

50TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE AUSTRIAN
ASSOCIATION FOR AMERICAN STUDIES

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS



VERSIONS OF AMERICA SPECULATIVE PASTS, PRESENTS, FUTURES

UNIVERSITY OF KLAGENFURT

OCTOBER 20-22, 2023

MULTIPLICITIES OF U.S. CULTURE: Indigenous Americas

Panel chair: James J. Donahue (SUNY Potsdam)

“Pop Art, Activism, and Indigenous Futurism: The Visual Art of Ryan Singer”

Karsten Fitz (University of Passau)

For the past four-hundred years, American settler colonialist depictions have frozen Native Americans in a bygone, static past. Against this background, it seems to be an oxymoron to imagine Indigenous people as part of future worlds. Writing against this long-established Western norm, Indigenous Futurism has established itself as a new movement over the past decade. This movement consists of art, literature, comics, (online) games, and other media forms that express Indigenous perspectives of the past, present, and future in the context of science fiction and related subgenres. These perspectives often reflect Indigenous forms of knowledge, traditional storytelling, historical or contemporary political narratives, and cultural realities. Indigenous Futurisms are part of what Gerald Vizenor has termed Native survivance, challenge centuries of appropriation of Indigenous cultures by mainstream Anglo-American society, and at the same time diversify the frame of reference of the genre of science fiction. As such, they contribute to processes of decolonization, as Grace Dillon has pointed out. This panel contribution investigates Ryan Singer’s visual art at the intersection of pop art, activism, and Indigenous Futurism. By focusing on Singer’s artistic engagement with the fictional characters and settings of the *Star Wars* franchise, in particular, this paper reads Singer’s works as pop artistic acts of cultural and political decolonization. This is shown, for instance, when Singer (re)appropriates Princess Leia as *Hopi Princess Leia* (2009), because her hair style in *Star Wars* was originally adopted from Hopi women’s tradition, or when, in *(De)Colonized Ewok* (2019), the Navajo artist uses an iconic *Star Wars* creature to comment on the forced assimilation of Native American children through boarding schools during the 19th and 20th centuries. Such visual depictions make Ryan Singer’s art legible as examples for the (re-)appropriation of Indigenous futures, and thus represent Native survivance in the Vizenorian sense at its best.

Francisco Delgado’s *Adolescence, Secondhand: A Postmodern Rhetorics of Survivance*

Katharine Wilson (Universität Bamberg)

Postmodernity has shifted the concept of “identity” into something defined and mediated by narratives. Textual strategies associated with postmodernism (such as intertextuality and metafictionality) are ways that postmodern authors can engage with what identity means in a world determined by specific cultural frames and stereotypes. These questions regarding identity and narratives are not exclusive to postmodern authors, but have been thematized by non-white authors who have written about the burden of racialized stereotypes and expectations throughout the history of American literature. Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor’s concept of survivance describes how Native American authors use their writing to assert the lived experience of Indigeneity while fighting to exist within a society intent on

colonial practices of categorization and reductionism. Native American writers are forced to situate themselves within a particular understanding of America: one where, as Kathryn Shanley writes, “playing Indian has become a national American pastime” (678). In this sense, the Native American writer has used the same tools as the postmodern author to explore the role of identity in a postmodern America built on (often racialized) tropes. In Francisco Delgado’s 2018 chapbook *Adolescence, Secondhand*, intertextual and metafictional references force the reader to engage with the complexities of growing up as a multiracial (Japanese, Seneca, and Chamorro) individual while constantly negotiating the racialized cultural scripts imposed by postmodern American society. In this paper, I use Delgado’s text as a case study to show how Native American texts of survivance make use of postmodern textual strategies in order to assert their lived experience in the face of colonial practices of stereotyping and simplification that define their version of the US.

Transatlantic Belonging: Early and Contemporary Mohegan Travelers in Madeline Sayet’s “Where We Belong”

Nina De Bettin Padolin (University of Graz)

Madeline Sayet’s autobiographical play “Where We Belong” (2022) opens with the question “Where do we need to start today?” (14) and delves into a journey from the Mohegan homelands to the far-off shores of England and back home again. Mohegan travelers to Europe at the time of colonization and those traveling today are brought into close proximity on stage. The drama asks how this Indigenous presence across the Atlantic has been marked by colonial exploitation and Indigenous agency, disenfranchisement of rights and the protest for human rights, as well as loneliness and strength. These dualities of belonging and isolation are at the heart of Sayet’s drama, in which crossing borders for the good of the Mohegan nation encapsulates the difficulties of Indigenous resurgence in a (neo-)colonial world. I look at the Mohegan travelers to England to trace the futurities established by these early voyagers, to then move on to the present realities of border crossing and navigating invisible lines. The Mohegan epistemic practices that are integral to the travelers’ journeys presuppose that each individual is the future of their nation because their existence is resurgent. In arguing this, I consider the drama version of the performance and evaluate the ways in which Indigenous futures are aesthetically conceptualized through the individual. I examine how the act of transatlantic traveling becomes a metaphorical journey of healing for the main character and the nation itself that is intimately tied to traditional Mohegan epistemologies. In addition, a focus on how issues of repatriation and strengthening kinship ties are addressed in the performance is also a fundamental aspect of uncovering how Mohegan futures are intertwined with the individual’s journey of healing.

(RE-)VERSIONING PASTS, PRESENTS, AND FUTURES: Visions of American Pluralism

Panel chair: Sofie Sabbioni (University of Basel)

Visions of Welfare: Poor Whites and Criminal Blacks?

Grit Grigoleit-Richter (University of Passau)

At the onset of the American welfare state that emerged in direct response to the Great Depression, President Roosevelt advocated a vision of a just and equitable society. Strongly influenced by progressive ideas the Roosevelt administration passed the Social Security Act of 1935, which afforded unprecedented securities for the unemployed, the elderly, the poor, or the disabled to ameliorate pervasive poverty and to allow for a more prosperous future. Yet this progressive outlook was compromised by a version of America that has been deeply racialized since its inception towards oppressing racialized minorities and maintaining White supremacy. As a result, the Social Security Act denied access to domestic and agricultural workers who in turn were predominantly African Americans and Latinx. This paper argues that race and gender which accounted for these exclusions already at the birth of the U.S. welfare state, have gained in the following decades institutional stability and furthermore an authoritative hegemony in the political and public discourse. Even though the working class altogether has been hit hard by deindustrialization, austerity, mass unemployment, wage stagnation, and more currently the Covid-19 crisis, gendered and racialized perceptions of poverty came to determine who is worthy and who is not worthy to gain access to benefits in an increasingly neoliberal welfare regime that is built on the free market and self-responsibility. This paper examines the controlling image of the Welfare Queen and the perception of the criminalized Black men: both are closely tied to the carceral state that employs exceedingly social control to marginalize, stigmatize and exclude impoverished minorities. The growing carceral state thereby intervenes in the welfare state and regulates and monitors social services that are not exclusively based on the criteria of need but are increasingly aligned with criminal justice policies. Hence, two versions of how the U.S. came to implement welfare emerged: to relieve poor Whites and punish poor Blacks.

U.S. Pluralism: Intelligent Design or Accidentally All-Inclusive?

Lee Rijn Tate

The Colonists who settled on Native American land in the 1600s and 1700s in what became the 13 Colonies, were a motley crew of societal outcasts, religious cults, entrepreneurs, adventurers, and other Europeans looking for a path out of poverty and new lives. Puritans, Slavers, Shipbuilders, Catholics, indentured servants, farmers, trappers, frontiersmen, soldiers, Quakers, and myriad other groups of European diaspora comprised the recognized citizenry of what would become the United States of America (this citizenry deliberately did not include American Indians or slaves, and women had only limited rights under the law). This diversity of white groups necessitated—and arguably inspired—the unprecedented language on universal rights in the country’s founding documents. The principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution, and others—all written by white men—were surprisingly universal, and were compromises without which the

fragile, young confederacy would indubitably have foundered. This paper will explore the intent of the U.S. Founders and analyze salient milestones in U.S. history where democracy was expanded beyond white men to assess whether the Founders intended or even imagined the inclusion of women, American Indians, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and many other groups as full citizens with suffrage, equal rights, and protection under the law. Contrasting the intent of U.S. founding documents with the dramatic ecumenicism achieved through Emancipation, Women's suffrage, and the Civil Rights Movement should afford clearer understanding of how intentional the Founders of the U.S.A. were, and therefore enable a reexamination of how much credit they deserve for the diversity of U.S. citizenry today.

“[T]he perfect national illustration of the unity and dignity of the human family”: Frederick Douglass’s Vision of the United States against the background of the “Chinese Question”

Kieran Sommer (Heidelberg University)

Narratives of the US-American nation have long drawn on the idea of the United States' exceptional or model character. However, as the development of US nationalism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century was shaped principally by dominant White US-Americans, the model that the country was held to represent by thinkers of those ethnicities was typically characterised by notions of assimilation, race exclusivity and European American supremacy.

Yet the nineteenth century in particular also saw alternative conceptions of the US nation, such as the one reformer Frederick Douglass outlined in his 1869 speech “Our Composite Nationality”. Prompted by the developments surrounding Chinese immigration to the United States in the mid nineteenth century, the speech presents not merely a reaction to the so-called “Chinese Question” or a racial minority's version of the US-American nation, but the vision of a speculative near-future, in which the potential of each race and the nation can be realised in a racially diverse and inclusive US society.

My paper will engage with the following questions: What characteristics does the US nation require to provide a model of composite nationality and which does it already possess according to Douglass? In what respects is his conception of the US nation interlinked with, and different from, previous White-dominated versions of US nationhood? How does Douglass's oratorical delineation address issues of the “Chinese Question”?

Through such an analysis of the speech's text, one can explore the political and cultural potential of Douglass's version of the US-American nation, how it is interlinked with issues of racial and ethnic minorities as well as the layeredness and interconnectedness of conceptions of the United States.

AESTHETICS AND POSSIBILITIES OF VERSIONING: Space, Place, and Geo-Perspectives

Panel chair: Joshua Parker (University of Salzburg)

Cabin Fever? Conflicting Versions of America in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and *Walden* (1854)

Robert A. Winkler (University of Salzburg)

Scene 1: It is 1850, and in *The Scarlet Letter, A Romance*, Nathaniel Hawthorne sends his tragic 17th century heroine Hester Prynne to live in a cabin at the edge of town to make her flee the moral confines of Puritan society. – cut –

Scene 2: It is 1852, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* shocks the American public with its unadorned depiction of the horrors of slavery while its main character finds refuge and community in his cabin only. – cut –

Scene 3: It is 1854, and Henry David Thoreau publishes *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, wherein he chronicles the simple form of life he has tested during his two-year stay in a self-built cabin near Walden Pond, Massachusetts. – cut –

Canonized classics of American literature, all three works emerge at the beginning of the 1850s – that crucial moment in the history of the nation when it found itself on the brink of the civil war – and epitomize its apparently disparate conflicts in the simple material form of the cabin. The conflicting versions of America that each of the works thereby and therein propose can be, as Klestil suggests, “understood as cultural practices of imagination and speculation” which, in turn, help “shape our perceived realities” (Call for Papers: 50th AAAS Conference 2023). Implicitly as well as explicitly, Hawthorne, Beecher Stowe, and Thoreau thus work through the nation's past to shed light on its present in order to eventually turn the projected future into a reality. This paper compares and historicizes three defining literary versions of America whose cultural influence and power is not least rooted in their respective depiction of the cabin as “both icon and shelter” (Hoagland 2018).

'Salem Literature' as Memory Site: *The Crucible* and Katherine Howe's *Conversion*

Clara Petino

Set in one of the most contested periods of American history, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* has shaped the collective memory of the Salem witch trials more than any other literary work. Moreover, Miller's 1953 play does not only form the core of what I term 'Salem literature', a corpus of now over 70 works of fiction telling and retelling the 'Salem story' of 1692 and its legacy, it has also influenced later works. In fact, I suggest reading Katherine Howe's young adult novel *Conversion* (2014) as a *lieu de mémoire*, a memory site, of Salem literature itself. Like Miller, Howe was inspired by events of the present, an outbreak of conversion disorder at a high school in Le Roy, NY in 2012. The author parallels the account of Ann Putnam, the most infamous 'afflicted girl', with the competitive climate of an all-girl Catholic prep school in modern Danvers where large numbers of girls fall sick with inexplicable symptoms. Eventually, it is first-person narrator Colleen Rowley's reading assignment of *The Crucible* that helps her understand the dynamics behind

the mystery illness. In fact, for a reader unacquainted with Miller's play, Howe's novel would forfeit its depth as the play becomes an indispensable intertextual tool for understanding Howe's claims on the parallels between girls' lives then and now and her critical reading of Miller's 'sexplanation', to use Robin DeRosa's apt term. While the play centers on a male hero whose fall is brought about by the 'afflicted girls', Howe makes her story of the witch trials, just like the actual event, a predominantly female experience by having Ann Putnam, written out of *The Crucible*, tell the story from her perspective. This paper shall discuss the role of fiction in shaping different versions of American history and the self-reflexive function of literature about an American trauma.

Versions in Stone: Hawthorne's Ecogothic Rocks

Matthew Wynn Sivils (Iowa State University)

Stones are the partners with which we build the epistemological structures that may topple upon us.

—Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*¹

Moments before a rockslide suddenly buries them all forever, the titular stranger of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Ambitious Guest," tells the family whose cabin sits at the base of a mountain that "it is our nature to desire a monument, be it slate, or marble, or a pillar of granite, or a glorious memory in the universal heart of man" (167). In this and other stories, Hawthorne engages in a compelling gothic geology, one in which literal and figurative rocks, as well as a host of other instances of lithic imagery, figure not as static scenery but as dynamic and deeply meaningful participants in the tale. Hawthorne crafts an American Gothic landscape scattered with stones that function as dark versions of ourselves, as agentic entities charged with uncanny purpose and that at times take the shape of humanity's deeply felt fear of the land.

Drawing upon scholarship by theorists such as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Francesca Ferrando, I focus on two of Hawthorne's rock-strewn works of fiction: "Roger Malvin's Burial" and "The Man of Adamant." Each of these stories exhibit pronounced examples of how he employs lithic imagery to interrogate nineteenth-century conceptions of a natural world haunted by humanity's shifting place (and displacement) within an increasingly industrialized nation. In the case of these stories, rocks engage with humanity's pervasive fear of the dissolution of the discrete self, and incorporate significant lithic features that force a confrontation with ecogothic anxieties.

Ultimately, I analyze Hawthorne's portrayal of the often intimate and profound relationship between stone and humanity, paying special attention to formulations in which characters not only obsess over stones and what they represent but also come to absorb, mirror, and intersect

Works cited:

¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, (Minneapolis, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2015), 4.

SPECULATIVE (CULTURAL) POLITICS: U.S. Cultural Mobilities

Panel chair: Alexandra Ganser (University of Vienna)

Versions of America Shaping Hungarian Diplomatic Efforts toward the United States between the World Wars

Éva Mathey (University of Debrecen)

The bedrock American political ideals and principles of freedom, liberty, and justice seem to have historically rendered the United States an example in the eyes of the world, and thus the US has always fired the imagination of Europeans, including Hungarians. Hungarians entertained predominantly positive images of the US; especially two traditional versions of America were prevalent: besides the image of the Promised Land, the image of the US as the land of freedom and democracy—the US as *arbiter mundi*—had gained special significance in Hungary during the period between the two world wars with view to Hungarian foreign policy and efforts to revise the post-World War I frontiers. The presentation proposes to study the general features and manifestations of such *versions* of America which gave rise to the Hungarian hope that the US would do justice and help Hungary change the postwar status quo.

This popular myth of America was also fueled by some historical, and political tenets, including, for example, President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points of January 1918 as the basis for the postwar peace, the belief that the USA did not wish to dismember the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, or the refusal of the US Senate to ratify the Paris peace treaties.

Drawing on a great body of archival sources (including, among others, National Archives and Records Administration materials, and the Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States), this paper proposes to explore the various versions of America as represented in political and diplomatic discourses—thus the historical and political ideas, concepts, and often misconceptions about the US that had shaped Hungarian's perceptions of the US between the world wars.

American World's Fairs in a Divided and (Dis)Connected World: Chicago's "Century of Progress" (1933/34) and New York's "World of Tomorrow" (1939/40)

Marcus Gräser (Johannes Kepler University Linz)

World exhibitions are a popular subject of global history writing. The self-representation of many nations at a specific location provide much scope for analyses of globality and world views. The significance of world's fairs for the host nation, however, has surprisingly received little attention. Using the example of the two American World's Fairs in Chicago in 1933/34 and New York in 1939/40, the presentation will not ask about world and globality, but about the cultural practices of imagining one's own nation and America's negotiation with itself (against the background of 'world').

My thesis goes like this: The two American World's Fairs of the 1930s were primarily a national and urban affair, not only in their planning and execution, but also in their message: The two World's Fairs formed responses to the crisis of the U.S.'s self-image as a society oriented toward permanent growth that became apparent during the Great Depression. At the same time, however, the exhibitions

were also, in a narrower sense, reactions to the crisis of the city and its economy. That is why the evocation of „progress“ and the „world of tomorrow“, which has been made at the exhibitions, was primarily an opportunity to find not only national, but first and foremost urban answers to the process of globalization and its disruptions through the economic crisis and the political crisis in the 1930s.

I will analyze the two World's Fairs against the background of tendencies of re-nationalization in the 1930s United States. Above all I want to look at how the 'national' is being redefined in discourses in the field of science and technology. The presentation of American industry and science at a world's fair is, of course, an important example of this. What was presented in Chicago and New York was not a technology of international cooperation, but a national and urban one, which is also to be protected from an outflow abroad by a multitude of legal measures. The background for these tendencies of re-nationalization was of course not only the severe economic crisis, but also a certain, very critical assessment of the international interdependencies of the United States in the 1920s.

Decontinentalizing the U.S.? Archipelagic Poetics of Mobility in Caribbean Poetry across the Diaspora

Barbara Gföllner (University of Vienna)

Archipelagic Poetics of Mobility in Caribbean Poetry across the Diaspora Myths and narratives of boundless mobilities of the U.S., starting with the discovery myth of the Americas, have considerably shaped ideas of American exceptionalism and the American dream, construing the U.S. as superior continental space of unlimited possibilities. However, these conceptions obscure complex and fraught imperial, colonial, and neoliberal power relations that link the U.S. to places like the Caribbean. Scholars from the field of Archipelagic American Studies argue for a *decontinentalization* of the U.S. in order to reconceptualize the U.S. as intricately entangled with, and part of, islands, oceans, shorelines – an archipelago. The Caribbean, of course, has always been part of the U.S. since im/mobilities of Caribbean peoples, capital, food, or labor have been largely dictated and monitored from imperial powers. Against the backdrop of these im/mobilities, diasporic Caribbean writers problematize and reimagine im/mobilities beyond their prevalent conceptions as necessarily linear, progressive, teleological. I resort to an archipelagic framework, springing from Édouard Glissant, to conceptualize these im/mobilities across the Caribbean and its diaspora in the U.S. This paper critically looks at how im/mobilities are negotiated in contemporary Caribbean poetry – such as by the poets Kei Miller, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, and Desiree C. Bailey – through the reorientation of traditionally privileged island-continent material relations to archipelagic connections that shed light on the symbolic, historical, and utterly imperial projects that have long profited from narratives of insularity and dependency. The poets contest restrictive mobility regimes, such as ones related to the nation state or borders, but also reimagine more expansive forms of movement, which I then subsume as a poetics of mobility. By focusing on the archipelago, I hope to challenge preconceived notions of borders and migrations, while simultaneously exploring alternative poetics of mobility emerging from within the Caribbean experience in the diaspora. This paper then asks: What can the archipelago, as an epistemology and methodology springing from a Caribbean background, offer for critical engagement and reconceptualization of American Studies?

VERSIONING BEYOND THE HUMAN: Pasts, Presents, and Futures of Climate Change

Panel chair: David Callahan (University of Aveiro)

Fragmented Future(s): Chronology and Space in Richard McGuire's *Here* (2014)

Marie Dücker (University of Graz)

As a narrative medium, the graphic narrative allows for several timelines to be explored simultaneously. Clearly mediated, Richard McGuire's graphic narrative *Here*, published in 2014 and based on his comic strip from 1989, forges the understanding of a mortality caused by humankind's role in the ongoing environmental crisis with an attempt at creating a chronology of how time and space have affected the Here.

The text is fragmented on numerous levels and layers, pondering a future apocalypse by suggesting the passing of time in the form of layering frames onto one another, thereby mirroring passages taking place in the same space across decades. By urging his implied readership to piece together the particles comprising his text, *Here* challenges to reconsider traditional understandings of the space-time continuum by imposing frames that suggest transtemporal bridges from the suggested now to the past as well as to the future.

Here, I claim, proposes a fictional chronology of humanity's understanding of change and loss while at the same time suggesting a reconsidering of our standing in environmental crises. How can the graphic narrative propose an aesthetic commenting on the synergies of the now—a literal rendering of the Here—as well as of a future that suggest a moral rethinking of space and time and the implied reader's inability to fill the cracks in the fragmented, yet astonishingly rich visual narrative McGuire created?

Evidences of an Otherwise Cosmos: Black and Indigenous - Futurisms as Decolonial Praxis

Markus Schwarz (University of Salzburg)

Current discourses surrounding climate change are aligned with a renewed interest in outer space. In narratives of tech billionaires, the colonization of outer space seems inevitable to provide a future for humankind in the face of climate apocalypse. This vision of outer space is unthinkable without the belief in the teleology of capitalist expansion and progress. Outer space here marks the "next frontier," the next *terra nullius* to be conquered, a new "New World," this time situated in the galaxy. Especially in the United States, private corporations not only expand resource exploitation from the terrestrial to the galactical but – legitimized by collaborations with federal government associations such as NASA – influence policymaking (such as the *Artemis Accords*) and thus shape the future to come. In contrast to these narrow visions, Black and Indigenous Futurisms trouble easy solutions and point towards multiple futures, highlighting the entanglement of the past and the present, the planet and the galaxy, as well as humans and non-humans, and the impossibility of treating these fields separately. In this paper, I will argue for resonances between the orbits of Black and Indigenous thought in order to engage with the past, present and future of climate change and outer space exploration in US discourse. Based on a theoretical framework between

utopian theory, Black Studies and Indigenous Studies, I read Alexis Pauline Gumbs's short story "Evidence" (published in the collection *Octavia's Brood*) in conversation with Navajo filmmaker Nanobah Becker's short film *The 6th World* as decolonial counter-narratives to the dreams of capital, which refuse and reimagine the world and locate utopia not in (outer) space and time but in what Tiffany Lethabo King calls the "otherwise" and what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang describe as the "elsewhere" of decolonization.

Global Weirding, Science Fiction, and the American Apocalypse; or the Past, Present, & Future of the Late-Anthropocene

David J. Cross (University of Stuttgart)

"There has to be more that we can do, a better destiny that we can shape. Another Place. Another Way. Something!"

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*.¹

Literary fictions, most notably the genre of Science Fiction (*SF*), have long depicted the late- Anthropocene. Nevertheless, we are relative newcomers in the early phase of this geological epoch, one marked by humanity's influence on the Earth's ecosystems. While manifestos and calls for action stack up, they already seem anachronistic or obsolete as humans gather a sense of their own decline while drifting towards the end. This is the era of "global weirding", where climate crisis, hyperobjects, simulation, saturation, and cybernetic enterprise collide in a rolling cacophony of catastrophe conducted by late-stage capitalism. Evan Calder Williams calls this the combined and uneven apocalypse "the story of a yawning duration, an accretion so slow and naturalized that we can no longer recognize it."² In Octavia Butler's 1993 novel, *Parable of the Sower*, catastrophe is similarly unbound as Lauren Olamina imagines an alternative future where leaving the past, present, and future of the late-Anthropocene is the only option in pursuit of a new utopia. Frederic Jameson calls utopia not the representation of radical alternatives but "it is rather simply the imperative to imagine them."³ Like Lauren Olamina, contemporary readers find themselves at an obscure historical moment on both the socio-political and environmental stages. Existential threats linger on the horizon, while others enter daily life with an unrelenting force, ranging from the various conflicts and waging of wars around the planet to the impacts of anthropogenic climate change, rises in populism, and the inflammatory rhetoric around nuclear proliferation gloom and doom haunts the collective consciousness. Mark Fisher, recalling the scripts of Jameson and Žižek, states, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism", so we may ask what then comes *after the end*?⁴ Like Butler, authors of apocalyptic *SF* thrive because of certain conditions of the present era. One of the primary objectives of this paper is to investigate these conditions starting with Hunter Lovins' term 'global weirding' and thinking through Mark Fisher's definition of the weird: "a sensation of wrongness: a weird entity or object so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here."⁵ Thus, we may ask if the engineering of an apocalyptic imaginary (pre- or post-) can answer the call for the shaping of a better destiny.

¹ Butler, Octavia. *Parable of the Sower*. 1991

² Calder-Williams, Evan. *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*. 2011. p109.

³ Jameson, Frederic. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. 2005. p419.

⁴ Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism*. 2009. p1.

⁵ Fisher, *The Weird and The Eerie*. 2016. p5.

MULTIPLICITIES OF U.S. CULTURE: Afrofuturist Imaginaries

Panel chair: Juliann Knaus (University of Graz)

America the Wild Seed: Octavia Butler's Speculative Versions of a Disrupted Past

Timothy E. Stroud (University of Halle-Wittenberg)

Literary Afrofuturism draws from the wisdoms and philosophy of history as a means of imagining undisrupted futures for people of African descent. Afrofuturist writer and artist Ytasha Womack defines Afrofuturism as the "intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation". In her book *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, she poses the question, "If a new society were created beyond Earth's stratosphere, who would populate it?" (43). A question that indeed merits further deliberation.

Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*, a novel that positions Doro and Anyanwu, two immortal and *mostly* African figures as its protagonists and provocateur, lends itself rather seamlessly to the framework and aesthetic of Afrofuturism. From extraterrestrial plagues to telepathic offspring, *Wild Seed* is the dawn of a sequence that not only generously provides an answer to Womack's questions but excels at inquiring about the past.

The notion of the wild seed in Butler's novel refers to the untamable psionic children with which the Patternist Doro must contend; the unpredictable resistance which often serves as a disruption in the fabric of Doro's reality; Anyanwu. Alternatively, Anyanwu must contend with a wild seed of her own; one that she excels in taming only upon escape from Doro; America.

How then does this multiethnic, progressive version of Anyanwu's pre-20th century America address and resist the story's reality, where slaves are taken from their homeland and sent to the new world to become a part of something else, entirely divergent from and completely subverting the age-old Slave Race trope? In this paper, I will examine selected tropes that reinforce Butler's version of America and utopian settlements, and how these notions reject disruptive elements of heteronormativity and the societal poison that is, as Butler puts it, "hierarchical thinking" as a form of resistance and resilience – the very essence of Afrofuturism.

Afrofuturist America: Risk and Utopia in Black Panther Comics and Films

Jeanne Cortiel (University of Bayreuth)

Black Panther embodies an expansive, transmedial narrative world that operates at the intersection of afrofuturism, africanfuturism, and superhero fiction within the Marvel "multiverse." This paper explores how Black Panther storyworlds and characters, particularly as interpreted by Ta-Nehisi Coates and Nnedi Okorafor in comics and by Ryan Coogler in film, proliferate yet also contain versions of "America" through an engagement with versions of Africa. The crux of this exploration centers around the critique of global catastrophic risk and edgework (in this case superhero risk-taking) within these narratives, while acknowledging their fallback on ultimately neoliberal positions that champion individual optimization and success. This raises questions about how these versions of Africa - supposedly

isolated from historical colonialism and rich with advanced technology - disrupt and redefine Western, particularly American, hegemonic narratives. What vision – or version – of America emerges from these Afrofuturist/Africanfuturist perspectives? How do these narratives negotiate risk, power, and collective well-being? This paper is part of a larger research project examining risk fiction as an interrogation of the contemporary culture of risk.

“All You Have to Do Is Know What You Want”: Failing Kinship in Samuel R. Delany’s *Trouble on Triton*

Charlotte Schmiegel (Heidelberg University)

Since the culture wars of the 1950s, both academic and popular discourses in the US have seen heated debates surrounding the alleged erosion of the nuclear family and traditional understandings of kinship. Notably, what can be gathered from these discussions is the fact that our various understandings of kinship are entangled with notions of futurity, be it in conservative ideas of relationality in terms of heterosexual reproduction, or in numerous queer, feminist, indigenous, or critical race reimaginations of the concept. In this latter sense, kinship is often regarded as a *form of futurism*, a performative and shared doing toward the future between individuals and groups, a continuous and creative enactment of new ways of being with one another. A utopian longing is thus at the heart of queer understandings of kinship, one that, I argue, finds expression in a literary genre whose central concerns lie with speculative futurity: Science Fiction (SF). The aim of this paper is to present the productive potential of coupling an analysis of kinship with the speculative futures imagined in SF through the example of *Trouble on Triton* (1974), a SF novel by US-American writer Samuel R. Delany. I argue that *Triton* presents its reader with the failure of kinship in the face of what John Fekete has called an extrapolated “ultralibertarian” future society that, rather than universally freeing its citizens from normative constraints, may equally paralyse the individual’s formation of social bonds by forcing it to constantly choose between specific social forms of interhuman connection that exist among an endlessly proliferating multitude of predetermined categories. The novel thereby exaggerates and critiques present social configurations under neoliberal capitalism and their necessary failures while simultaneously highlighting the utopian potential inherent in these failures, urging us to think beyond normative notions of being and making kin.

(RE-)VERSIONING PASTS, PRESENTS, AND FUTURES: West of the Rest: Trans-Mississippi Thirdspaces

Panel chair: Robert Winkler (University of Salzburg)

Smallpox and the “Empire of Remedies”: New Mexico, 1898/99

Martin Gabriel (University of Klagenfurt)

When a smallpox epidemic hit the Pueblo settlements of the Territory of New Mexico in 1898, this was by no means an entirely new phenomenon. The infectious disease had devastated large swaths of the Americas since the beginning of European colonialism. By the end of the 19th century, actions taken by the Spanish in Mexico had shown that large-scale inoculations could, at least to some degree, protect populations; also, the Jennerian vaccine had already proven its high effectiveness for decades. The United States had vaccinated tens of thousands of Native Americans during the course of the 19th century – not only for humanitarian reasons, but also as a means of consolidating its dominance in the Trans-Mississippi theatre. However, the “empire of remedies” was not very effective in the fight against smallpox in New Mexico in 1898/99. Identification of Pueblo cultures as sedentary and non-militaristic resulted in low-level anti-contagion measures. Federal responses hinged largely on the actions or inactions of specific individuals (e.g. Indian agents, teachers). While, for example, glycerinated vaccines were available for US Army troops, they were not provided to Pueblo communities until months after the epidemic had ended. In my opinion, the episode shows how Euro-American ideas about the characteristics and traditions of Native Americans shaped US biopolitics and anti-contagion response, and incapacitated any “empire of remedies” that might have existed in other regions.

Where East and West converge: Fort Ross as a multicultural contact zone

Robin Raabe (University of Klagenfurt)

Hearing the term Russian America, most people would likely think of vast, rugged and icy Alaskan landscapes. Yet, it entailed for nearly three decades the far more temperate Ross counter, a district administered by the mercantile colony and trading post Fort Ross in present-day Sonoma County, California. It was there, near the northernmost frontier of the Spanish mission chain, that a multiethnic and multicultural group of Russian American Company (RAC) employees built a fort which was used as a base for sea mammal hunting, manufacturing and agriculture. Dozens of Russians lived and worked there alongside many more Alaskan as well as Californian Natives. Contrary to the Spanish approach towards Native Californians a few miles south, the Russians conducted no extensive proselytizing, “civilizing” or resettling of the local Kashaya Pomo and Coast Miwok people. Instead, they hired some of them as laborers and mostly tried to maintain peaceful relations with the hunter-gatherers, who in turn utilized the “undersea people” for their own gain. Consulting RAC documents, travelogues, archaeological surveys as well as transcriptions of Kashaya Pomo Oral History, this paper will map the multilayered interdependencies between Russians, Native Alaskans, Native Californians and Creoles at Fort Ross with a view to understanding how specific colonial characteristics relate to changes in Kashaya Pomo social identity and “tribal” organization.

“But all I know is, real cowboys is white”: Or, why Black Urban Cowboydom is speculative and Afrofuturist AF

Stefan “Steve” Rabitsch (University of Oslo)

Imagine the cognitive labor necessary to reconcile the speculative, indeed disruptive energies with the historiographic realities captured in the following scene taken from Greg Neri’s YA novel *Ghetto Cowboy* (2011): “We pass a big ol’ mural someone painted on the side of a building. [...] It’s like a shot of the Old West, except instead of country, you got city, and instead of white folk, you got black cowboys” (79). Set against the backdrop of the revisionist, activist, and interventionist dynamics of what has since become known as the Yeehaw Agenda, this paper puts forth a seemingly preposterous claim: not only are Black urban cowboys inherently science-fictional, but the lifeworlds of urban Black horse(wo)men also exude potent Afrofuturist energies. By hybridizing Black cowboys—who, if made visible at all, would be expected to populate rural, Western settings—with urban geographies—which are popularly equated with Black despair, decay, and dysfunction rather than agency, pride, and resilience—*Ghetto Cowboy* and its 2020 movie adaptation, *Concrete Cowboy*, espouse speculative, indeed science-fictional qualities. More precisely, there is an speculative pedagogy at work in both texts; while they do not employ Afrofuturist aesthetics, they deploy Afrofuturism as both criticism and method. In the vein of Afrofuturist critic Kodwo Eshun, the social and epistemological labor performed by Black urban cowboy communities amounts to a “cultural project of recovery” that seeks to produce disruptive “countermemory” (287). Consequently, this paper will leverage science-fictional poetics and Afrofuturist criticism in order to identify, map, and explicate how *Ghetto Cowboy* and *Concrete Cowboy* articulate the pedagogical challenge that is advanced by the Yeehaw Agenda to dominant/racist epistemologies.

AESTHETICS AND POSSIBILITIES OF VERSIONING: Narrative Versioning Across Media

Panel Chair: Nassim Balestrini (University of Graz)

To Cut a Short Story Long: Poe and the Aesthetics of Versioning in Early Classical Cinema

Christian Quendler (University of Innsbruck)

D. W. Griffith's film *The Avenging Conscience* (1914) is the first of a relatively small number of Edgar-Allan-Poe adaptations that resulted in a feature film. Although Poe has enjoyed a prominent presence on and behind the film screen, feature-length adaptations of his short stories remain rare. During the first decades of cinema Poe's short fiction as well as hagiographic stylizations of the author as a national icon were popular subject matters that helped to boost cinema's social prestige. Behind the screen, the influence of Poe as a critic who shaped popular conventions of late nineteenth-century storytelling was particularly important for the movies, which had only recently joined the short-story and the stage play as a "single-sitting" narrative form. Historically, *The Avenging Conscience* falls into a time when industrial standards shifted to longer forms and thus posed new challenges for cinematic storytelling. Griffith responded this challenge by introducing several different versions of Poe that are inspired by the author's life and fiction in various ways. In this paper, I will read Griffith's *The Avenging Consciences* against an earlier film aesthetics of versioning, or what Charles Musser has described as an aesthetics of discernment that rewarded viewers with the pleasure of experiencing a familiar story in different versions and media. I will argue that Griffith's feature-length filmic elaboration of "The Tell-Tale Heart" offers both a cinematic transposition of Poe's aesthetics and a national appropriation for a civil religion.

Two Versions of America: A Stranger in My Arms

Simone Francescato (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)

My paper focuses on the two "versions" of America, and in particular of the American South, depicted in Robert Wilder's novel *And Ride a Tiger* (1951, later re-titled *A Stranger in My Arms*) and its film adaptation, *A Stranger in My Arms* (1959) directed by German director Helmut Käutner for Universal Pictures. Moving across different literary and cinematic genres, such as the war novel/film and melodrama, the two works narrate the story of a war veteran called to face a moral dilemma — that of exposing the truth about a dead young man whose life and conduct were very different from what his family publicly claim them to be.

Although they received little critical praise at the time they were released and are now relatively forgotten, both the novel and the film offer insight into American life during the Cold War period, with its political, racial, gender tensions, all symbolized in the problematic recognition of war veteran. By concentrating on questions related to intermedial adaptation, my paper examines and contrasts Wilder's novel and Käutner's film, in order to show the different narrative strategies they deployed and the discourses they mobilized. Both these works went far beyond condemning rhetorical heroism and confronted larger issues of the society they depicted.

Speculating in Intimacy – Chance, Algorithms, and the Future of Matchmaking

Karin Hoepker (Freie Universität Berlin)

When Nora Ephron's *You Got Mail* (1999) reimagined Ernst Lubitsch 1940 *A Shop Around the Corner*, it tapped into codes of epistolary romance to evoke a sense of potential and promise for a new communicative medium; it imagined the internet as an extra-social space where true selves could meet. Only a few years later, accounts of online dating in Arlie Russel Hochschild's *Outsourced Self: Intimate Lives in Market Times* (2012) or Eva Illouz's earlier study *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* seemed to draw very different conclusions from their observations of the impact the internet seemed to have on practices of intimacy as speculations on romance or happiness.

Testing those propositions, I will look specifically at the way in which the use of algorithms and technoscientific developments of matchmaking may not only change our lives but may require reconfigurations of social codes of love and intimacy. Drawing, among other texts, on Elena Esposito's *Artificial Communication. How Algorithms Produce Social Intelligence* (2022), I will discuss TV series like *Soulmate* or *The One* as sciencefictional cultural productions that employ techniques of algorithmic matchmaking in order to explore what such a "taming of chance" might do to romance and the semantics of love in the contemporary imagination.

SPECULATIVE (CULTURAL) POLITICS: Aging, Caring, and Kinship

Panel chair: Iris van der Horst (University of Klagenfurt)

Medical Futures of America: Health Care in Speculative Fiction and Life Writing of the 1960s

Ruth Gehrman (Johannes Gutenberg-University)

By following the question of “What if?” science fiction has been known to present a multitude of possible pathways into the future and to insist on the plurality of possible American futures. Philip K. Dick’s *The Penultimate Truth* appears as a compelling case in point for this understanding. The novel from 1964 hinges on the matter of organ transplantation and is situated in a divided world in which access to medical care is inseparably tied to social standing. In contrast to such examples of science fiction, those invested in the medical practice tend to frame their endeavors as non-experimental and thus as decidedly non-speculative. Yet, by relating to 1960s’ new stories which feature doctors as aliens, or to heart surgeon Christiaan Barnard speculating about bionic legs, it becomes apparent that speculative elements cannot be reduced to the genre of science fiction. By focusing on shared strategies in fictional texts, surgeons’ life writing, and news coverage, I want to present speculation as a common endeavor that crosses disciplinary boundaries and that opens the future as a shared space.

By focusing on speculation, my talk also underlines the political significance of imagining the future of the health care system. Rather than asking how true a specific prediction turned out to be and rather than reading fictional and seemingly factual engagements with transplant practices in opposition, I thus want to find common ground by discussing their shared speculative potential. Exploring the future percussions of medical practice, then, also entails an engagement with possible futures of America in which structural inequality is navigated in interrelation with the health care system.

Imagining Pasts, Presents, and Futures: Ursula Le Guin and Speculations on the Human Condition: An Anocritical Approach

Roberta Maierhofer (University of Graz)

When Ursula Le Guin was announced as the recipient of the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in 2014, the National Book Foundation in America based this decision on the fact that for “more than 40 years, Le Guin has defied conventions of narrative, language, character, and genre, as well as transcended the boundaries between fantasy and realism, to forge new paths for literary fiction.” When announcing its choice, the organization emphasized the power of science and fiction “to challenge readers to consider profound philosophical and existential questions about gender, race, the environment, and society.” By applying an anocritical approach to the two short essays ‘The Space Crone’ (1976) and ‘Introducing Myself’ (1992), the expressed and experienced interconnectedness of gender and age are explored. Le Guin’s approach to an understanding of this ‘presence’ as ‘narrative’ can be interpreted as her commitment to the speculative and ongoing definition of the *conditio humana* from a feminist perspective, and reveals how cultural and social representations emphasize the general relevance of studying gender and age/ing in conjunction as

crucial for an understanding of this 'narrative presence'. Imagining different worlds allows us – in reference to Le Guin's definition of selfhood – to understand the matrix of time and experience and our own impermanence.

"I'm Talking to an Appliance": Speculative Cinematic Visions of Posthuman Eldercare

Katalina Kopka (University of Bremen)

The United States face massive demographic changes due to growing elder populations. This development, combined with a shortage of care workers and increasing automation, evokes concerns about an impending care crisis. Pop culture addresses these public anxieties about the future of caregiving. Recent speculative films provide fictional settings that envision ways in which Artificial Intelligence could participate in care routines. In this contribution, I examine Michael Almereyda's *Marjorie Prime* (2017) and Jake Schreier's *Robot & Frank* (2012), two films that feature human protagonists with dementia and their nonhuman caregivers. Specifically, I explore the ways in which intimate encounters with posthuman companions challenge humanist ontologies and modes of relating, as well as human-centered care practices. I argue that despite their mildly utopian outlook, the films remain ambivalent in their portrayal of posthuman care: they employ narratological strategies to frame AI as humanity's Other, thereby insisting on human exceptionalism and perpetuating asymmetrical power structures. With regard to human characters, power hierarchies persist in the movies' class and racial politics that mirror existing inequities in the care industries. At the same time, neurodiverse elders and their caregiving machines are united by a sense of diminished personhood because neoliberal societies relegate them to liminal spaces. Thus, they form strong bonds of trans-species kinship. In the process, nonhumans are presented as unselfish, compassionate, and community-oriented caregivers that invite affective engagement. Human protagonists, in contrast, are primarily shown as care receivers – vulnerable beings that are dependent on their posthuman counterparts. This portrayal of (post)human relational webs implies that the self is relational and always part of larger technosocial systems. Ultimately, my analysis sheds new light on speculative visions of America's alternate posthuman futures, thus making a vital contribution to larger debates about human-machine entanglements in the digital age.

VERSIONING BEYOND THE HUMAN: Critiques of Environmental Degradation

Panel chair: Marie Dücker (University of Graz)

Oil Extraction Culture and the American Novel: Reading Petrofiction as Risk Fiction

Marija Krstic (University of Bayreuth)

The category of risk has been a productively employed analytical tool in the field of environmentally oriented literary and cultural studies. However, it has not yet been systematically employed in the analysis of petrofiction – literature that explicitly deals with oil. Bringing petrofiction into the conversation with risk studies, my presentation will delineate how selected American petrofiction texts critically engage with petroculture and communicate risks associated with oil extraction, oil spill, and one of the central challenges of our energy future – peak oil. Drawing attention to the widespread effects of fossil fuel use, novels about oil produce knowledge that animates critical thinking about oil as an essential component of modern social and cultural life and thus add the dimension of risk to our perception of America whose political and economic systems depend on the depletable energy source. Among the novels studied will be Mei Mei Evan's *Oil and Water* (2013) Kurt Cobb's peak oil novel *Prelude* (2008).

The Repercussions of Climate Change Affecting the United States in T. C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth*

Andrea Färber (University of Graz)

This paper discusses the representation of the repercussions of climate change affecting the United States in climate change fiction. As of now, climate change affects the planet unevenly. Some regions, such as the Arctic, experience its ramifications already in full force, whereas others are still spared. In the future, however, the repercussions of the climate crisis will be experienced by everyone around the globe without exceptions unless the crisis can be mitigated. Climate change literature grapples with the crisis in various ways. One such way is by depicting how a world fully affected by the crisis could turn out, and how its inhabitants would be able to adapt. For this paper, an analysis of T. C. Boyle's climate change novel *A Friend of the Earth* (2000) focuses on the representation of living in the United States of America affected by the crisis in full force. The novel is split into a near past and a near future. The near past depicts the United States as we know them today, still rather unaffected by the crisis. In the near future, however, the country has changed beyond recognition. The main character Ty Tierwater, a former climate change activist, has had to learn how to adapt to a new environment that is the result of too little actions taken against the crisis when it was still possible to mitigate. An analysis of the novel traces the changes of these new United States, and the efforts made by inhabitants to acclimatize accordingly in order to survive. A new normal is introduced in the novel that grapples with taking actions too late and suffering the consequences once the crisis can no longer be contained.

MULTIPLICITIES OF U.S. CULTURE: Practices of Identity in Popular Culture

Panel chair: Roberta Maierhofer (University of Graz)

American Love and Romance in the Global Spotlight: International Adaptations of *The Bachelor* Franchise

Oleksandra Romaniuk (University of Vienna)

American dating and relationship reality TV franchise *The Bachelor* has become a multimedia phenomenon captivating millions of viewers worldwide for over 20 years. With 37 international adaptations and a dedicated *The Bachelor Nation* fan base, the franchise has become a cultural force that shapes perceptions of love and romance (Ferris et al., 2007; Seabrook et al., 2016). While the designed format mostly remains consistent, each adaptation reflects a unique blend of local dating traditions and global influences. For example, in the original American version, the lead invites three final contestants to spend a night in the Fantasy Suite without producers and cameras, whereas the Japanese adaptation forbids kissing or sexual activity. Although the franchise focuses on heterosexual relationships, the Australian bisexual adaptation sets a precedent embracing diverse sexual orientations. This study explores how American dating norms have been adapted to local cultures on a global scale and perceived by a large and diverse audience.

The study draws upon two theoretical frameworks: the cultivation theory, as interpreted in the contemporary context (Signorielli et al., 2019), explains how the consistent portrayal may influence the audience's real-life dating experience; the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) examines how viewers may internalize mediated depictions of courtship behaviors and relationship dynamics. The qualitative content analysis investigates changes to the designed format, elimination process, and themes, while social media analytics examines the fans' comments related to the portrayal of love and romance on social media platforms. The comparative analysis considers the extent to which dating norms are perceived as a form of cultural imperialism or as a result of cultural blending in the era of globalization. The findings inform discussions on the ways in which global media shapes cultural practices in the realm of dating and romantic relationships.

Works cited:

- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory of mass communication. *Media Psychology*, 3, 265–299. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0303_03
- Ferris, A. L., Smith, S. W., Greenberg, B. S., & Smith, S. L. (2007). The content of reality dating shows and viewer perceptions of dating. *Journal of Communication*, 57(3), 490-510. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2007.00354.x>
- Seabrook, R. C., Ward, L. M., Reed, L., Manago, A., Giacardi, S., & Lippman, J. R. (2016). Our scripted sexuality: The development and validation of a measure of the heterosexual script and its relation to television consumption. *Emerging Adulthood*, 4(5), 338-355. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696815623686>
- Signorielli, N., Morgan, M., & Shanahan, J. (2019). Cultivation Analysis. In *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research* (3rd ed., pp. 113–126). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203710753-11>

“A Century of The Last Man Trope - Apocalyptic Depictions Female Presidents in Popular Culture”

Tatjana Klein (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)

The first fictional female president appeared in an American feature film almost one hundred years ago. Nevertheless, ever since *The Last Man on Earth's* (1924) release, still with no woman in the Oval Office, the topic seems as contested as ever. Previous literature has identified trends arguing that a representation in popular culture could only benefit the chances of a real female president in the United States. Yet, while many acknowledge the power that television and film hold over the (re-)creation of national identity, this article finds that many works help undermine that possibility. In particular, no study has yet recognized that the Last Man trope, in which women reach the presidency not by election, but through the line of succession, is especially prevalent. Since 1924, various feature films, and, recently, a graphic novel and TV show both titled *Y: The Last Man* (DC Comics 2002-2008; Hulu 2021) have followed a similar plot: a disease eradicates all men, except one, leaving women in charge to not only lead the country but save humanity all at once. Drawing on speculative fiction, this paper follows those various works of popular culture and determines why the Last Man trope has remained so powerful in the American imagination of female presidents.

Lonely–Lost–Literally Me(n): Loneliness, Masculinity, and Internet Memes

Georg Gruber (University of Graz)

On May 2, 2023, the U.S. surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy, released a report titled “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation” declaring loneliness as a detrimental factor for the psychological and physiological well-being of the U.S. public (Dillinger). This newly declared epidemic follows a pandemic that led to an overall increase in loneliness, especially amongst young adults (18-29 years) (Wickens et al. 106). While research is inconclusive on the gendered differences in perceived loneliness as well as its frequency, researchers theorize that men are hesitant to admit and communicate feelings of loneliness (Cox et al. 2020; Kealy et al. 2021; Ratcliffe, Galdas & Kanaan 2020; qtd. in Ogradniczuk et al. 2023). However, outside of academic studies and through internet anonymity this reluctance may be replaced by ironic, humorous, and cynical internet memes.

Two internet meme types coincide with this hypothesis. Firstly, ‘Literally Me’ memes, “in which a certain individual relates to characters from films, TV shows and other media, usually outsider figures with certain redeemable qualities” (Philipp). Secondly, ‘Sigma Male’ memes which delineate an ideology of a patriarchal masculine ideal that is “willing to be ‘alone’ and doesn’t require a pack or group” (Sanderson). Through the meme’s postmodern and discursive qualities these men construe loneliness as a masculine ideal. Additionally, they normalise social deviance by referencing and reframing male outsiders, antiheroes, and villains of pop culture (e.g., Patrick Bateman (*American Psycho*, 2000), Arthur Fleck (*Joker*, 2019), Homelander (*The Boys*, 2019–)) as identifiable and relatable representations of their struggles, hopes and ideals.

The aim of this presentation is to show that these memes represent loneliness as a contemporary issue of Western hegemonic masculinity and that premeditated social isolation is a coping mechanism of subversive online forms of masculinities which delineate loneliness as positive while still suffering from its negative psychological effects.

Works cited:

- Dillinger, Katherine. "Surgeon General Lays out Framework to Tackle Loneliness and 'Mend the Social Fabric of Our Nation.'" *CNN*, 2 May 2023, edition.cnn.com/2023/05/02/health/murthy-loneliness-isolation/index.html. Accessed 5 May 2023.
- Ogrodniczuk, John S et al. "Suicidal ideation among men during COVID-19: Examining the roles of loneliness, thwarted belongingness, and personality impairment." *Scandinavian journal of psychology*, 6 Feb. 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12904>.
- Philipp. "Literally Me Syndrome / Wow, This Is Literally Me." *Know Your Meme*, 18 Mar. 2019, knowyourmeme.com/memes/literally-me-syndrome-wow-this-is-literally-me. Accessed 25 May 2023.
- Sanderson, Ryan. "The Sigma Male (Definition, Strengths, Weaknesses)." *QuizHoot*, 29 Jan. 2023, quizhoot.com/sigma-male/. Accessed 24 May 2023.
- Wickens, Christine M et al. "Loneliness in the COVID-19 pandemic: Associations with age, gender and their interaction." *Journal of psychiatric research* vol. 136 (2021): 103-108. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2021.01.047>.

(RE-)VERSIONING PASTS, PRESENTS, AND FUTURES: Blackness and Resistance

Panel chair: Timothy E. Stroud (University of Halle-Wittenberg)

"From Trauma to Agency: Reading Lorde's Version of America as Presented in her Life Writing *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*"

Lena Elisabeth Leßlhuber (University of Salzburg)

In the US, members of the Black community tend to be most vulnerable to race-based trauma due to the historical and cultural dimensions of racism in the country (cf. Niguel Hoskin 2022). For generations, individuals raised their voices to address hardship they experienced by narrating their version of America, first in form of slave narratives and then by turning to the autobiographical literary genre. In their subjective accounts, they give an impression of how socio-political and economic systems work on the micro-level. With her biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* Caribbean-American Audre G. Lorde not only established a new genre of life writing, but also used it to hint at traumatic moments as she recalls: "I remember how being young and Black and gay and lonely felt. A lot of it was fine, [...] but a lot of it was purely hell" (176). The brief insight Lorde provides here vividly describes her version of America as a "Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet" (cf. Poetry Foundation 2022), a self-identification that highlights the tapestry of her identity.

The presentation is dedicated to investigate what forms of trauma (e.g. racial, cultural, transgenerational; cf. Luckhurst 2008) Lorde faced while coming-of-age in America during Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement and McCarthyism. The discussion seeks to implement the socio-cultural concept intersectionality (cf. Nash 2023), which is suggested to provide a vital framework when analyzing life narratives of marginalized groups (e.g. Black and LGBTQIA2S+ people). In order to closely examine Lorde's biomythography, Eve Tuck's article "Suspending Damage" is respected, in which she urges researchers to not solely focus on received and experienced trauma (damage-centered research) by BIPOC, but also on their joy and agency (desire-based research). By considering Tuck's argument, the attention is shifted from initially discussing in-/directly experienced forms of trauma in Lorde's life writing to investigate how she has re-claimed her agency. Finally, it will be explored what socio-political potential her life writing has for Black feminism and the BLM movement today.

Works cited:

Lorde, Audre. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name. A Biomythography*. Penguin Modern Classics, 2018.

Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. Routledge 2008.

Nash, Jennifer C., and Samantha Pinto, editors. *The Routledge Companion to Intersectionality (Routledge Companions to Gender)*. Routledge, 2023.

Niguel Hoskin, Maia. "The Dangerous Impact of Racial Trauma On The Black Community." *Forbes*, 2022,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/maiahoskin/2022/09/26/the-dangerous-impact-of-racial-trauma-on-the-black-community/?sh=1dd2f7c841ef>.

Accessed 1 May 2023.

Poetry Foundation. *Audre Lorde: 1934-1992*. Poetry Foundation, 2022,

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/audre-lorde>. Accessed 1 May 2023.

Tuck, Eve. "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities." *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 79, no. 3, pp. 409-428.
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15>. Accessed 1 May 2023.

Sutton E. Griggs and the Black Possibles

Verena Adamik (Leuphana University Lüneburg)

Sutton E. Griggs (1872 – 1933) speculated dozens of different versions of America in his early twentieth-century creations, challenging dominant history and its claims on the present and the future. As a Baptist preacher, print entrepreneur and prolific author, he held an influential position within Southern Black communities (Coleman 7). This paper traces his engagement with Black history, time, and the 'possibles' (Debais and Stengers) within his novels, among them *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), *Unfettered* (1902), and *The Hindered Hand* (1905), all of which feature radical alternative versions of the USA and the role of Black people within them: conspiratorial shadow governments, Black nationalism and secession, exodus, bioterrorism and race war are imminent caesuras of US American history, but ultimately halted by African American protagonists, emphasizing that the fate of the nation lies in the hands of its Black population. Despite Griggs having been labeled a conservative later in life, these byzantine plots (in the double sense) are daringly radical, not least because the final 'solutions' proposed only appear moderate in comparison to the averted violence. By evoking alternative temporalities, "literally to make history" (Griffin 13), they are opening up alternative versions of US history, the acknowledgement of which I see as a commitment to the *possibles* – "a thinking that commits to a possible, by means of resisting the probable" (Debais and Stengers 18). The Afrofuturist protagonists intervene in their exclusion from modernist time and their confinement to a past-bound present (Scott 6) or a present flooded by the future (Hunt 15), contesting the myth of Black docility and the limits of Black imagination conferred upon them by White supremacy.

Works cited:

Coleman, Finnie D. *Sutton E. Griggs and the Struggle Against White Supremacy*. University of Tennessee Press, 2017.

Debais, Didier and Isabelle Stengers. "The Insistence of Possibles." *Parse Journal*, vol. 7, 2017. <https://parsejournal.com/article/the-insistence-of-possibles%e2%80%a8-towards-a-speculative-pragmatism/> Originally published as: Bebaise, Didier and Isabelle Stengers "L'insistance des possibles. Pour un pragmatisme Spéculatif", *Multitudes*, vol. 65, no. 4, 2016, p. 82-89. Translated by Angela Brewer.

Griffin, Roger. "Fixing Solutions." *Journal of Modern European History / Zeitschrift für moderne europäische Geschichte / Revue d'histoire européenne contemporaine*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2015, pp. 5-23.

Hunt, Irvin J. *Dreaming the Present: Time, Aesthetics, and the Black Cooperative Movement*. University of North Carolina Press, 2022.

Scott, David. *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*. Duke University Press, 2014.

Nope: Jordan Peele's Versioning of the American Spectacle

Andrin Albrecht (Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena)

Hannah Schoch (University of Zurich)

Upon its release in 2022, a *New York Times* review proposed that “while [Jordan Peele’s *Nope*] can fairly be described as Spielbergian, it turns on an emphatic and explicit debunking of Spielberg’s most characteristic visual trope: the awe-struck upward gaze.”¹ The act of seeing and its pleasures, perils, and contingencies constitutes a central paradigm in Peele’s movie about two African-American Hollywood horse trainers and their endeavor to photograph an elusive alien predator.

In our joint paper, we argue that *Nope* debunks more than just a Spielbergian trope. The film deconstructs the US’ obsession with spectacle that, while predating Hollywood, has in the last century been catalyzed by its film industry. It not only brings to the fore the trappings of awe-inducing spectacle, but also of two types of speculation—capitalist and narrative—that are inextricably intertwined with it. *Nope* highlights the cultural potency of spectacle in the US and how it has served to valorize speculative land and resource appropriation, the marginalization of indigenous and African American peoples for profit maximization. However, it also engages with the affordances of speculating about the unreal, both in the reality-distorting sense of mythmaking, and the more hopefully subversive sense of envisioning possible worlds outside these predefined capitalist structures.

The film thereby drives home how the United States’ capitalist underpinnings and the national obsession with self-mythologizing are mutually reinforcing acts of taking possession through projections of worth and meaning into the future.

Through its blending of genres—from the Western, the horror movie, and the American Jeremiad, to the apocalypse drama, and the buddy comedy—*Nope* draws attention to these underpinnings while avoiding reductionist judgment. It reckons with the potential of abusing the awe-struck upward gaze for neoliberal exploitation, while simultaneously acknowledging the human joy of being awed by spectacle beyond mere capitalist logic.

Works cited:

Scott, A. O. “‘Nope’ Review: Hell Yes.” *The New York Times*, 20 July 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/20/movies/nope-review.html>.

¹ Scott, A. O. “‘Nope’ Review: Hell Yes.” *The New York Times*, 20 July 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/20/movies/nope-review.html>.

AESTHETICS AND POSSIBILITIES OF VERSIONING: Colson Whitehead's Americas

Panel chair: Karin Hoepker (Freie Universität Berlin)

"Maybe America has never been great": Remembering an alternative past on screen in Berry Jenkins' *The Underground Railroad* (2021)

Jana Rosebrock (Europa-Universität Flensburg)

The concept of memory is integral to the emergence, narration, and negotiation of different versions of the past, as it informs a society's understanding of its (shared) history and impacts processes of identity formation. Since the narration and negotiation of the past often take place in media, a focus on the mediation of memory and the ways in which "media disseminate versions of the past across time, space, and mnemonic communities" (Erll 2014, p. 13) assists the understanding of how memory and media work together in creating and narrating versions of the past that shape our perceived realities.

This paper is concerned with the memory of African American communities and how their past experiences are secured within contemporary versions of American history. To discuss this, it will analyze Berry Jenkins' mini-series *The Underground Railroad* (2021), an adaptation of Colson Whitehead's novel of the same name, which creates an alternative version of the highly traumatic history of slavery in the United States. Through the adaptation of strategies of magical realism and the integration of ahistorical elements, the series both stresses its interpretation of the past through a present lens and an awareness of its own constructedness as a version, or counter-memory, that coexists with and challenges other versions of U.S. history. Drawing on theoretical discussions of transcultural memory processes, media representations, and the specific characteristics of African American memories, this paper will address how contemporary cinematic representations create narratives of the past, discuss existing memory processes, and challenge predominant narratives about African American history. It will show how, by creating an alternative version of the African American past through a present lens, *The Underground Railroad* opposes narratives that dehumanize enslaved people or claim a glorious American past.

"Also, I am a real person": Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019); or How to Write About Racism in a "Post-Racial" Era

Maria Wiegel (University of Cologne)

In an interview with Deborah Treisman for *The New Yorker*, Colson Whitehead answered the question of what sets him apart from one of his protagonists (Benji from *Sag Harbor* (2009)) by saying "Also, I am a real person" (2008). Emphasizing the fictionality of his characters, Whitehead points at the blurry lines between fact and fiction. This is something his metafictional history novels highlight. Although a fictional story, I argue in my talk that in *The Nickel Boys* (2019), the real person Colson Whitehead refracts a very real America through the lens of a fictional 1960s setting. Being an author, whose work defies categorization, Whitehead consciously makes use of several genres, such as historical metafiction, crime and adventure novels, to unfold a variety of affects and, by doing so, render visible systemic racism in an era that, after electing a Black President, believes to be "post-racial". Using the example of *The Nickel Boys*, in my talk I will examine how the use of a

1960s setting in American literature bears the potential to create a range of affects, and, therewith, enables an adequate refraction of racism in contemporary America. I will also show how the interplay between this use of scenery and the use of a mix of genres further enables the potential for a range of affects that render visible the complexity of racism in present-day America.

Playing with Ambivalence: Mark Spitz as the Everyman in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*

Valentina López Liendo (Heidelberg University)

Colson Whitehead's zombie novel *Zone One* (2011) depicts a post-apocalyptic version of America in the growing pains of reconstruction, an effort the novel's protagonist joins as part of a civilian militia tasked with clearing Manhattan of zombies. He is only known to readers by his nickname Mark Spitz. Mark Spitz is a genre-typical everyman character, his most salient characteristic is an exceptional mediocrity that, ironically, renders him perfectly fit for survival in the post-apocalyptic world. Notably, Whitehead does not address the fact that Mark Spitz is African American until the novel's final pages. The first explicit mention of Mark Spitz's race thus occurs during the falling of the barricades, a typical trope of the zombie genre. I argue that Whitehead's treatment of his protagonist's racial identity in *Zone One* both renders Mark Spitz's Blackness incidental and offers a deeply ambivalent treatment of race within the text. Whitehead's discussion of race *en passant* at a crucial moment in the novel – in itself a textual strategy that generates tension – suggests an almost playful engagement with racial identity, one that allows Whitehead to address race and hint at its many implications, without necessarily centering *Zone One* around it. This depiction of Blackness is reminiscent of post-Black aesthetics, as are Whitehead's mixture of the literary and popular culture in *Zone One* and, lastly, the novel's ironic tone. Whitehead depicts a version of America in which, despite the upheaval of an apocalypse, pre-apocalyptic systems remain, with all that entails. As Mark Spitz muses, “[i]f they could bring back paperwork, they could certainly reanimate prejudice, parking tickets, and reruns.”¹

Works cited:

¹ Whitehead, Colson. *Zone One*. Vintage Books, 2012, p. 231.

SPECULATIVE (CULTURAL) POLITICS: Prophecy, Conspiracy, and Post-Truth Discourses

Panel chair: Marcus Gräser (Johannes Kepler University Linz)

Deconstruction, the Sokal Hoax, and Alternative Facts, or Did Postmodernism Really Lead to Post-Truth?

Péter Csató (University of Debrecen)

In Chapter 6 of his recent book, *Post-Truth* (2018), Lee McIntyre contends that “it is [. . .] embarrassing to admit that one of the saddest roots of the post-truth phenomenon seems to have come directly out of colleges and universities” (123). The chapter in question bears the title “Did Postmodernism Lead to Post-Truth?”, in which McIntyre unequivocally links the emergence of post-truth up with the constructivist theories of Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. As a case in point, he draws upon a detailed discussion of physicist Alan Sokal’s mock-publication in 1995 of “a cotton-candy mélange of fawning postmodernism clichés” (130), which has come to be known as the “Sokal hoax.” My proposed presentation intends to take issue with McIntyre’s claims in three steps. First, by revisiting the media representations of post-structuralist theory and criticism (deconstruction) from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s to argue that his accusations of relativism and lack of regard for truthfulness are based almost entirely on these oversimplified and distorted images of theory. Then, my paper goes on to discuss the substantive philosophical foundations of deconstructive theory and criticism mostly through the work of Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and J. Hillis Miller. I will make the case that the rigorous logic of their rhetorical analyses of texts could, in fact, be viewed as a potential antidote to the pernicious effects of the post-truth phenomenon. The presentation concludes with a short analysis of passages from Sokal’s mock-article, claiming that while the text might pass for an effective parody of the style of post-structuralist theory, the philosophical points elude the author completely.

MONK'S EYES: into today thomas merton and a new american seeing

William Tate (James Madison University)

The guarded statements of moral theologians are a small matter compared to the constant deluge of irresponsible opinions, criminal half-truths and murderous images disseminated by the mass media.

merton, the non-violent alternative, loc

2831

The times are a-churning. Here in America: mass shootings, white extremism, anti-semitism, lethal violence brought upon benign acts, misinformation, conspiracy theories, voter suppression, authoritarian tendencies, extreme partisan politics. To name a few. Fear is being stoked at every corner. Which makes us blind.

And each side justifies their stance via diatribes, accusations, and self-proclaimed white-hat-syndrome. It seems the Truth can be whatever you want it to be.

But: *Truth is absolute.*

It is not open to interpretation. So how do we recognize the Real Thing?

In reading Thomas Merton, a monk at the abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, who wrote prolifically on a wide range of topics, from prayer to interfaith dialogue, to Vietnam, to civil rights, to war + peace, to the non-violent alternative, to shakers, to zen, to photographs of God, we get glimpses of a new becoming, of a challenge to the status quo. Merton was an incredible sieve for the truth, funneling his extensive reading and dialogues into views upon the world. These produced a series of essays, books, and journals in the 1950's and 1960's, that as you read this man confronting his times, you read ideas and thoughts that relate *directly to our times*. His thinking is still current; it even reads like now. And they offer the uniqueness of an outlier authenticity; Merton was tuned into other frequencies that yield a radical and fresh perspective. He wakes us up. It is the voice of an alchemist. A prophet.

This paper is to pull from books such as *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, *Cold War Letters*, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, and to collide them with our times.

So as to jostle us via a monk's eyes.

'Don't Say Gay': Anti-Queer Conspiracy Theories and Far-Right Visions of U.S. American Decay

Sofie Sabbioni (University of Basel)

Since 2020, anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric from North American far-right groups and individuals has increased dramatically, leading to rising violence and a record number of harmful bills aimed at queer and, more specifically, trans people in the U.S. Former Fox News host Tucker Carlson, far-right political commentator Ben Shapiro, and the TikTok account LibsOfTikTok, for example, have all come to view the existence of queer people – who they commonly depict as 'groomers' – as a sign of their country's moral and societal demise. Queer people, they argue, pose a threat to traditional gender roles, the nuclear family, and most importantly, they are after your children (indeed, they see proof of this 'wokeness' everywhere: from gender-neutral bathrooms and Disney movies, to Bud Light Beer). Thus, far-right social media, news outlets, and also several Republican politicians such as Ron DeSantis and Donald Trump have made fighting this imagined threat to the nation one of their primary objectives. But crucially, anti-queer hate, which is not exactly new in ultraconservative politics, has become inextricably intertwined with patterns of argumentation recognizable in conspiracy theories, seeping from the far-right cultural fringe into the political mainstream. My talk examines this inherently post-truth phenomenon as part of a larger far-right version of the U.S. as an increasingly degenerate country by analyzing far-right social media output (e.g., on TikTok). It then outlines the connection of this vision to white supremacist narratives and conspiracy theories such as the great replacement theory. It will conclude by considering far-right utopias predicated on a return to an imagined past; a past which takes the form of a romanticized, ahistorical white and straightwashed version of 1950s America.

VERSIONING BEYOND THE HUMAN: Speculative and Transhuman Futures

Panel chair: Jeanne Cortiel (University of Bayreuth)

Cyborg Futures: Fictional Transhumanism and its Influence

Christian Perwein (University of Graz)

The rapid advancement of AI technologies in recent years has opened up and made visible new possibilities for human-machine integration, challenging conventional notions of what it means to be human and how to construct the societies and communities we live in. Drawing inspiration from Donna Haraway's influential work, "A Cyborg Manifesto," this presentation dives into the potentials, challenges, and ethical considerations associated with the realization of transhumanist ideals and their dichotomies to fictional representations of them. By exploring the convergence of fiction and reality in the context of cyborg futures, it will be shown how narratives inspire and inform real-life transhumanist endeavors.

By referencing notable works of fiction that depict cyborg or transhuman futures, perhaps most notably Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy, the power of imagination in driving innovation and inspiring real-world efforts will be highlighted and the movement itself contextualized.

Real-life transhumanists serve as important catalysts in the journey towards making fictional transhumanism a reality. Their groundbreaking research and advancements in fields such as neuroprosthetics, biohacking, and human augmentation bring us closer to the possibilities envisioned in speculative fiction. Case studies of these real-life transhumanists demonstrate the interdisciplinary nature of their work, showcasing collaborations between scientists, engineers, ethicists, and artists.

Ultimately, this presentation highlights the importance of bridging the gap between fiction and reality in the field of transhumanism. By drawing inspiration from fictional narratives, acknowledging the achievements of real-life transhumanists, and considering the ethical dimensions of cyborg futures, a meaningful conversation and collaborative efforts shall be sparked on our way to a cyborg future.

A transhumanist version of the United States: Neal Shusterman's *Arc of a Scythe* trilogy

Iris van der Horst (University of Klagenfurt)

My research focusses on transhumanist perspectives in contemporary American young adult fiction. Transhumanism, which is a philosophy and scientific movement, envisions a utopian version of the world that is inhabited by humans with increased, possibly unlimited lifespans and eternal youth. Such posthuman worlds have become a popular topic in young adult novels, which mostly foreground the dystopian elements of such societies (Applebaum 2010; Basu/Broad/Hintz 2013; Flanagan 2014). My focus, however, lies on a utopian work of fiction, namely Neal Shusterman's *Arc of a Scythe* trilogy, which describes a futuristic, utopian version of the United States, which knows no war and poverty nor disease and suffering. Governed by a benevolent artificial intelligence, this utopian America is inhabited by humans with several posthuman capacities, most importantly immortality and eternal youth.

However, although this version of the United States may at first glance have all the characteristics of a utopia, it actually contains many dystopian elements, which are connected to the question of what it means to be human and humane. In my presentation, I will discuss both the utopian and dystopian elements of Shusterman's posthuman America, searching for an answer to the question of whether such a transhumanist version of the United States is desirable or not. As Bradford et al. (2011, 5-6) point out, utopias are not only social critique, but they also have a transformative purpose as they promote and advocate transformative possibilities such as new social and political systems. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to critically examine utopias and the visions and versions of the world they advocate and discourage, especially when they are aimed at children and young adults.

Rearranging Ethnic America in *Horizon: Zero Dawn*

David Callahan (University of Aveiro)

It is a commonplace of far future science fiction that current ethnic tensions and constituencies will have faded to insignificance. It has also become common that these wish-fulfillments have come under scrutiny in science fiction studies for their lack of explanation as to how this might have occurred, a scrutiny that considers it a form of failure to address or recognize deep tensions as well as differing cultural heritages in present American society.

The high profile video games *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017) and *Horizon: Forbidden West* (2022) were developed by a Dutch company but with Americans John Gonzalez and Ben McCaw as Narrative Director and Lead Writer, and they provide one more example of this tendency to write ethnic tensions out of the future. In both games, the narrative repurposes iconic locations such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, or Salt Lake City, as well as the western former "frontier" states of Colorado, Wyoming, Montana and Utah in particular. In current considerations, some of these sites have close associations with identity-specific constituencies, Latinx in Los Angeles, Mormons in Salt Lake City, Native Americans in swathes of Colorado, Wyoming and Montana, or GLBTQ+ in San Francisco. According to the games' constructions of the far future none of these resources for belonging will supposedly be apparent, as very different groups will have emerged, based on territory and rituals in which even the notion of America has disappeared, let alone racialized histories and solidarities.

This paper will attempt to parse the discourses of group identities in *Horizon: Zero Dawn* in order to discern what hopes for "American" identities are articulated. Theoretical sources for this enquiry include ethnic studies and postcolonial studies in general, along with science fiction and video game studies where they intersect with these, such as, for example, the work of Rogers Brubaker on ethnicity and André Carrington on race in science fiction.

MULTIPLICITIES OF U.S. CULTURE: Nonnormative and Intersectional Identities

Panel chair: Ralph Poole (University of Salzburg)

Constructing Masculinities in American Drama: Theatricality in Sam Shepard's *True West* (1980) and Young Jean Lee's *Straight White Men* (2017)

Christine Veloso Lao (University of the Philippines Diliman)

American realist drama has been critiqued for being aligned with the dominant ideologies that prevail in American culture. One such ideology is patriarchy—the idea that legitimizes structures that maintain male dominance through violence. It has been argued that amplifying theatricality—the result of a spectator's recognition of “cleavages” inscribed by an author in the object or event that the spectator sees—breaks the “illusion of ‘real life’” that realism perpetuates, thereby allowing the audience to see past the ideologies perpetuated by realism. But to what extent does the manipulation of theatricality in and of itself tend to subvert dominant ideologies such as patriarchy? I compare how theatricality is amplified in Sam Shepard's *True West* (1980) and in Young Jean Lee's *Straight White Men* (2017) to show how the manipulation of theatricality tends to reveal or support certain truth claims, which may or may not be consistent with patriarchy. Without denying the subversive potential of amplifying theatricality in realist drama, I argue that calling attention to the “realist illusion” perpetuated onstage and in real life may not necessarily lead to the subversion of a dominant ideology. This is evident in Shepard's manipulation of theatricality in *True West*, which remains consistent with a vision of patriarchal masculinity. Nevertheless, I identify elements in Lee's *Straight White Men* that tend to realize theatricality's subversive potential.

Reading Past, Present, and Future Motherhood in Torrey Peter's *Detransition, Baby*

Sandra Tausel (University of Innsbruck)

In a post-Roe United States, the curtailing of reproductive rights coalesces with Republican legislative efforts that seemingly aim to turn back time and reestablish the “ideal” of the nuclear, white, heterosexual, and cisgender family unit. Meanwhile, activist and scholarly efforts propelled and conditioned by social changes continue to envision a future that decenters binary notions of gender, cis- and heteronormativity, and the insistence on the nuclear family. The idea of “the mother” is frequently at the heart of such “ideal” family units and is an ever-present theme in autobiographical, autofictional, and fictional narratives. Accordingly, US-American socio-cultural norms prescribe what Nancy Felipe Russo has termed the “motherhood mandate” (144). While white, heterosexual, cis-identified women frequently have to defend their choice to remain childfree, LGBTQIA+ identified women and individuals and persons who are Black, Indigenous, and of color have to justify their desire to become a mother or parent. Especially trans or nonbinary persons are often excluded from debates surrounding reproductive rights and may face barriers to accessing gender-affirming healthcare (including fertility preservation, hormone therapy, and birth control). In addition, their “non-compliance” to white, cisgender, and heterosexual norms frequently

renders the mothering and parenting experiences and narratives of trans and nonbinary persons and characters invisible. In an effort to change that, Torrey Peter's 2021 debut novel tells the story of three cis and trans women, Reese, Amy, who detransitions and becomes Ames, and Katrina, and interrogates what it means when "not all motherhoods are [considered] legitimate." Throughout the novel, Reese, Ames, and Katrina navigate their lives while negotiating pivotal issues, such as gender identity, family, motherhood, and parenthood. Therefore, I am going to argue that *Detransition, Baby* writes back against the dated essentialization of the cis and heteronormative nuclear family while enabling a crucial investigation of what mothering and parenting, as an empowering practice, already look like and might become in the future.

Works cited:

Peters, Torrey. *Detransition, Baby*. One World, 2021. Kindle.

Russo, Nancy Felipe. "The Motherhood Mandate." *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 32, no. 3, July 1976, pp. 143–53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1976.tb02603.x>.

Escaping the Basement: Intersectionality and American Naturalist Literature

Gregory Phipps (University of Iceland)

Drawing on the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, this paper brings an intersectional reading to the representation of dominant hegemonic identity positions in American naturalist literature, specifically, Peter Benchley's 1974 novel *Jaws*. In her 1989 article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," Crenshaw famously uses a metaphor of traffic moving through intersections to describe how discriminatory practices such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism overlap and reinforce each other. My paper examines a less well-known metaphor from Crenshaw's article, that of a basement. In this metaphor, the basement is a space that represents stratified, shifting tiers of people who face discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sexuality, class, and/or other markers. For Crenshaw, the trope captures the way people may embrace a single identity position and downgrade others in their attempts to "climb over" each other to escape the basement, thereby eliding the way that identity develops through intersecting matrices. Implicit in the metaphor is the notion that there is a ceiling above the basement, which is inhabited by a dominant minority. Yet who makes up this minority? As far as America is concerned, the rudimentary answer is that the ceiling dwellers are individuals who inhabit every dominant identity position in society, that is, straight white men of a certain age and class. At the same time, the very principles of intersectionality complicate this assessment since intersectionality presents identity positions as fluid and processual. Adopting Benchley's *Jaws* as a case study, my paper investigates the fraught question of how intersectionality frames an "other" to the occupants of the basement. The depiction of a straight white male police officer in *Jaws* suggests that this other constitutes a volatile identity position that is defined mainly by its instability.

Fatherhood in the Wilderness: The Father-Daughter Relationship in *Leave No Trace* (2018)

Ege Alperen Özbek (University of Graz)

Contemporary U.S. cinema has been marked by a shift in the portrayal of gender norms, with masculinity and fatherhood being redefined in recent decades. This transformation can be attributed to the achievements of second-wave feminism, which has challenged and transformed mass culture in various ways, leading to a new era known as postfeminism. This presentation examines the postfeminist discourse in *Leave No Trace* (2018) and argues that the film presents a nuanced portrayal of masculinity and the father-daughter relationship. The movie subverts traditional gender roles and explores themes of family and human connection within a wilderness setting. Through the depiction of a sensitive father and a “wise-beyond-her-years daughter” (Hamad 111), the film contributes to the postfeminist discourse while also challenging it to some extent.

While filmic representations of gender roles may take longer to change than the broader culture, they remain a significant cultural marker of shifting social values. Thus, one might observe how past, present, and future versions of America, in terms of gender representation, function and interact through films. This also allows us to explore the United States through a cultural practice, films, that shapes our perceived realities. The presentation analyzes the ways in which the changing understanding of masculinity and fatherhood in *Leave No Trace* and contemporary U.S. cinema more broadly has political implications and is shaped by power relations and ideologies. Ultimately, the presentation argues that *Leave No Trace*'s portrayal of masculinity and fatherhood provides a valuable contribution to ongoing discussions of postfeminism and its relationship to contemporary U.S. cinema.

(RE-)VERSIONING PASTS, PRESENTS, AND FUTURES: Storying the Nation

Panel chair: Michael Docherty (University of Innsbruck)

Nation(s) in Making: The Historical Westerns of 1920s Hollywood

Patrick Adamson

In the final half-decade of the silent era, the Western film – widely seen to be on the decline – returned to the production schedules of Hollywood’s major studios on an unprecedented scale. Against the backdrop of persistent debates about the social influence of genre and industry alike, the release of Paramount’s Oregon Trail epic *The Covered Wagon* (1923) inaugurated a cycle of prestige historical Westerns acclaimed not only for their rare “authenticity” and their revival of the frontier filmmaking tradition but for being the foremost evidence of a laudable new purpose for cinema: popularising America’s “defining” history – the story of its constructive nineteenth-century frontier past. Reaching audiences across linguistic and cultural divides, they demonstrated, in a time of mainstream nativism and concerns about the perceived moral slippage of the Jazz Age, a role for Hollywood as the purveyor of a new type of American history, enlarged by cinema’s medium-specific reach to provide the “melting pot’s” diverse filmgoers with inspiring, unifying lessons in the very “making” of their nation.

Used to familiarise people *en masse* with their heroic nation-building forebears, the motion picture was to help build a greater future. Yet, as this paper shows, this cycle’s success led to the articulation of not only local and vernacular historical traditions – casting as national foundation myths the first postbellum cattle drive from Texas to Kansas in *North of 36* (1924) and the heroism of the riders of *The Pony Express* (1925) – but also more marginal, even oppositional, perspectives. *The Covered Wagon* set an example that was put to the imagining of an array of Americas, from the multicultural, transnational roots of John Ford’s epic of the transcontinental railroad *The Iron Horse* (1924) to the knowing, irreverent skewering of the nation’s inflated pioneer mythology in Cherokee comedian Will Rogers’ *Two Wagons—Both Covered* (1924).

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

Ingrid Gessner (University College of Teacher Education Vorarlberg)

Angelika Ilg (University College of Teacher Education Vorarlberg)

Histories of the American West, including reports of settler colonial expeditions to newly occupied territories of the United States and accounts of life at the “frontier” have often been told as “heroic tales: stories of adventure, exploration and conflict” (Armitage and Jameson 10). These stories that typically center on the experience of White cisgender male protagonists have captured the imagination of Americans, at the same time erasing the darker sides of the history and obliterating the experiences of others whose stories were marginalized due to their race, ethnicity or gender.

This paper sets out to analyze the speculative re-envisioning of the frontier in Jaclyn Backhaus’ play *Men on Boats* (2015) that is based on the first government

sanctioned expedition to explore and map the region of the Colorado River and its canyons (1869). By means of a detailed analysis of the play's literary and theatrical devices, particularly its gender-fluid mode of casting, we argue that the dramatic text critically challenges the dominant ideology of manifest destiny and actively engages the audience in a transformative reimagining of America's frontier.

Furthermore, this paper highlights the potential of *Men on Boats* to enhance students' understanding of complex topics in American Cultural Studies, particularly the frontier. The presentation will also include a report on a theater workshop conducted at Pädagogische Hochschule Vorarlberg in the spring term of 2023, showcasing the creative and artistic approach employed in exploring the play's themes.

Work cited:

Armitage, Susan, and Elizabeth Jameson. *The Women's West*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1987.

Secularism, Gender, and Black Women's Political Thought

Christopher Cameron (University of North Carolina at Charlotte)

Starting with the publication of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* in 1928, Black women intellectuals and secular activists began to construct their own version of America, one that was free of the domineering influences of Christianity, patriarchy, and sexism. Writing across multiple genres, including novels, poetry, autobiography, theatre, and non-fiction books and essays, Black women writers such as Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Lorraine Hansberry, and Alice Walker strongly attacked the prevalence of Christianity within Black communities and its relationship to systems of oppression that had been a central feature of Black life since the colonial period. Larsen and Hurston, contemporaries and significant writers of the Harlem Renaissance, imagined what the lives of Black women could be like if they were free to travel the world and choose (or not choose) romantic partners as they saw fit. Their novels *Quicksand* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* were both groundbreaking in their critiques of the heteronormative family structure and provided a model for later Black women writers. Among these was Lorraine Hansberry, whose 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun* followed the lead of her secular predecessors in using her play and one of its main characters, Beneatha, to undermine traditional notions of women's place in society. Alice Walker's 1983 essay collection *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* represents a more extended reflection of the ties between religion and female subservience, proffered by a freethinker who won the Humanist of the Year Award in 1996 from the American Humanist Association, making her the first Black woman so honored. Their writings speak to a humanist hope for a new world where women have complete agency over their lives and are unencumbered by tradition and dogma. It is a hope that continues to inspire secular thinkers and activists today.

Allen Ginsberg's Prophecy, Messianism and the Making of a Future America

Jonas Faust (University of Heidelberg)

Beat poet-turned countercultural icon Allen Ginsberg employs a wide variety of strategies to not only speculate about the future of America, but actually bring it into being. Following the tradition of the American Jeremiad, he creates two contrasting images of his country in present and near future—one that was doomed

by its rampant materialism, blind veneration of technological progress, eco-destructive and warmongering policies and spiritual vanity. On the other hand, he leaves open the possibility for salvation through religious mass-awakening, facilitated by poetry, a turn to personal religion and psychedelic drugs. While his works of the 1950s are largely restricted to a passive description of the nation's status quo and potential futures, the poet moves beyond speculation in the 1960s and employs active-performative poetic strategies to actualize his vision of a more positive future, culminating in "Wichita Vortex Sutra"'s bold declaration "I here declare the end of the [Vietnam] War" as well as poeticized attempts to levitate and thereby exorcize the Pentagon. This begs the question whether we ought to think of these as serious claims (which some critics have done) or more subtly as works of poetic "potentialism" (Houen). In my paper I wish to explore the shift from prophetic (i.e. descriptive-predictive) to Messianic (i.e. performative-"future-founding") rhetoric and potential reasons for this, but also highlight how Ginsberg's texts and paratexts subtly navigate between reality claims and strategies of poetic worldmaking. In order to do so, I will give a brief definition of the figures of prophet and Messiah, differentiate their key rhetorical strategies and devices (with the help of Sascha Pöhlmann's *Future-Founding Poetry*) and then apply this theoretical framework to some of Ginsberg's most well-known poetry from the 1950s to 1970s- "Howl", "America", "Wichita Vortex Sutra" and "Plutonian Ode".

AESTHETICS AND POSSIBILITIES OF VERSIONING: Transgenerational Storytelling

Panel chair: Verena Adamik (Leuphana University Lüneburg)

Ghosts of the Past: Magical Realism and Transgenerational Trauma in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*

Lucija Periš (Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek)

The paper scrutinizes elements of magical realism in August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson* (1990), arguing that the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright engages with the theme of African-American transgenerational trauma by reconciling fantasy and reality. The term magical realism was coined by art historian and critic Franz Roh in 1925 to celebrate a new direction in painting and soon began to be used as a designation for an artwork that is grounded in reality but permeated with supernatural elements. Used as a narrative strategy in Wilson's play, it sheds light on the way the legacy of enslavement impacted the construction of African-American identity at the dawn of modern America. Set in 1936 Pittsburgh during the Great Migration, *The Piano Lesson* centers around an African-American family that moved from the agrarian South to the industrial North, but is still burdened by the trauma of slavery. Disturbed by the ghost of a dead Southern slaveholder, the Pittsburgh home of Doaker Charles becomes a metaphorical locus of the past that weighs on the African-American collective memory. In *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson transcends the realm of the fantastic, combining the supernatural with African mythology and Christian tradition to depict a community whose tradition was disrupted by the white intruder and reclaimed by means of ancestral heritage. Following Elleke Boehmer, Stephen Slemon and Brenda Cooper's theoretical reflections on magical realism narratives, the paper will show that *The Piano Lesson* subverts dominant cultural discourses that legitimized racism during the 20th century, thereby providing remediation of collective trauma.

"The Legacy of American Slavery: Contesting Blackness and Re-envisioning Nationhood in *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation*"

Tatiana Konrad (University of Vienna)

This paper analyzes Damian Duffy and John Jennings' adaptation of Octavia E. Butler's novel *Kindred* (1979), *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* (2017). It focuses on the graphic novel's explorations of the American past and present to examine the legacy of slavery today. Touching upon issues of interracial relationships, biracial children, and sexual abuse, the graphic novel discusses the complexity of being Black in the U.S., from the times of slavery to the present day, and demonstrates how generations of Americans are bonded together through the tragic history of slavery – a history through which racism has challenged the American nation and continues to do so. The paper specifically focuses on how the graphic novel explores the relationship between the perpetrators and victims of slavery, the immediate and long-lasting effects thereof, as well as the responsibility borne by both the perpetrator and the passive observer (or the 'implicated subject', to borrow Michael Rothberg's term) in the formation of institutionalized oppression. The graphic novel functions on various layers: making perpetrators and victims visible (in the antebellum temporal context), complicating and deconstructing the perpetrator-victim binary in the contemporary context, and exploring implication

through time. This paper examines the potential of the graphic novel as a genre (in particular, its visual and verbal aspects) and of the motif of time travel to address the difficult legacy of slavery, the question of implication across time, and systemic/institutional racism.

The Civilian-Military Divide: How the US Military is Perceived Through a Multi- generational Lens in Todd Robinson's *The Last Full Measure* (2019)

Kristina Seefeldt (University of Freiburg)

Since Abraham Lincoln first articulated it in the Gettysburg Address, fallen US military heroes are often described as having given their "last full measure of devotion" for their country. This last measure is interpreted in various ways and paints multiple versions of the US and its military, including accounts by active-duty personnel, veterans, and civilians. *The Last Full Measure* by Todd Robinson is a 2019 US Vietnam war drama that addresses the civilian- military gap in a contemporary American context and offers a patriotic outcome. It highlights the connection between the Vietnam war and its aftermath, military and civilian worlds, military heroism and failings, as well as signs of PTSD and the celebration of honor. In my talk I aim to show how these polarizing elements create vastly different versions of the US as a nation filled with military heroism and how they are used to further the support for the US Armed Forces. The diverse versions are thus discounted in order to perpetuate the narrative of honorable, military heroes and national superiority. I will analyze the role accounts of the war and its heroes play and how these are negotiated afterwards, by veterans and civilians alike. The movie spans three decades and thus works to include accounts of multiple generations, their experiences with the Vietnam War, the fallen, the veterans, and the resulting national trauma, which results in their versions blending into each other, influencing another, and ultimately decreasing the civilian-military gap. Through addressing the chasm between the civilian and the military world, this analysis is built on a larger phenomenon and ties Hollywood's accounts of US military heroism to contemporary cultural issues dividing the nation.

SPECULATIVE (CULTURAL) POLITICS: Migration, Mobilities, and Modes of Belonging

Panel chair: Marijana Mikić (University of Klagenfurt)

Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* and Maurice Fishberg's *The Jews* – Two Versions of America as a Home for Jews

Klara S. Szlezák (University of Passau)

Having immigrated from the Russian Empire to the United States in 1889 and 1891 respectively, the Jewish American anthropologist and physician Maurice Fishberg and the Jewish American novelist Mary Antin published their versions of America as a home for Jews at the same historic moment, in 1911 and 1912 respectively. During the peak years of Jewish immigration to the United States and in the midst of both Progressivism and Nativism, both Fishberg and Antin, albeit from vastly different perspectives (scholarly v. semi-fictional) and led by different purposes (providing scientific proof v. narrating a life), participated in the contemporary discourse on immigration and immigration policy, and on competing models of acculturation. Moreover, both relied significantly on photographs as illustrations in their books to convey their point of view.

This paper proposes to read Antin's *The Promised Land* alongside Fishberg's *The Jews: A Study of Race and Environment* against the shared backdrop of historical discussions about 'race,' Americanization, the idea of a 'trans-national America' as coined by Randolph Bourne only a few years later, as well as the various roles of the then still new medium of photography. The intertextual and intermedial dimensions of this reading reveal a complexity and an ambiguity that is simultaneously stimulating and disturbing, entangling notions of American Exceptionalism with ideas of transnationalism and addressing "the perennial problem," i.e., "whether there is ever a probability of incorporating the Jews into the body politic of Anglo-Saxon communities" (Fishberg v) at the crossroads of assimilation advocacy and calls for cultural pluralism.

"Let's pretend your city // is Evanescence –" Agha Shahid Ali's Translocal Reconfiguring of the North American Continent

Julia Machtenberg (Ruhr-Universität Bochum)

In his poetry collection *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), Kashmiri American poet Agha Shahid Ali represents various open-ended versions of US-American landscapes by intertwining the local with the global, the global with the local. Numerous scholars have commented on the ways in which Ali "imaginatively moves rapidly across borders associating and examining experiences in a variety of lands and situations to establish relationships or to recall what has been lost in the process of living" (King 3). This "imaginative" way of moving not only across but also within and beyond geographical and national as well as socio-temporal borders, I argue, results from Ali's lyric construction of "affective landscapes" (see Berberich, Campbell, and Hudson). I maintain that it is through his construction of such "affective landscapes" that Ali represents and maps vulnerable states of de- and emplacement throughout and beyond the North American continent. By offering a close reading of Ali's traveling poem "A Nostalgist's Map of America," I will exemplify the ways in which the poem's "affective landscapes" create multiple, multifaceted versions of America that share a profound understanding of

a fundamental vulnerability to evanescence. As I will show, the poet's representation of vulnerable states of de- and emplacement allows him to not only trace instances of personal loss but facilitates efforts toward a meaningful reconstitution of the US as a translocal terrain affectively interconnecting the world's ephemeral components. My paper thus examines the ways in which Ali's representation of de- and emplaced states of vulnerability allow the poet to recreate and recombine multifaceted versions of US- American landscapes that produce a lyric (re)configuration of (trans)national notions of belonging.

Works cited:

Berberich, Christine, Neil Campbell, and Robert Hudson. "Affective Landscapes. An Introduction." *Cultural Politics*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2013, pp. 313-322.

King, Bruce. "Agha Shahid Ali's Tricultural Nostalgia." *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1994, pp. 1-20.

"Cooking Up America: Culinary Versions of America in Contemporary Chef Memoirs"

Philine Schiller (University of Heidelberg)

A nation often defines parts of its identity via the cuisine it created through the centuries. US national cuisine has faced certain challenges from its colonial inception to the institution of slavery and waves of immigration from across the globe. Can you then even speak of one coherent US-American cuisine? Historian Katharina Vester argues that US American cuisine played a large part in creating an American identity and upholding hegemonic power structures by in- and excluding certain foods and groups. Today, American foodways have become increasingly globalized. This fact is reflected in the food that is served in restaurants across the country, from food trucks to fine dining establishments. In the 21st century, chefs have become celebrities, and the food they cook is considered not only nourishment but also central to their identity. A menu becomes a narrative, creating a string of dishes that tell the chef's life story. The traditional image of a white, male chef in a tall chef's hat persists; however, today's food world more truthfully reflects the profession's diversity. This is also apparent when considering food memoirs, in which celebrity chefs market themselves, rather than just their food, and act as public taste makers and major drivers of conversations around food and gastronomy. I look at two memoirs, David Chang's *Eat a Peach* (2020) and Kwame Onwuachi's *Notes from a Young Black Chef* (2019), as exemplars of a larger food memoir boom, to inspect the "versions of America" that they construct in relation to their personal life stories, which are heavily influenced by their cultural backgrounds. These chefs thus tell individual life stories that weave together the tapestry of "a nation of immigrants where people with many different backgrounds and beliefs have engaged in perceiving, telling, and living a multiplicity of versions of America," as stated in your call for papers. Food memories and recipes/dishes contained in memoirs construct, reaffirm and expand the national cuisine and thus constitute part of a larger American culinary discourse.