published *The Toxic Tour of Texas*, a photographic journey through a state that, as she puts it, "prides itself on being the biggest, the best. And it is. Texas has the largest concentration of oil refineries and chemical plants in the nation. Texas ranks first in the United States in the amount of known or suspected carcinogens released into the environment" (Stewart).

Her photograph of Chevron's uranium waste dump site is as much a work of beauty as it is a document of environmental destruction. Simultaneously, the accompanying text provides competing interpretations of the site. The Co-Chair of Panna Maria Concerned Citizens would seem to corroborate the contents of the image, while the Uranium Operations Manager at Chevron asks viewers to trust the corporation's promise of innocence and not what the photograph would seem to show. Stewart's work encourages viewers to closely consider the relationship between beauty and devastation.

Beauty is also important for Dawoud Bey – but as it works to trigger a complicated cultural memory. Taking its title from a Langston Hughes poem, Bey's series *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* imagines the perilous journey of enslaved Black US-Americans moving north along the underground railroad, toward Canada and freedom. The photographs in the series were taken in Ohio, within fifty miles of Lake Erie – the final push to the border. The dark, rich hues of the tangled, inhospitable landscape seem to charge the atmosphere with a tension that is both lush and ominous. In the photograph, we see both a place and a cultural memory – a portrait of experience conveyed through suggestion. Bey asks us to consider the relationship between environments and the lasting imprints of the past. "The experience is visualized and imagined through their eyes," he says, "so while their black bodies may be literally absent from the images, their presence still informs the work in a visceral way" (Bey qtd. in Lee).

In the contemporary gallery, we also circled back to Yosemite to revive the visual conversation with Ansel Adams. It was in that national park, while teaching photography in 1976 at Adams's Photography Workshop, that the idea for Roger Minick's "Sightseer Series" came to him. Photography students, he later recalled, would gather at the famous Inspiration Point overlook,

> "prop their cameras on tripods, and wait for the grand man himself to move along the line bestowing his blessings on each student's composition and choice of exposure. A cacophony of clicking shutters would then follow, with the result of course that all the students ended up making nearly identical images."

It was not long, however, before he became aware of something else happening at this site. "Waves of tourists were continually arriving at the overlook's parking lot in cars, buses and motorhomes," he said, "thrusting their way through this gauntlet of photographers not only for a clear view of the famous vista but also for the obligatory snapshot of themselves proving they were there" (Minick). For the next several years, Minick dedicated himself to photographing what he describes as a new genus – "Sightseer Americanus." The result is a poignant series of how ordinary people interact with the natural environment (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Roger Minick's "Sightseer Series" was inspired by teaching an Ansel Adams Photography Workshop in Yosemite National Park. The photograph here became one of the exhibition's signature images. © Roger Minick. Photograph by Sandy Carson/Ransom Center.

Richard Misrach, who also taught at Adams's Photography Workshop, identifies Ansel Adams as having a major impact on his own career. Misrach is both generous and critical of Adams in a way that is quite productive. "You don't want people making more Ansel Adams pictures," Misrach says. "You want people to take your legacy and then build on it. He gave me the tools to go off and just do something completely, radically different" (Misrach). The tools are both technical (the use of large format cameras and what he calls a fetishism for the print), as well as conceptual: namely, an appreciation for the power of beauty to evoke feelings and political action. But the direction is entirely different. The photograph that he loaned us for the show – of Yosemite after a forest fire – demonstrates that quite well (Figure 6). Where Adams strove to visualize the environment through a prism of pristine nature, Misrach confronts the often-destructive ways that environments change, in this case, by a lightning strike one year earlier. The results, to our eyes, are evocative of the opportunities and stakes at the heart of environmental photography.

Reflection Four

The scholarship involved with conceiving, researching, and mounting this exhibition was as rigorous as any project I've worked on. And with scores of visitors coming

through the gallery every week, I think it's reasonable to assume that it will have greater impact than any book, article, or essay that I've ever published. The question remains how it should "count." Neither Google Scholar nor Academic Analytics – two widely-used data platforms that measure faculty productivity – include exhibition curation in its assessment. Faculty at research universities like UT-Austin are often evaluated by administrators deploying such metrics, so this matters. Nonetheless, as my experience demonstrated to me, organizing an exhibition at a place like the Ransom Center is itself a form of scholarly activity, even if that work does not appear in a data-mined index of productivity. The creative, logistical, and intellectual labor necessary to produce an exhibition is substantial and should be recognized as such. I discussed this with Paula Krebs, Executive Director of the Modern Language Association, during a campus visit in fall 2024, and also with Russell Wyland, Director of Outreach for the National Endowment for the Humanities, during a September 2024 exhibition walkthrough. We all agreed that the question about how to evaluate public-facing scholarship, especially in the humanities, is an urgent one. (S. H.)

Conclusion: Pictures on a Wall

In the end, nearly 20,000 people visited the exhibition, a number that includes both walk-in visitors and from docent-led tours. Many of those tours included educational groups, both K–12 and university. The dozens of university classes came from a wide range of subjects, including: "American History since 1865," "US Environmental Justice Movements," "Sustaining a Planet," among many others.

Not only were people coming to the exhibition, but they were interacting with it in ways that we had hoped. In her report of the exhibition, the Ransom Center's Head of Education and Public Programs, Anne Terrill, summarized what she saw in the gallery:

> Visitors responded movingly to Ansel Adams's works and the powerful images in the contemporary photography space. Dawoud Bey, Elliott Erwitt, Bruce Davidson, and Sharon Stewart provoked varied and thoughtful response from students. The structure of the exhibition allowed visitors to understand and develop their own ideas about Adams's style and approach to photography. The earlier history was very helpful for discussing how to look at and interpret photographic evidence (Terrill).

Combined with the large number of visitors, this was, of course, gratifying to hear. Moreover, Terrill's report concluded that one of our concerns – whether an exhibition that did not adhere to a strict chronology would be potentially confusing – was, in fact, one of its virtues. "The structure of the exhibition also worked well for larger tours, because groups could easily start at different points in the exhibition," she noted. "The non-chronological approach was very helpful for our goal of small group tours that engage closely with objects."

This returns us to our initial task of closing the gap between cultural critic and cultural creator, and how misunderstood that process can be for those who have never worked in the area. As one faculty colleague put it when we told him that we were considering such a project: "[W]hat could be more straightforward than hanging some pictures on a wall, right?" Although well-intentioned and offered in the spirit of humor, the comment landed flat. Such work, we anticipated, is anything but straightforward and our experience has borne out that hunch. But even more than we expected, the project was rewarding as it enabled us to work collaboratively with outstanding research center professionals, and to conceive our scholarship well beyond the ivory tower. It also seemed important. In a moment when faculty are increasingly called upon to make their research more widely and publicly available, now is a very good time to make sure that the public is aware of the critical, relevant work being done in the humanities. For more scholars to undertake such work, and to actively close the gap between the cultural critic and cultural creator, it really should be recognized as doing more than "hanging some pictures on a wall."

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Peer Review

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Book Reviews edited by Joshua Parker

Narrative in the Anthropocene. By Erin James. Ohio State UP, 2022, 207 pp.

How does the Anthropocene affect the arts – and vice versa? This question has been looming large in literary studies for the last two decades or so. Erin James offers a response from the perspective of postclassical narratology. Her compact monograph is, to this reviewer's mind, a must-read for scholars and students who want to know whether and how narrative texts can answer this pressing concern. Framed by an introduction and a coda, James subdivides her take on the matter into chapters entitled "Worlds," "Material," "Time," "Space," and "Narration." Throughout the volume, the author strikes a fine balance between innovative extensions of narratological theory and often strikingly insightful analysis of numerous examples of narrative fiction. She, moreover, embeds her crisp argumentation effectively within the historical development of her field and positions her work in relation to competing schools of narratological thinking throughout anglophone scholarship.

According to the introductory chapter, the monograph "corrects two shortcomings: a lack of engagement with narrative theory within the environmental humanities" and the "relatively scant considerations of the environment in narrative theory" (4). The trajectory of what she calls "Anthropocene narrative theory" (5) proposes that there are reciprocal impacts between the conditions of the Anthropocene and specific features, uses, and effects of narrative. Readers obviously play a central role in this endeavor because they are cast as responding both to the current epoch and to narratives of the same. Rather than siding with scholars who have claimed anything from narratives' responsibility for the current condition of Planet Earth via certain types of narratives as offering real-life solutions to the supposed impossibility of even conveying climate change in fiction (7–14), James makes a case for studying how "readers interact with narrative" (14). In contrast to the frequently content-focused research by scholars in the environmental humanities, she argues that narratology's emphasis on form complements and enriches analyses of underlying worldviews and ideologies (16), as feminist and postcolonial narratological works have also demonstrated (17). The central points in all of the five main chapters latch onto useful insights into specific schools of thought, but the author consistently carves out a niche for the added benefit of a postclassical Anthropocene narratology

that will heighten our understanding of the triangular relation between narrative, recipient, and a world affected by anthropogenic climate change.

Chapter one, "Worlds," provides the argumentative basis for the subsequent chapters, highlighting an innovative perspective on defining narrative as the creation of "storyworlds" with specific purposes in mind. Especially the gaps built into such fictional storyworlds encourage readers to imagine how the "*unnarrated*" (39, original emphasis) may translate into their actual environments. Based on the theory of the "extended mind" (42) from cognitive narrative theory, the author argues that narrative can serve as a connector between individual human minds and the world around them. Further developing Caroline Levine's new formalist stance, James emphasizes "narrative as an *affordance of worldbuilding*" (46, original emphasis) by offering an "aesthetic design" (46) that sets in motion "worldbuilding for some purpose" (46). As a result of addressing gaps and the ways texts elicit responses that take into account readers' notions of the(ir) worlds, James cogently argues that narratives do not necessarily have to thematize the Anthropocene explicitly in order for us to study their storyworlding strategies. Her model here is Edward Said's "*contrapuntal reading*" (53, original emphasis) of the real-world, yet mostly un-narrated colonial subtext of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814). From this perspective, the "extradiegetic heterodiegetic" (63) narrator of Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2010) satirically highlights the dire consequences of the myopically solipsistic protagonist's inability to perceive the dystopic state of the world outside his own mental cage.

Having closed the first chapter with stating the absence of "adequate analytical language" (65) for researching texts and formal features not yet included in the environmental humanities, James then proposes new terms in the following chapters and applies them rigorously. The second chapter, "Material," offers a fresh take on new materialist claims about the ostensible narrative agency of the material more-than-human world (68, 69–72) which glosses over the use of human language, writing, and communication necessary to make texts known to readers. James develops convincing alternatives such as the concepts of "*material narrativity*" and "*material-narrative cognition*" (69, original emphasis). Rather than adopting the notion of material as an agentic narrator with independent powers of self-expression, she argues "that many types of nonhuman matter do encode within them certain significations" (72) – such as "tree rings" – which, in themselves, "are not narratives" in the sense of engaging in "worldbuild[ing] for some purpose" (72). Instead, these "significations" allow us to deduce that "*something happened*" (73, original emphasis) to them. The example of Aldo Leopold's depiction of a tree serves as a case in point (75–76). It also brings to mind a narrative that, in James's sense of not only considering Anthropocene-themed narrative texts, would provide fine material for an analysis: *Quercus*,

the invented novel embedded as the protagonist's reading material in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Invitation to a Beheading* (Russian original published in 1935–36, English translation in 1959), which is an experiment in contemplating deep time *avant la lettre.*

The subsequent chapters are just as cogently argued. Chapter three, on "Time," addresses the debate about scalarity, which has been one of the top concerns in scholarly work on the (un)representability of climate change in the arts. Here, James introduces Anthropocene-appropriate new narratological categories such as the "*pseudo-singular*" and the "*effect-event*" (97, original emphasis). In particular, her reading of Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) demonstrates the usefulness of reading such a text for young readers narratologically because, otherwise, the understanding of its contents and its central arguments may remain comparatively superficial. In chapter four, "Space," James highlights how setting has become a moving target in Anthropocene narratives that highlight swift change and the unrecognizability of devastated locations. Her notion of "*despatialization*" (122, original emphasis) encapsulates a narrative technique that targets readers' imagination in depictions which force them to feel their way into fictional settings that explode their previous notions of possible (and, i.e., mostly stable) locations. This chapter illustrates that James's perspective allows in-depth study of a broad range of works, be they works favored by the Blue Humanities or narratives that depend heavily on the affordances of digital communication.

Chapter five, on "Narration," prepares the shift towards the discussion of claims made by scholars outside literary studies. The author elucidates variants of we-narration and second-person address, homing in on what she dubs "*inconstant we-narration*" and new variants of "the fictional *you*" (150, original emphasis). The oscillation between I- and we-narration requires readers to comprehend the switching between individual and collective subjecthoods, especially in relation to the imagined worlds to which they are connected (159). James's reading of Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* (2020) lets this technique and the demands it puts on readers become clear (162–66) and beautifully demonstrates how the amazingly innovative expressive possibilities of inconstant we-narration transcend the storyworld and encourage us to contemplate the relation between "collective action" and "the personal responsibility of the individual" (166).

The chapter entitled "Coda: Narrative and Climate Science" points out the problematic ways in which some scientists have used often hopelessly antiquated, simplistic notions of what narrative is and what it can supposedly do to find ways of communicating climate science to lay readers. Especially the lack of consideration for

worldbuilding is at fault in such reductive perspectives on narrative as mostly a sequence of events arranged into a plot. By contrast, James closes with brief descriptions of two large-scale research projects which rely on National Science Foundation funding and take the synergetic collaboration of natural sciences and narratology seriously. One of the projects combines the forces of "two geographers, an environmental philosopher and indigenous scholar, and [James] as a narrative theorist," who jointly study "water quality and governance in two indigenous communities" (186). The other project focuses on how people narrate their experiences with "wildland fire in rural Idaho" (187) and how such narrative-based data could be used "to increase scientific literacy" (187), to produce new insights into the occurrence and management of fires, and to improve ways of managing fire hazards (188). This section about her involvement in interdisciplinary research is all-too-brief and does not quench the thirst for more insights into innovative research designs and their results. At the same time, it leaves this reader looking forward to publications coming out of the projects and, more generally, further books and articles by James herself.

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Narrative in Crisis: Reflections from the Limits of Storytelling. Edited by Martin Dege and Irene Strasser. Oxford UP, 2024, 182 pp.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced epidemiologic crisis as the antagonist of an overwhelming number of global narratives of precarity, inequality, and conflict. Individually and collectively, the human species cast, perhaps more frequently in liminal spaces than otherwise, for ways to make sense of its devastating grip, not only through a frantic resort to statistics (and the necropolitical figurations that it stood for) but also by means of narrating (with and without numbers). Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic, with its lingering shadow more than half a decade since it started, was and continues to brim with stories.

Edited by Irene Strasser and Martin Dege, *Narrative in Crisis: Reflections from the Limits of Storytelling* is a timely collection of essays that focuses on exactly this: narratives of/about crisis, including the untold, the unsanctioned, and the unheard. Consisting of ten chapters and organized in two parts, the book is a record of intellectual engagements in Europe and North America with the narrative crises of the past five years, starting (in its introduction) with spelling out the (not always knowable, certain, or coherent) modes in which psychology and narrative have met in collective attempts to make sense of the (clinically) unknown, the (psychologically) uncertain, and the (emotionally but also corporeally) incoherent – both in the narrative landscape of the 2020s and beyond. The introduction raises several urgent questions, among which "Will we have learned something about humanity and equality after this pandemic has ended?" (4) functions as the central query for the entire volume.

Launching an adjoining query on the power and the limits of everyday forms of narrative (through which human collectives have long labored to make sense of crises), the first part, "End of Story?" starts off with Mark Freeman's reflections on what he argues is largely missing from such "alluring narratives" as white populist narratives on refugee crises and vaccine conspiracies. This, a mixture of "hope, despair, and nausea" (15), he identifies as the potential rise of emergent modes of relationality and solidarity which hope to puncture the self-sufficiency of "the seemingly self-sufficient self" (16) in the wake and *in spite* of catastrophic events.

Reading the COVID-19 pandemic against the epidemic that Albert Camus narrates in *The Plague*, Dan P. McAdams turns to a tripartite model of narrative in the third chapter. As McAdams argues, the modes of denial, redemption, and acceptance are those in which more or less all the stories about the pandemic, whether autobiographical or purely fantastical, have been told.

If McAdams's chapter is invested in stories in which the virus appeared as more than a mere external cause for human suffering and, in fact, as a full-fledged adversary, the chapter by Corinne Squire zooms in on the term "crisis." Squire sets out to make sense of its shifting practices and definitions in light of the 2020 pandemic and along *counteracting* (that is, alternative, transgressive, parodic, even oppositional) narrative strands. The chapter's engagement with a variety of counteracting narratives of the pandemic, e.g., by people with long-term conditions and disabilities such as HIV and Chronic fatigue syndrome/Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (CFS/ME) or those generated by the far-right and followers of various post-truth discourses presents evidence of tremendous intersectional complexity that usefully challenges *a*historical debates on COVID-19.

Similarly aware of the larger historical backdrop against which such narrative practices could be made sense of, and in exploring the double frame of "war" and "crisis,"

Hanna Meretoja's chapter, "The Pandemic as a Crossroads," argues for awareness about (and against) the narrative dangers of telling stories about the pandemic by relying merely on such metaphors as war, fire, or crisis. Instead, Meretoja calls for understanding the pandemic with the help of fittingly complex narrative moves that relate it to "the direction in which humankind is heading" (83) and frame it "as a lesson on the limits of our agency" (84).

In the final chapter in the book's first section, Luka Lucić and Guro Nore Fløgstad bring history even more meticulously to the analytical center. Focusing on a regional crisis of comparable acuity, "Beyond Trauma Narratives: How the Military Siege of Sarajevo Shaped the Stories Told in the Aftermath" employs the retrospective narrative mode set in the stories that ten Sarajevan adults have written as reflections on how, as children, they had endured the 1,335-day-long siege of Sarajevo from 1992 to 1995. The sociocultural mapping of the COVID-19 pandemic onto the siege of Sarajevo, the authors demonstrate, sheds much-needed light on the uses of language in the narrative formations and formulations pertaining to individual accounts of "radical change" in one's living conditions and of ensuing technologies of coping with "trauma" in what connects the "self" in times of acute crisis (be it regional or global) to "the space experienced" (106).

The book's second part, "The Self in Crisis," stays with the question of the self (including crossovers between narrative and individual emotions, thoughts, and stories), while casting a closer look at the affordances and limitations of storytelling in coping with crisis. "Plotless Stories and Unthought Knowns," by clinical psychologist Ruthellen Josselson, takes up the task on a predominantly personal note. The chapter poses a fundamental question that emerges at the early stages of any crisis such as COVID-19 (i.e., a large-scale health crisis followed by a near-global lockdown): "What can we know, and how do we know it?" (111). Accompanied by haunting (but unnervingly familiar) images of empty public spaces across the United States and Europe, such as Times Square and London's National Gallery during the early days of the lockdown, the chapter details not only the tension between data, subjective experiences and memories, troubled senses of time and space, and communal (including political) accounts of crisis, but also the intermediary, interpretive (and not always successful) role that "narrative" has played in bridging them to one another.

"Coping Personally and Politically with World Crises" further complicates the COVID-19 crisis as Michel Ferrari and Melanie Munroe discuss the significance of personal and communal "wisdom" (including the resources that individuals and communities have at their disposal in accessing it, and the function that "cultural narratives" (129) assume in dealing with crises (such as surviving the residential school system in Canada) and their aftermaths. As the authors argue, "wisdom is not about using a

specific coping strategy, but about discerning the most appropriate ways of coping with a crisis" (131).

Next, written before the pandemic had come to a widely agreed-upon end (as most chapters in this collection were), Molly Andrews' "Rethinking our Lives" entertains the possibility of comprehending what has remained incomprehensible in the COVID-19 crisis while living it. This includes its exact origins, the psychological challenges it has posed to various communities, the emotional weight of loss, alienation, and even the forced re-imagination of the nature of one's lived sense of time (especially of one's pre-crisis past) – what Andrews usefully terms "fluid temporality" (144).

The volume closes with "The Self and Its Crises." Adopting a cultural narratology approach, Jens Brockmeier revisits some of the ways a two-sided, philosophical and psychological, approach to the age-old, tenuous interlinks between the self and its crises facilitates a better understanding of the integral yet shape-shifting, "fundamental category" of the self – whether *in* or *out* of crisis (160). He rounds off this debate by analyzing the modernist "pandemic" narrative of Ingmar Bergman's 1957 movie *The Seventh Seal*, which Brockmeier reads as a struggle between an elusive sense of a living, feeling, sovereign self and its face-off with death and demise.

Well-placed in the "Explorations in Narrative Psychology" series, *Narratives in Crisis: Reflections from the Limits of Storytelling* is an account of the COVID-19 pandemic while it was still unfolding. Covering a wide range of topics that are tackled from a variety of perspectives and accessibly written, it functions as a successful collective endeavor by scholars in Europe and the United States to understand the interjection of the everyday with an unusually high dose of the radical that the Covid-19 crisis made possible. Second, the volume explores the narrative toolboxes that individuals and communities resorted to (or else that they had to create from scratch) in trying not only to cope but also to comprehend and commemorate. Follow-up research in the years to come should show how the narrative modes explored in this collection will evolve, what tales will have remained, and what accounts will have been (un-)remembered.

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