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Sebastian M. Herrmann,
Katja Kanzler,
Stefan Schubert (eds.)

BEYOND NARRATIVE

Exploring Narrative Liminality and Its Cultural Work

[transcript] Culture & Theory

Sebastian M. Herrmann, Katja Kanzler, Stefan Schubert (eds.)
Beyond Narrative

Culture & Theory | Volume 268

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Sebastian M. Herrmann, Katja Kanzler, Stefan Schubert (eds.)

Beyond Narrative

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[transcript]

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Acknowledgments

This book has its origins in 2015, when the three of us and our colleague Frank Usbeck, having just finished a project on the poetics and politics of narrative, became increasingly interested in thinking and theorizing beyond this seemingly ubiquitous form. Having focused so much on the well-established category of narrative, we now wanted to divert our attention to artifacts and formations that reached beyond, challenged, or 'hybridized' narrativity. Eventually, these efforts resulted in an academic network on "Narrative Liminality and/in the Formation of American Modernities" (www.narrative-liminality.de), which ran from 2017 to 2021 and was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

During these years, the members of the network met in four different workshops, collaborated on an online platform, and engaged with other scholars in an international conference at Leipzig University, Germany, in October 2019. Shortly thereafter, the Corona pandemic precluded further in-person meetings, but the results of the discussions and collaborations among participants in the network are now collected in the present volume. All ten members have contributed articles to this book, along with a number of other scholars who interacted with the "Narrative Liminality" network as speakers in workshops or presenters during the 2019 conference. We want to thank all of them for the immense energy and enthusiasm they brought to the network, the insightful theoretical and conceptual discussions, and the productive spirit of collaboration that was with us during these years. Together, we pushed for new ways of conceptualizing what is beyond narrative and how one can study it. We also want to thank those colleagues who shared their expertise and insights with us along the way but who could not contribute to this book, among them Jeremy Douglass and Jared Gardner. While considerable work of employing and refining our concept of narrative liminality remains to be done, the network's collective effort laid important groundwork for thinking about narrative and other symbolic forms without reifying the boundaries between these forms.

We are particularly happy that the results of these years of thinking about the borderlands of narrativity can be presented in open-access form, and we want to thank the DFG as well as Leipzig University's Open Access Publication Fund for

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Leipzig, August 2021
Sebastian M. Herrmann, Katja Kanzler, and Stefan Schubert

Borderlands of Narrativity
Towards a Study of Narrative Liminality and Its Cultural Work

Sebastian M. Herrmann, Katja Kanzler, Stefan Schubert (Leipzig University)

Already two decades ago, writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Peter Brooks forcefully declared the narrative turn to be over. "The notion," he stated, "that narrative is part of a universal cognitive tool kit, which seemed in the mid-60's a radical discovery, is now one of the banalities of postmodernism." Brooks, of course, was in no way alone in his assessment. Beginning at around the end of the twentieth century, a steady stream of scholarship had begun to ritually diagnose the demise of narrative as a useful analytic category, to issue calls "[a]gainst [n]arrativity" (Strawson) or "[a]gainst [n]arrative" and against the "broad, overly eager uses" of the concept (Tammi 19), and to more generally lament the "*narrative fatigue* due to overkill" in previous decades (Freeman 22; emphasis in the original). Indeed, so multiple were these calls to be done with narrative, they themselves now constitute an entire subset in the ongoing scholarship on narrative. If all these assessments were right, if, by the end of the twentieth century, the concept of narrative was dead after all, the unending stream of obituaries certainly was evidence of a lively afterlife.

Far from simply joining this chorus, and far from simply insisting that these repeated proclamations of the death of narrative signal the continuing impact of the concept, this book calls for an investigation of what we call the 'borderlands of narrativity'—the complex and culturally productive area where the symbolic form of narrative meets other symbolic logics. Often, we contend, it is not simply the narrative form that becomes culturally salient or politically meaningful, and often the most compelling insights of cultural and textual study are not to be found by simply identifying the presence of narrative logics in one artifact or another. Rather, it is the narrative form's ability to interface with other symbolic logics, along with the complex formal negotiations that take place in these processes of interfacing, that determines much of narrative's cultural and political salience—an aspect that has so far been largely overlooked. What is needed, then, is not simply more study of narrative, or less; or a more intensive study of other discursive logics in narrative's

stead. What is needed is the investigation of the often fuzzy, complex borderlands the narrative form shares with other forms of discourse.

We begin this volume with Brooks's refutation of narrative not only because he illustrates the two major lines of attack that have been lobbed against narrative—that the concept was overexpanded and overused and that an interest in narrative had displaced the study of other formal logics—but because he also provides an opportunity to more tangibly show what we mean by a study of narrative liminality. Both complaints about narrative, demonstrated amply in Brooks's essay, are based in the sense of having to push back against previous decades' "narrative excess" (Freeman 23). As Brooks observes with a crucial choice of verb, narrative "appears to have *colonized* large realms of discourse, both popular and academic" (our emphasis), and in this sense the concept's success presents a problem onto itself. In academia, this ready "travelling" of the concept has led to a proliferation of "narrative turns" across a broad range of vastly different disciplines (Hyvärinen et al.; Hyvärinen), but the price for such wide, "promiscuous" (Brooks) appeal has been a bloating of the term: In many cases, and in many disciplines, an attention to narrative has come to mean little more than an awareness for the "narrative construction of reality," as Jerome Bruner's felicitous and widely resonant phrasing has it. 'Narrative,' in other words, has ended up meaning little more than 'social construction.' At its core, this is the once "radical discovery" of the 1960s that, in Brooks's eyes, has grown banal; and the term's success has been largely due to its ability to express social constructionism in particularly accessible ways.

This is true in narrative's transdisciplinary appeals, but it is even more acutely the case in the more "popular" "realms of discourse" Brooks addresses: The majority of his essay is devoted to showcasing how US society—and US politics in particular—has become estranged from reality thanks to the power of narrative. Ronald Reagan, he thus elaborates, was "the first U.S. president to govern largely by anecdote"; Bill Clinton was impeached by the Starr Report, the main chapter of which was labeled not an investigation but a "Narrative"; and George W. Bush brandished "stories" whenever he tried to sell the American people on either his cabinet picks or his tax cut policies. In a society and in a cultural moment—postmodernity—that is so fully and so self-reflexively aware of the power of narrative, there is no need to keep rediscovering the importance of narrative, Brooks asserts. The freshness of this discovery has worn off in the same way that postmodernism has exhausted itself, and in this sense, Brooks's, like other calls for an end of the study of narrative, speaks of a need for conceptual innovation at least as much as it speaks of a broader cultural desire, poignantly palpable at the end of twentieth century, to usher in a new period and to finally be done with (late) postmodernity (cf. also Herrmann et al.).

The second line of attack, similarly present in Brooks's essay, is more narrowly formal. As he points out, the 'colonization' of public discourse by narrative has

decimated and displaced a more 'indigenous' discursive presence both in contemporary culture and in academia, and it has thus come at the cost of "other forms of discourse" that are organized by other formal principles. In the public realm, he explains, narrative has come "to trump statistics" and "compilations of fact," and it has similarly pushed aside a "more traditional rhetoric of American politics, concocted of moral and sentimental abstractions." This is problematic because these other discursive strategies, he claims, would point to "a different truth" than the one pushed by these narratively invested politicians, Bush and Reagan. Similarly, he asserts, the Starr Report on Clinton's sexual behavior relied on narrative to advance its own agenda. Had it been less invested in doing so, had it been more interested in truth than in politics, it would have presented its findings "as a collage of witnesses' reports and legal argumentation" and thus in "a more cubist approach," which would have allowed readers to interact with the information more freely and more critically. And even academic discourse, he points out, once "governed by logic, syllogism, or mathematical formula" has become all the poorer for dismissing these earlier, endemic discursive logics in favor of narrative.

Notably, Brooks's call to reclaim—and (re)focus academic attention on—formal discursive logics other than narrative resonates with other debates lively at the time: The formation of the field of game studies, for example, was accompanied by animated debates over how the symbolic logics of play were fundamentally different from those of narrative, debates that explicitly pushed back against the perceived "colonisations" of the emerging field by narratologists, calling this a kind of "theoretical imperialism" (Eskelinen, "Towards"; Aarseth, *Cybertext* 16; cf. also Eskelinen, "Gaming Situation"; Aarseth, "Genre Trouble"; Pearce). Just as these debates binarily pitted so-called ludologists against narratologists (cf. Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan), they also set up narrative and play as irreconcilably different categories, with some positions alleging that trying, for instance, to frame video games as (partly) narrative makes it epistemologically impossible to properly understand how the medium operates. Similarly, discussions of spectacle and its place especially in contemporary cinema, building on work by scholars like Laura Mulvey and Tom Gunning, turned on and drove home the observation that spectacle is best understood as disrupting, suspending, or even displacing narrative from a cinematic 'text.' Redeeming spectacle, in these debates, typically means asserting—against a perceived general trend—that even the nonnarrative can have its value (Bukatman; Jenkins; King). While much of the scholarship thus proceeds from the assumption that spectacle and narrative are two symbolic logics that are fundamentally at odds with one another, some more recent work is beginning to question precisely that, hypothesizing that there might be "no *necessary* opposition between narrative and spectacle" (Lavik 173; emphasis in the original) or asking how exactly the two are intertwined in cultural materials (cf. Lewis). A similar debate underwrote an influential discussion of "database as symbolic form" triggered by Lev Manovich around

the turn of the millennium. Building on work by Erwin Panofsky (and, ultimately, Ernst Cassirer), Manovich casts narrative and data as two fundamentally different, oppositional "symbolic forms," two "natural enemies" competing over the "exclusive right to make meaning out of the world" (85). Despite N. Katherine Hayles's intervention—in a special issue of *PMLA*, she insisted on imagining the relationship between data and narrative not as antagonistic but as symbiotic—Manovich's vision of Manichean oppositionality was the more mainstream and more resonant model. It captured the general sense, informing many, and many later, debates of the relationship of narrative and data: a sense that these two forms were categorically distinct, that the constellation was, as Jesse Rosenthal put it, one of "Narrative against Data" (1), and that narrative was the form that had to be pushed back against.

Ultimately, these three debates, along with other, similar interventions, did indeed constitute a valuable counterweight against the dominance of narrative in literary and cultural studies. They are exemplary in how they attempt to limit the reach of narrative by pointing to other formal patternings of discourse, other symbolic forms, that they imagine as categorically different or incompatible with what narrative is. Such stark oppositionality, however, comes at a price. In how these interventions operate on the basis of binary either-or oppositions, they do little to illuminate the ways in which cultural artifacts often become meaningful by tapping into multiple symbolic forms at once, by traveling among, or translating between, such forms or by forcing them to overlap.

This brings us back, for one more time, to Peter Brooks's essay in the *Chronicle*. Writing in 2001, Brooks obviously could not imagine a presidency by then-reality TV star Donald Trump. Briefly after discussing Reagan, Clinton, and Bush, however, he turns in an abrupt and almost prescient way to a discussion of reality TV, a then-new formal strategy in television that was widely perceived as being nonnarrative and that was increasing its cultural presence at the time: "Meanwhile," he writes, "we have reality TV (*Survivor*, *Temptation Island*), which producers contrast to story-form TV (*The West Wing*), sometimes with predications that the former will make the latter obsolete. But reality TV is as narrative as can be: It invites the viewer to construct it as a continuing story, a grittier, or more titillating, sitcom." Eager to show that narrative indeed does reign supreme in turn-of-the-century US culture, Brooks here commits a telling sleight of hand: He dismisses the nonnarrative, discontinuous, spectacular, ludic, collage-like qualities of reality TV, its being different from "story-form TV," by claiming that viewers will turn this nonnarrative material into "a continuing story." Put in the terms of narrative liminality, he casts what we would call a moment of potential or latent narrativity, i.e., an arguably nonnarrative artifact's ability to be turned into a story, as being an instance of narrative itself.

Indeed, on closer inspection, most of Brooks's examples of narrative's presumed dominance in the contemporary moment are somewhat dubious along the same lines, suggesting that he, too, falls prey to the very overexpansion of the concept of narrative he laments: The Starr Report, despite its main chapter indeed conspicuously being labeled "Narrative," is peppered with footnotes and references, constituting a veritable database of factual information that is merely woven together by the narrative thread of the main text and that invites readings other than the one presented—a textual quality Brooks acknowledges but fails to discuss any further. Similarly, many of the 'narratives' presented by George W. Bush, while referred to as a "story" by the president, are, as Brooks portrays them, not full-fledged narratives but merely archetypal characters, "an elderly citizen from Florida forced to sell her home to pay for prescription drugs" or "a crime victim mugged by liberal courts." They "*represent* exemplary narratives" (our emphasis), they evoke stories, but they are not, strictly speaking, stories themselves. Casting them, as Brooks does, as narratives overlooks those formal qualities that makes them politically salient—qualities such as their "spreadability" (Jenkins et al.), which stem precisely from their atrophied narrativity. Finally, as Brooks also acknowledges, the power of Reagan's storytelling resided not in the narrative but in the anecdotal quality of the former actor's tellings. As mere anecdotes, these short, fragmented, barely narrative pieces form the direct opposite of the *grands récits* typically credited with narrative power. In short, the examples Brooks offers of an alleged dominance of the symbolic form of narrative turn out to be examples of much more complex symbolic constellations: In each instance, the social meaning and political power of these 'texts' does not rest on them being narrative. It also does not rest on them simply corresponding to some other symbolic form. It rests instead on the translations between different symbolic forms that these texts invite and partake in.

What is needed, then—twenty years into the ongoing declarations of the demise of narrative and into the declaration that other forms of discourse required serious study—are investigations not into either this one form, narrative, or its presumed 'enemies' or 'others,' but into how different symbolic forms overlap and interact in cultural artifacts or practices: into how their respective formal territories, mechanisms, and affordances—to pick up Caroline Levine's immensely stimulating development of the term for formal(ist) analysis—mix and blur, and into how these gray zones of mixing of different symbolic forms more often than not constitute the rich soil from which social and cultural salience (and political power) springs. It is the study of these multiple liminalities between symbolic forms that we call for when we call for an investigation of narrative liminality. There is as of yet no set methodology for the study of narrative liminality, and so, in lieu of such a set methodology, we suggest the following ten theses:

Ten Theses on Narrative Liminality

1. The study of narratives has greatly enriched scholarship across the humanities, not least by drawing attention to the ways in which the epistemological, societal, and political effects of texts or practices are tied to their formal qualities. Yet narrative, as a conceptual category, risks obfuscating rather than illuminating cultural dynamics when it is operated as an unbounded category. Not everything is narrative, and narrative is not everything.

2. In this spirit, narrative can be conceptualized as a symbolic form that circulates in culture alongside other symbolic forms such as data(base), play, spectacle, ritual, etc. Each of these symbolic forms comes with its own, discrete principles of patterning experience and knowledge. Each carries its own aesthetic, epistemological, affective, and political implications. Each comes with its own set of affordances.

3. Like most borders, the boundaries between symbolic forms are porous and permeable. They allow for, even invite, crossings and transgressions, traffic and exchange, policing and challenge. Symbolic forms are thus bounded by borderlands, liminal zones that host mixings, overlaps, and encounters of various kinds.

4. Cultural artifacts and practices regularly traverse the boundaries between different symbolic forms. The resulting encounters can develop different dynamics, which always need to be examined in detail—dynamics, for instance, of conflict, symbiosis, intersection, disruption, dialectics, etc.

5. Narrative holds a privileged position among symbolic forms. In part, this may owe to the central role it plays in Western imaginaries and epistemologies, in part to the canonization of narrative as a concept in the humanities that has rendered it more visible than other symbolic forms. The borderlands around narrative thus enjoy a particular prominence and—potentially—cultural salience. While inquiry into forms and instances of narrative liminality may thus be particularly urgent, it should serve as an invitation to direct more sustained attention to the borderlands and the traffic between other symbolic forms, for instance between data and play.

6. Cultural artifacts and practices at the borderlands of symbolic forms combine and hybridize the principles and affordances of these forms. For example, a narratively liminal artifact like a video game may combine the interactivity of play with the world-making and causation afforded by narrative. For such lim-

inal artifacts, allegiances to different symbolic forms like play and narrative are a matter of scale rather than of either-or.

7. Focusing on narrative liminality, and thus focusing on the scalar, gradable nature of a symbolic form's properties, works against strong disciplinary desires to clearly and unambiguously define symbolic forms. In particular, focusing on narrative liminality works against disciplinary efforts to define what narrative 'is' or 'is not,' embracing a gradable quality instead, best captured by the concept of 'narrativity.' Similar gradable terms exist or need to be employed for other symbolic forms.

8. In liminal artifacts and practices, the principles and affordances of different symbolic forms intersect and organize each other in always specific, situated ways. These intersections are best described in terms of relationships between the manifest and the latent, the explicit and the implicit, the present and the tacit, or similar concepts that highlight the gradable and interdependent relationships at stake.

9. Different symbolic forms serve distinct cultural functions, inhabit distinct cultural locations, and are differently accessible to different social actors. They are thus socially embedded and implicated in structures of power; they and their uses are both subject to historical change and can become instruments of historical change, each of them in specific ways. Processes of historical change—challenges to, conflicts over, or transformations of the social, political, and cultural structures in which symbolic forms circulate—often animate the borderlands between symbolic forms and are, in turn, often energized by cultural artifacts and practices that emanate from there. Liminal artifacts seem to possess unique potentials in situations where the multiple boundaries that organize the social and cultural world are set, or are to be set, in motion.

10. When artifacts and practices invest in solidifying and absolutizing the boundaries between symbolic forms, in advancing notions of symbolic form-purity and of binarisms between them, this also does cultural work. One field where this kind of boundary work can be prominently observed is academia. There, it is often bound up with institutional politics of self-legitimization and disciplinary territoriality. Engaging the borderlands between symbolic forms and narrative liminality thus also demands academic self-reflection.

Articles in This Collection

The sixteen articles collected in this book examine the borderlands of narrativity. Discussing literature, popular culture, digital technology, historical artifacts, and other kinds of texts from a time span of close to two hundred years, they function as case studies exemplifying the productivity of the conceptual framework sketched above, with some articles highlighting formalistic, conceptual, or theoretical questions and others centering on cultural and historical contextualizations. In curating these contributions, we have decided against clustering them into subsets or chapters so as not to imply that their inquiries could be reduced to just one central idea. Instead, we understand all of the sixteen articles' case studies as entering into a dialog with each other. Together, they speak to the rich, multifaceted scholarly promise of probing the borderlands of narrativity.

Maurice S. Lee opens our collection with an article on "Numbers, Literature, Aesthetics," exploring the role that numbers, quantification, and data play in literature. His article is positioned against a widespread skepticism around considering the role of numbers and other data in aesthetic terms, and he instead argues that numbers can possess affective and narrative power as well. The hesitation of studying numbers in literature can also be seen as a by-product of the overreach of narrative, which, as Lee points out, adds to a perceived binary between the literary and the informational. While data and literature today are most visibly being discussed in the digital humanities, Lee's article traces the history of quantification in literature by pointing to significant 'numerical' moments in nineteenth-century texts. He turns to a genre that is particularly invested in exploring the liminal spaces between numbers and narrative, the British and American adventure novels of the long nineteenth century, most prominently Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. His rereading of the adventure novel as a numbers-oriented genre focuses on how such liminal moments are characterized not only by antagonism but also by negotiation and collaboration. Lee's article thus works both as a specific intervention into our thinking about the literature and culture of the nineteenth century and as a historical contextualization of the borderlands of data and narrative.

James Dorson adds to this investigation of the nexus of data, narrative, and literature, yet he moves historically toward the end of the nineteenth century in his contribution "The Data of Life and the Life of Data: Epistemological and Aesthetic Liminality at the Fin de Siècle." Looking at both scientific writings (e.g., by Charles Darwin and Claude Bernard) and literary works (including by H. G. Wells and Frank Norris), he scrutinizes moments and instances in these texts in which data takes on 'a life of its own,' becoming vital. Dorson places this inquiry against the backdrop of contemporary humanities scholarship, which is still wary of the place of data within literary studies, and he argues against an opposition that sees data as 'dis-

enchanting' and narrative (or art more generally) as 'unsettling.' Instead, he moves to instances of liminality between these forms, for example in moments that produce a 'data sublime' through the spectacular complexity and immensity of evoking data configurations. The article's close analyses, in conjunction with its conceptual contextualization, rethink the relationship of data and narrative in terms of a dialectical interdependence rather than a strict opposition, facilitating an exploration of the liminal areas between the two forms that emerge in texts of the fin de siècle.

Regina Schober's article "The Potentialities of Data: Self-Tracking as Liminal Narrative" moves such inquiries into the contemporary moment, arguing to understand practices of self-tracking (for instance by measuring biometric data in apps) as forms of life writing that rely on both data and narrative to constitute a meaningful practice. While previous scholarship has already considered processes of quantifying the self as part of the logics of data capitalism and self-optimization, Schober highlights that the datafication of the self is intricately connected to narrative. Throughout her contribution, her focus lies on tracing the relationship between these two symbolic forms, which she considers one of both conflict and complementary harmony. In understanding self-tracking as a mediated externalization of the self, she highlights how the practice relies on the visualization of data, creating data maps that, in turn, brim with narrative potentiality. On top of these theoretical and conceptual concerns, Schober's article contextualizes the intersections of data and narrative in self-tracking as a cultural question, interrogating what kind of knowledge self-tracking produces and how these twenty-first-century constructions of identity are interwoven with issues of agency and privilege.

Such cultural concerns are also at the center of Sebastian M. Herrmann's article "Unnecessary Complications? The Interplay of Symbolic Forms in John Carroll Power's 'Diagram and Statistical Record of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence.'" Herrmann looks at one particular artifact, a broadsheet from 1858 that uses a line-graph visualization to display biographical data about the signers of the Declaration of Independence, in order to probe into the cultural work that this particular way of curating information does. By closely analyzing the mechanics of the diagram, he points out how it has only limited value as a reference work or as a didactic text, combining seemingly arbitrary pieces of information with each other and making it more difficult to actually access that information. These 'unnecessary complications,' as Herrmann calls them, can be made sense of historically, however, when framed within the middle of the nineteenth century's intense interest in notions of 'fact' and 'data.' In Herrmann's reading, the diagram can best be understood as merging three distinct symbolic forms—data, narrative, and play. It thus has to be read via its affordances, which go beyond merely displaying information and instead also invite playful tracing and interactive exploring, among others. Studying how this artifact works within the borderlands of narrative, play,

and data thus evidences nineteenth-century American culture's fascination with the mingling of symbolic forms and with experimenting with more 'democratic' forms of representation.

The affordances of the same three symbolic forms can overlap in very different textual and medial artifacts, as becomes evident in Sören Schoppmeier's contribution "Narrative Liminality, Ambient Operations, and the Database Western in Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption* Videogames." Schoppmeier also understands his primary text as an interaction between database, narrative, and play, yet on the surface, the contemporary video games that he examines look very different, of course, from nineteenth-century texts. Schoppmeier argues to consider the *Red Dead Redemption* games as constituting a new kind of genre, the 'database Western,' which he specifically investigates by looking at what he calls its 'ambient operations,' events that happen around the player in the game world without constituting the center of attention. The video games in this franchise are full of such events, and for Schoppmeier, they work according to a database logic: They are selected to happen seemingly at random, which then affords interaction by the player and can potentially entail narrative significance. Yet while the different forms intersect in these 'ambient' events, in Schoppmeier's analysis, the database dominates the other forms. Overall, his article contextualizes these design choices within the Western genre that *Red Dead Redemption* narratively evokes, reading the interaction between these different symbolic forms for its politics, which Schoppmeier argues sever the games' genre from history.

The way in which different symbolic forms can both invigorate and impede each other is also a central concern in Sarah J. Link's contribution "Detecting Liminality: The List and Symbolic Form," in which she positions the list as a form potentially characterized equally by narrative, database, and play. She traces the different ways in which we encounter lists in fiction in the genre of the detective novel, where they can appear diegetically (e.g., as an element in the story), textually (in terms of how the narrative discourse presents the story to readers), and paratextually (in the table of contents or in a score sheet). By reading Agatha Christie's fiction for its use of lists, the article establishes how they function as representations of consciousness and processes of rationalization without the mediation that is typical of narrativity, instead aligning them more closely between the symbolic forms of narrative and database. She adds to this an investigation of Dennis Wheatley's *Murder Dossier* novels, which further increase the potential for interactivity inherent in detective fiction by inviting their readers to play with the works' own database structure. Taken together, Link's article points out how lists' adaptive potential lies in the contact zones of different symbolic forms, which the texts she examines make use of both for reasons of narrative innovation and experimentation and as a specific way of meaning-making that goes beyond what a 'purely' narrative form can express.

Stefan Schubert's contribution "'To Live Your Life Again, Turn to Page 1': Affordances of Narrative and Play in Neil Patrick Harris's *Choose Your Own Autobiography*" is interested in another phenomenon of narrative innovation, discussing a form of life writing that engages with both narrative and play. He frames the autobiography by actor and comedian Neil Patrick Harris as part of a larger pop-cultural trend towards fusing narrative with play, which he dubs 'ludic textuality.' Harris's text experiments with established ways of how we tell life stories by presenting his autobiography similarly to a choose-your-own-adventure story. Affordances take center stage in Schubert's argument, which focuses on how the text's ludonarrative mechanics afford not just playful nonlinearity and interactivity but also narrative closure, finality, and linearity—at times symbiotically, at times by impeding each other. These poetics also come with their own particular politics, enabling Harris to textually render identity as fragmented and multiple while also complicating the book's viability as an autobiography. Ultimately, Schubert's contribution highlights how the mingling of different symbolic forms allows the book to metatextually explore its own mechanics, a dynamic that might hold true for other borderlands of narrativity as well.

Sascha Pöhlmann investigates the limits of narrative in the works of an author known for experimenting with the very mediality of the novel in his contribution "Multimodality as a Limit of Narrative in Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*." On a theoretical level, Pöhlmann argues against the widespread notion that multimodality, understood as the use of more than one semiotic mode to convey meaning, is to be considered a narrative strategy, instead making a case for contextualizing it as an instance of narrative liminality. While his arguments apply to all of Danielewski's works to some extent, he pursues his analysis through a close reading of the pentalogy *The Familiar*, investigating the books' manifold visual elements, material aspects, and the multitude of styles used, including software code and free indirect discourse. This consideration of the books' visual aesthetics and their use of unconventional narrative perspectives allows him to argue how the series' textual, visual, and material elements trouble and transgress the boundary between narrative and nonnarrative elements without either reinforcing or disintegrating that border. In a larger sense, Pöhlmann's article demonstrates how such a reframing of multimodality as a formation of narrative liminality opens up new perspectives on the work of a writer like Danielewski and on its position within literary traditions.

Gesine Wegner's contribution "The Poetics and Politics of Staring: Spectacle and Disability in Chris Ware's *Building Stories*" considers the multimodal medium of comics, and her analysis of *Building Stories* explores the role that spectacle plays in Ware's work. Her framing intervenes in existing scholarship of Ware's oeuvre, which has highlighted the importance that (narrative) closure and ludic elements in his comics play, by instead analyzing how spectacle disrupts the narrative process of *Building Stories* but also provides orientation for readers in navigating the

multimodal text. Wegner traces this reciprocal relationship between narrative and spectacle in the overall format of *Building Stories*, which expands on the medium's common affordances, and in the individual pieces, or perhaps stories, that the novel builds on. She complements this consideration of *Building Stories*' poetics with an investigation of the politics that spectacle enables in the text: The book invites its readers to stare, a practice primarily targeted at disabled bodies. Overall, the article points out how the interplay of spectacle and narrative activates particular modes of meaning-making, thus extending concepts such as the idea of visual pleasure from the medium of film to comics and demonstrating how this type of meaning-making is more dependent on symbolic form than it is on medium.

Katja Kanzler also examines the symbolic form of spectacle, shifting attention, however, to the medium of television in her article "'No Show Dissed Quite Like This One': Invective at the Borderlands of Narrative and Spectacle in *Veep*." Building on scholarship of spectacle and spectacularity, especially from film studies, she extends the concept's usual understanding of visual spectacle to also include verbal ones. This allows her to demonstrate that the ubiquitous and incessant use of all manner of insults and degradation in the political satire/comedy *Veep* can best be conceptualized as spectacular, not as narrative, especially due to its excessiveness and its focus on affective stimulation. In a second step, however, the article argues that the proliferation of invectives in the show often operates in the borderlands of narrative and spectacle, for instance when these insults contribute to the protagonists' characterization and when they tap into latent metanarratives that become reinvigorated through the spectacularity of verbal abuse. In turn, this dynamic complicates how the show's audience is interpellated and affectively positioned towards the frequency and intensity of *Veep*'s invectives. Next to carefully tracing elements of the two symbolic forms in the show and contextualizing them within a politicized invective culture, Kanzler's contribution thus also introduces a theorization of the relationship between narrative and spectacle that transcends previous binaristic paradigms.

In her article "Repetition, Rhythm, and Recital: Lyrical Strategies and the Ritualistic in Twenty-First-Century US 'We' Narratives," Michaela Beck examines a trend in contemporary literature by detecting a proliferation of 'we' narratives in a number of recent novels and short stories. In Beck's understanding, fictional works such as *Then We Came to the End* and *Our Hearts Will Burn Us Down*, which are narrated by a collective referred to as 'we,' feature elements that traditionally have not been assumed under the logic of narrative. In particular, she focuses on repetition and rhythm as two such characteristics that become prominent in 'we' narratives. To understand the function of repetitive and rhythmic elements, she turns to the exchanges and interdependencies between narrative, lyric, and ritual. By analyzing rhythmic and repetitive elements in TaraShea Nesbit's novel *The Wives of Los Alamos*, she highlights how these three symbolic forms are combined in moments of both

cooperation and conflict. In a final step, the article connects these formal concerns to the cultural work that this interweaving of different symbolic forms does, which Beck pinpoints to concerns about the stability of collective identity and belonging in twenty-first-century America.

Katharina Gerund's article "Home Front Autobiographies of the 'War on Terror': Narrative Liminality, Tacit Knowledge, and Affective Labor" continues this interest in contemporary literature, investigating the autobiographical works written by (predominantly female) military spouses. In Gerund's reading, texts such as Jenn Carpenter's *One Army Wife's Tale*, Lily Burana's *I Love a Man in Uniform: A Memoir of Love, War, and Other Battles*, and Taya Kyle's *American Wife: Love, War, Faith, and Renewal* grapple with the unrepresentability of the experience of war by building on and activating readers' emotional knowledge about family and love. It is especially in how these autobiographies rely on different forms of tacit knowledge (such as 'emotional understanding' or 'bodily knowing') that Gerund reads them as expanding on the narrative form, finding ways to activate this extra-narrative knowledge in order to fuel the texts' own cultural work—which then, again, is rendered narratively as well. The article locates this contradictory and ambiguous cultural work in how the books promote US warfare, display its adverse effects on the home front, and empower military spouses in finding ways to make their stories work and resonate both narratively and affectively.

Moving away slightly from this attention to novels, Christina Meyer explores iconic characters of consumer culture in her contribution "Form and/in Modernity: The Brownies, a Case Study." Her focus is on a set of fictional characters called the Brownies, first featured in serialized illustrated stories found in the children's magazine *St. Nicholas* in 1883. From there, the figures soon proliferated in a variety of other media forms and consumer items. Meyer argues that this portability of the Brownies can be explained through an analysis of their form, with 'form' understood as referring to both the Brownies' physical appearance and the material forms that they circulated in. Crucially, in her reading, it is narrative depletion that mobilizes these characters, enabling them to be adapted and to reemerge in different media and contexts. The lack of certain narrative features usually associated with characters in a story accentuates their iconic properties and the nonnarrative ways in which they can be interacted with. Taking a step back, Meyer contextualizes the need for and cultural work of this mobility within the burgeoning consumer culture of the time and the capitalist mechanics within which it operated.

A related interest in narrative depletion and iconicity also animates Sebastian Domsch's argument in his contribution "Embodying Narrative, Staging Icons: The Liminal Space of Embodied Performance." He examines two historically and culturally very different practices, mystery plays and cosplay. In his reading, both show a comparable affinity for depleting the narrativity that governs them to a considerable extent and embracing other symbolic forms for meaning-making, most

prominently play, spectacle, performance, and ritual. Mystery plays are biblical dramas that were prominent in Europe between the thirteenth and sixteenth century and constituted that period's only form of dramatic entertainment. Cosplay, on the other hand, is a contemporary fan practice of dressing up and performing in a visually recognizable way like characters from popular entertainment franchises. Domsch scrutinizes the similarities between these performative practices for their narrative and nonnarrative dynamics. By considering storyworlds, iconicity, performance, and embodiment, his article not only examines the poetics and politics of these practices but also provides a theoretical and conceptual framework for studying such diminished narrativity. The article thus demonstrates how these performance practices build on narrative material but operate by reducing the narrativity of their source material in order to foreground the iconic, the spectacular, and the ritualistic.

Leon Gurevitch's article "Liminal Labor: Narrating Authorship, the VFX Career, and Protest Through 'Social-Actor-Networks'" considers the role of narrativity and visuality in the labor market of the visual effects industry. It focuses in particular on so-called green screen protests from 2013, during which people working in the VFX industry used green tiles for their social media profiles, drawing attention to how many contemporary Hollywood films would look like without visual effects and without the labor from the industry they depend on. Gurevitch considers how these images and other social media strategies, such as tagged credits lists posted on Facebook, use the visual form to evoke narrative associations and to thus forge connections through their shared seriality to other stories of networked and decentralized labor. As the article outlines, the green screen protests can serve as a case study in how protest, and with it a sense of belonging, community, and authorship, can be mobilized beyond more traditional narrative means by forming identities around visuality rather than narrativity. Gurevitch considers these tendencies against their explicitly political background and takes a step back to connect this particular example of digital protest to more recent forms of a growing culture of networked activism.

We conclude this collection with an article by Caroline Levine, who, fittingly, discusses "Endings and Sustainability." Her contribution proceeds from the common assumption that endings provide narrative closure, because of which many scholars consider (especially happy) endings to serve politically conservative functions. However, Levine's line of argument reconsiders the ending as a form that affords transition rather than closure, as a shift into predicable stability, a reconsideration that she traces in the endings of fictional works such as *Barchester Towers*, *Esther Waters*, and *Oliver Twist*. Her article connects this interest in the affordances of endings with the contemporary political moment, in which she detects a need for stability, security, and predictability provided by (happy) endings in the context of the climate crisis, understanding such endings as thresholds to sustainability.

To illustrate this point, Levine reads Matthew Desmond's nonfiction book *Evicted* as interweaving data on the history of housing policy with individualized narratives about a number of precarious characters, a liminality that also characterizes the book's ending and that it uses to imagine policy solutions—rather than narratively individualized ones—for large-scale structural change. The way in which these 'collective happy endings' tap into the gray area between narratability and the nonnarrative beyond turns them into exactly the kind of form, Levine argues, that is politically needed in the current moment.

In a similar way to Levine's cautioning about how to understand endings, neither this introduction nor this overall collection can or should provide narrative closure. It rather wants to function as a point of transition and of departure: This book aims to open up a conversation about the 'beyond' of narrative, about the myriad constellations in which narrativity interlaces with, rubs against, or morphs into the principles of other symbolic forms—data, play, spectacle, ritual, and others. With the notion of narrative liminality, which this book's contributions operationalize in such inspiringly diverse ways, we hope to offer a conceptual platform that brings into focus the borderlands of narrative and that provides a language to discuss the representational and epistemological dynamics that can be observed there, as well as the cultural work they enable.

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Numbers, Literature, Aesthetics

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Abstract:
I presented this talk as a keynote address at the "Beyond Narrative: Literature, Culture, and the Borderlands of Narrativity" conference held in Leipzig in October of 2019. One thrust of the paper was that quantitative and aesthetic discourses are not as opposed as we tend to think—that numbers can possess the kind of dramatic, affective, narrative power often taken to be uniquely literary. My paper built toward a reading of Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island, focusing on the enchanting, wonderful merging of quantitative and aesthetic domains. Five months later, with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, I found myself obsessively processing data with very different emotions: fear, anger, regret, and the anguish of uncertainty. These, too, may seem the stuff of literature, but just as we impose narratives on numbers, numbers impose meanings on us.

No one knows for sure why Roberto Bolaño titled his posthumously published 2004 novel *2666*. Bolaño's earlier novel, *Amulet* (1999), refers to the year 2666, and by some accounts, the biblical story of Exodus takes place 2666 years after God created the world (Echevarría 897; Hitchings). But it may be that the exact figure of Bolaño's title is less important than his gesture of using a number—a gesture that, like much of the first section of the book, feels vaguely ironic and threatening. *2666* begins with "The Part About the Critics," which features four literary scholars obsessed with a reclusive German author who provides tenuous order to their otherwise purposeless lives. In one scene that promises to be particularly revealing, Manuel Espinoza and Jean-Claude Pelletier talk on the phone about the failed marriage of Liz Norton, their fellow scholar and mutual lover:

> The first twenty minutes were tragic in tone, with the word *fate* used ten times and the word *friendship* twenty-four times. Liz Norton's name was spoken fifty times, nine of them in vain. The word *Paris* was said seven times, *Madrid*, eight. The word *love* was spoken twice, once by each man. The word *horror* was spoken six times and the word *happiness* once (by Espinoza). The word *solution* was said twelve times. The word *solipsism* seven times. The word *euphemism* ten times. The word *category*, in the singular and the plural, nine times. (40-41; emphasis in the original)

And so on for other words: "*structuralism*" (1 time); "*American literature*" (3 times); "*dinner*," "*eating*," "*breakfast*," and "*sandwich*" (19 times total); "*eyes*," "*hands*," and "*hair*" (14 times). The joke is that numbers cannot represent the kind of complex unfoldings of interiority that one might expect from a novel. The threat, heightened by the impotence of the literature professors, is that the passage qua statistical report actually charts the characters' thoughts and feelings well enough to convey meaning and invite interpretation. In a novel that contains numerous catalogues and lists—including the chilling, numbing details of over one hundred police reports on murdered women—Bolaño's data feels both foreign and appropriate to his larger aesthetic designs, both a replacement for and a mode of what we might call the literary (Jaussen). From cosmopolitan academics to armies moving across national boundaries to life on the borderlands between Mexico and the United States, *2666* explores the liminal spaces between numbers and narrative.

Perhaps David Foster Wallace had *2666* in mind in his posthumously assembled novel, *The Pale King* (2011). One of the book's narrators, David Wallace, discovers his calling when he wanders into an accounting seminar taught by a Jesuit priest. Wallace (the character) recalls how, as a child,

> [...] instead of reading something, I'd count the words in it, as though reading was the same as just counting the words. For example, 'Here came Old Yeller, to save me from the hogs' would equate to ten words which I would count off from one to ten instead of its being a sentence that made you love Old Yeller in the book even more. (160)

Wallace (both as author and character) punctuates *The Pale King* with meta-literary enumerations. For example: "I've said 2,752 words right now since I started. Meaning 2,752 words as of just before I said, 'I've said,' versus 2,754 if you count 'I've said'—which I do, still" (160). Wallace later reports how the Jesuit, after "8,206 words," ends his class with a stirring speech that Wallace reproduces verbatim but does not quantify, as if inspired, quasi-religious eloquence lies beyond the reach of numbers (225). The joke here is that the priest's apparently transcendent speech is an encomium to accounting as numbers and narrative become, not so much incommensurate, but entangled and even congruent. Indeed, the most dramatic arc of *The Pale King* is not a love plot or some heroic journey—it is the character Wallace making his way from the airport to the Examination Center of the US Internal Revenue Service. As in *2666*, there is irony here but also a threat to aesthetic conventions. What, *The Pale King* seems to ask, is the difference between data and narrative, between information and literature?

This may seem a question for the twenty-first century and postmodernists navigating our digital revolution. With the dominance of Big Data, Big Tech, and the STEM fields, and with the rise of statistical analysis in the digital humanities and data-driven accountability in the corporate university, literary critics today might

feel that they face unprecedented pressures from informationalism. Such pressures, however, can be understood as part of a long information revolution stretching back to at least the nineteenth century, for as much as our digital age can feel newly exciting or frightening, the unfolding relationship between literature and data has historical roots that go largely unexplored.[1] In accordance with this volume's interest in the borderlands between symbolic forms, what follows resists the longstanding assumption that information and literature are fundamentally separate, offering instead a counter-narrative of liminality and hybridity in which nineteenth-century authors find data congenial to their aesthetic aims. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) serves as a primary case study that shows how the dynamics between information and literature have been marked not only by estrangement and antagonism but also by accommodation, negotiation, and collaboration.

Literature versus Information: A Brief History

There are at least two reasons why literary studies lacks a robust historical account of the relationship between data and narrative. The first is the presentist orientation of most thinking about our information age. We are told that the internet has changed everything, that our digital revolution is a radical epistemic break, and that computational power has left the past behind as it launches toward a utopian or dystopian future. The second reason is that information and literature are often taken to be incommensurate, essentially opposed, or categorically different. Literary narrative is typically associated with subjectivity, formal unity, affect, beauty, and wonder, whereas data is regarded as objective, reconfigurable, logic-based, instrumental, and disenchanting. Such dualistic thinking is why distant reading can stir so much controversy and why the 'two cultures' divide between science and literature has proven so recalcitrant. It is why some cultural stereotypes have proven so stubborn—the boring accountant, the passionate artist, the emotionally-stunted tech genius, the storyteller who reveals interior truths that statistics cannot explain, the heartless financier with his hair slicked back, people of certain colors, women, and the elderly supposedly unfit for informational enterprises but possessing intuitive folk wisdom. Though neuroscience has disabused the notion,

1 Jerome McGann worries that the digital humanities are working under an "increasingly attenuated historical sense" (14). Andrew Piper writes of humanist and computational scholars, "[w]e are talking not only past each other but also past the past itself" (3). For a recent article that begins its history of the relationship between quantification and literature in the mid-twentieth century, see Ted Underwood, "Machine Learning and Human Perspective," esp. 92.

left brain calculation versus right brain creativity remains a popular belief, as if our very minds are split between the informational and the literary.

Though some literary scholars are drawing on information and media studies or adopting scientific and statistical methods, most abide by a literature/information divide that has been traced to—and projected onto—the nineteenth century. Brilliant scholars such as Lev Manovich, Mary Poovey, Friedrich Kittler, and Christopher Newfield set literature and data at odds, as do poststructuralists who follow Nietzsche in discounting the authority of objectivity and empiricism.[2] The Frankfurt School supercharges Weber when setting aesthetics against calculation, while Heidegger and Wittgenstein help literary critics make arguments against scientism.[3] New Critics like Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren define poetry against "mere information" (180), while related aestheticians follow F.R. Leavis, who once wrote that life "cannot be aggregated or equated or dealt with quantitatively in any way." (65-66). Carlyle took science to "destroy Wonder, and in its stead substitute Mensuration and Numeration," (53), and Coleridge used the metaphor of a shattered mirror to lament how knowledge and texts are broken into disarticulated units (72). Wordsworth, Melville, Thoreau, Dickens, Dickinson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Anthony Trollope, and their contemporaries satirized efforts to measure the world. With the rise of statistical thinking, bureaucratic systems, algorithmic processes, and data management, the nineteenth century witnessed the spread of romantic, proto-modernist ideologies that set literature against information.

Here are just three examples of this dominant, dualistic narrative. As quantitative sociology emerged in the 1830s, practitioners measured, among many other things, book ownership and literacy rates (Hacking; Porter, *Rise*; Porter, *Trust*).[4] Dickens's "Full Report of the First Meeting of the Mudfog Association for the Advancement of Everything" (1837) is a precocious satire of such efforts and a prescient exploration of differences between informational and aesthetic concepts of literature. Dickens in "Mudfog" introduces Mr. Slug, a statistician whose presentation on books owned by children in London includes the following table (364):

2 See, here, Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*; Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*; Friedrich Kittler, "Number and Numeral"; Christopher Newfield, "The Trouble with Numerical Culture."

3 See, for instance, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (164); Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*; Jonathan Beale and Ian James Kidd, eds., *Wittgenstein and Scientism*.

4 For quantitative tracking of literacy in the 1830s and 1840s, see Stephen Colclough and David Vincent (284-85, 297-99).

Jack the Giant-killer	7,943
Ditto and Bean-stalk	8,621
Ditto and Eleven Brothers	2,845
Ditto and Jill	1,998
Total	21,407

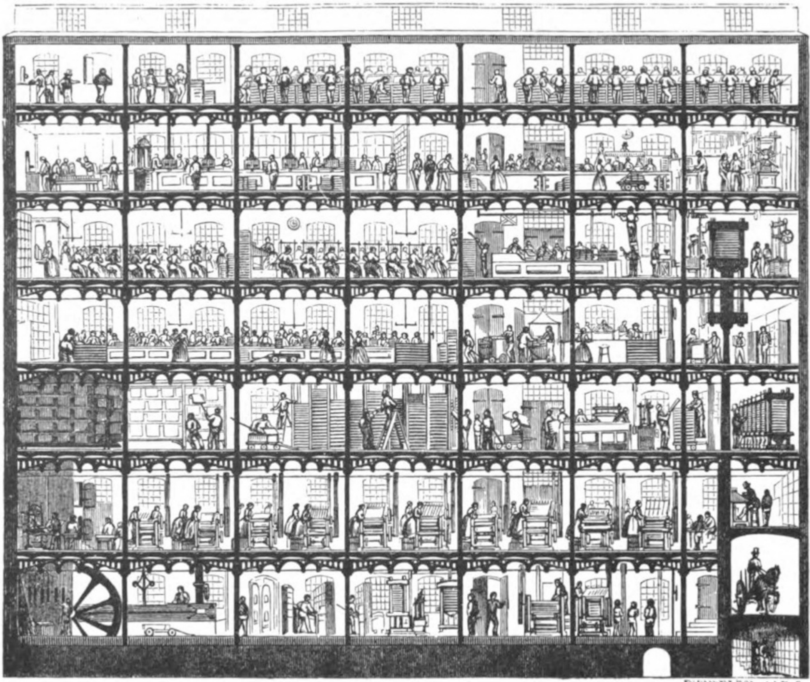
Slug calculates "the proportion of *Robinson Crusoe*s to *Philip Quarll*s" (4.5 to 1), "*Valentine and Orson*s" to "*Goody Two Shoes*es" (3 1/8th to one-half), and "*Seven Champions*" to "*Simple Simon*s" (also 3 1/8th to one-half) (364; my emphasis). The Mudfogians then debate the morality of Jack and Jill while lamenting that some children believe in Sinbad the Sailor. And just in case some readers fail to apprehend the juxtaposition of literature and data, the section concludes with President Woodensconce's call for "stor[ing] the minds of children with nothing but facts and figures" (364-65). Dickens's satire is heavy-handed enough, and yet the incongruity between Slug's dismal information and the imaginative play of children's literature is not as simple as it may appear. The children's books themselves betray a lack of creativity in that Jack is a mass-produced protagonist, while the very titles of some books—*Seven Champions*, *Goody Two Shoes*, *Jack and Eleven Brothers*—suggest how children's literature is already embedded in discourses of data under which numbers gain authority, aesthetics languish, and books proliferate without bringing variety or joy.

Melville, at times, also defines literature over and against the rise of information. During the industrialization of the mass book trade, which included the collection and distribution of publishing data, Jacob Abbott wrote *The Harper Establishment* (1855), a technical book with ample statistics on the Harper Brothers' new printing factory and warehouse (Zboray 3-16; St. Clair; McKitterick). Readers learn how many books are produced, how much time it takes to produce them, how much they are worth, how much they weigh, how many workers are employed, and so forth. Abbott also provides an image of the highly regulated operations, including the organization of female laborers (Fig. 1).

Melville probably had the Harper's operation in mind when he wrote "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (1855), a story in which a narrator describes his visit to a dehumanizing paper factory:

> I found myself standing in a spacious place, intolerably lighted by long rows of windows [...]. At rows of blank-looking counters sat rows of blank-looking girls, with blank, white folders in their blank hands, all blankly folding blank paper. In one corner stood some huge frame of ponderous iron, with a vertical thing like a piston periodically rising and falling upon a heavy wooden block. (1270)

Fig. 1: Jacob Abbott's The Harper Establishment (1855, 42)

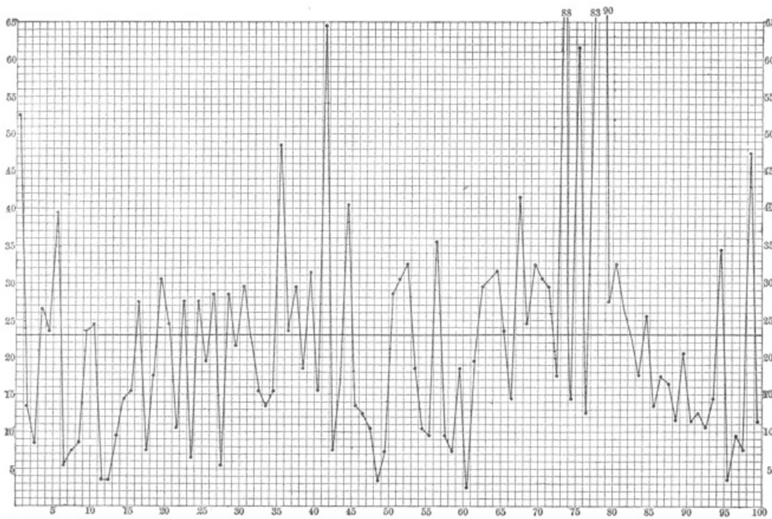


Melville's passage reflects the workflow of Abbott's image, which includes women feeding the presses with paper (on the second floor), women folding paper at counters (on the fourth floor), and the pistons of the finishing press (on the sixth floor). Melville also had business connections with Harper's, for he lost hundreds of unsold novels in 1853 when the old Harper's printing house burned down, and "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" first appeared in *Harper's Magazine*. The narrator of the story is horrified by industrialized print, which stands in brutal contrast to romantic notions of reading and writing. Like Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853), "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" recoils from the reduction of literature to algorithmic, bureaucratic, informational processes.

A more sustained example of efforts to treat literature as information comes from Lucius Adelno Sherman, Professor of English at the University of Nebraska, whose *Analytics of Literature: A Manual for the Objective Study of English Prose and Poetry* (1893) offers a range of proto-stylometric case studies, some with accompanying graphs (Fig. 2). Sherman calculates the average sentence lengths of admired prose stylists (Macaulay 22.45 words per sentence, Emerson 20.58, Spenser 49.82, and so

on [259]). He determines ratios of stressed to unstressed syllables as a measure of poetic force (for instance, the three stanzas of Robert Browning's "Count Gismond" move from 23:38 to 24:41 to 30:44 [17]). He also demonstrates the superiority of *Hamlet* (1609) to Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Alastor* (1816) by comparing ratios of phrases ranked according to five classes of rhetorical power (57). Sherman studied philology at Yale and aspired to scientific objectivity, though he worried in *Analytics* about the "very natural antipathy to treating aesthetics by scientific methods" (xiii).

Fig. 2: From Lucius Sherman's Analytics of Literature. Lengths of the first one hundred sentences of Thomas Macaulay's Critical and Historical Essays (1843). The x-axis is the number of the sentence; the y-axis is the quantity of words (288).



Sherman's concerns turned out to be well-founded with the hardening of the literature/information divide. Willa Cather, who once called literary scholars "information vampires," (111) took a course from Sherman at the University of Nebraska and ridiculed his methods in a poem titled "He Took Analytics" (see, esp., Jewell and Zillig 167-70). Stephen Crane, after speaking with Cather about Sherman's techniques, wrote to her: "Where did you get all that rot? Yarns aren't done by mathematics" (qtd. in Sorrentino 154). Around the same time, Frank Norris expressed similar disdain for the quantitative criticism he encountered at college:

> 'Classification' is the one thing desirable in the eyes of the professors of 'literature' of the University of California. The young sophomore [...] is set to work counting

> the 'metaphors' in a given passage. This is actually true—tabulating them, separating them from the 'similes,' comparing the results. [...] The conclusion of the whole matter is that the literary courses of the University of California do not develop literary instincts. (1110-11)

Long before distant reading, nineteenth-century authors resisted efforts to treat literature as data and in so doing helped establish dualistic views that remain in force today.

Between Literature and Information: The Case of *Treasure Island*

Literature can be defined against information, but there is also a counter-narrative in which nineteenth-century writers found aesthetic enchantment in informationalism, and this narrative can help literary scholars today rethink their relationship with data. *Moby-Dick* (1851) brims over with numbers and facts, including a catalogue of the quantities of gin and beer required for a whaling voyage. Ishmael writes, "Most statistical tables are parchingly dry in the reading; not so in the present case" (1269). *Walden* (1854) contains a map of its titular pond along with an account of how Thoreau measured its depths, and we can read the book as an effort to combine data and narrative while also gauging the differences between them (306-11). Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1854) tells the story of a naïve writer who comes to master the calculative business of authorship. Fern includes financial figures and commentary on the informational economy of journalism as her protagonist flourishes simultaneously in gender-coded domains of literature and data (269). Trollope was both a successful novelist and a high-ranking bureaucrat for the British Postal Service, an institution at the forefront of the Victorian information revolution. Trollope's *Autobiography* (1883) provides a ledger of his earnings as an author while describing his aesthetic process—or perhaps more accurately, protocol—in informational terms:

> [I]t still is my custom [...] to write with my watch before me, and to require from myself 250 words every quarter of an hour. I have found that the 250 words have been forthcoming as regularly as my watch went. [...] This division of time allowed me to produce over ten pages of an ordinary novel volume a day, and if kept up through ten months, would have given as its results three novels of three volumes each in the year. (170)

As a result of the literature/information divide, Trollope's *Autobiography* damaged his artistic reputation but it also shows how some nineteenth-century authors challenged such dualistic thinking.

One genre has been particularly committed to blurring distinctions between the literary and the informational: British and American adventure novels of the long nineteenth century. From deserted island narratives to American frontier fiction to the exploration fantasies of Edgar Allan Poe, H. Rider Haggard, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Edgar Rice Burroughs, adventure novels deploy quantitative discourse for dramatic, affective ends. Scholarship on the genre is often taken to focus on its disavowals of modernity: As much as authors imagine escapes from civilization, they cannot help but carry its ideologies with them (cf. Loxley; Bristow; Weaver-Hightower). In some cases, however, adventure fiction can be acutely self-conscious in exploring relationships between myth and modernity more generally, and narrative and data in particular. At least this is the case with Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, an apparent rejection of informational discourses that actually stages a complex encounter between numbers and aesthetic enchantment. Recalling *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) while he worked on *Treasure Island*, Stevenson wrote of Crusoe's catalog of salvaged items, "the bare enumeration stirs the blood" ("Gossip" 260). He then went on to fill his own adventure novel with stirring enumerations.

Stevenson did so advisedly, for *Treasure Island* is sensitive to the power and problems of data. The absence of quantification matters at the start of the book when the pirate Billy Bones takes up tyrannical residence at the Hawkins family inn. Mr. Hawkins, the father of the young narrator Jim, dies before he settles Bones's account, thus setting the stage for Jim's maturation as numbers drive the bildungsroman plot. After Jim's no-account father passes, Billy Bones in turn dies before paying his bill, and so Mrs. Hawkins tries to take from his sailor's chest the seven guineas he owes. The problem is that she will not settle for "a fraction" more or less than her due, but she can only "make her count" in English money, whereas Bones's coins come from all over the world and are beyond her ability to convert them (32). Jim and his mother must finally flee, though not before Jim grabs Bones's oilskin packet to, in his words, "square the count" (33). In so doing, Jim takes on the role that his father should have fulfilled—the management of accounts—even though Jim's coming-of-age will entail a recognition of the limits of numbers.

Famously, Bones's oilskin packet contains a book that has a map to the treasure of the mythic Captain Flint; and yet if the volume is the gateway to narrative enchantment, it is first and foremost "an account-book" containing geographic coordinates, financial figures, and a table for converting currencies (46). Like the coded message of Poe's *The Gold-Bug* (1843), Bones's ledger reduces the stuff of romance to numbers in seeming anticipation of Weberian disenchantment. But as with Poe's story, quantification in *Treasure Island* opens up imaginative possibilities only to readers of sufficient literary sensibilities. It is the romantic Squire Trelawney, not the scientific Dr. Livesey, who first cracks the code of Bones's book.

The ensuing adventure further indicates how information and literature, data and narrative, work in enchanting conjunction. Flint's treasure, the very object of

fantasy, is repeatedly referred to as "seven hundred thousand pounds" (247). Numbers also work their way into Stevenson's pirate ballads: "[O]ne man [returned] of her crew alive,/ What put to sea with seventy-five" (3) and—most famously—"Fifteen men on a dead man's chest,/ Yo Ho Ho and a bottle of rum" (172). Moreover, when the pirates first attack the loyalists' stockade, the heroic Captain Smollett reckons the proportion of good guys to bad by subtracting casualties and wounded. "Five against three leaves us four to nine," he says, "That's better odds than we had at starting. We were seven to nineteen then" (160). And when Jim earlier discovers the mutinous plot of the pirates, he writes: "[T]here were only seven out of the twenty-six [sailors] on whom we knew we could rely; and out of these seven one was a boy, so that the grown men on our side were six to their nineteen" (94). With Long John Silver calculating interest rates and Jim enumerating time and topography, *Treasure Island* can be read as an escapist novel that actually furthers the disciplinary purposes, not only of global capitalism and imperial bureaucracy, but of the data-driven practices fundamental to both (Parkes; Gubar 70-92).

At the same time, the numbers that appear throughout *Treasure Island* advertise the limits of their explanatory power as Stevenson displays a tension that Poovey and John Guillory set at the center of novelistic aesthetics—the urge both to leverage empirical particulars and to differentiate literature from the data-rich genres of political economy and scientific empiricism.[5] Thus, Smollett's calculations on the stockade battle feel fatuous, for he himself has been wounded. Surely the stalwart Captain should count for more than one feckless, drunken pirate. Jim suggests a similar point when first calculating the odds of the mutiny: How one should count—that is, whether one can count on—a boy is a central question that *Treasure Island* resolves, not with blunt statistics or quantitative assessments, but through narrative unfoldings, even as data remains crucial to the novel's plot. It matters how many pirates there are, how many guns they have, how far it is from the trees to the fort, how many hours have passed. Such data needs to be aesthetically arranged—it requires literary narrative—but Stevenson's designs also require the explanatory power of information.

We see this interdependence in the climax of *Treasure Island* when Jim struggles to describe the wonder of Flint's treasure:

> It was a strange collection, like Billy Bones's hoard for the diversity of coinage, but so much larger and so much more varied that I think I never had more pleasure than in sorting them. English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Georges, and Louises, doubloons and double guineas and moidores and sequins, the pictures of

5 See, here, Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain*; John Guillory, "Memos and Modernity" and "Literary Study and the Modern System of the Disciplines."

> all the kings of Europe for the last hundred years, strange Oriental pieces stamped with what looked like wisps of string or bits of spider's web, round pieces and square pieces, and pieces bored through the middle, as if to wear them round your neck—nearly every variety of money in the world must, I think, have found a place in that collection, and for number, I am sure they were like autumn leaves, so that my back ached with stooping and my fingers with sorting them out. (260-61)

This enchanted passage contains stirring enumerations, but numeracy gives way to an unaccountability in which counts cannot be squared. Flint's treasure is seven hundred thousand pounds, which is one way to understand its significance. But it is also irreducible to a single unit of value as Jim's description grows increasingly lyrical, subjective, metaphorical, affective, and (in a word) literary. Coins conjure romantic histories and faraway lands. They become pieces of jewelry with totemic power. The data-driven job of sorting and calculating is painful but also intensely pleasurable in the manner of the sublime. And as "for number," Jim can only equate the haul to "autumn leaves."

Seven hundred thousand pounds can fire the imagination, but such data cannot in and of itself convey the aesthetic pleasures of pirate booty. Yet neither can the narrative of *Treasure Island* succeed without a sense of the numbers involved. In a sample of 105 adventure novels between 1820 and 1920, the frequency of keywords associated with quantification—Arabic numerals, number words, words linked with mathematical operations—is, according to a modest statistical study, significantly higher than in non-adventure novels from the time (Lee 139-52). That the genre is particularly committed to data is suggested by the last sentence of *Treasure Island*, which is itself an allusion to *Robinson Crusoe*. As Jim straddles the line between boyhood and maturity, myth and modernity, he recalls the cries of Captain Flint's parrot: "Pieces of eight! pieces of eight!" (266) Stevenson leaves us with this synthesis of data and narrative, the enumerations that *Treasure Island* finds so stirring on the borderlands between literature and information.

Conclusion

Stevenson was not the only nineteenth-century author to find aesthetic power in numbers, nor was the nineteenth century alone in merging literary and informational discourses. From the sprawling libraries of Borges and Eco to the swamped bureaucracies of DeLillo and Saramago to the oversaturated semiotic conspiracies of Pynchon to the ironic and threatening numbers of Foster Wallace, Bolaño, and Carmen Maria Machado, postmodernism plays on the borderlands of data and narrative, as does much cyberfiction, detective fiction, and mystery novels. But such play is not exclusive to our digital age or to its popular genres, for the nineteenth

century helped establish the terms for the twenty-first century's ongoing negotiations between the literary and the informational. Knowing the history of such negotiations can help literary critics respond more thoughtfully to the rise of data, technology, STEM fields, and the digital humanities insofar as it helps us resist the urge to ascribe monolithic narrative and symbolic forms to literature. It may even help us better make the case for the humanities in our digital age and the corporate university. No single response or set of responses necessarily follows from the recognition that literature has historically engaged informationalism in a variety of ways—except to suggest that hard divisions between literature and data are not as fundamental as they are sometimes taken to be and so should not constrain continuing efforts to reimagine literary studies in our long information revolution. Just as Stevenson dreams of "pieces of eight," we too can find enchantment in our information age.

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The Data of Life and the Life of Data
Epistemological and Aesthetic Liminality at the Fin de Siècle

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Abstract:
Scientific and literary texts at the fin de siècle are unique cultural documents in that they register at once the culmination of a reductive mechanistic science and its crisis following its expansion into the life sciences. This essay focuses on instances from the late nineteenth century where data takes on a life of its own—instances, that is, where data becomes vital. I suggest that the liminality between a data-driven mechanistic outlook, on the one hand, and tropes of the sublime, on the other, can help us think about the forms of data and narrative in terms of a dialectical interdependence instead of as strictly opposed. By reading the scientific writings of Charles Darwin, Ernst Haeckel, and Claude Bernard alongside literary texts by Émile Zola, H. G. Wells, and Frank Norris, the essay sheds light on how a narrative of the sublime—emphasizing the limits of understanding in the face of the world's irreducible complexity—not only coexists with scientific reductionism, but is actually produced by it, as both William James and Henri Bergson argued when they identified a double movement of rationalization and mystification resulting from the analytical decomposition of what is indivisible. Returning to how this double movement was produced by the encounter of reductive methods with the intractability of the living in the late nineteenth-century life sciences and literature brings recent debates in the humanities, which seek to negotiate the coordinates between "Western aspirations to mastery" and its other, epistemological "humility," into historical relief (Levine, "Enormity" 73). Finally, I turn to Norris's reformulation of literary naturalism as a synthesis of realism and romance in order to show how naturalism inhabits a liminal space that effectively mediates this tension between the mechanical decomposition of life and its mystical recombination.

Does data disenchant? Does breaking the world apart into quantifiable units drive back the unknown? Does computation and control go hand in hand?

Such at least have been the hopes invested in science since the Enlightenment as well as the fears by critics of modernity's distinctive synthesis of knowledge and power. The same logic that aligns science with the disenchantment of the world

has associated art variously with religion, beauty, wonder, pleasure, and the anti-instrumental. This opposition between a positivistic or mechanistic science seeking to dominate nature, on the one hand, and the irreducibility and singularity of works of art, on the other, also remains a formidable structuring force in the humanities today. A recent special issue of *Genre* titled "Narrative against Data" is a case in point. In the introduction to the issue, Jesse Rosenthal notes the disciplinary discomfort that the rise of computational literary studies has produced in a field that long has defined itself against data-driven approaches. But if, as Rosenthal observes, "the role of data in literary criticism presents a threat to business as usual" (4), the aim of the issue is apparently to return to business as usual, as it shores up the opposition between data that disenchants and art that unsettles. Rosenthal writes that the contributors "show how the novel form itself is consistently adept at expressing the discomfort that data can produce: the uncertainty in the face of a central part of modern existence that seems to resist being brought forward into understanding" (2).

This resistance of literature to the incontestable knowledge of data as something given ("datum") is striking in Caroline Levine's contribution to the issue of *Genre*, which examines the Victorian novel's preference for narrative over numerical representations of large-scale phenomena, its "refusal to count" ("Enormity" 61). Levine writes:

> Instead of bemoaning our loss of depth and mastery, I want to suggest that literary critics in the moment of big data might instead take our cue from the sublime and experience a moment of terrifying smallness. That is, the sublimely vertiginous recognition that there is far more to know than we will ever be able to grasp or represent is a better, more chastening and valuable starting point for research than legible and condensed visualizations of data. In response to traditional Western aspirations to mastery, I believe that it is wise, both ethically and epistemologically, to start from a humility in the face of a reality so large that it will always be beyond us. (73)

Victorian novelists refrain from using numbers, Levine argues, because "precise numbers do not produce that unsettling, dissonant crisis of sublime vastness" (71). Yet representations of data are no stranger to "sublime vastness." The most obvious example is what Julian Stallabrass terms "the data sublime," "the impression and spectacle of a chaotically complex and immensely large configuration of data" (82). Tropes of the romantic sublime also infest popular literature on big data, with mandatory references to mountains, oceans, avalanches, and floods of data. And this is only the most recent manifestation of what David Nye (following Leo Marx) calls "the technological sublime," where industrial technologies from the railroad to the atom bomb have been represented in rhetoric borrowed from the natural sublime. That discourse on data routinely invokes the "sublimely vertiginous" can

be shown to be the case both historically, as Maurice Lee does in his account of information overload in the nineteenth century, as well as today, where "[d]ata are everywhere and piling up in dizzying amounts," to quote from the opening of a recent critical book on data (Gitelman and Jackson 1). In short, there is something vertiginous about data that scrambles the coordinates of any debate that takes for granted that data disenchants.

If the aim of producing data is to make the world legible and thereby manageable, why then do representations of data so eagerly embrace romantic tropes? There are doubtless many reasons for this, including the paradoxical mixture of passivity and control built into both the romantic sublime (for Kant the experience of being overpowered is subsequently reclaimed by reason) and scientific reasoning, which submits itself to the natural laws it seeks to discover (as in Francis Bacon's aphorism: "Nature to be commanded must be obeyed" [39]). What I would like to focus on here are instances from the late nineteenth century where data takes on a life of its own—that is, instances where data becomes vital or, to borrow from Don DeLillo's 2003 novel *Cosmopolis*, where "data itself [becomes] soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process" (24). I would like to suggest that a consideration of such liminality between a data-driven mechanistic outlook and aesthetic, on the one hand, and tropes of the sublime, on the other, can help us think about the forms of data and narrative in terms of a dialectical interdependence instead of as strictly opposed. My reading in what follows of the scientific writings of Charles Darwin, Ernst Haeckel, and Claude Bernard alongside literary texts by Émile Zola, H. G. Wells, and Frank Norris is meant to shed light on how a narrative of the sublime emphasizing the limits of understanding in the face of the world's irreducible complexity not only coexists with scientific reductionism, but is actually produced by it.

Both William James and Henri Bergson at the turn of the twentieth century identified a double movement of rationalization and mystification resulting from the analytical decomposition of the world. Because they regarded life as indivisible, the application of reductive methods to vital phenomena meant that life could be endlessly decomposed into smaller and smaller units without ever grasping it. The result for Bergson was "an analysis passing away to infinity" (226) leading to a perception of living matter, on the one hand, as "infinitely complex," and, on the other, as ultimately inscrutable, as its fragmented parts could only be recomposed into a whole by assuming an "incomprehensible influence of an external force that has grouped its elements together" (250). When applied to life, physics turns into metaphysics. Or, as James puts it: "[W]e insist on treating things as really separate when they are given as continuously joined, invoking, when union is required, transcendental principles to overcome the separateness we have assumed" ("World" 1164). Returning to how this double movement was produced by the encounter of reductive methods with the intractability of the living in the late nineteenth-cen-

tury life sciences and literature brings recent debates in the humanities, which seek to negotiate the coordinates between "Western aspirations to mastery" and its other, epistemological "humility," into historical relief (Levine, "Enormity" 73). Finally, I turn to Norris's reformulation of literary naturalism as a synthesis of realism and romance in order to show how naturalism inhabits a liminal space that effectively mediates this tension between the mechanical decomposition of life and its mystical recombination.

Darwin's Romantic Materialism

Scientific and literary texts at the fin de siècle are unique cultural documents in that they register at once the culmination of a reductive mechanistic science and its crisis following its expansion into the life sciences. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Austrian physicist Ludwig Boltzmann called the century that had just ended the "century of the mechanical conception of nature, Darwin's century" (qtd. in Rheinberger 13-14). But if mechanism is the materialist philosophy that regards all matter as reducible to physicochemical elements that can be subjected to experimental manipulation and extrapolation, then Darwin fits uneasily into this rubric. As Gillian Beer writes in her 1983 landmark study *Darwin's Plots*, "[Darwin] could not rely upon a fully experimental method. He was obliged to work in terms of an imaginative history. He moved outside the protecting terms of Baconian induction into a role more like that of a creative artist" (95). In order to understand Darwin's blend of scientific materialism and literary tropes in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Beer refers to his work as "Romantic materialism" (75). "His text is an unusually extensive fiction," she writes, "one which deliberately extends itself towards the boundaries of the literally *unthinkable*, which displaces the absoluteness of man's power of reason as an instrument for measuring the world" (92; emphasis in the original). If Darwin is a mechanist, his is a mechanism that repeatedly slips into the mode of the sublime as it records the limits of knowledge in face of what he calls "the beauty and infinite complexity of the co-adaptations between all organic being" (84). In *Origin of Species*, the attempt to explain life scientifically leads to aesthetic appreciation of nature rather disenchantment. The scale and intricacy of evolution breaks the frame of mechanistic thinking—not because life for Darwin is not material but because the entangled material relations that determine the life process are 'infinitely complex,' a phrase that recurs repeatedly throughout *Origin of Species*.

Darwin's classic text exemplifies a mechanical materialism that has migrated from the 'hard sciences' of physics and chemistry to the life sciences, uprooting creationist and vitalist explanations along the way, only to reintroduce a level of complexity that exceeds the methods and representational forms available to mech-

anism. Like the data sublime, the "blind algorithmic process" (59) of evolution, to use Daniel Dennett's phrase, is at once mechanistic and unfathomable. Darwin's transgression of neat epistemological and methodological boundaries makes *Origin of Species* a threshold text. Not only is evolution a process of incremental gradation that confounds taxonomic attempts at categorizing living beings into separate species. The form of the text itself is liminal in the sense that the data of life—Darwin's meticulous attention to detail, the slight variations whose accumulated effects resist understanding—continually prompts a narrative that relishes in the wonders of nature. Darwin's conception and representation of evolution requires aesthetic as well as methodological liminality that renders the boundaries between science and art porous. It also suggests an interdependence between the data of life and a narrative that both provokes a reflection on the limits of knowledge and makes life subject to aesthetic appreciation. As the ambitious title of *On the Origin of Species* indicates, Darwin's starting point is anything but humble. And yet his narrative repeatedly turns to humility as the proper response to the "infinite complexity" of the life process.

From Vivisection to Vitalism

Beginning his career at the eclipse of the Victorian era, H. G. Wells did not write Victorian novels but "scientific romances" (Stableford). The humbling feeling of "terrifying smallness" that Levine extols ("Enormity" 73) is nevertheless a stable in his work, where characters are repeatedly confronted with the infinitude of time and space and their inability to grasp it. Moreover, Wells displays not only a refusal to count but a veritable hostility to numbers: "When we teach a child to count, we poison its mind almost irrevocably. [...] He is inoculated with the arithmetical virus; he lets a watch and a calendar blind him to the fact that every moment of his life is a miracle and a mystery," Wells writes in his 1891 essay, "The Rediscovery of the Unique." At first glance, the essay appears to ratify the opposition between singularity and disenchanting science. Yet rather than opposed to science, it turns out that singularity is produced by it. "The work of Darwin and Wallace was the clear assertion of the uniqueness of living things; and physicists and chemists are now trying the next step forward in a hesitating way," he writes. "We are on the eve of man's final emancipation from rigid reasonableness, from the last trace of the trim clockwork thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries."

This uniqueness of the living discovered by evolutionary theory, which roots out the mechanical "clockwork thought" of the preceding centuries, is also what thwarts the Frankensteinian efforts of Wells's most memorable antihero, the mad scientist and titular character of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896). Moreau is a "notorious vivisector" (35) who has turned the Pacific island on which the narrator and

protagonist Edward Prendick is shipwrecked into a laboratory for grafting animals into the shape of humans. While Moreau has initial success in creating "humanized animals—triumphs of vivisection" (71) that are capable of speech and religious observance, the humanoid specimens soon revert to their old behavior. In spite of Moreau's best efforts, "somehow the things drift back again," he complains (77). As his scientific quest to take command over life unravels and the island descends into chaos, the ordered universe of Victorian England seems to unravel with it. Facing the violent despair of the "Beast People" torn between their old and their new natures, Prendick has a stark realization: "I must confess I lost faith in the sanity of the world when I saw it suffering the painful disorder of this island. A blind fate, a vast pitiless mechanism, seemed to cut and shape the fabric of existence," where everyone is "torn and crushed, ruthlessly, inevitably, amid the infinite complexity of its incessant wheels" (96). As the novel closes, we find Prendick, who has escaped from the island, withdrawn into solitude, having taken refuge in "experiments in chemistry" and "the study of astronomy," whose "eternal laws of matter" now provide him with the sense of "peace and protection" (131) that he no longer finds among the living.

The novel stages the conflict between two sciences at the end of the century. On the one hand, the life sciences were dominated by the successes of physiology, which used the experimental method taken from chemistry and physics to discover the causal laws of organic matter. On the other hand, the understanding of life in evolutionary terms revealed the limitations of the experimental method's reductionism when confronted with life's "infinite complexity," as Prendick notes with a nod to Darwin (151). The undoing of Moreau's "man-making" (73) project thus reflects the evolutionary challenge to the mechanistic approach to life pioneered by physiology,[1] along with the crisis of humanism based on the idea of scientific progress and control over nature. The solace that Prendick finds in chemistry and astronomy is the solace of order and predictability that celestial mechanics offer but which the study of living matter does not, as Moreau's grotesque failure so vividly demonstrates. It is the encounter of a mechanistic science with the irreducibility of life that drives the novel, where the "science" carefully explained by Moreau gives way to the sublime vision of "a vast pitiless mechanism" (96) beyond the grasp of human understanding and control.

The mechanism out of control in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is not only a metaphor for evolution, although it surely is that—Darwin too uses machine

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1 Niall Shanks and Ray Greek note that "the appearance of evolutionary biology challenged a way of doing biology that had emerged from the rise of science itself during the Renaissance" (130).

metaphors to describe evolution.[2] It also registers a growing tension within the mechanistic science of physiology itself. The expansion of the experimental method to the life sciences initially appeared to validate faith in scientific progress and the control of organic as well as inorganic matter, climaxing with the physiologist Jacques Loeb's "engineering ideal in biology" and the eugenic fantasies it entailed (Pauly). By the turn of the twentieth century, however, it had precipitated an epistemological crisis that saw the revival of various strands of vitalism.

Following the French pioneer of experimental medicine, Claude Bernard, the noted (and notorious for his racial ideology) German zoologist Ernst Haeckel calls vivisection "one of the *indispensable* methods of research into the nature of life" (41; emphasis in the original). Haeckel's monism—the philosophy that subjects all phenomena to the same natural law—involves what he describes as a "cosmic mechanicism" (260) in his popular science book *The Riddle of the Universe* (1895). "The great abstract law of mechanical causality," he writes, "now rules the entire universe, as it does the mind of man" (366). Curiously, however, Haeckel's radical scientific materialism repeatedly shifts into its opposite, a pantheism that he takes from Spinoza and Goethe, and which he refers to as his "natural religion":

> The astonishment with which we gaze upon the starry heavens and the microscopic life in a drop of water, the awe with which we trace the marvellous working of energy in the motion of matter, the reverence with which we grasp the universal dominance of the law of substance throughout the universe—all these are part of our emotional life, falling under the heading of "natural religion." (344)

Reducing all matter to a mechanical "law of substance" leads Haeckel to a romantic vision of a sentient world where even atoms have "souls" (218), as the smallest elements of a mechanical universe are "not without a rudimentary form of sensation and will" (225). Far from disenchantment, a mechanistic approach for Haeckel uncovers a "mighty world-wonder" (380), where "substance becomes more mysterious and enigmatic the deeper we penetrate into the knowledge of its attributes, matter and energy, and the more we study its countless phenomenal forms and their evolution" (380). Science, in short, leads to the "æsthetic enjoyment of nature" (342), as the beautiful illustrations that Haeckel was famous for amply demonstrate. No wonder that William James, in his repeated attacks on monism, referred to it as "the mystical method" ("Pragmatism" 552).[3] More congenially, the physiologist Max

2 Cf. Ruse: "Seeing nature's parts as machines, as mechanisms, as contrivances, is absolutely crucial for Darwin" (63).

3 As James caustically writes: "[T]he authority which absolute monism undoubtably processes, and probably always will possess over some persons, draws its strength far less from intellectual than from mystical grounds. To interpret absolute monism worthily, be a mystic" ("Pragmatism" 552).

Verworn (and not incidentally Haeckel's student) describes the reductive method's paradoxical discovery of complexity as a kind of "mechanical vitalism":

> [T]he view that vital phenomena depend at bottom upon the agency of physical and chemical forces; but that in living organisms these forces are linked together into such a peculiar and thus far unexplored complex that for the present it must be contrasted with all the forces of inorganic nature as a specific vital force, characterising the actions of living organisms only. (44-45)

Such a mechanical vitalism, forced to concede the specificity of the life process, was evident in Bernard's seminal *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* from 1865, which laid the groundwork for experimental work in physiology as well as provided the inspiration for Wells's Moreau.[4] Bernard does not equivocate about the necessity of a reductive approach in medicine for the discipline to be taken seriously as a science: "[W]e must [...] analyze the organism, as we take apart a machine to review and study all its works [...] and must make use of the same experimental method which physicists and chemists employ in analyzing the phenomena of inorganic bodies" (65). Nor does he equivocate about the Baconian goal of experimental medicine: "[W]hen an experimenter succeeds in learning the necessary conditions of a phenomenon, he is, in some sense, its master; he can predict its course and its appearance, he can promote or prevent it at will" (66). This approach to life, which relies fundamentally on the practice of vivisection, was resolutely against the idea held by the so-called Montpellier vitalists that life expresses a 'vital force' that cannot be taken apart or be understood analytically.[5] In turn, it was principally in reaction to a mechanistic understanding of life that vitalism saw a revival at the turn of the twentieth century through the work of Hans Driesch and Bergson, whose philosophy of life as "perpetual becoming" (272) rules out experimental control and planning of the life process.

Yet, as a number of critics have pointed out, foremost among them the philosopher of biology Georges Canguilhem (*Knowledge*, *Vital Rationalist*), Bernard's experimental approach to what he repeatedly calls "living machines" is not as far removed from a vitalist position as it appears. While Bernard insists that life can be understood experimentally in the same way that inorganic matter can be understood, life is nevertheless characterized by unique laws. Bernard's original concept of a 'milieu

4 Bernard defends vivisection in sensationalist terms: "A physiologist is not a man of fashion, he is a man of science, absorbed by the scientific ideas which he pursues: he no longer hears the cry of animals, he no longer sees the blood that flows, he sees only his idea and perceives only organisms concealing problems which he intends to solve" (103). Moreau explains vivisection in almost identical terms: "The thing before you is no longer an animal, a fellow-creature, but a problem" (75). See Vint (87-89) for similarities between Moreau and Bernard.

5 See Wolfe on Bernard's relationship with the vitalists of the Montpellier Medical Faculty.

intérieur' showed that life was a mechanism with its own principles of organization autonomous from the mechanical laws that determine external phenomena. The unique organization of the 'milieu intérieur' is what had misled vitalists to believe in a force exempt from scientific laws. It is also what distinguishes biology from the other natural sciences: "In experimentation on inorganic bodies, we need to take account of only one environment, the external cosmic environment; while in the higher living animals, at least two environments must be considered, the external or extra-organic environment and the internal or intra-organic environment" (Bernard 63). Moreover, the self-organizing 'milieu intérieur' of vital phenomena differs from the 'milieu extérieur' by its greater complexity. Like Darwin, Bernard repeatedly invokes the term "complexity" to describe the life process, referring to its "enormous complexity" (64) and "excessive complexity" (134). And like in Darwin, complexity goes hand in hand with a deference that, even when Bernard is arguing that life is a machine, compels his otherwise coldly analytical prose into romantic appreciation of the wonders of nature: "[A] living organism is nothing but a wonderful machine endowed with the most marvellous properties and set going by means of the most complex and delicate mechanism" (63).

The more that the "living machine" is taken apart, the more wonderful it seems to Bernard. What fundamentally distinguishes life for Bernard is not the particular arrangement of its chemical elements but what he sums up with the dictum that "life is creation" (93). In a passage in which his argument sounds positively vitalist, he writes:

> In every living germ is a creative idea which develops and exhibits itself through organization. As long as a living being persists, it remains under the influence of this same creative vital force, and death comes when it can no longer express itself; [...] physico-chemical means of expression are common to all natural phenomena and remain mingled, pell-mell, like the letters of the alphabet in a box, till a force goes to fetch them, to express the most varied thoughts and mechanisms. (93-94)

Life is likened to a romantic principle of creative self-expression, where even the ruling mechanical metaphors for life used throughout *Experimental Medicine* yield to a linguistic metaphor of creating words out of letters. Rather than starkly opposed to vitalism, Bernard carves out a liminal space between mechanism and vitalism where life is understood as something that can be taken apart like a machine but where there is also something "within life [that] rebels against its mechanization" (Canguilhem, *Knowledge* 73).

The Liminal Aesthetics of Naturalism

If Bernard's experimental medicine served as inspiration for the antihero and plot of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, it had an even greater impact on the literary movement of naturalism spearheaded in France by Émile Zola. In his famous 1868 preface to *Thérèse Raquin*, his first naturalist novel published serially the year before to widespread scandal, Zola coldly describes his macabre story of passion and murder as "a study of a curious physiological case" (22). "I simply applied to two living bodies the analytical method that surgeons apply to corpses," he explains (23). Later, in his naturalist manifesto "The Experimental Novel" (1880), Zola doubles down on his commitment to the experimental method and the analogy he draws between writing and vivisection: "we should operate on the characters, the passions, on the human and social data, in the same way that the chemist and the physicist operate on inanimate beings, and as the physiologist operates on living beings" (18). Yet, Zola's manifesto is not only exceptional for its loyalty to Bernard's method, which lends naturalist fiction the prestige that Bernard himself had taken from the hard sciences. The essay is also exceptional for its simplification of Bernard's ideas. After quoting Bernard extensively on the 'milieu intérieur,' Zola stops short of following Bernard back down the path of vitalism. "I restrain myself for fear of complicating the argument to too great an extent," he disingenuously concedes, before altogether erasing the difference between the living and nonliving that follows from the 'milieu intérieur': "Living beings, in which the vitalists still admitted a mysterious influence, are in their turn brought under and reduced to the general mechanism of matter" (16).

Zola's aesthetic ideology has been widely condemned by critics who either complain that his fiction does not live up to his theory or who take issue with his mechanistic approach. Commenting on the resemblance of naturalism to the "control-technologies of machine culture" (100), Mark Seltzer writes that naturalist fiction "everywhere notes numbers and intervals of time; calibrates time and motion; measures and decomposes values, distances, and actions into intervals, sequences, and statistics" (14). In contrast to the Victorian novel's "refusal to count," naturalist fiction for Seltzer embodies the "culture of numbers, models, and statistics" of its times (5). If any literary movement could ever be described as 'data fiction' (Dorson and Schober), naturalism would surely be it. Yet, as the discursive liminality between mechanism and vitalism at the end of the century also suggests, a commitment to data and mechanism does not necessarily translate into mastery.

Take the work of Frank Norris, the self-described 'Boy Zola' who helped popularize a naturalist aesthetic in the US after it had run its course in France. While Norris deliberately models his fiction after Zola, he also reads the experimental method that Zola introduced to literature through Bernard as a form of romance characterized by melodramatic excess (Norris, "Zola"). Rather than subjected to disenchant-

ing control, a mechanistic universe for Norris holds a fascination that tallies with the intensity of experience so eagerly pursued by his neurasthenic-wary contemporaries. Jackson Lears notes how Americans at the fin de siècle "yearned to reconnect with some pulsating primal vitality." He writes: "Never before had so many people thought that reality was throbbing with vitality, pulsating with excitement, and always just out of reach" (232). But while Lears ascribes this "vitalist impulse" to "a broad revolt against positivism, a rejection of a barren universe governed by inexorable laws, where everything was measurable and nothing mysterious" (237), in Norris's work it is mechanism itself that is mysteriously vital.

The characteristic movement in Norris's style between minute description and detached explanation resonates with Zola's claim that the goal of the naturalist novel is to produce "human data which may prove very useful" ("Experimental" 53). In his Marxist critique of Zola, Georg Lukács argues that such a capitulation to "bourgeois science" (122), where social relations are naturalized as scientific laws instead of represented as the effect of historical processes, produces a fragmentary effect—"a kaleidoscopic chaos" (133)—in which the plot moves forward mechanically, driven by chance instead of by historical necessity. To compensate for this chaos, Lukács argues that naturalist texts resort to symbols for producing the unity that their lack of historical consciousness deprives them of (131). What Lukács does not observe is how symbolic unity in naturalism is commonly produced by a perspectival scaling up. This scaling effect is used in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* when the narrator describes the "vast pitiless mechanism" by which the islanders are "torn and crushed, ruthlessly, inevitably, amid the infinite complexity of its incessant wheels" (Wells 96). The fragmented syntax along with the climatic buildup of the sentence through repetition ("ruthlessly, inevitably") formally mirrors a movement from chaotic fragmentation to unifying totality too extensive to be grasped. And this aggregation of singular phenomena into overwhelming forces represented metaphorically is the signature style of Norris's naturalism, which he regarded as a fusion of realism's attention to detail and romanticism's larger commitment to "the broad truth of the thing" ("Weekly Letter" 74).

Consider a passage from Norris's posthumously published *Vandover and the Brute*, written between 1894 and 1895, around the same time as *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. In one of many unsettling moments in which Vandover faces the prospect of his own degeneration, he receives, like Prendick, "a glimpse far down into the springs and wheels of life" (181):

> It was Life, the murmur of the great, mysterious force that spun the wheels of Nature and that sent it onward like some enormous engine, resistless, relentless; an engine that sped straight forward, driving before it the infinite herd of humanity, [...] grinding them to dust beneath its myriad iron wheels, [...] driving it blindly on

> and on toward some far-distant goal, some vague unknown end, some mysterious, fearful bourne forever hidden in thick darkness. (188)

This is life as the ghost in the machine, the "mysterious force" that animates nature's "enormous engine." While a glimpse "into the springs and wheels of life" evokes the penetrating gaze of a vivisectionist, taking apart the mechanism of life reveals a vital force that resists mechanical understanding.[6] In typically sublime fashion, the process can only be represented negatively (as something "unknown" and "hidden"). But as the similarity of the style and imagery with the revelation in Wells's novel also suggests, by scaling up to "Life" in the abstract, the passage shifts the understanding of life from physiological to evolutionary terms. If the tension between the two methods of approaching life is generative for the plot of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, the interplay between the data of life and its sublime narrativization is also a generative aesthetic principle in Norris's naturalism. The fragmentary effects of the naturalist novel, resulting from its aesthetic investment in data, produce the need for a transcendental principle able to unify the text. In other words, realism begets romanticism. But rather than imposed externally, as Lukács argues, the unifying principle in naturalist texts—typically referred to simply as 'force'—results from the mechanistic approach to life itself, where scaling up leads not only to comprehensive totality but also to sublime complexification that exceeds all comprehension.

Conclusion

What light does the scientific and aesthetic liminality at the fin de siècle shed on the current state of the humanities? The recent special issue on "Narrative against Data" is a pushback against the embrace of data in computational literary studies. But Levine's rejection of "traditional Western aspirations to mastery," a tradition to which the reliance on data clearly belongs, in favor of epistemological humility was also evident in her 2015 book on *Forms*. "[W]e may intuit the overwhelmingly complex webs of social interconnections in glimpses and hints," she writes, "but [...] the overlapping of social networks approaches a magnitude and a complexity so great that their wholeness defies full knowledge" (129-130). Levine's commitment to complexity that defies analysis vividly recalls the coordinates of the debate that ensued when scientists and writers in the second half of the nineteenth century first contended with the complexity and vitality of the life process.

And Levine is not alone in her call for epistemological humility. The New Materialist embrace of what Jane Bennett calls "methodological naiveté" (17) in the face

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6 See also Fleissner's excellent account of physiology and vitalism in *Vandover and the Brute*.

of "vital materiality" (vii) as a way of reclaiming enchantment resonates not only with Spinoza and the vitalists that Bennett reclaims but also with Haeckel's "atoms with souls." The route that arrives at the limits of analytical knowledge may be different—Haeckel takes reductionism to its cosmic limits while Bennett recoils from it—but the result is the same. What such strange resonances suggest to me is that humility is not a radical alternative to mastery but something more like its dialectical counterpart. The concept of liminality at least seems better equipped to illuminate the many dialectical reversals that have taken place since the Enlightenment than moralizing oppositions (for both Levine and Bennett, humility comes with an ethical imperative). The historical interdependence of the data of life and the life of data suggests that mechanism and mysticism are entangled in ways that necessitate a method capable of navigating between the two. Without such a method, we seem to be locked into a false choice between one or the other, and the prospects of scholarship are then, as Canguilhem notes, anything but encouraging:

> We accept far too easily that there exists a fundamental conflict between knowledge and life, such that their reciprocal aversion can lead only to the destruction of life by knowledge or to the derision of knowledge by life. We are then left with no choice except that between a crystalline (i.e., transparent and inert) intellectualism and a foggy (at once active and muddled) mysticism. (*Knowledge* xvii)

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The Potentialities of Data
Self-Tracking as Liminal Narrative

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Abstract:
Self-tracking practices, such as monitoring and quantifying the self through the measurement of biometric data, can be understood as a specific form of life writing, one that relies on and feeds into the logic of self-optimization and data capitalism. This essay argues that the datafication of the self is intricately connected with narrative. In the practice of self-tracking, data and narrative converge in a liminal space in which these two modes of meaning-making engage in conflicting, complementary, and mutually influential relationships. The focus of this essay is to trace the 'potential narrative' of a Heads Up Health self-tracking visualization in order to demonstrate how narrative is instrumental in reinforcing the conceptualization of the quantified self as a measurable and manageable project of self-governance within a larger tendency of corporate storytelling.

In her 2020 memoir *Uncanny Valley*, Anna Wiener reports her experiences of working in various tech companies in Silicon Valley. Having started a new job at an open-source startup, she describes how the company had given her a step-count wristband as an onboarding gift, pondering that "fit workers were happy workers, and probably cheaper to insure. I wore the wristband for a week, tracking my steps and calibrating my caloric intake, until I realized I was on the brink of an eating disorder" (165). She writes about "the ecosystem's fetish for optimization culture and productivity hacking," more specifically about new trends in biohacking that include the monitoring and engineering of sleep cycles, cognitive performance, and productivity. She admits to have had ambivalent feelings about this self-enhancement culture, noting that "there was something a little bit sad about body optimization" and how "quantification was a vector of control" (166), while also confessing that "self-improvement appealed to me, too. […] I wanted to better understand my own desires, what I wanted; to find a purpose." She concludes, though, that "nonmedical monitoring of heart rate variability, sleep latency, glucose levels, ketones—none of this was self-knowledge. It was just metadata" (167).

Apart from informing the reader about current fashions of self-engineering, the passage contextualizes self-tracking practices within a larger narrative of self-actualization. Employing the typical features of self-narration, the memoir provides a retrospective account of the narrator's real-life experiences, emplotted in temporal sequence with causal suppositions and a substantial amount of self-reflection and self-evaluation. The narrator's focus on her search for identity, her desires, and her (lack of) self-understanding firmly places this narrative within the introspective mode of autobiographical writing. Obviously, the narrative mode of this explicitly subjective self-description is strikingly dissimilar to the theme that she describes, the seemingly 'objective' mode of numerical self-tracking. Narratologically speaking, on the level of 'story,' the text portrays how individuals 'count' biometric data, while on the level of 'discourse,' it 'recounts' these data collection practices within a narrative framework. *Uncanny Valley* occupies the liminal space between data and narrative mainly through its descriptive and factual aesthetic, although in its narrative mode it unequivocally distances itself from the data collection practices it depicts—with the subtitle "A Memoir" suggesting that it presents the form of self-knowledge lacking in self-tracking practices.

Data and Narrative: Functions and Potentialities

Uncanny Valley critically assesses a socioeconomic framework of "data capitalism," defined by Sarah West as a set of "business models that support the commoditization of data" and which "places primacy on the power of networks by creating value out of the digital traces produced within them" (21). Apart from introducing the effects of data capitalism on the conception of the self, the memoir also serves to illustrate one central function of narrative in relation to data, namely to provide a counter model to numerical data, to critically reflect on and give a personal face to the abstractions that data produce. Yet, this is not the only function of narrative in the context of self-quantification. While the datafication of the self has acquired a privileged space of self-knowledge in the digital age, narrative is often instrumental in perpetuating the logic of data capitalism, namely when it is implicit in the very self-tracking data itself.

In our neoliberal economy, quantified data has gained importance over qualitative modes of knowledge, and descriptions of the self have increasingly moved away from traditional forms of narrative to statistical renderings of the numerical self. Self-tracking practices have come to dominate conceptualizations of the self as measurable and manageable. Although by no means a new phenomenon, self-tracking has been spurred by recent developments of wearable sensor technologies and radically increased storage capacities. Self-tracking technologies are designed to collect biometric data in order to record, understand, and modify sleep

patterns, caloric intake, physical activity, and much more. Often engaging gamification features, these practices are geared toward enhancing self-knowledge and self-monitoring. As the data-driven practice of self-tracking is shaped by and feeds into a neoliberal culture of self-optimization and self-governance, the narratives of self-quantification can be both corrective *and* complicit of such a culture. They can both reveal the blind spots, biases, and paradoxes of data-driven knowledge *and* substantiate the power of data through its contextual legitimization. Narrative emerges from the 'potentiality of data' because of data's affordances to produce narrative via causal links, to proliferate into networks of signification, and to yield imaginative processes that render abstract experiences concrete.

The Narrative of Self-Tracking Data

In this essay, I aim to examine how the quantified self can be situated within a larger tradition of self-writing or, in other words, in which ways these practices constitute junctions between numerical data and the narrativization of the self. As a mediated externalization of the self, self-tracking substantially relies on the presentation of data, usually in visual form, making statistical data graspable and therefore controllable. While the self becomes a project to be constantly worked on, these data maps also rely on and produce a specific narrative of the self. In this essay, I am particularly interested in what kind of narratives are generated by self-tracking practices, which functions narrative have as paratexts or framing devices, how we can describe the transition from numbers to narrative (or narrative to numbers), and what biopolitical, cultural, and aesthetic assumptions emerge in these conflicting knowledge spaces.

While the quantified self as a cultural practice and a model of subjectivity as well as literary negotiations of the quantified self, as is the case, for example, in *Uncanny Valley*, have already received critical attention (cf. Danter et al.; Reichardt and Schober), self-tracking data itself has not yet been examined with respect to the category of 'narrative liminality.' So, rather than looking at narratives of the quantified self, this essay will proceed from the reverse perspective and scrutinize the intersections of narrative and data in the self-tracking records both as diverging and complementary forms of self-knowledge. I will also examine when and under which circumstances numbers become readable and what 'reading' means when it is more and more performed by machines. In asking which stories the numbers in these charts tell us about ourselves *and* which stories they obscure, a specific liminal space between narrative and data reveals itself that pertains to the very question of who we are and how we conceptualize ourselves in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, the liminal space exposes socioeconomic privileges attached to both the capacity to write the self in data *and* in narrative. The forms of control

the symbolic forms of data and narrative exert over one another *and* over the writing subject raise questions pertaining to the politics and ethics of self-tracking in consideration of the affordances of the liminal space between data and narrative.

The Quantified Self as a Form of Knowledge

The term 'quantified self' describes self-tracking practices, mostly through digital technology. The term has become popular since its promotion in the context of the Quantified Self Movement. One of its cofounders, tech journalist Gary Wolf, introduced the term in an article for the magazine *Wired* in 2009, entitled "Know Thyself: Tracking Every Facet of Life, from Sleep to Mood to Pain, 24/7/365." In a TED talk from 2010, Wolf describes the functions of self-tracking as to "reflect, learn, remember, improve." Self-knowledge, according to the dominant narrative of the self-tracking community, becomes equivalent with self-optimization, self-management, and self-engineering. Personal data is regarded as a utility, a resource, and an asset in a neoliberal culture that promotes health and well-being as markers of productivity. Self-tracking becomes a useful tool to register, collect, and capitalize on biometric data. The quantified self turns into what Deborah Lupton calls "an ethos and apparatus of practices that has gathered momentum in this era of mobile and wearable digital devices and of increasingly sensor-saturated physical environments" (3). Self-tracking, in this view, is not only a technological practice but largely expresses a set of beliefs, values (such as honesty, transparency, improvement/productivity, sharing/public persona), as well as a biopolitical formation of discourses, institutions, and rules that exert power over the individual. The quantified self entails a normative concept of the body that needs to be continuously optimized. Furthermore, the body is turned into a commodity for data monetization as well as a biopolitical tool that can be monitored within the neoliberal efficiency logic: Although often presented as a voluntary form of self-improvement, the quantified self is a core component of data capitalism in that it increasingly becomes a form of self-surveillance and a valuable database—not only for companies that sell and make profit of our data but also for political parties, employers, health insurances, etc.

In order to understand the cultural implications of the quantified self, however, such sociological diagnoses need to be supplemented by discussions of its status as a specific form of knowledge, one that resides between data and narrative. Minna Ruckenstein and Mika Pantzar explore the epistemology of the quantified self. Challenging the widely held assumption that self-tracking produces 'objective' results, they argue that

> [g]iven the move away from the mechanical objectivity that we describe as characteristic of confrontations with personal data, the data valences of discovery, emphasising the possibility of finding unknown patterns in the data, and connection, defining the data as providing space for conversation, are particularly interesting. As previous empirical studies of self-tracking have argued, personal data encounters produce material that self-trackers use for self-discovery and to construct stories for themselves and others. In this shift towards narration and sense-making, the truthiness and accuracy of data are evaluated in light of the relevance of the measured data in a specific context. [...] By using the concept of situated objectivity we acknowledge that the self-trackers' way to approach life is not methodical and systematic (it might not even be logical) but, rather, combines knowledge in a selective manner that follows a different course of knowledge formation. Framed this way, self-tracking practices are less occupied with 'facts of life' than with translating and transforming life based on earlier experiences, cultural understandings and shared expectations. (2-3)

Ruckenstein and Pantzar use the term "situated objectivity" to describe a dynamic, context-dependent, and relational form of knowledge produced by self-tracking. Intriguingly, they talk about the "stories" that are constructed by quantified selves, placing the practice of biometric data collection within the tradition of experiential and explorational self-narration rather than within a positivistic framework that assigns data absolute truth value, as is often witnessed in discourses around the quantified self.

To read the quantified self as a practice of meaning-making places it somewhere in between the empirical tradition of statistical self-recording and the hermeneutic mode of narrative self-exploration. Although some proponents of the QS movement claim that they produce 'objective' access to the self, data is, of course, as Lisa Gitelman and Virginia Jackson have reminded us, never 'raw' but always bound to mediation: "Data need to be imagined as data to exist and function as such, and the imagination of data entails an interpretive base" (3). This is true for self-tracking data just as it is for any other data and, yet, the data sets generated by sensory devices are particularly vulnerable to the myths of objectivity, as they are framed as a counter model to what is perceived as more subjective forms of writing the self. At the same time, the centrality of narrative in the formation of Western subjectivity often gives dominance to unilinear, experiential, and causal conceptions of the self that do not take into account the fragmented, recursive, and embodied nature of being human. To read self-tracking accounts as inhabiting the liminal space between narrative and data therefore allows us to extend definitions of life-writing beyond narrative as well as to rethink the value that numerical knowledge plays in the conceptualization of the self. This involves both the liminal forms that data and narrative afford as well as the values,

expectations, affects, and politics that emerge in the spaces between them. The quantified self emerges as a particularly exemplary liminal space between data and narrative, I argue, because it challenges widely held notions of the non-quantifiability of subjective experience and because it raises pertinent questions about the contingencies and privileges of different modes of self-knowledge.

Morphologically, 'counting' and 'recounting' (or, in German, '*zählen*' and '*erzählen*') are closely related. This proximity between data-based and narrative knowledge suggests that both are codependent or, at least, that transitions and combinations between these two forms of knowledge frequently occur. It may be difficult to make sense of data without contextualization, emplotment, and sequentiality. Likewise, narrative requires the substance of factual data to acquire a level of referentiality to external reality. Assuming a mutually influential relationship between data and narrative, specific questions become central that relate data practices to cultural practices of storytelling, reading, and knowing—questions that will play a key role in the subsequent analysis of self-tracking data: When and under which circumstances does biometric data become readable? Which stories do numbers tell us about ourselves *and* which stories do they obscure? How can we describe the transition from numbers to narrative (or narrative to numbers)? Which functions do narratives have as paratexts or as framing devices? Where do these forms of self-knowledge blend into one another and where do they differ? What cultural, biopolitical, and aesthetic assumptions emerge in these conflicting knowledge spaces?

Heads Up Health: Data Visualization as Potential Narrative

Let me illustrate the relevance of these questions by examining a data visualization chart by David Korsunsky, creator and CEO of Heads Up Health, a visualization app used to generate this table (Ramirez; Fig. 1). The diagram displays a set of biometric data and statistics from weight, heart rate, blood pressure, and steps to meditation time. The underlying assumption is that different levels of human experience can be datafied, or, in other words, translated into data. Digitization of personal experience primarily aims at machine readability, a feature necessary to process, analyze, and manage large quantities of (big) data in a short amount of time. Yet, the data chart's multimodal arrangement, its aesthetic design, and its interactive features also presuppose the existence of a human reader. The visualization itself is already an interpretation of the aggregated data, a readable version of machine-readable code.

The modular arrangement of data makes the data both visually accessible and flexible—the "add new statistic" button suggests an open database format rather than a sense of closure commonly associated with narrative. The spatial arrange-

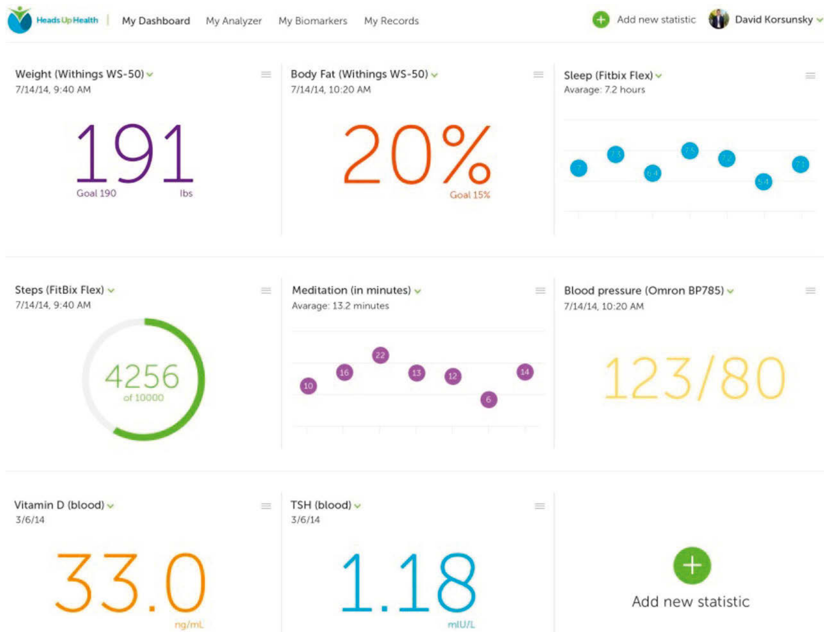

Fig. 1: Data Visualization Korsunsky

ment of the data maps rather than narrates data, emphasizing relations, correlations, and patterns within large sets of data. Patterns help us make data sets understandable, 'readable,' in short: They translate data into a visual mode of knowledge. They allow us to take a distanced view of ourselves through abstracting into the 'universal' language of numbers. As Alfred Crosby has demonstrated, statistical renderings of the self since the Renaissance have contributed to the measurability and manageability of the self. The "quantitative representation of your subject [...] is, however simplified, even in its errors and omissions, precise [...]. It possesses a sort of independence from you," allowing for more rigorous introspection (229). Korsunsky's bodily data thus arguably provide an opportunity for a detached, 'objective' mode of self-observation. Both reducing complexity and structuring data, the visualization functions as a heuristic tool to gain abstract knowledge about oneself. At the same time, the reduction of complexity fragments the self into seemingly disconnected units, supported by the modular aesthetic of the chart and disregarding the recursive interactions between properties such as 'weight,' 'body fat,' 'blood pressure,' 'steps,' and even 'meditation.' To separate these features into distinct categories means to treat bodily functions as isolated from each other rather than integrating them within a holistic narrative of the self.

Most obviously, this data chart is not a narrative. It does not even contain paratextual elements that display narrative features, as some other self-tracking charts do (for example, by explaining and commenting on the data). The chart contains no plot, no sequence of causally related events, and no fictional world. At most, one could discern a sense of character with goals (such as to walk 10,000 steps per day) who undergoes a development (visualized in the progressive data chart). However, if we follow a definition of narrative that does not center on plot but rather on what Marie-Laure Ryan calls "a particular mode of thinking," that, in reference to Jerome Bruner, "relates to the concrete and particular as opposed to the abstract and general" and if it, according to psychological definitions of narrative, engages a "continuous act of self-creation" (345), we could indeed consider self-tracking and their visualizations forms of self-narrativization. Such a broad definition of narrative would allow us to place digital self-quantification in the tradition of life writing. Individual self-construction is definitely at the center of both self-quantification and self-narrativization. However, even the most extensive conception of narrative fails to account for the lack of cohesion and emplotment that this data chart offers.

To read the data *as* narrative would probably be beside the point, anyway. A more productive way to read the data is as what Nick Montfort, for the case of interactive fiction, has called "potential narrative" (14). Although such self-tracking data does not explicitly invite user interaction like the text riddles that Montfort describes, a similar process occurs in the interaction between the 'reader' of this data and the emergent narrative. Data patterns quickly materialize as latent narrative links. This, for example, pertains to the goals of the 'protagonist.' His desire to reach a certain body weight of 190 lbs, for example, is almost achieved, while the body fat percentage of 15% has been missed by 15%. Yet, drawing on the contextual knowledge that 15% body fat is a very ambitious, if not improbable, goal, the character reveals himself as an overly determined, weight-obsessed individual. At 9:40 am in the morning, he has almost walked half of the 'required' 10,000 steps and his blood pressure is at a healthy 123/80. Given his interest to keep in check his Vitamin D and TSH blood levels, it is likely that he is careful to monitor his immune system as well as his thyroid function to ensure a high level of productivity.

His interest in his body extends to his sleep and meditation patterns as well. It potentially reflects the value that recreation and mind enhancement has been put on by the logic of a pervasive efficiency paradigm. That sleep and meditation duration exhibit a correlative pattern is not surprising, as meditation has often been said to be instrumental in improving sleep and vice versa. All of these links can yield narrative unfolding, depending on the sequence, perspective, and context with which they are interlinked. They can, for example, narrate a typical day in the life of a self-tracker, they can tell the story of a medical recovery, or they can provide the backdrop to a successful coming-of-age narrative. Many possible narrative trajectories can be imagined from this data set, reuniting the numbers

within a more holistic idea of a self. Narrativizing self-tracking data sheds light on narrative potentiality by making visible the blanks that data necessarily leave.

While self-tracking is often understood as providing 'objective' data about the self, such imagined narratives bring into sharp focus that numbers are by no means 'universal' and of course do *not* speak for themselves. Rather, these charts are based on arbitrary assumptions (that 10,000 steps per day are a marker for a healthy lifestyle, for example) and subjective selection processes (for instance, what time span of sleep measurement is considered representative and significant?). Yet, the narratives that these data seem to suggest are neither static nor uniform. In keeping with the modular logic of databases, self-tracking data provide dynamic, modular, and evolving forms of self-knowledge, as they are continuously updated by the data gathered in the process of monitoring, analyzing, and assessing the self as a project. The quantified self as an evolving self corresponds with early conceptions of the digital self as "fluid," an observation prominently made by Sherry Turkle in the early days of online culture, one that emphasizes the potentials of continuous (re)constructions of postmodern identities as "multiple yet coherent" (259). The empowering politics of self-renewal tie in with Paul Eakin's perspective on autobiography as writing the self "less as an entity and more as a kind of awareness in process" (x). James Dyer speaks of "the meritocratic success narratives of self-tracking, whereby all can change and nothing is fixed, and autonomy is exercised as a will towards change—the individual has the ability to become something other: something better" (358). Drawing on process philosophy and posthumanism, Dyer reads the quantified self as "a critical unsettling and disruption of the human (as substance) to exaggerate its historical contingency, incompleteness, and uneasy composition (as process)" (366). Is the self-tracking data, seen in a posthumanist sense, a more accurate representation of the postmodernist subject as deeply fragmented? Does the data chart, in its narrative potentiality, restrain from full narrativization of its subject in order to avoid essentializing the self and thus accounting for the fact that the subject is more atomistic than Western self-narratives have continuously suggested?

To read self-tracking data as a liberating move in this sense appears tempting, yet problematic, as it neglects the totalizing narrative that is implicit in the data logic itself. The data implicitly suggest an internalized narrative of the neoliberal self according to which the body-as-project is externalized (via data) to increase control of the mind over the body. The mechanistic concept of the body reflects a mind-body dualism that is, in fact, far removed from a posthumanist critique of such dualistic conceptions. Rather than being able to modify the self in ever-changing narrative actualizations of the self, the quantified self seems to rather conform with the internalized hyperindividualization of a data capitalist consumer society. As Lupton notes, self-tracking complies with an "increasing focus in neoliberal politics on emphasizing the personal behavior and self-responsibility of citizens"

(19). The ‘corporization’ of the self through a seemingly universal comparability of numbers, paired with indicators of normative productivity (including set goals and social media components that encourage competition), as well as bodily categories that emphasize efficiency as the core marker of individualism, appear to be the cornerstones of the predominant success story that these data tell us. The mission statement of Heads Up Health—an implicit narrative behind these data—is revealing in its normative conception of the body:

> Heads Up Health was founded by a team of health-conscious technology experts on the simple concept that being healthy doesn’t have to be complicated. We saw a world of disjointed medical records, underutilized health tracking technologies and abundant, but poorly managed, health data. We felt that intelligent software could provide the perfect solution.
>
> Based on our belief that well-organized data holds the key to optimal health, we have created a central space where you can manage and explore your own. We are constantly looking for feedback from our customers. We would love to talk more about your health goals and discuss how Heads Up can be a part of your solution. Please feel free to contact us at any time. (“Our Story”)

Centering words like “perfect solution” and “optimal health” effectively installs a normative problem-solving approach to what is considered a dysfunctional body by default, one that regards the body first and foremost as a vessel to ensure functional productivity. Health is framed primarily as an engineering challenge and a goal that can be translated into numbers—numbers that suggest easy applicability in individual self-care. That the website entitles the company’s mission statement as “Our Story” integrates it with a growing tendency of ‘corporate storytelling,’ the aim of which is primarily to increase brand identity and emotional customer engagement through affirmative company PR. The narrative that accompanies the data, in this case, is a simple and straightforward success narrative of a neoliberal economy that links individual self-monitoring, control, and financial success (for the company) with each other in direct causal relation. By focusing so selectively on individual success, the narrative ignores the structural circumstances that enable or disable such individual success as well as the privilege of being able to engage in such self-tracking practices, a privilege that can be directly linked to economic status, gender, health, age, education etc. A persistent blind spot of self-improvement narratives such as these is that being a young, white, tech-savvy male not only increases your chances of reaching numerical goals dictated by the normative framework of these data systems but also that it increases your chances of controlling the narrative you create from individual data. That the agency to turn data into narrative is proportionally related to the level of social power also shows on a different scale: At the end of the day, it might not be individuals at all who hold

the privilege of narrativizing data but the corporations that (often unnoticed by the customer) collect and monetize large amounts of personal data.

Data's Return to Narrative

Not only the data chart presented by Heads Up Health but also the protagonist of *Uncanny Valley* finally returns to narrative. Having worked with, in, and around data for several years, she decides to give up her job writing customer support emails in the tech industry and return to writing narrative nonfiction. Disillusioned by tech's alliances with neoliberal capitalism, the narrator states that one of the main reasons for her resignation is that she "was always looking for the emotional narrative, the psychological explanation, the personal history" (262), yet decidedly *not* the simplistic tales of corporate storytelling (261). Narrative, in *Uncanny Valley*, is the happy ending, the humanizing closure to the dehumanizing logic of data. The memoir's conclusion seems to correspond with what Steven Shaviro notes, namely "what's missing [in the network society] is what is more than information: the qualitative dimension of experience or the continuum of analog space in between all those ones and zeroes" (249). Both Shaviro and Wiener propose a transcendental concept of narrative, according to which narrative can complete and reunify the subject in the atomistic world of data.

This is one way of conceptualizing narrative liminality, certainly, to privilege and recenter narrative in a teleological manner: Eventually, data will prove to be insufficient and will need to be 'completed' by narrative. Will not every dataset ultimately resolve in narrative? In keeping with this volume's project to decenter narrative, this would be a naïve and problematic conclusion. Another, perhaps more productive way to regard narrative liminality is to take seriously the potential of the liminal space itself as an unstable yet potentially dynamic and rewarding space in between. If we consider Korsunsky's data chart as a database (which, in the strictest sense, it is not but for the purpose of this argument can be treated as such), it may be helpful to follow a definition by N. Katherine Hayles, who argues in rebuking Lev Manovich's thesis that narratives were "natural enemies" (225) of new media:

> Rather than natural enemies, narrative and database are more appropriately seen as natural symbionts. [...] Because database can construct relational juxtapositions but is helpless to interpret or explain them, it needs narrative to make its results meaningful. Narrative, for its part, needs database in the computationally intensive culture of the new millennium to enhance its cultural authority and test the generality of its insights. (1603)

The liminal space between data and narrative, to employ Hayles's conception of a symbiotic relationship, *is* a space of potentiality that permits us to think beyond

the boundaries of narrative closure and causality as well as data positivism and precision. To consider the data records of self-tracking practices as inhabiting this liminal space may mean to embrace the openness and indeterminacy of databases, allowing for numerable and potentially endless narratives to emerge from numerical charts, while simultaneously acknowledging the liberating politics of nonnarrativized self-knowledge. This does not mean to reduce the definition of narrative to the customizable, simplistic notion of narrative that is increasingly circulating in corporate contexts. Neither does it mean to reduce data to empty, 'lifeless' signifiers, but rather to acknowledge the plurality of potentialities that emerge from the complex interactions between these two modes of self-knowledge.

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Unnecessary Complications?

The Interplay of Symbolic Forms in John Carroll Power's "Diagram and Statistical Record of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence"

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Abstract:
This paper investigates the mixing of different symbolic forms in John Carroll Power's 1858 "Diagram and Statistical Record of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence." It argues that the diagram's odd design constitutes an attempt to bring together the symbolic forms of narrative, data, and play to thus highlight and foreground their liminal boundaries and to invite readers to practice exchanging one form for another. In this, the diagram speaks of two important facets of nineteenth-century US culture: a fascination with different symbolic forms and their relationship on the one hand and a desire to use these different forms and their liminality for more democratic forms of representation on the other.

This paper looks at one individual historic artifact, the 1858 "Diagram and Statistical Record of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence," a broadsheet that uses a line-graph visualization to show a subset of biographical data for the fifty-six delegates who signed the Declaration (Fig. 1). Very little is known about the document and its intended uses. While the following pages thus enter into a dialog with this object that is ultimately best described as hermeneutic, the overall thrust of this reading is one of historicization and theorization. After all, I am primarily interested in how this large, lithographed diagram intertwines different symbolic forms, such as data, narrative, and play. As I will show, this intertwining situates the "Diagram" within US culture's fascination with the diversity of symbolic forms around the middle of the nineteenth century—a time when print culture consolidated and a time when the young republic was vigorously experimenting with the affordances and the potential cultural functions of different symbolic forms as they could be realized in the medium of print. Focusing on this historical dimension allows me to explore the relationship between symbolic form, affordance, and cultural work. As I will argue, the diagram's cultural work of animating the past

and democratizing its representation relies on how it mobilizes this plurality of forms and how it activates these forms' interfaces with one another, inviting its readers to playfully turn data into narrative.

The Diagram

Approximately 120 by 90 cm in size, the lithograph consists of seven individual sections that all serve distinct functions.[1] The top region features a reproduction of the text of the Declaration of Independence, interrupted only by the embroidered title of the chart. The bottom region contains an explanation of how to use the chart along with a sample reading, a section with six footnotes, a section with additional information on the ratification of the Declaration, along with an image of Independence Hall, a section with general historical information on the Declaration, and a paratextual section with "General Remarks" that detail some of the considerations that went into producing the chart.

By far the largest section, however, is the eye-catching line graph in the middle region. It contains the names of the signers of the Declaration, their places and dates of birth, their education, their profession, the states they came to represent, whether they were married (and how often), how many children they had, whether they were survived by their wife, and how many living children they left behind. These columns are reordered three times: The left column has the names ordered in the sequence "as they are usually published," this sequence then gets shuffled to represent the individual delegates' age at the signing of the Declaration, it gets shuffled again to represent the order in which they died, and again to give their age at the date of death. These reshufflings lead to the three areas of crisscrossing lines.

Very little is known about the purpose of the diagram. Similar broadsheets were produced to be used in schools and other educational contexts, and historical education is certainly one possible use of this document as well. After all, its author, John Carroll Power, was a historian who wrote books such as the *History of the Early Settlers of Sangamon County, Illinois* (1876), co-written with Sarah A. Power, or the *History of an Attempt to Steal the Body of Abraham Lincoln* (1890). Indeed, as Thomas Craughwell explains, Power's *Early Settlers* "is still regarded by historians as a meticulously researched guide to the region's founding families" (101). Today, Power is also known for being the first custodian of Lincoln's tomb and for playing

1 Obviously, much of the evocative appeal and aesthetic power of the diagram stems from its visuality. It is an object that should ideally be experienced in full size and detail. In lieu of that, a high resolution, full-color reproduction is available online at: www.data-imaginary.de/signers.

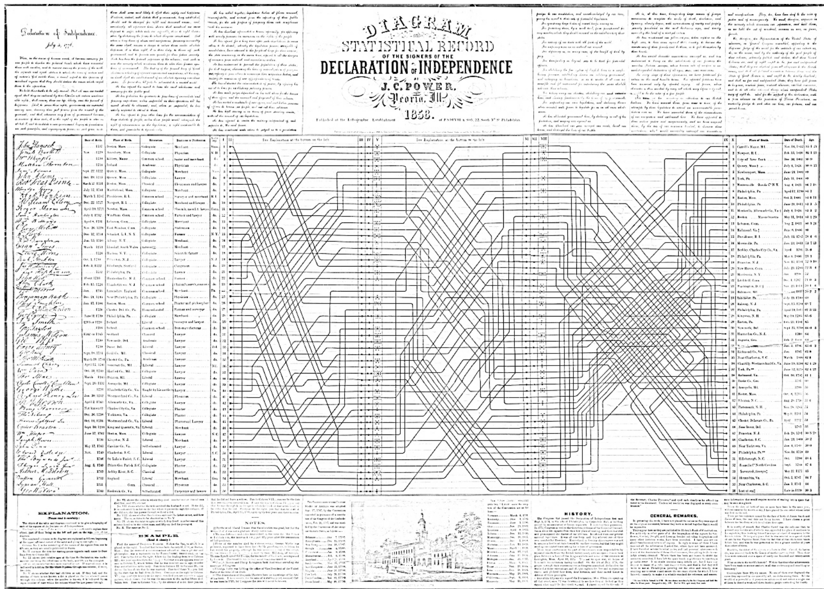

Fig. 1: The “Diagram and Statistical Record”

an instrumental role in preventing the theft of Lincoln’s body in 1876 (cf. 102; “John Carroll Power”). His interest in preserving the past as a historian and as a custodian of the tomb suggests that the diagram, too, was meant to serve a historical interest of preserving the past for future readers. Indeed, the bottom-right “General Remarks” explain that the goal in making the chart was to produce, over time and in several iterations, “a reliable standard for reference.” It details the process of composition as a mix of reading secondary material and of historical fieldwork, interviews with descendants of the signers, and it marvels at the “era in the world’s history” it is thus meant to capture. Clearly, history was on Power’s mind.

As a reference work, however, the diagram is deeply flawed in more ways than one: Most of the information it contains is meaningless regarding the historical moment it was meant to capture. Knowing, e.g., how many children Benjamin Franklin had, or how old he was, does not get anybody any closer to understanding his role in the signing of the Declaration. Why would this be of any interest? If, as the “General Remarks” section explains, the goal of the document is to “concentrate information that would require months of reading into a space that may be seen at a glance,” it seems not only that Power had chosen to relay the most trivial bits of information from these “months of reading” but that the organization in the chart of crisscrossing lines is also the least efficient way to “concentrate” this in-

formation: Had he sorted all columns in the same order in a simple table, he could have left out the lines and saved half of the space. The chart, while acknowledging an information overload of sorts, fails at organizing information in a particularly convincing and effective way.

More problematically, the chart is not only an incredibly inefficient way of storing information but a flawed one of relaying it: It is difficult to read and, with the lines' multiple crossings, any reading is prone to contain errors. The line graph also fails as a form of data visualization. While the middle of the nineteenth century generally saw the development of novel, successful formulas for visualizing data many of which are still in use today, Power's is certainly not among them.[2] If the goal of a visualization is to "reveal the data" (Tufte 13) or to allow for "[p]erceptual [i]nference," "[e]nhanced [r]ecognition of [p]atterns," or a shift from cognitive to perceptual work (Card et al. 16), the diagram succeeds at neither of these. If anything, it increases the cognitive load of reading, it obfuscates the data at stake, and it complicates the reading without any noticeable gain.

In light of these shortcomings, it seems almost unsurprising that the copy held by the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, MA, is the only known to still exist, and there seem to be no other, similar lithographs using such a line graph visualization for biographical information.[3] And yet, precisely because it is so oddly inefficient, Power's diagram radiates a strange fascination. It remains an object of 'archival wonder'—one of a kind and, despite its own overly prolific paratextual self-description, deeply enigmatic. The diagram must be more than simply a failure.

Context

Produced in 1858, the diagram must be seen within the context of the evolution of print culture in the US and within American culture's efforts at the time to figure out how the technology of print would contribute to the social and political fabric of the young republic. After all, as a growing and vibrant body of interdisciplinary scholarship over the last decades keeps showing, print culture played a vital role for the young republic not only because it provided the material basis, the infrastructure, for the circulation of those narratives that helped form an 'imagined

2 This paper is part of a larger project on the nineteenth-century's 'data imaginary' and on the role that increasingly widespread appeals to data played in shaping notions of literariness and literature. For more on the project, cf. the webpage www.data-imaginary.de.

3 I encountered the chart in the course of an archival research stay at the AAS in September 2015. The stay was made possible by the German Association for American Studies's Christoph-Daniel-Ebeling Fellowship.

community.' Rather, it was print culture's material practices—the formal and informal networks of information flows it inaugurated, the modes of production and of circulation it instituted, and the patterns of thinking it practiced—that helped bring into existence democratic logics of representation, a veritable 'grammar' of republicanism in the antebellum years. As Trish Loughran's felicitous phrasing has it, it was an evolving print culture in those decades that introduced "the expanding republic [...] to itself for the very first time" (361), and this introduction was a matter of finding forms at least as much as of circulating content.

In light of this, recent work on the emergence of print culture in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century has not only focused on the print public sphere's highly dynamic, discontinuous makeup, a plurality of smaller, overlapping, and competing publics rather than one coherent national public sphere. It has also focused on the role that the printers' "little jobs"—broadsheets, blank forms, and other 'non-book' printing—played for this (Stallybrass; cf. Brown). It is here, in the margins of the more canonical book and newspaper printing, that a wide range of formal experimentation took place. Seen thus, the "Diagram" is an example exactly of that: It is expressive of the will to formal experimentation and innovation that marked the emergence of print culture in those decades.

Two areas of such experimentation deserve to be discussed more fully here because they relate to the diagram in particularly direct a fashion. One has to do with American culture's profound fascination with 'facts' and their 'statistical' aggregation at the time. As David Shi explains, US culture in the middle of the nineteenth century was marked by a "rapturous devotion to 'literal facts'" and by a strong preoccupation "with the pursuit of verifiable knowledge and tangible concerns" (3). The resulting proto-realism was mostly a "rhetorical" (rather than a philosophical) movement, deriving much of its energy and unity from embracing democratic pluralism and from opposing a "genteel elite" (6). Indeed, this newfound, "growing predilection and respect for 'statisticks' and 'authentic facts'" was inextricably tied to the young republic's democratic aspirations (Cohen 35). Patricia Cline Cohen thus observes:

> statistical thought offered a way to mediate between political ideas based on a homogeneous social order and economic realities that were fast undermining homogeneity. Inventories of descriptive facts about society were touted as providing an authentic, objective basis for ascertaining the common good. (55)[4]

4 Cf. also Daniel Boorstin's related observation: "Numbers," he writes, "seemed somehow to offer self-evident answers to complicated social questions," and a "by-product of democracy" thus was "an unprecedented popular diffusion of statistics" and "a new kind of number consciousness" (188).

The result was a logic that still resonates today: In a democracy, citizens need to be able to agree on the facts and to disagree only regarding their interpretation (40-42).

Notably, facts in this view were understood at least as much as a formal as an ontological category. As Ellen Gruber Garvey explains, it was in the decades between the end of the eighteenth and the middle of the nineteenth century that the meaning of "information" fundamentally changed, taking on its "abstract sense" (111). Summarizing an argument by Geoffrey Nunberg, she asserts that this shift transformed information from being seen as "the productive result of the *process* of being informed to a *substance*" of its own (91; emphasis in the original). In consequence, facts referred then not simply to statements that were empirically true but to information that had been "morselized and extracted in isolated bits." It is this understanding of facticity as a formal quality, 'data-esqueness,' that turned facts into an object of deep cultural fascination.

A second area in which nineteenth-century print culture engaged in a wide range of formal experiments has to do with the relationship between history, information overload, and linearity. Countless charts, lithographs, and broadsheets show nineteenth-century authors and printers attempting to find novel ways of visualizing history, and many of these attempts struggle with linearity as a core problem they face: In many of these visualizations, the distant past, low in information density and already relayed in the inherently linear, narrative form of myth, can easily and orderly be portrayed in simple, linear sequences. Of more recent events, however, simply too much is known to be contained in linear form. Emma Willard's famous *Temple of Time* is a particularly prominent example of this, with the floor of the 'temple' becoming ever more complex the closer it moves to the present, but the effect can be observed in other documents, such as Sebastian C. Adams's *A Chronological Chart of Ancient, Modern and Biblical History* or Elizabeth Palmer Peabody's *Chronological History of the United States* as well. Faced with an overabundance of information, these visualizations of historical data choose a two-dimensional graphic mapping rather than the one-dimensional linear sequence to capture the (recent) past. Their unusual, often unwieldy and experimental form typically requires these projects to come with an additional booklet explaining how they are supposed to be read.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, these early information workers' interrelated attempts to satisfy the time's hunger for 'facts' and 'data' and their grappling with linearity indeed encouraged experimentation. In a different context, Ian Hacking speaks of a "silly season," a "whole series of conceptual confusions, false starts, and crazy responses" (455), but his characterization of early work on statistics and determinism applies equally well here. The time's fascination with facts and its frustration with linearity led to a number of beautiful failures of sorts. Indeed, it is such a failure of sorts that today's readers recognize in the "Diagram":

The chart seems troubled because of the open incongruity between its subject matter, the signing of the Declaration, and its 'generic' desire to speak in the form of the "Diagram" and the "Statistical Record." After all, there is very little statistical information here, and hardly any use for statistical inquiry. And yet the chart seems bent on using this form. If the chart seems to fail, it is because of this seeming mismatch between content and form.

Symbolic Forms

However, the chart seems much more successful once it is seen not as an attempt to implement a single, static form but as an experiment trying to facilitate a dialog between different forms. It brings together, after all, at least three different symbolic forms—data, narrative, and play—and it accentuates the dynamic interaction between the three. In this sense, the "Diagram" gains much of its value, meaning, and semiotic productivity from the liminal boundaries these symbolic forms have with another.

The large, tabular center section of the diagram quite obviously foregrounds the symbolic form of data, as I conceptualize it. It contains discrete pieces of information, much of it quantitative and all of it narratively depleted: the chart gives individual states that are emphatically not connected by causality, as they would be in a narrative sequence, but that are tied together by lines that indicate mere correlation. In their formal uniformity the individual items are thus indeed "morselized and extracted in isolated bits." In fact, all of the information contained in the diagram could easily and much more efficiently be represented as a simple table of information—the prototypical form for representing data at the time. Seen thus, the ordered columns (the delegates' age at the signing of the Declaration, the order in which they died, their age at the date of death) constitute indexes: They facilitate effective arbitrary access along any of these axes, making it easy to, for example, identify the youngest signer. But this improved access comes at the cost of reduced information density and a reduced storage efficiency—a problem that continues to haunt contemporary database design where indexes typically entail a trade-off between speed of access and storage cost.

At the same time, the entire chart constitutes a data-esque information container simply by how it stores individual informational items that never get pulled together into a syntagmatic form. The individual sections bring together, in discontinuous ways, very different materials that are simply stored side by side: the facsimile reproductions of the signatures and of the picture of Liberty Hall, the quantitative information, the more anecdotal items, and the various forms of instruction. All of these are merely collected and presented as an ordered resource for the readers to mine by themselves. The chart is the result of Power's gather-

ing of historical information and of his wrestling with the problem of information overload, his having parsed "information that would require months of reading." It does not present an effective condensation of this work, but it invites readers to redo the work, to explore the data on their own.

At the same time, of course, the chart brims with narrativity—beginning already with the individual, minimalist data entries. The entry, under "education," that George Wythe (who came to be Thomas Jefferson's legal mentor) was "taught by his mother," the sheer number of occupations listed for Abraham Clark and Roger Sherman, or the laconic death-place entry "Lost at sea" for Thomas Lynch Jr. are all examples of how a minimalist data point can "evoke a story to the mind of the audience," as Marie Laure-Ryan defines narrativity (11).[5] Narrativity, thus understood as a potential to trigger narrative scripts, can be found even in individual, purely numerical entries—Carter Braxton's nineteen dots indicating nineteen children, or William Whipple's single one—or in such entries' relationship to one another: Columns VII and VIII indicate that only eight of Braxton's nineteen children survived their father, or that Whipple lived to lose his wife and his only child. This effect turns on and dramatizes our tendency to think of life in narrative terms, a staple observation in the context of life writing and an observation at the heart of the oft-cited contention that "man [sic] is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal" (MacIntyre 216; cf. Fisher 7). As it turns out, the seemingly 'private' data collected on the chart, as much as it is at odds with the historical, 'political' topic of the Declaration, is deeply suggestive and particularly potent at triggering narrative scripts.

The diagram explicitly encourages this kind of reading, not least in its instructional sample reading of the life of Benjamin Franklin:

> Follow the line on which [his name] is placed, to the right. You find that he was born January 17, 1706, at Boston, Mass.; that he received a commonplace education; [...] Pass to the dot on the right; follow the line leading from it [...]; the dot on the line shows that he was married. Pass to Column V.; you find by the stars that he had three children. Continue on.

In effect, the chart, the main section of which denarrativizes and datafies the life stories of the signers, here instructs its readers to turn the resulting data back into narrative, to renarrativize the data it presents. The diagram's prolific instructions are more than a simple user's manual. By explaining how to use the chart, they instruct readers more generally on the practice of turning data into narrative, and they are deeply invested in this operation of conversion between symbolic forms: The extensive explanations are one indication of this. The repeated exhortation to

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5 The same holds for many of the entries in the Notes section, short 'narratoids' amending the denarrativized data in the chart, mostly on the circumstances of a signer's death.

"Please read it carefully" or to "Read it closely," ambiguously referring to either the instructions or the chart itself, are another.

Notably, this conversion of data into narrative here is facilitated by a third symbolic form: play. Already visually the lines suggest a game of sorts, not least by alluding to a board game or a maze.[6] They are drawn so closely to one another and the crossing of lines often is so intense and puzzling that readers have to trace the connection from one column to the next using their finger—and even then at least some of the biographical paths require a steady hand not to get lost. In this sense, the connecting lines invite rule-bound readerly activity, and they facilitate interactions marked by "interactivity, agency, nonlinearity, and iteration," all hallmarks of play (Schubert 116). In fact, much of the gamelike quality is due to one particular aspect in the organization of the data: The lines only crisscross as much because column III and IX are ordered by relative age and column VI by order of death. Ordering column VI from last to first would have improved readability but would have made the game less challenging.

In a relatively early attempt to bring together insights from video games and literary studies, Espen Aarseth characterizes 'ludic' texts, such as "hypertexts, adventure games, or multi-user dungeons" (2), as marked by a "nontrivial effort" that is "required to allow the reader to traverse" them. Adopting his view, the chart indeed qualifies as an "ergodic" text in Aarseth's sense: it certainly requires a "nontrivial effort" to be read, and it "includes the rules for its own use," making it "a work that has certain requirements built in that automatically [distinguish] between successful and unsuccessful users" (179). While Aarseth is primarily interested in interactivity, and in defining interactive texts as a class of texts that is categorically distinct from traditional ones, his notion of the "ergodic," in terms of both the dynamics he describes and the examples he uses, closely tracks what I call 'ludic' here: the potential of a text to not simply be read but played.

Affordances

The diagram's characteristic visual property, the crisscrossing lines in its main section, simultaneously constitute a particularly intuitive example of an affordance.[7]

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6 The golden age of board games was around the turn of the century, but they became *en vogue* earlier: The American Antiquarian Society catalog alone holds over 30 board games published between ca. 1830 and 1900.

7 My understanding of 'affordance' here draws on Don Norman's definition as "the relationship between a physical object and a person (or for that matter, any interacting agent [...]). An affordance is a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used" (11). Caroline Levine has shown how the concept can be adopted to talk about form in (literary) texts (6). With its focus

So strongly do these lines, the flat surface, the connected dots, the tangled intersections, signal traceability, so powerfully do they invite a playful, exploratory, curious engagement, readers (players?) of the chart seemingly feel irresistibly compelled to try their luck following a line from one column to the other to see where it leads.[8] The line graph, and the confusing complexity of the lines' intersections—this presumably unnecessary complication—is crucial to this effect. As much as the diagram's 'data visualization' may fail at effectively relaying information and as much as its quality is diminished by its obfuscations, 'play' and 'exploration' turn out to be its strong suit, and 'affordance' thus is a core concept for understanding the value of the diagram's unnecessary complications.

Playful tracing, following a line without getting lost, is merely the most obvious one of these affordances. Closely related is interactive exploration, an activity that is afforded by both symbolic forms, play and data: Picking a name, or a date of death, or a particularly remarkable number of children, a reader may start anywhere on the chart to then follow the line and see where it leads. This moment of exploration is heightened by how the meaning of the individual columns is only given in the "Explanation" section in the bottom left corner: Exploring an individual biography, a reader has to physically keep her finger on the line while she looks up a given column's meaning. Tangledness, along with the dispersion of data and metadata, here affords curiosity. If we think of the "Diagram" as a form of gametext, the reader's reward is satiating her curiosity by finding out where the line leads and what its individual stations mean, and the lines' tangledness is crucial to making this challenging.

Exploration is directly related to the kind of 'distant reading' that the symbolic form of data affords particularly well. Precisely because the chart does not offer the overall coherence of narrative and because data is so uniform, the diagram invites cursory reading: Knowing that the (same kind of) information is there for all the signers, readers will often stop after tracing one or two biographies. Since one can simply repeat the process for others, there is no reason to actually do so. Instead, seeing the abstract, visualized data from a distance then draws the eye to outliers (e.g., the one with the many children) and to patterns (e.g., the correlation between age and death). The diagram's foregrounding of the symbolic form of data thus encourages readers to zoom out of the individual biography and to, quite literally, look at the larger picture—a distant reading of sorts.

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on potentiality, on *afforded* uses, the concept also helps avoid many of the argumentative pitfalls that come with classifying artifacts as being, for example, either narrative or play.

8 I can obviously only speculate on the diagram's effect on readers in the nineteenth century. Having presented a full-sized reproduction of the chart at various conferences, and having observed patrons at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester engage it for the first time, I am confident that this compulsion to trace the lines manifests in almost all (contemporary) readers: Whenever the chart gets unrolled, people start tracing the lines right away.

One pattern that emerges from such a distant view is that of the network, another symbolic logic, which affords connectivity. The large areas of overlapping lines, as much as they complicate reading the diagram, suggest a fabric of connectedness between the signers. While the chart only alludes to this form on a visual level, the sense of connectedness that 'network' affords is already present in the data form. After all, the normalizing uniformity of the data already affords comparing the individual signers' data points vertically, thus relating the events of their lives to one another rather than seeing them in the context of their individual biographies.

Cultural Work

Finally, this plurality of overlapping symbolic forms and affordances suggests that the chart was conceived to perform fairly complex cultural work: Rather than simply displaying the fifty-six biographies of the signers of the Declaration, it affords a wide range of readerly activities: playing, tracing, exploring, skimming and browsing, interpreting, and contemplating, to name just some. The presumably more superficial engagements—merely tracing a line without caring much for the respective signer's life and circumstances, or merely figuring out the name that belongs to one random outlier—are particularly crucial here. They activate the readers and facilitate engagement with these biographies. If the chart was meant for education, it is most adequately thought of as an early edu-game of sorts.[9]

Seen thus, the chart's multiple and at times contradictory affordances moreover constitute a response to two difficulties US culture encountered as it developed a cultural memory around the signing of the Declaration. One is the difficulty of balancing the reverence for the signers with the anti-aristocratic, egalitarian thrust of the young republic's political orientation and its reluctance to overly elevate individual political figures. The chart manages to balance these two impulses: It presents the information on all of the signers at once, presenting them as a group and stressing this group's egalitarian quality by presenting the exact same set of information for each of its members: No one stands out. At the same time, it forces readers to explore each biography individually, simply because the lines are so tangled that each life's path needs the readers' full attention. In other words, it mythologizes each biography by affording a narrative reading, but it also emphasizes the egalitarianism of the uniform data and the interconnected network of 'comparable' individuals.

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9 For a later example of such an early edu-game, cf. Mark Twain's description of his invention of a game that "[makes] [h]istory [d]ates [s]tick."

Secondly, the chart's investedness in readerly activity seems to speak to an anxiety over a beginning 'staling' of the past.[10] Produced roughly twenty-five years after the death of the last of the signers, Power created the chart at a time when the signing was passing over into the realm of historical, documented memory. His effort to contact and interview the descendants of the signers speaks to exactly this: What had been a nearly contemporary affair a generation ago was now becoming part of the nation's past. The chart's desire for readerly activity accordingly constitutes an attempt to keep the memory alive, to have it retain its disorderly, vibrant quality, and to prevent it from passing over into the more coherent but also potentially stale form of linear historical narrative. Its investedness in interactivity thus marks the diagram as doubly a child of its time. Its unusual formal properties clearly are the result of mid-nineteenth-century US print culture's experimentation with symbolic forms, but they also speak to a coming of age and a concern for keeping recent history alive as this history further recedes into the past.

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As strange and as opaque as Power's "Diagram" seems, and as much as it fails to effectively 'concentrate' relevant information, the lithograph exudes a lasting appeal. It eloquently speaks of how nineteenth-century US culture relished experimenting with different symbolic forms and finding novel ways of conserving, displaying, and circulating 'information'—a then-new cultural object. But while the diagram's form partly stems from this generic desire for experimenting with statistical information, it also comes with a project of its own. As I have shown, the diagram attempts to fulfill contradictory demands: to honor the memory of each founder individually without elevating one as exceptional and to hold on to the past without consigning it to the canonizing, rigid, linear form of narrative. For these conflicting projects, no single symbolic form suffices. Rather, the chart turns to and activates a range of different symbolic forms, and it utilizes the distinct engagements these symbolic forms afford. It is in the synergies between these affordances that the chart performs its cultural work.

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10 I am grateful to Mark Goble and John Durham Peters for pointing out this aspect when I presented the "Diagram" at the *American Media/Knowledge at the Turn of the 20th Century* workshop organized by Martin Lüthe and Alexander Starre in Berlin in the summer of 2017.

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Narrative Liminality, Ambient Operations, and the Database Western in Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption* Videogames

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Abstract:
This article reads Rockstar Games' Red Dead Redemption series as a new form of Western, the database Western, which is found to be marked by a state of narrative liminality as the symbolic forms of database, narrative, and play interact in a way that privileges the logic of the database. Analyzing the videogames' ambient operations, specifically their random events, it is argued that the database Western's underlying logic severs the genre from history. In doing so, it produces a politics of evasion and performs the cultural work of a withdrawal from history.

In this article, I argue that *Red Dead Redemption*, a series of open-world Western shooters published by Rockstar Games, exemplifies the genre of the database Western, which is permeated by instances of narrative liminality that are central to the production of meaning in these videogames[1]. My argument revolves around one particular characteristic of *Red Dead Redemption*'s gameworlds, their 'ambient operations,' and three symbolic forms that converge in these instances: 'database,' 'narrative,' and 'play.' The liminal areas in which these three symbolic forms blend into each other define the cultural work of these videogames. As database and also play take primacy over narrative, the Western genre is reconfigured in a way that drains it of history and, thus, politics, which ultimately produces a politics of evasion in its own right. The cultural work resulting from this can be considered a withdrawal from history.

The article begins with a brief overview of the *Red Dead Redemption* franchise and the genre of the database Western before I introduce the concept of ambient

1 Following Brendan Keogh, I "have committed to the one-word spelling *videogame* (as opposed to *video game*), which sees videogames as a hybrid of audiovisuality and game aspects" rather than specific, digital (meaning: computer-processed) types of games, but games after all (Keogh 12, n2).

operations, illustrated by some examples. These form the foundation for the argument that unfolds afterwards in which I examine the entanglements of database, narrative, and play as they converge in the ambient operations of *RDR* and *RDR2*.[2] This analysis reveals the database Western's liminal status, which informs *Red Dead Redemption*'s politics and, hence, the cultural work of the database Western as a genre.

Red Dead Redemption and the Database Western

Both *Red Dead Redemption* videogames are set in turn-of-the-century America—that is, the turn from nineteenth to twentieth century—and both tell the stories of outlaws trying to leave their outlaw lives behind, with *RDR2* functioning as a prequel to its predecessor.[3] In respect to their core plot lines, both draw on the tradition of the so-called revisionist Western and accentuate violence and moral ambiguities in the actions and characters of their white, male protagonists (Buel 53-54; Humphreys 210; Triana 2-3, 10-11, 15-16).[4] Completing the plot, however—that is, the so-called story missions—is entirely optional. As so-called open-world videogames, they invite players to stray and explore the gameworld on their own and engage in nu-

2 Throughout this article, *Red Dead Redemption* (published in 2010) and *Red Dead Redemption 2* (published in 2018) will be referred to as *RDR* and *RDR2*; *Red Dead Redemption* will refer to the series as such.

3 *RDR* was preceded by the more linear third-person shooter *Red Dead Revolver* (2004), which featured discrete, albeit large, levels rather than an open gameworld. *Red Dead Revolver*, however, was a videogame originally conceived by a different studio and publisher, Angel Studios/Capcom, which was then completed by Rockstar Games after their parent company Take-Two Interactive had purchased Angel Studios and the rights to their videogames. While Rockstar Games did turn the project into their own, thus founding the larger *Red Dead* franchise, *RDR* was arguably the title that started the series properly since it was developed by Rockstar San Diego from scratch, borrowing heavily from the success formula of Rockstar Games' flagship franchise *Grand Theft Auto*. Due to the different structural design, I therefore do not consider *Red Dead Revolver* as part of the *Red Dead Redemption* series.

4 The so-called revisionist Western is a label applied to a number of films from the 1960s onwards "that took the Western in a different, more violent direction, away from the simplistic frontier morality plays of an earlier age to scenarios that openly attacked the ethos of the mythic West while wrestling with contemporary politics disguised in turn-of-the-century dressings" (Nelson 6). In his introduction to *The Western Reader*, Jim Kitses provides an account of the Western as a continually changing genre that also illuminates the role played by revisionism. For a critical discussion of and important intervention into the discourse on the revisionist Western, see Andrew Patrick Nelson's *Still in the Saddle: The Hollywood Western, 1969-1980*. Esther Wright's dissertation "Rockstar Games and American History" furthermore sheds light on how Rockstar's promotional materials actively supported contextualization of *RDR* within the revisionist Western (91-119).

merous optional activities ranging from bounty hunting to horse breaking and everything in between, most of which draw on easily recognizable Western tropes (Triana 11; cf. Humphreys 201).[5] This essential aspect of experiencing the gameworlds of *Red Dead Redemption* is crucial to understanding the series' relation to the Western and, ultimately, its cultural work.

The premise of this article's argument is that the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames present a new form of the Western, the database Western. As a subgenre of the Western, the database Western, like the traditional and revisionist Westerns,[6] is a genre in its own right. What we find in these videogames is the convergence of two genres, the Western and the database, into one. Though the former is thematic and the latter is formal—one privileges the subject matter and the other privileges the mode of presentation—they both are genres. The Western can take any form just as the database can accommodate any content. While the Western has long been employed as a prime example for the operations of genre, database as not only a technical but also a cultural phenomenon has only begun to receive scholarly attention in the 2000s. Nonetheless, it was soon considered a transformative force that would be central to the production and reception of culture in the twenty-first century. "We are coming to recognize, then, gradually but inevitably," Ed Folsom writes in a *PMLA* article in 2007, "that database is a new genre, the genre of the twenty-first century" (1576).

In the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames, players encounter two Westerns at once: the revisionist Western of the main storylines, which previous scholarship has tended to focus on,[7] and the database Western found in the videogames' formal structure, which has largely been neglected. The database Western, I argue, takes primacy over any other type of Western one may identify in *RDR* or *RDR2* precisely because it constitutes the operational core of the videogames.

In essence, the database Western is the Western reconfigured as a database. This hypothesis is based on an argument proposed by Lev Manovich, one of the earliest theorists of the computational database. In *The Language of New Media*,

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5 For accounts of the central features of the Western and its tropes throughout, which will forever remain hopelessly incomplete, see, for instance, Kitses's "Authorship and Genre: Notes on the Western" and Jane Tompkins' *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*.

6 It is useful here to remember that what constitutes either of these genres and which texts belong to them is conditioned, as Jason Mittell convincingly argues, by "discursive practices" as suggested by Michel Foucault (Mittell 8). Mittell elaborates that "Although genres are categories of texts, texts themselves do not determine, contain, or produce their own categorization. Generic categories are intertextual and hence operate more broadly than within the bounded realm of a media text. Even though texts certainly bear marks that are typical of genres, these textual conventions are not what define the genre. Genres exist only through the creation, circulation, and reception of texts within cultural contexts" (7-8).

7 See, for example, Buel; Humphreys; Triana.

Manovich asserts that the database is "the key form of cultural expression" in "the computer age" (218). His definition describes databases as "collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other" and "as collections of items on which the user can perform various operations" (218, 219), insisting that "as a cultural form, the database represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order this list" (225). Since the database itself does not order its entries or present them in any kind of fixed sequence, its guiding logic from the user's perspective, according to Manovich, is the logic of selection, which he describes as "the logic of all new media—selection from a menu of choices" (126). These basic characteristics of the database as a symbolic form equally apply to *Red Dead Redemption*'s (re)configuration of the Western, resulting in the new generic formation of the database Western.

Experiencing the Western in these videogames is all about the selection of Western tropes from a range of options, presented in and made available by the gameworld, and performing pertinent actions on them. Whereas previous kinds of Westerns offered their audiences a fixed composition of parts which formed a whole that only worked the way it did because of the specific arrangement—and produced a particular politics based on this—the database Western allows for random access in which each element works on its own but is also rendered optional and potentially dispensable. The database supplies the elements, but it does not order or rank them, which decontextualizes and dehistoricizes the individual elements, foreclosing their historical and, thus, political dimension. The gameworld serves as a spatial interface that allows random access to the contents of the database; navigating the world enables players to interact at will with the tropes included. From this perspective even the main story in each game is nothing but another element in the database which may or may not be selected and thus enacted. The database Western, therefore, supersedes all other kinds of Westerns in the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames. The functioning of the database Western is most visible in *RDR* and *RDR2*'s ambient operations, which are discussed in the next section.

Ambient Operations in *Red Dead Redemption*

A core feature not only of the database Western but of other open-world videogames similar to *Red Dead Redemption* are the ambient operations of the gameworld. What I call ambient operations combines two arguments on videogame operations proposed by Alexander R. Galloway and Ian Bogost. In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Galloway introduces the concept of the 'ambience act,' by which he refers to the continuing functioning of the gameworld and its entities when the player does neither act nor pause the game. "Things continue to change

when caught in an ambience act," he writes, "but nothing changes that is of any importance. No stopwatch runs down. No scores are lost. If the passage of time means anything at all, then the game is not in an ambient state. It rains. The sun goes down, then it comes up. Trees stir. These acts are a type of perpetual happening, a living tableau" (10). The ambience act describes these environmental actions in videogames as one holistic phenomenon which is essential to the creation of any gameworld's atmosphere,[8] and the concept has been taken up by other scholars in the same way.[9]

By contrast, Bogost's notion of 'unit operations,' developed as "an approach to criticism for procedural artifacts like videogames" (xv), provides a more granular concept, which serves as a productive complement to Galloway's ambience act. "Unit operations," Bogost writes, "are modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems" (3). Furthermore, "[u]nit operations are characteristically succinct, discrete, referential, and dynamic. System operations are characteristically protracted, dependent, sequential, and static. In general, unit operations privilege function over context, instances over longevity" (4). When Bogost speaks of "discrete, disconnected actions" and "instances" that produce meaning in that very discretion and succinctness, these are the individual units that constitute the ambience act described by Galloway.

Combining both ideas, my conception of ambient operations zooms in on the particular acts and instances that make up the perceived ambience act and accords them the individual significance demanded by a unit-operational approach. An ambient operation, then, is anything that happens around the player in the gameworld in any one moment of gameplay that is not the center of attention. Any ambient operation is meaningful and significant in its own right and independent of any larger system, such as the game's central plot. For example, particularly in *RDR2*, the player character is occasionally ambushed by one of several gangs marauding through the gameworld. While these gangs do appear in *RDR2*'s main story on occasion, most of them are not essential parts of the plot. Mainly, gang members are stumbled upon by accident while exploring the gameworld, which usually results in a conflict situation that can be resolved in several ways. Occasionally, gang members ambush the protagonist as he is riding through the gameworld. Though

8 'Atmosphere,' here, is understood in the way conceptualized by Gernot Böhme in *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*.

9 A recent application of Galloway's concept in its holistic sense, for example, can be found in Felix Zimmermann and Christian Huberts' article "From Walking Simulator to Ambience Action Game: A Philosophical Approach to a Misunderstood Genre," which proceeds from Galloway's ambience act to delineate a conception of the genre of the 'ambience action game' as an alternative to the popular term 'walking simulator.'

the gang sometimes refers to a previous altercation with the protagonist, nothing really motivates the occurrence of this particular encounter in this specific moment on a narrative level; it appears both random and inconsequential. It does not even matter how one resolves the situation since any way the event plays out remains without lasting consequences. The state of the gameworld and the state of the player will be largely the same, apart from minor variations in the possessions or reputation of the player character.

Ambient operations are, by definition, operations of the environment—the background, if you will. This means that they are precisely what the player is not originally concerned with in any given moment of gameplay. The player may be focused on navigating the gamespace, on reaching a particular goal, such as solving a challenge set by the game, or something else; ambient operations are what is happening in the gameworld around the playable character at the same time as the player is doing those other things. This does not mean, however, that players do not engage with these ambient operations. Ambient operations in videogames are significant as producers of meaning precisely because they regularly capture the player's attention and redirect their focus and action. Whereas the 'standard' gameplay activities of navigating the gamespace and completing set objectives often lapse into an instrumental mode of engagement, ambient operations break up this instrumentality, demanding a different, more conscious, kind of attention beyond the instrumental. Once an ambient operation enters the center of attention, it both ceases to be an ambient operation—since it is no longer in the background—and it opens up new avenues for player action. This potentiality of emergent player actions marks an entrance point into the territory of narrative liminality.

From Random Events to a Randomized Genre

In order to illuminate the question of narrative liminality, its importance for the cultural work of *Red Dead Redemption*, and the politics of the database Western, this article focuses on one specific type of ambient operations common in contemporary open-world videogames, especially those by Rockstar Games: random events. These random events are the moment when database, narrative, and play collapse into one, producing a narrative liminality emblematic of the cultural work of the database Western as the Western genre itself is randomized and thus divested of any coherent position within the realm of the social, of history, and of politics.

One example already mentioned is the outlaw ambush, another is the damsel in distress. Players moving through the gameworld in either *RDR* or *RDR2* will occasionally hear the voice of a stranger nearby calling for help, complemented by a blinking icon on the mini map that is part of the graphical user interface,

which alerts the player's attention. Maybe her carriage has broken down, maybe she was robbed—in any case, she needs the protagonist's help and asks to be escorted. From a narrative point of view, nothing about this is motivated by either the plot or the player's actions in the gameworld. The player's reaction, likewise, is largely without major consequences. The protagonist's reputation in the gameworld may be affected slightly, but really it does not matter whether the player plays along or ignores the occurrence.

These random events occur regularly in the gameworlds of *RDR* and *RDR2*, provided that certain parameters are met—for example, they will not occur during one of the videogames' scripted missions. Since players cannot know the underlying algorithms that specify the conditions for when a particular event will be triggered, the events appear to occur randomly at the same time as they never seem out of place; random events always fit in with and organically emerge from the environment. The random event, then, is the epitome of an ambient operation as a part of the ambience act described by Galloway. Random events not only fit in because they appear to emerge from the environment; they, in turn, also contribute to the atmosphere of the gameworld by making the environment appear integrated, active, and responsive. This moment when the random event occurs and captures the player's attention is the juncture at which the database logic underlying the database Western in *Red Dead Redemption* becomes visible and demands action.

The database logic works in two ways here. First, the videogame itself selects, as it were, one event from a set of all possible events. No event is more important than any other, and the occurrence of an event never depends on the occurrence of another before or after it. This part of the database itself is hidden to the player; there is no immediate way of seeing all possible events or even influencing their occurrence. It is confined to the machinic level and operated solely by the program, which chooses based on specific conditions of the gameworld. Yet the player does engage the database logic from the other side. Every time a random event occurs, the player must choose how to act in relation to the event. Ignore it? Engage it? If so, in which way? Follow the suggested script and play along? Simply shoot everyone, thus ending the event? The options are plentiful.

One can dissect this moment even further. In the first instance, it is guided by the logic of selection. The system not only selects an event to occur in the player's environment, the player also selects their action in response to it. No event is more important than the others and no player reaction is more appropriate than any other. Any way in which this moment plays out is as significant and meaningful as any other for two reasons. First, none of it is mandatory. Unlike the story missions in *RDR* and *RDR2*—which, in fact, have to be actively sought out and triggered by the player, yet another instance of a database logic—random events do not need to occur. Most players will never witness all possible random events. The second reason is that the way ambient operations are organically embedded in the gameworld,

in the sense that they always make sense, also entails that any kind of engagement with them also equally makes sense. This is because all options of engagement that the videogame affords are likewise designed in line with the world in which they occur. *RDR* and *RDR2* revolve around outlaws in the Wild West so that the possibilities for interaction with other characters privilege the acts of shooting, capturing, and robbing while providing only limited opportunities for verbal communication. If a damsel in distress calls for the protagonist's help because she is being robbed, it makes just as much sense, in terms of the videogame, to help her by apprehending or killing the bandit as it does to rob her oneself. Each option is afforded by the videogame and its database structure, and each option is similarly significant.

As every option is meaningful on its own rather than as part of a larger whole, however, the whole gets drained of significance. When it does not really matter what comes before or after, which choice is made, and which action taken or not, and when an algorithm randomly stages events in the gameworld, the genre text itself is randomized. But if this is the case, if everything is fluid, how can we even confidently classify the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames as Westerns? Do they not avoid classification? Perhaps not, if we consider how database, narrative, and play interact in these moments. Since the underlying structure of the gameworld follows the principles of the database rather than that of narrative or any other symbolic form, ambient operations like random events are never narratively motivated. And although play affords interactivity, player action has no lasting effects; it does not affect the database or the machinic processes of selection in the long term. While database interacts with the two other forms, it also effectively dominates them as one always returns to the database as the grounding. Thus, any attempt of generic classification must inadvertently return to the items in the database and consider them on their own terms rather than as part of a fixed organizing structure such as a narrative. Yet narrative, however liminal, here shows itself to be important for the database Western despite its subordination to the database.

While there is no apparent cause-and-effect relationship between one random event and another, and on the level perceivable by the player one does not follow the other in any fixed way, this is by no means tantamount to the absence of narrative in the database structure, in random events, or in ambient operations more generally. Any random event itself constitutes a micro narrative consisting of actors, events, an order of those events, and apparent causes and effects that lead to that order. Precisely these micro narratives form the very content of *Red Dead Redemption*'s Western database. Most of the random events and many other ambient operations follow established tropes of the Western genre—the ambush, the damsel in distress, the duel, and so on. The functioning of these tropes as tropes by themselves—rather than as tropes embedded in a single, fixed, and logical sequence of events—is crucial here.

Drawing on "Matthew Thomas Payne's work on post-9/11 military games," Soraya Murray contends that "all games are cultural palimpsests" (61, 60). Both Payne and Murray highlight the ways in which videogame representations always contain previous cultural writings and, hence, meanings which may not be visibly apparent even as they fundamentally undergird and structure the experience of playing a particular videogame. The figure of the palimpsest, which refers to a manuscript page that is reused after the original writing has been erased, draws attention to the residues of earlier cultural expressions that remain as new ones are written over them. These residues are central to the database Western and the question of narrative liminality in *Red Dead Redemption*.

If one examines closely the Western tropes included in *Red Dead Redemption*'s Western database, it becomes apparent that they are, in fact, truncated versions of Western tropes. Consider the example of the duel, which is a recurring event particularly in *RDR*. The duel, signifying the violence and self-administered justice of the mythic American West, has become such an iconic set piece of the Western genre that it is immediately recognized as something simply belonging to the world of the Western. It is, therefore, easy to overlook that the Western's duels have always been embedded in logical, causal chains of events. Owen Wister's *Virginian* has to fight Trampas because of the latter's escalating frustration and hate in the wake of years of being outplayed by the former; McKay has to face Buck in *The Big Country* because an ongoing feud escalates over a woman desired by both men; and *Once Upon a Time in the West*'s Harmonica confronts Frank over his many crimes, including the murder of Harmonica's brother. All of these examples show how the duel in the Western is usually the culmination of a longer line of causally connected events.

A few scripted exceptions notwithstanding, the duels in the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames appear disconnected from such cause-and-effect narratives. Rather, opponents somewhat randomly confront the protagonist for no apparent reason, upon which the player may accept or decline the duel.[10] If accepted, it turns into a ludic challenge requiring the player's quick reaction and precision in taking out the contender before the protagonist himself is shot. Though immediately understood as a ludic challenge, the duel, due to its randomness, makes little sense from a narrative point of view. Unlike the iconic duels mentioned above, nothing builds up to those in *Red Dead Redemption*; they simply happen. The videogames present the duels but they do not offer explanations for them. Still the duels do not seem odd or out of place; they firmly fit in and belong to the Wild West world of *Red Dead Redemption* and are likely immediately understood by players. These are the residues,

10 One notable exception is the duel that ensues when the player cheats during a game of poker in the gameworld, which is also the only way for them to actively seek out a duel themselves.

as it were, on the palimpsest of the Western in *Red Dead Redemption*, and these narrative residues continuously ground the database Western within the larger generic formation of the Western and make it readable as such.

Returning to the question of narrative liminality, the important point here is the moment in which database, narrative, and play converge in the same instance of gameplay when a random event occurs. It seems helpful at this point to briefly recall Galloway's notion of videogames as "an *action-based* medium" (3; emphasis in the original). According to him, "[w]ith video games, the work itself is material action. One *plays* a game. And the software *runs*. The operator and the machine play the video game together, step by step, move by move. Here the 'work' is not as solid or integral as in other media" (2; emphasis in the original). In Galloway's account, action is what ensures videogames' existence beyond lines of code (Galloway 2) and data stored in "carrier media" (Starre). In the *Red Dead Redemption* series and similar videogames, this logic of action is accompanied by one of selection akin to that described by Manovich. One could say that these videogames are marked by logic of 'selaction'—a hybrid form of 'selection' and 'action' in which one works coterminously with the other. In such works, the user (here: the player) selects through acting, acts by selecting, selects in order to act, and acts in order to select; and not just the user, the machine, too, is involved in similar ways as random events from the database are selected by executing the game's code.

The logic of selaction, in fact, constitutes the act of (game)play. In *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman define play as "free movement within a more rigid structure" (304). Understanding gameplay in this way illuminates how database, narrative, and play interact in *Red Dead Redemption*'s ambient operations. The videogames' databases of western tropes, interfaced by the gameworlds, provide an expressive structure that is rigid because it is finite—there are only so many tropes making up the database, and they are these tropes and not others. The micro narrative of the ambient operation—a gang of outlaws ambushes the protagonist, a damsel in distress calls for help, a stranger demands a duel—likewise provides a rigid structure, albeit a narrative rather than operational one, as they are scripted in particular, invariable ways. The "free movement" highlighted by Salen and Zimmerman emerges once the player acts in response to the event: Do they play along with an established, generic script, do they undermine it, or do they ignore it altogether? Do they kill and rob the damsel in distress instead of rescuing her and escorting her to safety? Do they confront the outlaws in a shootout or do they run away? Do they accept the duel or decline it, thus unsettling the teleological logic of the trope?

Narrative Liminality and the Cultural Work of the Database Western

Inherently narrative as these moments are, their narrativity proves to be liminal here because narrative does not order the unfolding events. They are structured in the symbolic form of the database, their meanings are framed by narrative, but the sequence of actions belongs to the realm of play. While the formulaic nature of the narrative elements of *Red Dead Redemption* should provide a sense of not only predictability but also stability, both the database structure and the factor of (game)play produce a level of uncertainty typical for videogames but atypical for the Western. To return to a point raised earlier, Westerns generally work through their fixed composition, with each element fulfilling a specific function in relation to all the other elements. Videogames, on the other hand, often lack this degree of certainty. Marie-Laure Ryan points out that "[i]nsofar as they are based on a simulation engine, they generate a different storyworld every time they are played" (41). The logic described by Ryan is escalated in *Red Dead Redemption*'s database Western since not only the player's actions produce "a different storyworld every time" but also the machine's acts of selection which conjure the ambient operations experienced by the player in any given moment. "Uncertainty, in fact," writes Greg Costikyan, "is a primary characteristic of all sorts of play, and not of games alone" (9). This uncertainty of play, as a logic, conflicts with the narrative certainty typically required by the Western genre.

The uncertainty that emerges from the area of narrative liminality in *Red Dead Redemption*'s ambient operations shapes the cultural work of the database Western. Traditionally, the Western has been a genre that relies on resolution in one way or another. Whether affirmative of American myths, like the classic Western, or corrective of them, like the revisionist Western, the genre has generally been marked by value systems that are reliable within any single work and by rigid narrative structures that provide orientation for the audience. As Jim Kitses writes about the conventions of the Western, "[w]hat holds all of these elements together (and in that sense provides the basic convention) is narrative and dramatic structure" ("Authorship" 68). Since database and play prevail over narrative in *Red Dead Redemption*, narrative cannot provide order. In the words of John Wills, "[t]he omnipotent power of the Westerly dream was thus, if not totally rejected, at the very least questioned and prodded, with American history left intriguingly open and malleable to new interpretation" (82). The crucial point in this is precisely that interpretation is left open and that no political stance is taken.

The narrative liminality and uncertainty of the database Western in *Red Dead Redemption* effectively produces a draining of politics that ultimately reveals the series' own politics, which are cynical and evasive at best—a politics of withdrawal. The consequence of the design and functioning of the database Western is a cultural text that attempts to evade politics in a context that is deeply and historically

political. The *Red Dead Redemption* videogames reconfigure the Western genre in that they isolate and formalize generic tropes in a database to make them available for random access. This process not only decontextualizes these elements, it also severs them from their history, despite the fact that "the western is American history" (Kitses, "Authorship" 57). If narrative is relegated to a liminal status, then history is, too. Even *RDR2*'s occasional attempts to tackle white supremacy and racism, particularly in its depiction of the American postbellum South (Jones), ultimately remain optional, isolated events, items accorded the same significance as any other. In *Red Dead Redemption*'s database Western, with the exception of the main plot, there is no before or after to which any item in the database is tied; they exist and function for their own sake and are easily ignored or discarded. This amounts to nothing less than the ill-fated attempt to shake off the ideological baggage of a contested genre by reorganizing it formally, thus producing a pseudo-apolitical entertainment experience of an ostensibly neutral, simulated American West to play with. The emphasis on freedom of action and player choice—in the sense that this Western will be the Western any individual player wants it to be—is in line with the rhetoric of individual responsibility and agency that has characterized neoliberal societies in both their theoretical promise and practical illusion for decades.

Conclusion

As they isolate, decontextualize, and formalize familiar Western tropes in the form of a database that makes them available for random access, the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames exemplify the new genre of the database Western. While the genre is marked by an interplay of the three symbolic forms of database, narrative, and play, database and its logic of selection take command, which leads to a state of narrative liminality that deprives the Western of its historical dimension. Since this dimension has previously endowed the Western genre with its political meaning, relegating narrative (and, thus, history) to the realm of the liminal is at odds with the Western's significance for American culture. By turning the American West into a virtual entertainment experience that renders all elements equal and potentially discardable, the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames effectively disavow politics altogether. The database Western's cultural work, then, ultimately amounts to a withdrawal from history.

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Detecting Liminality[1]

The List and Symbolic Form

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Abstract:
This article examines the form of the list as a narratively liminal textual pattern that is suspended between the three symbolic forms of narrative, play, and database. Due to its affinity for enumerative structures, the detective fiction genre will serve as the background against which the cultural practice of listing and the operations it performs in the liminal spaces between symbolic forms are investigated. The new formalist concept of affordances will be employed to demonstrate the list's potential to travel and negotiate between different symbolic forms and to identify areas where the affordances of these forms overlap. Two novels by Agatha Christie will serve to illuminate the contact zone between the symbolic forms of database and narrative. The Murder Dossier novels by Dennis Wheatley will illustrate how the list-form works to fuse the symbolic forms of narrative and play through its affinity for database structures. Their allegiances with multiple symbolic forms awards Christie's and Wheatley's novels great potential for aesthetic innovation because each symbolic form offers specific strategies of meaning-making that can (re)position and (re)negotiate the role of these novels as cultural artifacts.

The List and Symbolic Form

At first glance, a simple list and a novel such as Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* seem to have little to nothing in common. Lists condense information, narrative texts expand on an idea to create entire fictional worlds. Lists tend to not have protagonists, nor are they frequently employed to stage conflicts or rep-

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resent causal links.[2] Even where they do occur in literary texts, lists are frequently considered as disruptive and nonnarrative elements. And yet, detective fiction— a heavily plot-driven genre—teems with lists of suspects, of evidence, of questions, of rational conclusions, and has such lists appear in key moments of the story.

The list's "liminal status," so Gérard Genette (xi), allows it to negotiate relations between text and reader by framing or contextualizing the text it surrounds or intermits. When lists appear as diegetic texts in detective fiction, i.e., as elements of the story world, they tend to contain or conceal information vital for the solution of the case. As paratexts, for example, in the form of the table of contents or, as will be discussed below, the score sheet, they take on yet more functions that are no less essential for the story they accompany.

Both textual and paratextual lists, whatever context they originate in, share a number of recurring features that mark them as cognitive tools and as structuring devices that invite their own patterns of meaning-making. Lists are easy to navigate, provide quick access to and overview over their material, and the loose connections between their items offer various possibilities for interaction or manipulation. Through these properties, the form of the list draws on the poetics and aesthetics of what Lev Manovich designates as the symbolic form of the database (81).[3] Symbolic forms, so Manovich, present ways of structuring experience and hence "a model of what a world is like." Manovich describes the symbolic form of the database as consisting of a collection of items that "can be navigated in a variety of ways," that are generally open to new additions, and that, hence, follow an "anti-narrative logic" (82). Despite the list's close affinity to the characteristics of the database, its properties at times allow it to move beyond the confines of database logic and forge complex connections to other symbolic forms.

Symbolic forms can serve as useful concepts for literary analysis because they do not work in binary oppositions but rather suggest gradable categories with a prototypical center and fuzzy margins that overlap with and are not clearly separable from other symbolic forms. Recent new formalist approaches to literature have theorized this potential for variety inherent in form in terms of affordances.[4] Affordances can reach beyond fixed category boundaries and point out relations

2 Among the criteria Marie-Laure Ryan lists for narrativity, we find that a story needs "anthropomorphic agents" who "must be motivated by conflicts" and that "[t]he sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure" (194).

3 Schubert points out that Manovich appropriates the term from Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Cassirer.

4 In her recent monograph *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Caroline Levine defines affordance as "the potential uses or action latent in materials and designs" (6). Levine's idea of clashing forms that enable a reader to view those forms against one another and consider their mutual productivity describes a similar phenomenon to the interaction of symbolic forms discussed in this article.

that might otherwise go unnoticed. Any particular list, for example, may afford narrativity without making narrativity an inherent property of the list as a textual pattern.

Viewing the potential uses inherent in different forms in terms of affordances proves especially productive where those affordances establish contact points between two or more distinct symbolic forms. This essay will focus on such areas of intersection and use the literary genre of detective fiction as an example in order to investigate how the cultural practice of listing operates within the liminal spaces between symbolic forms and facilitates border crossings between them (see Herrmann et al. 14). I argue that the list's affinity to and situatedness between three distinct symbolic forms allows it to negotiate between the seemingly disparate phenomena of narrative, database, and play and that this form's allegiance with multiple symbolic forms awards it great potential for aesthetic innovation.

I will first demonstrate how the novels of Agatha Christie employ lists to represent consciousness and processes of rationalization through their lack of mediation. Christie's lists uncouple the representation of consciousness from mediation, which is typically considered a marker of narrativity,[5] and thus renegotiate the relation between the symbolic forms of database and narrative through the detective fiction genre's affinity with enumerative structures. The apparent clash between the database-like structure of Christie's lists and the narrative quality of consciousness representation that they evoke will illustrate how the list can function to bridge such apparent gaps between symbolic forms. Subsequently, I will examine how the lists in Dennis Wheatley's *Murder Dossier* novels from the 1930s function to involve the reader in a game of detection. Wheatley's lists take on a ludic function and serve as a hinge device between the symbolic forms of narrative and play through their database affordances. The *Murder Dossiers* make lists the central tool that enables these novels' aesthetic innovation through its allegiance to more than one symbolic form (see Herrmann et al. 13).

Lists, Narrative, and Database in the Fiction of Agatha Christie

The novels of Agatha Christie teem with lists of suspects and motifs, with profiles, hypotheses and timetables, and with lists of unanswered questions. Very frequently, such lists appear at times when the investigator assembles crucial information. In Christie's 1950 novel *A Murder Is Announced*, for example, her detective,

5 See, for example, Prince, who argues that among the various features influencing narrativity, "narrativity is affected by the amount of commentary pertaining to the situations and events represented, their representation, or the latter's context," and further names the representation of thought and consciousness as a feature frequently connected to narrativity (387).

Miss Marple, leaves the following list behind before she mysteriously vanishes: "Lamp. Violets. Where is bottle of aspirin? Delicious Death. Making enquiries. Severe affliction bravely borne. Iodine. Pearls. Letty. Berne. Old Age pension" (256). This list contains all the clues that help Miss Marple identify the murderer in the story, yet it leaves the other characters, as well as the casual reader, baffled and confused: "Does it mean anything? Anything at all? I can't see any connection," (256) the character who finds the list comments.

Miss Marple's list represents her thought process as she jumps from one piece of evidence to the next, aligning each with her suspect. The sequence of words appears as a mental checklist, reducing each item to an informational core. This process of reduction eliminates the connecting principles—such as chronology or cause-effect logic—that hold the clues together from the perspective of the list-maker, and the rapid succession of items mimics the speed with which the pieces of the puzzle fall into place for Miss Marple. The mental operations Miss Marple performs here are central constituents of database logic. Miss Marple is able to "automatically classify, index, link, search, and instantly retrieve" information with the help of her mental checklist—affordances that Manovich considers to be core functions of databases (94).

Similar to direct speech, this (written) list of thoughts lacks a mediating instance. The immediacy that the form of the list affords provides direct access to Miss Marple's thoughts and seems to condense and assemble all the important pieces of information in one place. At the same time, it conceals the pattern that connects the items and thus conveniently leaves the reader in the dark about Marple's conclusions. Its immediacy situates Miss Marple's list at the intersection of the symbolic forms of the database as structuring tool and narrative as characterized by "events that form a unified causal chain and lead to closure" (Ryan 194). The very process of reduction that makes Miss Marple's list unintelligible to others and thus technically situates it outside the realm of narrative at the same time serves to represent consciousness. Through its lack of a mediating instance, the list allows the reader direct access to Marples's thoughts—a criterion that scholars such as Gerald Prince consider a key affordance of narrative fiction (387).

The list of questions that detective Hercule Poirot writes down in *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) similarly reminds the reader of a number of important clues and shows the progression of Poirot's thoughts. The questions—"Why do the hands of the clock point to 1.15? Was the murder committed at that time? Was it earlier? Was it later?" (210)—build on each other and thus let the reader take part in Poirot's reasoning process. Written down on paper, both Marple's and Poirot's lists serve as a device to focus and preserve their thoughts and become a problem solving tool. According to Ryan's criteria for narrativity, a text's "agents must be motivated by conflicts and their deeds must be aimed toward the solving of problems" (194). The

listing of Poirot's thoughts and Marple's clues on paper becomes a means for this very end.

Like other representations of consciousness, the lists in these novels stretch discourse time and slow down story time and thus arrest the continuous progression of plot. Despite this, these lists create suspense, which, Karin Kukkonen argues, is one of the three "cognitive effects of readers' engagement" with narratives. This cognitive effect arises from how Poirot's and Marple's lists oppose knowing and not knowing. It hinges on how those lists assemble clues as signposts to solutions all in one space at the same time and yet obscure the logical relation between them, and thus demonstrate to the reader the seemingly impossible task the detective is faced with. The lists leave the reader both curious about how this seemingly impossible task will be solved and worried that the character might fail to do so.

Detective fiction uses lists to engage the reader in the act of detection in a way that goes beyond how other fiction involves its readers by drawing them into fictional worlds. Agatha Christie makes frequent use of the list's affordance to create such additional engagement through its loose database-like structure that encourages interaction (see Manovich 81). The deliberate gaps lists comprise contain an implicit appeal to the reader to become active and fill them without the help of the detective. The detective fiction authors of the so-called Golden Age (1918-1939) during which Agatha Christie started publishing her novels made a special point of enabling their readers to take a more active part in their fictional investigations by drawing up rules to guarantee the principle of fair play—the idea that all clues necessary to solve the case will be included in the text and that readers therefore should have a fair chance of coming to the right solution by themselves.[6]

In conventional detective fiction, the reader's active involvement in putting together the puzzle the text presents is optional—the solution will be revealed in the end regardless of whether the reader 'guesses along' or not. Despite this, the offer to get involved comes with the suggestion that if the reader takes up the role of detective and accepts the investigative authority and ordering power that comes with it, they also accept the responsibility for the outcome of the investigation.[7] The in-

6 According to Carl Lovitt, the Golden Age is usually dated between the First and Second World Wars. Among different scholars, dates vary slightly. For a more detailed discussion on the fair play principle in detective fiction, see Lovitt 68.

7 While Golden Age fiction invites the reader to compete with the fictional detective for the right solution, the *Murder Dossiers* discussed in the following section take this engagement one step further and make explicit that a reader who commits to solving the case presented will be responsible for its outcome. The authors' note preceding the first *Murder Dossier* volume directly asks the reader to decide "who *you* will arrest" (emphasis in original) and thus evokes the impression that the responsibility for the outcome of the investigation lies in the reader's hands.

vestigative authority this role confers upon the reader thus further contributes to an active engagement with the story.

"Be Your Own Detective": Narrative, Database, and Play in the *Murder Dossiers*

The potential for interactivity already inherent in Christie's detective fiction is taken to an extreme by Dennis Wheatley's *Murder Dossiers*,[8] which indeed suggest the case might go unsolved if the reader does not make an effort to become involved in putting the pieces together. The *Murder Dossiers* advertise their innovative and interactive approach to the genre and, at the time of their publication, were as popular and widely known as the fiction of Agatha Christie. Wheatley's novels make their dossier format a "constitutive component of the text" and thus make database structures and list-based ordering systems a prominent feature. They take great effort to emulate a variety of documentary sources and display a strong concern for authentic representation (Codebò).

The seemingly authentic documents, notes, witness statements, and inventories that Wheatley's dossiers consist of are collected in the form of a police file and leave it mostly to the reader to piece together the plot from them. The easy access to information that comes with this format invites the reader to become active and extract information from the file. Two elements in particular distinguish the *Murder Dossiers* from other crime fiction of the age: They include actual material objects, supposedly found at the crime scene, for the reader to consider and engage with, and they explicitly ask the reader to do so.

The immediacy this invokes greatly fortifies the claim to authenticity that the first two dossiers in particular try to create. My analysis, however, will mostly focus on the fourth and last dossier, *Herewith the Clues!* (1939), in which the focus shifts to qualities connected to 'playability': interactivity, nonlinearity, and iteration. As listed by Stefan Schubert, these features are much more commonly found in games than in narratives.

The title of the fourth volume already hints at this shift of focus: While the first three dossiers bear titles which flaunt sensational keywords such as "murder," "killed," or "massacre"[9] that are typical of the detective fiction genre, *Herewith the Clues!* puts the emphasis on the by then well-known distinctive feature of the

8 The *Murder Dossiers* were a joint project of Dennis Wheatley, who was responsible for the writing, and Joe Links, who was responsible for the arrangement and logistics. For reasons of simplicity, this article will only refer to Dennis Wheatley as the author.

9 The complete titles of the first three dossiers, in order, are: *Murder off Miami* (1936), *Who Killed Robert Prentice?* (1937), and *The Malinsay Massacre* (1938).

dossiers: its material clues, which allow the reader a special degree of interaction with the story. The exclamation mark is highly unusual for a detective fiction genre title and rather reminds of the way games advertise their features.[10] The volume's cover further capitalizes on this advertising strategy by announcing "five times as many clues as in any of the previous dossiers" in bold print across the middle of the page. This advertising strategy and the structural changes that further distinguish this dossier from its predecessors situate *Herewith the Clues!* at the borderlands of narrative and play.[11] The easy access to information that the list-like dossier format provides, that renders it navigable and searchable, additionally ties it to the symbolic form of the database.

The database features of the dossier format make it uniquely equipped to operate as a hinge between the symbolic forms of narrative and play. Dossier novels typically "imitate the most commonly accepted procedures for establishing truth in [the] […] cultural context" in which they operate (Codebò), and through its proximity to the form of the police file, *Herewith the Clues!* can easily establish the context of authenticity that supports its status as a detective novel. At the same time, the dossier structure that prioritizes categories of evidence over chronological sequence invites the reader to treat the file as a kind of database and to extract information from the compiled documents. The dossier's proximity to database structures supplies the tools that enable even an amateur to navigate and interact with the material (see Codebò).

By including paratextual instructions, such as the prompt to "[b]e your own detective" printed on the jacket of *Murder off Miami* or an authorial preface that asks the reader to decide "who *you* will arrest for the 'Murder off Miami'" (inside cover), Wheatley's crime dossiers aim to merge the roles of reader and investigating officer. Lists play a central role not only in furthering such interaction through heightened reader involvement with solving the mystery that the plot presents. They also become salient with regard to the level of composition because they reorganize the dossier's structure into a more interaction-friendly and navigable pattern.

Throughout the four volumes, the material clues contained in the dossier become increasingly interactive. An innovative feature of the first volume is to hide central clues in the photographs of suspects and crime scenes it includes in order to make the reader detective look for both textual and non-textual clues. It, however, sticks to vision as the accepted and central mode of perception for both reading and

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10 Examples for this kind of advertising can, for instance, be found on the box of Hasbro's 2017 edition of *Clue*: "Now with Card Revealing Mirror!"; "Press to See Whodunit!"

11 Because of the large number of material clues included in this volume, Wheatley and Links considered to have it sold in a box rather than as a bound volume. Interestingly, the idea was not implemented because it would have placed *Herewith the Clues!* in the board game section rather than in the bookshelves of shops (see Humphreys).

detection. The importance of literal and metaphorical vision, of "seeing *as* reading" is a central and often discussed idea in most detective fiction, where "[t]he visible world [becomes] a text, the detective its astute observer and expert reader" (Smajić 71). The second *Murder Dossier* volume takes the degree of interaction a step further by including a central clue that relies on a different channel of perception: The smell of the same perfume on two different sheets of letter paper serves as a hint that these letters must have been written by the same person. To find this clue, the reader detective has to interact with the volume as a material object in a way that goes far beyond turning pages. The fourth volume takes this trend to the extreme and includes a secret note that only discloses its invisible message if the paper is dipped in water. To unlock this clue, the reader therefore not only has to alter material that is included in the volume but even needs to resort to resources situated outside both text and paratext. A reader who commits to such interactions has to expend what Espen Aarseth calls "nontrivial effort" to make sense of the text (1). This kind of "ergodic textuality" (5) that the *Murder Dossiers* rely upon awards the reader direct influence over the further course of the story and is much more typical of games than of narratives.

Another element in which *Herewith the Clues!* foregrounds its playability is the score sheet included before the sealed section with the solution. The score sheet is preceded by another (paratextual) author's note that spells out the rules on how to award points for each clue correctly interpreted. These rules are specific to the volume at hand and are therefore different from the (mostly unspoken) rules that define how readers approach a genre.[12] They rather remind of the sets of rules that can be found in game manuals made to introduce players to the specific rule set of a board game. *Herewith the Clues!* includes eight of these score sheets and therefore suggests that this game of detection is meant to be played by more than one player. The author's note explicitly mentions that "[e]ight solution sheets are provided so that each member of the family may fill one up." The number of sheets and the fact that a specific number of points is to be awarded for clues divided into two categories strongly invites competition between individual readers and implies that the score sheets and points awarded are to be compared between several readers or competitors. The detective who has scored the most points is supposed to emerge as the winner of the activity. The author's note even includes a warning against cheating: "No peeping, now!" Cheating, however, is only possible if the reader is meant to perform certain tasks or actions according to a specific set of rules and if following the rules guarantees fairness among at least two different parties. The

12 George Dove describes detective fiction as being similar to a game with a fixed set of rules agreed upon between author and reader. His rules remind of the fair play principle that dominates the Golden Age of detective fiction: "[T]he rules of the tale of detection are the rules of organized play; they exist only to make possible the playing of the game" (11).

author's note therefore refers to a situation that does not occur when one is reading a book just to follow the plot.

Interactivity, following a specific set of rules, and the element of competition that the score sheet introduces are highly unusual features of novels but standard elements in competitive (board) games such as Hasbro's *Clue*, in which players also have to solve a murder case by moving across the board and comparing and cross-referencing information on suspects, possible murder weapons, and murder scenes. Players of *Clue* are supposed to solve their case by the same principle of exclusion and comparison that readers of *Herewith the Clues!* have to apply to identify the correct murderer if they take up the dossier's repeated invitation to conduct their own investigation. By foregrounding the rules of the game that readers can engage in, Wheatley's dossier also foregrounds its ludic elements over the narrative elements it definitely possesses and thus occupies a liminal space between the symbolic forms of narrative and play.

This orientation towards aspects of play is also reflected in the structure of the dossier, for example in its section-based organization that deemphasizes linear plot structures. Lists, respectively the affordances that lists share with the database, play a major role in (re)organizing the different materials—reports, photographs, material clues, profiles, writing samples, etc.—which the dossier includes for its readers. Where the first dossier still organizes its files according to the chronology of the case, the fourth dossier groups its various document categories together into distinct sections. It opens with a series of chronologically ordered reports, followed by the material evidence, photos, and profiles, each grouped into its own section.

This structuring system constitutes a point of intersection between the symbolic forms of database and play and is emphasized over the page numbers that are generally recognized as a structuring marker for novels. Only the reports and profiles carry page numbers at all and those are printed on the upper inside corner of the pages, which makes them nearly invisible and gives more prominence to the file numbers (a date followed by a page number, with the numbering starting anew for each report) that characterize the initial collection of documents as reports. The photos and evidence pages are not numbered at all, but the photography section is instantly recognizable by the thicker and whiter paper on which the images are printed. That the dossier groups each type of evidence into a separate section makes it easier to navigate for the reader. Within these sections there are further subdivisions: The material objects, for example, are sealed into semitransparent paper bags glued to the pages, and each piece of evidence is labelled and listed as "Exhibit A," Exhibit B," etc., all the way to "P."

The list format and the affordances of the database it draws on are central not only to structuring the dossier into distinct sections that make it easy to retrieve and reconsider pieces of information but also to structuring the information provided within each section. Lists afford order, which makes them fit for structuring

large quantities of data. The list's capacity to organize and categorize knowledge becomes readily apparent in the score sheet included in *Herewith the Clues!* which the reader can use to keep track of their investigation. The prestructured format of the score sheets draw on the logic of the symbolic form of the database to provide the reader with a grid for organizing their clues that ensures information is stored in the correct space. The number of lines provided on the sheet, for instance, specifies not only how many clues can be found but also how many suspects there are and that for some of them it is necessary to correctly assign two clues to exclude them from the pool of potential perpetrators. Furthermore, the list-like array of numbered slots to enter observations in ascertains that notes are taken efficiently because of the limited amount of space available. This single sheet of limited space, in turn, ensures that the reader's notes will stay neatly arranged and easily revisable and retrievable.

The alphabetically labelled pieces of material evidence are also arranged in a list pattern. This not only puts all the material clues together in one space for easier access but also constitutes an act of categorization—another affordance the list shares with the symbolic form of the database. The list's tendency to condense information suggests that each object included in this array is clearly classified as a piece of evidence relevant to the case and that correctly interpreting any of those pieces will contribute to acquitting a character from their status as suspect. It also limits the number and kinds of objects that can serve as evidence. The labelling and putting into alphabetical order of the objects endows each of them with relevance and a clear purpose. This method of structuring and labelling evidence is closely tied to positivist ideologies, which propagate the existence of a single truth that is identifiable by the use of sensory perception and logic. This ideology of objectivity is usually taken for granted in detective fiction and is a strong undercurrent of the genre.[13]

The organizing and categorizing function of the list is also important when looking at Wheatley's dossier in its entirety. Presenting the material grouped into distinct sections encourages a nonlinear engagement with the text.[14] In order to correctly assign clues, readers need to cross-reference different document types with one another and, for example, link a material object found at the crime scene to a photograph displaying a person carrying that object with them. For this, readers need to be able to go back and forth between the separate sections quickly without spending a lot of time on locating items. The list format that organizes the

13 The positivist understanding of objectivity as the minimization of human intervention that lets nature speak for itself was typical for the mid to late nineteenth century and is described as "mechanical objectivity" by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (20).

14 Nonlinearity is another affordance shared by the symbolic forms of database and play.

general structure of the dossier makes it extremely easy to navigate the sections and to locate items.

Such a nonlinear reading mode prompts the implementation of yet another criterion for playability as defined by Schubert: iteration. To eliminate each suspect correctly, the reader has to repeatedly go through the various sections, each time with their focus on a different suspect. Iteration is a rather untypical mode of reading novels, but it bears resemblance to turn-taking in board games. Games "encourage repeated playthroughs or repetitions of individual sequences" (Schubert), often associating each turn with an intermediate objective (such as buying property in *Monopoly* or ruling out a murder weapon in *Clue*) that constitutes one step on the way to achieving the main objective. This nonlinear and iterative reading strategy diverges considerably from more conventional (detective) novels, where consecutively numbered pages suggest they are to be perused in order, from beginning to end. The missing page numbers in several of the dossier sections of *Herewith the Clues!*, on the other hand, indicate that these sections are not meant to be read from beginning to end but instead used complimentary to the other sections. Although the list format rips the dossier apart into separate sections and thus disrupts linearity, it at the same time unifies the material grouped within each section and therein affords a kind of coherence that depends more on categorization than on chronology or direct causality.

Despite the strong focus on its ludic elements, *Herewith the Clues!* undeniably has a narrative core. In fact, many of the lists mentioned in this paper serve a dual or even triple function, furthering both the narrative and ludic dimensions of the text by involving the reader in the act of detection through the list's affinity with the symbolic form of the database. The distinction between narrative and ludic lists is by no means as clear-cut as it may seem. More so than other formal elements of a fictional text, lists seem designed to offer the reader interactive potential. Thus, even the primarily narrative lists in the novels of Agatha Christie invite the reader to play detective and put the clues together before the protagonist reveals the solution. Wheatley's primarily ludic lists, on the other hand, also display a narrative dimension. One of the pieces of evidence, for example, is a hairpin described as "of such an unusual type that it is not even stocked by the majority of hairdressers" in the solution section (*Herewith* 25.5.39/5). To correctly eliminate the right woman as a suspect, the reader has to ponder what kind of woman would wear such apparel, and take into consideration the characters' habits, character traits, and appearance to identify the narrative context for this clue. Even the clearly ludic score sheet included in the fourth murder dossier can help the reader-detective reconstruct later on how certain suspects were eliminated and thus contribute to rearranging the separate sections of the dossier into a more coherent, causally connected order. Situated at the intersection of narrative, database and play, the short and simple form of the list contributes to this immensely. Lists order and categorize, they

unify disparate elements, condense information, and enable its neat, but variable arrangement. The concision of this form makes it an ideal tool for cross-referencing and comparing content that can be applied by characters and readers alike.

Conclusion

As cognitive tools, lists unfold their adaptive potential within the contact zones between different symbolic forms. The unvarying yet extremely adaptable form of the list seems particularly suited to negotiate the borderlands between different symbolic forms. The lists that occur in the fiction of Agatha Christie are neither entirely narrative in the strict sense of providing linearity, causality, and coherence nor are they entirely situated outside the realm of narrative because they can create suspense and provide access to characters' thought processes. The ludic lists in Wheatley's dossiers, on the other hand, invite a nonlinear and interactive engagement with the text that reminds of the mechanics of games. They do so without entirely abandoning their narrative function to characterize and to encourage the reader to construct their own narrative from the fragments. By the very fragmentation that ties the list to the symbolic form of the database, lists invite to bridge gaps and connect positions that seem to be situated at opposite ends of a sliding scale. The appellative function and interactive potential of the list allows this form a wide variety of functions that operate outside of a binary logic.

The detective fiction genre's affinity with enumerative structures establishes a contact zone between the symbolic forms of database and narrative in the case of Agatha Christie and between database, narrative, and play in the case of Dennis Wheatley. Their allegiances with multiple symbolic forms awards Christie's and Wheatley's novels great potential for aesthetic innovation as cultural artifacts because each symbolic form offers specific strategies of meaning-making that can (re)position and (re)negotiate their role as a cultural artifact within the cultural field.

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“To Live Your Life Again, Turn to Page 1”
Affordances of Narrative and Play in Neil Patrick Harris’s *Choose Your Own Autobiography*

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Abstract:
In this article, I explore a trend in contemporary popular culture of combining elements of narrative and play via a case study of Neil Patrick Harris’s book Choose Your Own Autobiography. I introduce play and narrative as distinct yet often intermingling symbolic forms that both come with particular affordances. I then analyze the ‘mechanics’ of Harris’s text by investigating how these affordances shape the experience of reading (or, more generally, using) his autobiography, and in a second step I connect these characteristics to the meanings and politics entailed in the book. Taken together, I argue that the autobiography’s ludonarrative elements allow the text to portray the multiplicity of Harris’s identity and to self-consciously highlight the constructedness of stories of life writing.

Introduction

Contemporary (US) popular culture is increasingly characterized by a fusion of the symbolic forms of narrative and play. This liminality of the two forms is, perhaps, most visible in video games, a medium that almost always builds on telling a story in an interactive and frequently nonlinear way. Yet through practices that have been described as convergence (cf. Jenkins, *Convergence*) or remediation (cf. Bolter and Grusin), more ‘traditional’ media—which is to say, traditionally narrative media—have also more recently integrated ludic elements, from choose-your-own-adventure books to twist films, so-called ‘complex’ television, or postmodern ‘cult’ novels. While previous scholarship has explored how such texts can be understood as combinations of different media or specific aesthetic principles traditionally associated with these media, my focus will be on conceptualizing them as fusions

of the symbolic forms of narrative and play, which are not intrinsically tied to any particular media. Specifically, in this article, I want to examine one recent example of popular literature that uses both narrative and ludic elements to make sense of experience: the actor and comedian Neil Patrick Harris's memoir *Choose Your Own Autobiography* (2014), which is stylized as a choose-your-own-adventure book. I argue that the book's fusion of narrative and playful characteristics allows it to both ambiguate the otherwise more linear narrative of Harris's biography and to thus metatextually explore and point to the constructedness of any story of one's life.

To explore the book's ludonarrative elements, I will first briefly establish my understanding of play and narrative as symbolic forms and discuss in how far I see them as increasingly intermingling in contemporary popular culture. After, I will examine Harris's autobiography in two steps: first by analyzing its ludonarrative 'mechanics,' second by connecting the intricacies of these mechanics to the cultural work that his autobiography does. My focus will thus be not so much on a close reading of the text than on a reading of its mechanics, of which of its elements we could consider narrative, which ludic, and how they work together to create a text that renders the story of Harris's life differently than a purely narrative version would have. This analysis can thus serve as a case study to illuminate how contemporary popular culture makes use of ludic elements in its narration in a mostly symbiotic and innovative way.

Ludic Textuality: Narrative and Play in Contemporary Popular Culture

I propose the term ludic textuality to describe contemporary popular culture's propensity to combine and interweave characteristics of narrative and play, which, in scholarship so far, has mostly been discussed for video games. As was established in this book's introduction, the humanities have been privileging narrative for a few decades, and one particularly prominent example of this overemphasis coming to the fore was the ludology-narratology debate that characterized early game studies. As part of these debates, some scholars argued that the ubiquitous and dominant framing of video games as a form of narrative needed to be countered with conceptualizations that understood them exclusively as a particular type of *ludus*, or play (cf. Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 189-204; Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan). To circumvent the pitfalls of this debate, I understand the majority of video games as particularly prominent examples of ludic texts, that is, texts that primarily are characterized by elements of play but that combine these with other symbolic forms, most often narrative (but also, for instance, ritual or the database). This emphasis on symbolic forms, then, also highlights that such ludonarrative texts exist beyond video games and, in fact, characterize contemporary popular culture (cf. Schubert, *Narrative Instability* 37-38).

I have previously outlined my understanding of ludic textuality and of play and narrative as symbolic forms in an article discussing the video game *Alan Wake* (2010) and the TV show *Westworld* (2016-). While my interest here centers on tracing these dynamics in a print book, many of the underlying theoretical assumptions are similar, so I will briefly refer to some of this previous writing in order to establish a theoretical basis, amended by a few additional theoretical considerations (for a more detailed account, cf. Schubert, "Narrative and Play" 114-19). In this perspective on narrative and play as symbolic forms, I understand both as being characterized by particular affordances. That is, play and narrative should not be conceived of as having certain 'essential' markers or elements that homogeneously or consistently characterize them, but rather as exhibiting specific tendencies or inclinations for how they can be engaged with and made sense of. Caroline Levine, who adapts the term from design theory, notes that affordance "describe[s] the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs" (6). This perspective helps us to move away from a particular object's or text's 'intended' use and instead shifts the focus towards the "potentialities [that] lie latent—though not always obvious—in aesthetic and social arrangements" (6-7); in this sense, the [term] "crosses back and forth between materiality and design" (9).

Understanding symbolic forms as having certain affordances equally de-emphasizes a producer's intention and instead foregrounds a particular text itself as well as its potential use(s) by readers, viewers, players, etc. For instance, most narrative novels afford to be read linearly, from beginning to end, and even though a reader can also skip pages or turn immediately towards the ending, the novel's narrative will usually make less sense that way—while it is thus possible to skip pages, the novel's narrative form does not particularly afford it. A more ludic choose-your-own-adventure book, in turn, in which at the end of many pages the reader is asked to make a decision of what should happen to the protagonist by turning to a particular page, affords nonlinearity: Reading such a book from front to back makes little sense, neither narratively—the story is incomprehensible and incoherent—nor ludically—the ludic potentials for agency, making significant choices in the text, are ignored. Since different ludonarrative texts entail different allegiances to the symbolic forms of narrative and play, their particular affordances cannot be easily generalized, which makes them so interesting to analyze individually and in detail.

As I have previously argued, this perspective productively 'marks' narrative as a symbolic form, seeing it as "not necessarily a 'neutral' way of processing information but as one that comes with certain biases or preconceptions" (Schubert, "Narrative and Play" 115). Among the 'prototypical' characteristics of narrative, I would especially list coherence, order, and causality in relation to the depicted events, the linearity of that representation, and a drive towards closure and finality. Play,

in turn, is characterized by interactivity, agency, nonlinearity, and iteration (116).[1] While there are a number of texts or cultural practices that adhere to these prototypes quite well—for instance, a novel like *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) that mostly affords to be engaged with as a narrative, or an activity such as playing hide and seek or a football game that is mostly governed by ludic elements—there are also numerous examples that feature some narrative and some ludic elements, a liminality that could be called 'ludonarrative.'

This liminality is the case, for instance, in so-called twist or mindgame films that mostly build on a narrative experience but afford to be engaged with in an iterative way once a twist has been revealed, when revisiting the text yields a significantly different experience (cf. Schubert, *Narrative Instability* 31-39). Other examples include TV shows that encourage a participatory engagement (like *Westworld* [2016-] or *Russian Doll* [2019]), postmodern novels like *House of Leaves* (2000) that use footnotes and other formal and typographic innovations to render the reading experience nonlinear (cf. Schubert, "Narrative and Play" 118-19), the genre of choose-your-own-adventure books, or the large majority of contemporary video games.[2] In all of these examples, narrative and ludic characteristics coexist, and they can sometimes work symbiotically or at other times compete or interfere with each other (cf. 117-18).

In the following, then, I will more specifically look at how the medium of the book can use ludonarrative elements. Playful elements in novels have a longer tradition (cf. Aarseth), and previous scholarship has used 'play' metaphorically, especially to describe elements of postmodern fiction (cf. Ryan 177). In turn, contemporary US culture, sometimes separated from earlier decades by being dubbed post-postmodern (cf. Herrmann et al.), is increasingly characterized by ludonarrative fusions. Again, instead of a focus on remediation, my interest in such novels is to see them as part of a larger trend towards ludic textuality, which is not media-bound (but, in its properties and characteristics, certainly media-specific). Methodologically, to analyze ludic textuality in these texts, I am less interested in a focus on a close reading than in an analysis of what could be called the 'mechanics'—or the 'narrative architecture' (cf. Jenkins, "Game Design")—of the text. To use video games as an analogy, instead of a focus on narrative elements, I instead highlight

1 Later in this article, I will explore these characteristics in more detail when I analyze Neil Patrick Harris's autobiography. For a more general discussion, cf. Schubert, "Narrative and Play" 116-17; Schubert, *Narrative Instability* 36-37.

2 *The Stanley Parable* (2013) is an example of a video game that turns this very liminality between narrative and play into its main appeal (cf. Schubert, "Playing"). Generally, video games are also a fitting example to establish that these fusions are not necessarily one by medium but by symbolic form, as I have argued elsewhere (Schubert, "Narrative and Play" 117). Hence, it would be reductive to consider video games a form of (only) play and novels a form of (only) narrative.

the 'gameplay': the way the text has to be engaged with in order to function. The mechanics of a purely narrative novel are usually not suited to a detailed analysis since they are so well known to us and have, in fact, become part of the characteristics that we consider a novel to have; something similar is true for a purely ludic activity. In turn, investigating how a ludonarrative novel works 'mechanically' is worthwhile because there are numerous specific ways in which ludic and narrative characteristics can (and can fail to) work together.

More specifically, this would be an investigation of how such a ludonarrative novel *affords* to be read or, more generally, to be used. For instance, a novel like Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006) affords multiple ways to ('physically') be read, since every page features text from two different narrators, but one is printed upside down, in addition to other textual choices that readers can make in traversing the book. These mechanics not only work descriptively, but instead, they are also semantic, contributing to how the text makes sense of experience (cf., e.g., Bray). This is also in line with how gameplay and narrative in video games can be understood. While some ludological approaches maintain that "a game's theme does not determine its meaning" and that "meaning emerges from a game's mechanics" (Johnson qtd. in Green 11), more narrative-driven perspectives assert that "mechanics themselves do not possess meaning on their own" but are "part of a larger, interconnected system by which a digital story takes shape" (Green 12). While I agree with a perspective that sees mechanics and content as interconnected, I disagree with the claim that the mechanics of a text do not possess meaning by themselves. The way *Only Revolutions* is narratively and ludically rendered, for instance, already signals an interest in openness and ambiguity, in "assembling and reassembling, combining and recombining" (Bray 196), which its contents also evoke—thus, "[t]he rigid form of *Only Revolutions* is clearly inseparable from its meaning" (Bray 184). Additionally, the fusions and clashes of two different symbolic forms also allow these ludonarrative texts to engender metatextual moments of reflecting on their own mechanics and constructedness. This meaning-making potential of a text's use of different symbolic forms will become apparent in the following reading as well.

"Choose Wisely": Ludonarrative Mechanics in *Choose Your Own Autobiography*

Neil Patrick Harris's autobiography, published in 2014, is more precisely titled *Neil Patrick Harris: Choose Your Own Autobiography*, and the title page specifies that the book is "By Neil Patrick Harris" but also adds: "As unshredded and pasted back together by David Javerbaum," a comedy writer. Harris, in turn, is primarily known as an actor and comedian, especially for his eponymous role in *Doogie Howser, M.D.*

(1989-93) and as Barney Stinson in *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-14). Accordingly, his autobiography is light and humorous in tone, centering around topics such as his early acting successes, his interest in stage magic, and his later performances in musicals and stints as host of the Tony and Emmy Awards.

However, this particular example of life writing becomes more unique through its form: Still before the first page, the book interpellates the audience as Neil Patrick Harris himself, telling them: "[T]his is a choose-your-own autobiography . . . and YOU AND YOU ALONE will be responsible for living the life of Neil Patrick Harris. Throughout this book, you will be presented with choices. [...] And remember, the decisions you make won't just be affecting you. From this point on, Neil Patrick Harris's life . . . is in your hands." The rest of the book continues to use this second-person address and relates aspects of Harris's life in brief chapters (on average between two to four pages), at the end of which readers have to make a decision of what to do and, thus, to which page to turn to next. In its form, the book thus combines the genres of life writing and choose-your-own adventure stories, also called 'gamebooks' (cf. Wake). In the following, I will look at the book's mechanics by discussing how the affordances of narrative and play mentioned before influence the experience of navigating Harris's autobiography. The fusion of these characteristics will establish the book's liminality as part narrative, part play.

Some of the core characteristics of autobiographies—and, on a higher level, narrative—that we might expect from the genre are superseded in *Choose Your Own Autobiography* by elements of play. Specifically, this concerns the narrative form's drive towards ordering events in a causal relationship and thus establishing a particular coherence (Nünning and Nünning 66), which is complicated by the book's ludic focus on interactivity and a potential for agency. The individual chapters of the book are certainly driven by causality, relating events that follow each other, and the specific element of choices at the end of each segment additionally highlights that causality since readers have to make a semantic choice that will directly lead to another outcome. In turn, these choices can be understood as a low level of interactivity—instead of only actively reading and interpreting, which all kinds of narrative texts demand, readers also have to interact more physically with the book, going back and forth across its pages (cf. Aarseth 1-2). However, this interaction is not merely physical either, since the book encourages readers to make informed choices, thinking about what they want to happen to Harris next. In other words, this setup affords a level of agency on the readers' side that is typical of play.

Together, these possibilities infringe on narrative's usual focus on coherence, order, and causality. For instance, the book begins (conventionally enough) on page 1 with a description of Harris's birth, further establishing the second-person address: "You, Neil Patrick Harris, are born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on June 15, 1973, at what you're pretty sure is St. Joseph's Hospital" (1). At the end of this first section, at the bottom of the page, the book includes the following instruction in

italics: "If you would like to experience a happy childhood, turn to page 8. If you would prefer to experience a miserable childhood that later in life you can claim to have heroically overcome, turn to page 5" (4). If readers go for the first option, they will continue hearing about Harris's childhood, and at the end of that chapter, they can choose again between "exploring the world of theater," "start[ing] [to] learn magic," or reading a speech Harris practiced at age 13 (11). If they went for the other choice—or if, after reading through this chapter, they are not happy with their original decision anymore and go back to the previous section to reconsider their choice—they can read about an alternative take on Harris's childhood, a crueler version, which ends with the option to continue with the happier one or to turn to a much later page in order to meet one's own children, decades later (7). These elements work against narrative's penchant for coherence and order since one event does not 'logically' lead to another one but rather to multiple possible ones, which overall facilitates various possible reconstructions of Harris's life. At the same time, it gives more narrative power and agency to the readers of the text in deciding what it is they want to engage with, akin to controlling a video game character.

These characteristics also lead to the book encouraging a nonlinear reading practice. By play's nonlinearity, I do not mean a lack of chronology (since, of course, narrative can be achronological as well) but the lack of "one fixed sequence of letters, words, and sentences," so that "the words or sequence of words may differ from reading to reading because of the shape, conventions, or mechanisms of the text" (Aarseth 41). In this sense, a nonlinear text has the "ability to vary, to produce different courses" (41-42). Ludonarrative video games like *Heavy Rain* (2010) or *Detroit: Become Human* (2018) have used this nonlinearity to render the choices of their players more impactful, increasing a feeling of agency: making a specific choice about what the protagonist will do will potentially lead to different endings, and if players want to experience another ending, they would have to play parts of the game again to choose differently.

In *Choose Your Own Autobiography*, this works similarly, but the 'cost' of going back to reconsider a choice is lower, since it only involves going back a few pages. Still, at times, it might not be easy to retrace one's steps, since the choices usually lead to very different sections of the 291-page book. Almost all endings of chapters thus function as nodal situations, "allow[ing] for more than one continuation, which means that the two continuations that are both *possible* from one point have to be *different* from each other" (Domsch 1; emphasis in the original). The agency readers have in being able to shape the course of the story thus leads to more than just one definite, linear path in which the narrative can unfold. While the chapters themselves are experienced linearly, getting from one chapter to another overall creates a nonlinear text. Due to this nonlinearity, reading through the autobiography and making certain choices until readers arrive at one of several endings

will very rarely be the same experience, since the choices offer dozens of paths to traverse the text. The experience of each session of reading the book (or even that of different readers) can thus differ drastically, leading to different storyworlds of Harris's life being reconstructed.

In turn, this nonlinearity also invites readers to make choices and to revisit previous nodes, which connects narrative's drive towards closure with play's focus on iteration. Initially, these might seem like opposite ends of a spectrum—either providing closure and finality on something or revisiting it in a repeating fashion—yet they are actually combined symbiotically in the book. Specifically, having to make a choice on where to 'go' next is always narratively motivated within the possible world that readers can construct of Harris's life, and narrative's penchant for closure will tend to compel readers to bring the story to a close, in turn increasing their investment in the choices they can make to engender that potential ending. Since there are multiple pages that proclaim an ending to the book, the experience of one path from the beginning to an ending will usually not take long, encouraging another read-through. Instead of the focus on an overall story that provides closure, the book (somewhat paradoxically) highlights multiple narrative strands as leading to different types of closure in themselves.[3]

For instance, if, as mentioned above, readers choose Harris's 'miserable childhood' and then go for the option to meet their children, they have three choices at the end of that: taking their children to a Disney World trip, seeing a "real happy ending. Not a metaphorical 'happy ending,' sicko," and a third option taking up the second one: "Although if you want that, that's back on page 78" (Harris 279). The first option eventually leads to the same page as the second option, offering no choices but instead telling readers to "[g]o on to the next page" (287), which leads, indeed, to a happy ending.[4] One of these routes thus only takes fifteen pages to get to the end of the book, experiencing only about five percent of the potential narratives of Harris's autobiography. Fittingly, at the end of that last page, the book thus prompts readers: "To live your life again, turn to page 1" (291), directly evoking a logic of iteration. One of the primary pleasures of Harris's autobiography is thus not to receive *one* account of his life but to 'witness' the effects of the choices one can make, to exert one's agency in shaping the course of Harris's life, but also to go back to previous choices and see where other decisions could have led. While a reader could, of course, put away the book after reading just fifteen pages of it,

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3 Readers can also never 'get lost' on these paths, so a given path will always eventually lead to an ending, emphasizing closure as well.

4 This ending happens on the very last page of the book—in most choose-your-own-adventure stories, in contrast, the happy ending is not actually placed at the end of the book, since it would be too easy to be found by readers who simply want to skip to that and then retrace their steps

its specific mechanics afford an engagement in an iterative, nonlinear, and interactive manner. These characteristics ultimately render the story of Harris's life as multifaceted and fragmented, an aspect to which I will turn next.

"Turn Back to the Page You Were Just On": Playful Identities

The elements I have discussed so far characterize *Choose Your Own Autobiography* as a liminal text between narrative and play. Beyond being just formal characteristics, narrative and play as symbolic forms can be considered as particular ways of making sense of experience—in this case, the experience of an entire life of a person. The text's ludonarrative poetics thus also come with their own particular politics, and I want to point to four larger ways in which the book's meanings are intertwined with its ludic textuality.

First, the text's interactivity, its potential for agency, and the resulting nonlinearity render the account of Harris's life fragmented and multifaceted. This is a telling of one's life that goes against the "classic idea of a coherent self sustained over a lifetime" (Wong 4). Instead, the book is in line with postmodern and experimental life writing that underscores "subjectivity as performative," as "situational," and "as dialogic and narrative-based" (4-5, 5, 5). All of these characteristics go in a similar direction, highlighting that "there is no core identity but only changing surfaces," that "identity shifts according to its context and community," that we "have multiple identities simultaneously," and that "the project of becoming a self is to claim the act of self-narration in a discursive web of signification and questioning" (5). In other words, such autobiographies subscribe to the postmodern notion of understanding identities as "points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (Hall 6). Yet Hertha Wong's focus on such identities as "narrative-based" is compelling in this context as well, because narrative, as I outlined above, usually affords coherence, not a multitude of fragmented identities. In this sense, while many contemporary autobiographies might subscribe to a discursive understanding of identities in their content, their (narrative) form might implicitly or explicitly work against that. Harris's ludonarrative mechanics, in contrast, support and enhance the plot's interest in depicting identity as multifaceted. The choices readers can make in the course of Harris's life overall highlight multiplicity, as some paths pursue Harris's acting career, either on TV or on stage, while others focus on his interests as a magician and entertainer, or his experience as a father, or as a gay man. Thus, the text's ludic elements offer competing narratives of Harris's life, highlight the agency readers have in reconstructing them, and overall establish the constructedness of these retellings.

Second, the text's particular characteristics complicate some of the usual appeals of autobiographies. For one, this concerns processes of identification; as Paul Eakin argues, the "identification of reader with autobiographer [...] constitutes the fundamental motive for the reader's interest in autobiography" (36). Generally, Harris's narrative of a white, upper-class, gay man might not be something every reader can identify with, but this is a potential problem that concerns any autobiography (or any text, for that matter). However, the book's particular interpellation of the reader *as* Neil Patrick Harris, using the second-person narration to address the reader and thus affording agency to make decisions as if they were Harris—and as if they could determine his path in life—intensifies this issue.

Additionally, the text's potential for agency leading to nonlinearity also creates a problem of unreliability, since not all of the segments are necessarily reliable. The choices about Harris's childhood, for instance, are essentially two mutually exclusively retellings of his earliest years. Likewise, most of the endings that stem from making apparently 'wrong' choices, like being violently beaten up by the actor Scott Caan (66), are clearly not part of Harris's actual life. In this particular example, the book even signals that explicitly, speaking of "an alternate universe [...] where Scott Caan takes a swing at you" and contrasting that with "the actual universe" (65). Other over-the-top endings do not make this so explicit, so the overall text does not seem concerned with appealing to be particularly reliable, 'authentic,' or 'nonfictional,' instead embracing perspectives that understand autobiography as also fictional (Eakin 49). Thus, the book aligns itself with a more experimental strand of life writing that consciously plays with some of the conventions of the genre, which seems particularly fitting for a text that is overall often humorous in tone. The two chapters about Harris's childhood, in turn, add another dimension to this unreliability: From the exaggerated tone of the 'miserable' childhood, we can assume that this is the one meant to be considered unreliable.[5] However, some of the parts of the 'miserable' childhood, like the existence of Harris's grandparents, are not mentioned in the 'happy' version, so that those can potentially be seen as part of Harris's actual experiences as well. The structure thus acknowledges that a reflection on one's childhood as 'purely' happy is surely to be an oversimplification, and in presenting this in a binary way with the miserable version, the book seems self-aware that any attempt to narrate one's life is a construction, pointing to this unreliability itself.

Third, a closer look at how the text's mechanics of nonlinear nodal branches are used can connect these formal choices to some of the text's less visible politics. Instead of focusing on the general existence of certain mechanics, such a perspective traces the text's choices in navigating in more detail: which choices causally

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5 For instance, Harris's mother here is described as "Cruella Bathory Harris, [...] the kind of mom who drinks alcohol and smokes crack a lot because she is an alcoholic crack addict" (5).

lead to which other ones, which chapters are particularly difficult to reach, which paths (or particular plot elements) are always somehow mentioned in every read-through and which ones are optional, etc. This connection of form to the text's politics is particularly significant in terms of how Harris discusses his identity as a gay man. One of the earliest of these references occurs after a chapter mentions his childhood interest in musicals, since one of the options to continue from there reads: "You know, a lot of young boys who are into theater turn out to be . . . umm . . . you know, why don't you just turn to page 27" (16). There, the chapter starts: "From early in life you are drawn to guys in a tingly kind of way" and, at the end, readers have the option to "get laid" (27, 29). This is one of several points at which one of the options to choose references Harris's queer identity, and it is in fact difficult to choose a path to an ending that makes no such reference, for instance by focusing on Harris's partner David Burtka (e.g., on pages 107, 121, 168, and 194) or when Harris describes his process of publicly coming out. As part of these chapters, readers can choose to "come out in a rational, controlled way" (which is what happened in Harris's life), "come out in a reckless, over-the-top way" that ends his career and leads to another ending of the book (which, again, is an unreliable narration of what happened to Harris), or "choose not to come out" by turning to page 101 (173). There, however, the text tells readers: "Have courage, Neil. Don't be scared. Life is an adventure. [...] Now turn back to the page you were just on and say yes to adventure!" (101). Significantly, there are no other options offered, so readers must go back to choose a way for Harris to publicly come out.

This is a highly significant choice when considering the meaning-making potential of play: Readers, here, would be stuck in a loop should they choose to continuously ignore Harris's gay identity, so the effective lack of a choice renders this part of Harris's life as significant purely on the level of how it is mechanically included in the text. The book thus uses the mechanic of (ostensibly) being able to make a choice but here recurs to narrative's linearity, forcing a specific path onto readers: They cannot choose not to come out. This makes sense of experience not in a narrative way but specifically through the combination of narrative and ludic affordances and how they are implemented in the text. Additionally, while these chapters retell the story of Harris publicly coming out, there is no such central 'coming out' on the plane of the book. If readers did not know about Harris's queerness, they could 'stumble upon' this fact in a variety of different ways throughout the text, the coming-out story being just one of many. In a way, this reduces the centrality of his sexuality in his life story, yet on the other hand, his sexuality is present—slightly less visibly—throughout the entire book, referenced and discussed repeatedly as a part of other stories. This fits with a self-description of Harris as not very 'politically queer'—"you are not, by temperament, an activist" (169)—or as not seeing his homosexuality as the one aspect that defines him. In other words, being gay is only one of his identities, a self-identification that is mirrored and expressed in

the mechanics of this autobiography.[6] In this way, Harris's queer identity is plotted through the mechanics of the text, and something similar is true for other aspects of his identity that fill the ludonarrative characteristics of the text with particular meaning—especially his privileged position as a white upper-class man and how that enables him, for instance, to include the chapter about a miserable childhood as a joke, as an alternate reality.

Finally, all of these ludonarrative elements, both individually and together, allow the book to self-consciously address its own process of constructing multiple selves. Many of the characteristics I outlined above lead to more or less explicit references to the discursiveness and constructedness of any life story, and the book's generally nonlinear form overall contributes to that by offering multiple possibilities of such stories. This metatextual interest of Harris's book is also buttressed by inclusions of material from other text types, such as recipes, interviews, a Twitter feed, or segments akin to a commercial break, while another chapter that talks about Harris's husband David features typographic corrections by David on how Harris describes him. These parts question the alleged authority of one voice narrating his life, and the metareferential elements overall further highlight the constructedness of narratives, even—or especially—those about ourselves. Additionally, other parts of the book acknowledge its ludonarrative elements, since there are pages that can only be reached by 'breaking the rules' of the game, browsing through the book or randomly turning to a specific page rather than following a path. These instances directly point to that fact by sarcastically stating that "it's impossible to imagine anyone violating this book's explicit instructions by casually flipping through it out of sequence" and that "everybody else reading this book will strictly follow instructions and only go to the pages to which they are directed" (Harris 97, 175). Acknowledging this reading practice, which is similar to practices of 'cheating' in video games (cf. Consalvo), again allows the book to point to its own constructedness, here explicitly as a hybrid of narrative and play, which in turn is transferred to the constructed nature of the autobiography that readers are both reading and creating.

6 In a similar vein, after learning about Harris's queerness in one chapter, readers can choose to turn to a particular page "[i]f […] this whole thing is giving you gay anxiety" (83), which then leads them to a parody interview for *Totally Straight Guy* magazine (94-95). This presentation also 'plays' with Harris's identity: It offers readers who might not be interested in or might not be able to identify with his queer identity a way to explicitly acknowledge that but then makes fun of attitudes of people who are in disbelief that Harris is gay—especially because his character on *How I Met Your Mother* was such a womanizer—through the figure of the magazine's interviewer.

Conclusion

Focusing on Neil Patrick Harris's *Choose Your Own Autobiography*, this case study has highlighted how some contemporary pop-cultural artifacts are neither only narratives nor merely games but position themselves liminally between the two. Harris's book affords to be engaged with both as narrative and as playful by combining characteristics such as causality and closure with nonlinearity and iteration; sometimes, some of these elements work together symbiotically, while at other times they impede each other. Yet, together, they allow the autobiography to self-consciously turn inward, highlighting its own 'mechanics' of discursively constructing multiple stories of somebody's identities—and suggesting such metatextual elements as potentially pleasurable for how readers can explore the book. As a piece of life writing, *Choose Your Own Autobiography* thus manages to implement its interest in fragmenting identities not only on its content level but also via its form, combining the two to complicate and ambiguate more coherent portrayals of identity. In the process, the book also marks practices and characteristics that one might assume to be 'neutral' or universally applicable to autobiographical texts as specifically narrative, contrasting them with ludic elements.

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Multimodality as a Limit of Narrative in Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*

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Abstract:
This essay challenges the prevalent notion that multimodality is basically a narrative strategy and instead discusses it as an instance of narrative liminality that is informed by both sides of the limit. This is the premise of a reading of Mark Z. Danielewski's pentalogy The Familiar (2015-17) with the aim to show how the textual, visual, and material aspects of this multimodal text combine beyond ekphrasis or illustration and how they expose, challenge, and transgress the boundary between narrative and nonnarrative features without dissolving or reinforcing it. This analysis focuses on two particular aspects of narrative liminality in The Familiar, namely the combined visual aesthetics of simultaneity and sequentiality as well as the peculiar narrative instances of the Narcons and VEM.

1. Multimodality and Narrative Liminality

For a form that is fundamentally defined by being narrative, the modern novel in the English language has a remarkably long history of nonnarrative elements that explore the limits of this very defining quality, and its starting point—Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67)—already indicates the most important (though not the only) aesthetic strategy of doing so: multimodality, or the use of more than one semiotic mode to convey meaning (on multimodality, cf. Gibbons, *Multimodality*). *Tristam Shandy* famously includes visual elements other than text, as well as metamedial references to the materiality of the book medium itself (on metamediality, cf. Starre; on such bookishness, cf. Panko; Pressman; Schäfer and Starre). These visual and material elements are nonnarrative in the sense that their meaning-making operates differently and requires a different process of readerly engagement as they may not be integrated into the temporal logic of a sequential reading process but rather contrast it with the "space-

logic" Joseph Frank describes in his famous essay "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" (229), to which I will return.

Yet, these nonnarrative elements are not necessarily considered as equal with narrative ones in theorizations of multimodality. For example, Alison Gibbons in her excellent introduction to the subject defines multimodal literature as "a body of literary texts that feature a multitude of semiotic modes in the communication and progression of their *narratives*" ("Multimodal Literature" 420; my emphasis), and her perspective is representative of approaches to multimodality more generally. Even if she references poetry repeatedly (along with "children's picture books" [421]), her premise is nevertheless a *narrative* one. Understood in this particular way, multimodality is the proper object of narratology, a different way of telling stories than in "monomodal (verbal) texts" (421). This position, I venture, needs to be challenged along with the larger paradigm on which it is based, namely the dominance of narrative as the privileged and indeed *normal* form of contemporary literary and cultural production and analysis. The goal is certainly not to return to a similar privileging of nonnarrative forms such as the New Critical focus on a particular type of lyric poetry. Instead, I want to suggest that multimodality should not be considered a narrative technique by default, in which any nonnarrative aspect serves a narrative purpose after all, but rather also as a particularly effective way of going *beyond* narration.

The concept of narrative liminality is a useful critical tool in this endeavor as it draws attention to the complex contact zone between narrative and nonnarrative modes of representation instead of assuming that the two can be as neatly separated as the binary terms at first suggest. In the following, I want to analyze a particularly salient example of such an aesthetic practice, Mark Z. Danielewski's pentalogy *The Familiar* (2015-17), which was originally conceived as a twenty-seven-part series but has been 'paused' indefinitely after the first 'season' (@markzdanielewski; on seriality in [and of] *The Familiar*, cf. Ven). *The Familiar* is probably the most ambitious novelistic project in contemporary US literature, a blend of manifold visual, textual, and material features combined in the book object whose range combines the very local—the plot of the twelve-year-old girl Xanther who finds a mysterious kitten in Los Angeles in 2014—to the universal, as eight other stories and protagonists (Xanther's parents Astair and Anwar, Luther, Özgür, Shnork, Jingjing, Isandòrno, Cas) radiate from this center and numerous other perspectives expand the novel to include, potentially, anything. This encyclopedic range is paralleled by a wide variety of styles that include software code as much as free indirect narrative, concrete poetry, or comics, all kept together by a formal rigidity that also establishes the serial quality of the novels.

With more space available it would have been desirable to discuss all of Danielewski's major works in order to show how *House of Leaves* (2000) enacts the process of transforming metafiction into metamediality, how *Only Revolutions*

(2006) shows us the complete result, and how *The Familiar* expands it further by fully incorporating more non-textual visual elements. All three base their meaning-making on a genuine connection (and not subordination) of narrative and nonnarrative aspects, and all three consider not the text but the book their proper medium. Restricting myself to Danielewski's pentalogy in the following, I will argue that it is aesthetically situated on this fuzzy border between narrative and nonnarrative meaning production, and that its manifold strategies of combining visual, textual, and material elements serve to create a productive tension between the narrative form of the novel and nonnarrative symbolic practices without privileging one or the other. In other words, this aesthetic is neither interested in making the novel a nonnarrative form (and thus abolishing it *as* a form in the process) nor in enriching or illustrating a basic narrative with nonnarrative ornaments. Rather, its goal is to have neither of the two as a secondary supplement of the other but to incorporate them as equal halves of an aesthetic form that diminishes the dominance of narrative and the primacy of the textual without giving up on narrative or the text. This means analyzing the multimodality of Danielewski's five novels in terms of how they mark the limit of narration and include both sides of this permeable border in their meaning production. This oscillation seeks to neither clarify nor dissolve the distinction, to neither construct nor destruct, but to genuinely deconstruct it in a strict Derridean sense.

In terms of Frank's notion of spatial form,[1] Danielewski's novels thus complicate the sequentiality of narrative with the simultaneity of other semiotic modes that create meaning not by progression but by juxtaposition and superposition.[2] They also mark a shift from a narrated sequence of events to a nonnarrative symbolism. Notably considering both modernist poetry and the modernist novel together in a conflation of narrative and nonnarrative literary forms, Frank argues that the reader of both is supposed to apprehend these works "spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence" (225), and that both undermine "the inherent consecutiveness of language, frustrating the reader's normal expectation of a sequence and forcing him to perceive the elements of the poem as juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time" (227). This dichotomy results in a productive tension rather than in a complete shift from one aesthetic paradigm to another; such texts strive toward spatiality while still being rooted in their inescapable temporality. Even if the text is there all at once it cannot be read as such but only in sequence (and never two texts at the same time), and its mediality constrains it to a sequential temporality much more than other media such as image, film, or music, which are much

1 For different considerations of *Only Revolutions* in light of Frank's concept, see Hayles; McHale; and Pöhlmann.

2 This is one way in which *House of Leaves*, in Ridvan Askin's Deleuzian reading, achieves a "differentiation of narrative" (100).

more based on synchronicity. Multimodality is a way of negotiating between these extremes and setting them to work in a combined process of meaning-making. Visual and material elements are a particularly effective way of introducing true simultaneity to a textual medium that is necessarily sequential, adding a spatial axis to the temporal one.

The multimodality of *The Familiar* involves typographic aspects such as font, color, and visual arrangement like in Danielewski's earlier novels, but the pentalogy expands this visual-material repertoire by a more extensive use of actual images throughout the text (and not just in the appendix or on the cover as in the prior novels). *The Familiar* is full of images that may or may not be constituted typographically, and it is best described as a multifarious exploration of the relation between image and text that operates beyond the linear and hierarchical notions of illustration or ekphrasis (which would consider one secondary to the other). This is the first sense in which the novels use narrative liminality in their meaning-making, but they also take their readers to a narrative limit in a second, related sense, in that they offer a unique narrative perspective that is inextricably tied to the visual and material qualities of the book instead of just the text.[3] I will discuss these limits by moving from the first to the second and then back, hoping to eventually show both sides of this same coin.

2. The Visual Aesthetics of *The Familiar*: Simultaneity and Sequentiality

The nine narrative strands of the book are distinguished visually by different fonts and marked by different colors in the corners of the pages of the respective chapters. Xanther's color is pink, and both the title and each instance of the word *familiar* are set in pink so that each instance of this color—be it in the recurring omission marks, the thread of the book's binding, or the fractals in the book's gutter—hints at the presence of the cat that Xanther finds in volume one, which accompanies not only Xanther but also the whole novel as an uncanny familiar. Aside from the different fonts, each of the nine sections is also marked by certain typographical idiosyncrasies: Anwar's and Astair's chapters are full of parentheses ('parent-heses'), hers only round, his in all sorts of styles. Cas's chapters are typographically most conspicuous since their text is usually aligned around a round blank space. This is more or less explained narratively in the course of the novels: Cas owns an 'Orb,' a human-made machine that enables her to 'scry,' a peculiar way of seeing. Readers are being made aware of her dependency on this unique mode of perception by this

3 For clarity, I will refer to this second type as 'VEM liminality' in the following, explaining the term in due course.

blank space, a central presence and absence in her narrative, a gap that is formed by the text itself and as such demands a visual and symbolic interpretation.

More generally, visuality is so prominent in *The Familiar* that it no longer makes sense to consider the novel to be fundamentally textual, as still was the case with *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions*. The merging of image and text is omnipresent, and it operates between the reductive extremes that would consider one merely an illustration or description of the other. Instead, they are at times placed in contrast, and especially the text in Xanther's chapters is often pushed aside by visual elements or overlayed by them. At other times there is a unity of image and text that is usually found in concrete poetry, such as when Xanther wonders in the rain how many drops there might be, and this question is repeated across the page in slanted lines (TFv1 62-63)[4]. Xanther's increasing connection to the spiritual world of her familiar is expressed by a multiplication of lines and hashmarks that condense into needles, branches, trees, and eventually a forest that leaves no more text visible (TFv2 779). This forest corresponds to the animalistic power of the familiar as well as to Xanther's epilepsy, and her transition into this parallel world and her loss of control during a seizure are conveyed through a clash between image and text. As a consequence of this transgression in the second volume, the branches first overlap (TFv2 90) and then fully cover the pink corner of the page (TFv2 782-83), and their presence causes the absence of a page number (TFv2 91). In the fourth volume (TFv4 539-55), the forest also changes color, and images as well as colored words distort and smear until both combine in the chaos of a typographical and pictorial representation that is dominated by the Orbs that appear in Cas's chapters and the inside covers of each novel. These images are arranged serially, but the novel nevertheless leaves sequential narration behind in these passages and turns toward a nonnarrative symbolism of simultaneity whose meanings are created by the visual arrangement on the page rather than by linguistic semantics.

The novels contain yet another kind of temporality and text-image relation in the form of C++ code when Anwar is debugging a program called "Cataplyst" (suggesting a combination of cat, catalyst, and cataclysm) (TFv2 112-15). Anwar also shows Xanther a version of the game "Paradise Open," on whose engine he is working. He comments on the execution of the code by saying: "'Image subitizes language [...]. But at what cost?'" (TFv1 380). This transformation of text into image occurs practically immediately, and it points toward a possibility of how the different temporalities of textuality and visuality may be approximated. 'Subitization' usually refers to the instantaneous recognition of quantities without counting their elements individually (for instance on six-sided dice), yet the term is not only used metaphorically for the execution of software here but also describes the tension

4 In citing the different volumes of *The Familiar*, I am following the format used in the novels themselves, as they cross-reference each other.

between the different temporalities of image and text in the novel. It would be too simplistic to just always consider this to be a linear process in which the image provides the cognitive shortcut to linguistic and textual perception; instead, this very discrepancy is part of the novel's meaning-making, and this dialectic intertwines with that of narrative and nonnarrative elements. This does not mean that text would play the narrative role and image the nonnarrative one. On the contrary: *The Familiar* breaks with such simple assignments and instead uses these two axes to create a coordinate system that allows for much more complex positions.

The novel repeatedly uses the pictorial qualities of text to play with sequentiality and simultaneity. For example, in volume two, Astair cannot remember the name of the artist who made the expensive glass sculpture in her living room (TFv2 52), and thus the name also remains blurred for the reader (even if one may decipher it as Jim Helhenny Joab after the name has been mentioned later on). The fifth volume, when Jingjing has traveled to Xanther in L.A. to accompany the old woman Tian Li, contains two more significant instances of such textual visuality. Tian Li, the prior custodian of the cat, initially speaks to Xanther using Jingjing as an interpreter, and when he fails to understand her, there is no word but only a blurred cloud between the quotation marks (TFv5 338). However, Xanther understands Tian Li herself even though she does not speak Chinese, and this is represented on the page by having both the Chinese and English sentences in front of said cloud, as if they were spoken at the same time. This is the situation in which the central catastrophe (yes, 'cat-astrophe') of the novel occurs, and much like Xanther's seizures it is represented textually and visually—it is shown rather than told. However, this transgressive catastrophe may only be analyzed in full when considering it in conjunction with the second aspect of narrative liminality I already mentioned, VEM liminality, which connects all of Danielewski's publications.

3. Narcons as Narrative Limits

Readers are taken to this limit by way of a presence that at first seems to be narrative and metanarrative. In the first volume, they encounter it in the opening narrative of prehistoric humans, in which each sentence is bracketed by the symbols ⁖ and ⁘, using two different fonts. The scene ends with a commentary in a third font: "For alternative set variants of gestural translations, including alveolar clicks, numerous sibilants, bilabial fricatives, retroflex approximants, pharyngeal consonants, see 19210491-07289230-030566763230, order VI, v. 26, n. 13" (TFv1 43). This mysterious narrative instance reappears again in the first chapter to add a date to Xanther's thoughts about *Battlestar Galactica* (TFv1 52), and a little later it offers some context to help readers understand what is going on: "The Ibrahims moved to California last year" (TFv1 54). However, the first Jingjing chapter shows rather

clearly that this is more than just some kind of annotating commentary, and that these narrative instances cannot simply be described as narrators in the classical sense. While we still get a straightforward explanation on the first page of "pelesit" as "[a]nimistic spirit frequently aligned with Polong" (TFv1 101), we do *not* get the translation of Tian Li's Chinese we might hope for depending on our language skills, but instead an irritated "[r]eally? Not your Google bitch" (TFv1 104). This is the point when, at the latest, it becomes evident that this is not a neutral, objective, omniscient narrator, and this is further confirmed in Cas's first chapter when we encounter for the first time a statement by one of these three instances that has apparently been redacted (TFv1 156). Shortly after, three of them comment on the narrative in different fonts, although at this point it is still unclear if they are actually communicating with each other. Notably, these comments all pertain to Cas's Orb: "Here where the ontology of thought lives. [...] Here where the epistemology of living incarnates Judgment. [...] Here where the origin of eschatological limits finds every consequential thread" (TFv1 157). It is no accident that this reference to threads connotes the three fates, as Cas—whose name evokes Cassandra—makes the connection herself: "But the more Cas looked into her Orb of Lachesis, the more it seemed that Clotho and Atropos looked back at her [...]" (TFv2 283). These mythological associations are certainly justifiable, but they do not explain the three narrative instances. Instead, they reveal themselves after two thirds of the first volume in a way that is marked as a radical break by symbolic, narrative, and medial means and which hints at the full scale of what 'metafictional' hardly begins to describe.

Anwar's chapter is followed by a vertical line that begins this parenthesis, just like another vertical will end it. The first sentence is "[a] good enough place to pause" (TFv1 564), so that both lines may be read as a pause symbol (a visual and symbolic reference to *Only Revolutions*). This singular moment reveals the massive narrative framework, as the insertion takes place metaphorically in the minimal time span between the lines of the pause sign. The parenthesis is marked visually as well, as it occurs on purely white pages whose clarity distinguishes them from the other pages of the book, whose light beige tone readers may perhaps only notice when offered this contrast. There are no page numbers and no colored page corners, which significantly only occurred before when Xanther asked about the raindrops (TFv1 62-65, 68-69, 478-79, 494-95, 506-07, 514-15). This visual parallel indicates that Xanther potentially has access to this higher order, and her question of "[w]hat kind of counting equals this sort of overwhelmingness?" (TFv1 61) is an inquiry into the processing power that may represent, calculate, and simulate a chaotic system like a thunderstorm down to the very last drop of rain (which she may encounter during the demonstration of 'Paradise Open,' TFv1 348). The narrative instance that then introduces itself as "[n]arrative Construct. Narcon for short" and as a programmed entity, "nothing but numbers. Zeros and ones" (TFv1 565), can be described as a

tool of said power—and it remains unclear whether this power is representing or simulating the world.

This expository chapter introduces mainly TF-Narcon^{9} but also TF-Narcon^{3} and TF-Narcon^{27}, which operate on different ontological levels and at least initially are not aware of their respective higher instances; two of the five parameters that TF-Narcon^{9} describes deny such a possibility: "MetaNarcons Do Not Exist" and "Narcons Cannot Interact With Other Narcons (Though rumor has it we can sometimes hear each other.) / (I can't.)" (TFv1 573). TF-Narcon^{27} is in charge of cross-references within the twenty-seven-volume series of novels, which usually happens retrospectively but occasionally also in reference to future volumes within a 'season' (cf. TFv4 181). Furthermore, TF-Narcon^{27} can narrate what will happen to certain characters in the future (cf. TFv1 576). TF-Narcon^{9} does not have access to these levels but contains all nine narrative strands of *The Familiar* as subsets of a narrative instance that is very much formally variable. Notably, its long catalogue of possible forms includes the "Chronomosaic" (TFv1 566) and thus establishes a parallel to *Only Revolutions*, in which the term is used on the copyright page to describe the 'history gutter' that runs parallel to the 'main' body of text. This suggests that the Narcons are not only active in *The Familiar*, and there are a sufficient number of cross-references to assume that Danielewski's works are connected: The word "house" is printed in blue on several occasions in *The Familiar* (cf. TFv1 729, TFv5 760), as it is throughout *House of Leaves*, and Freya claims that "'there's a ladder in the floor'" (TFv4 217); the insertion of a second L in a different font turns 'always' into "allways" (TFv1 798) like in *Only Revolutions*; Xanther's eyes have different colors (TFv1 388), blue and brown, but like Sam's and Hailey's in *Only Revolutions* they are "allways sparking with green and gold" (TFv2 522) and "of yellow and green. Same old same old" (TFv2 767); and Cas and her partner Bobby are addressed by others as Sam and Hailey (cf. TFv4 62). These intertextual references situate all of Danielewski's works in the same universe, only not trivially with regard to setting or character but in a more complex way in reference to a metalevel called VEM, which is also the most comprehensive instance of narrative liminality.

4. VEM Liminality

While VEM still remains a rather obscure phenomenon in and across Danielewski's works, *The Familiar* at least contains a number of strong hints as to what it may actually be. I venture that VEM is a mode of accessing the entire reality of all "manifold universes" (TFv3, n.p.), a transcendent site of the imagination that, as the Narcons state the first time they say something together, combines ontology, epistemology, judgment, and eschatology (cf. TFv1 157). Apparently, the Narcons have limited access to this infinite resource so that they, in their different ontological orders, may

theoretically truly narrate anything and everything, including for example the prehistoric scenes that open each volume. Cas's Orb grants her a similar access, only to a much more restricted extent, "summoning to life within her Orb those early glimmers of VEM" (TFv1 569). She can only see the past, and there are only six confirmed so-called Clips that show, among other things, Xanther and Cas herself. The most remarkable thing about these Clips is best exemplified by "Clip #4," which is the subject of a short story Danielewski published separately in 2012.

In this text, Realic S. Tarnen pursues this very Clip, which was apparently shot in Touland Ouse's kitchen, and which shows him watching a film projected on the wall that, in turn, shows his daughter Audra drowning in the Pacific. The projected film is shot from an impossible perspective and in impossible conditions under water. This is enhanced even further when Ouse describes his own Clip as just as impossible:

> 'You tell me this instant! Because there—' and he pointed an accusatory finger at his blank if egg-shelling wall, as if he were pointing from the page you now read this on, as if he were pointing at you. 'There, where it should have stood, had to have stood, to record your 'Clip 4,' to do all that panning and zooming, close-upping and such, there, right there, there never stood no one, and there sure never was no camera.' (185)

Ouse's metafictional gesture points beyond the printed page and blurs the ontological boundaries between text and reader, and it indicates the revolutionary power of VEM that makes it, in the words of Cas's antagonist Recluse, an omnipotent weapon, "a weapon that no individual has a right to wield. It represents an imbalance of power grossly disproportionate to the way the world must create consensus" (TFv3 698). He furthermore describes VEM in contrast to art: "See, you and I are far greater than any artist. What we created isn't something to be experienced by others. What we created is the means through which to experience that which will always exceed art and us: here" (TFv5 470). The extent of this experiential power is "the majesty of infinite revelation" (TFv5 101), or the possibility of truly being able to see everything, for example the scene in Ouse's kitchen or the death of his daughter. The access to this metalevel radically questions the ontological and epistemological foundation of this world, and the complexity of this condition goes far beyond the linear ontological transgressions that occur for example when a character in a novel meets his author.

This difference is evident in that Cas's tenuous access to VEM does not grant her contact with the Narcons, and she does not gain full insight into the nature of her ontological metalepsis. In turn, the Narcons are aware of their own nature as software but are also explicitly limited in their programming to prevent them from asking what may lie beyond their own boundaries. VEM then describes the most fundamental or all-encompassing instance of this order, the software engine that

makes possible and contains all possible executions of the program. Anwar's genius friend Mefisto is a candidate for having created or discovered it, as he describes a secret project that also involved Cas by saying "[c]oncerns seeing. Or perceiving" (TFv3 493), while asking Anwar about the ideal compression of information: "'But even if we could compress everything into something manageable in a lifetime [...] or even manageable in the blink of an eye: what would such knowledge look like?'" (TFv3 485). Later on, they discuss God as an artist and conclude that such a creator would only produce one thing, "[n]o product. Just the algorithm itself," and they describe their own existence in these terms: "'Here then is to living in the algorithm.' 'Or to just being the algorithm'" (TFv3 683). Mefisto's own programming language, "My Word Ode" (TFv3 491), could contain or be the VEM algorithm, since "Word Ode" is an anagram of the name that Xanther eventually gives to her cat, Redwood, and of the name "Mister Doder Wo" (TFv1 254) that she uses to describe her epilepsy (and when she does, her alleged aphasia is purely textual, as she also asks "Door? Wed?" in yet another permutation that is visual, not auditory).

5. Xanther's Transgression

This example indicates that Xanther, in conjunction with her cat, has a special role in this initially stable constellation of narrative levels of reality: not rather trivially, by becoming aware of her own textuality, but by interfering with these ontological boundaries. Mefisto calls her an "Aberration" (TFv3 494), an anomaly that should not exist in this order. This is implied early on in the novel. While Xanther's question about the number of raindrops, about the engine of her world, at least suggests her metaphysical interest, she goes on to speculate in a conversation with her therapist about the existence of what will later be revealed to be the Narcons:

> 'Dr. Potts? Do you ever think, like, there's a conversation going on, you know, like somewhere out there, somehow parallel to the one you're having with yourself, like in your head, or even with someone else? [...] Uhm, like there are these voices that know everything. :. So close. .: Like voices that don't really live and can't die and have been around forever :. such a noisy, boisterous parade .:, before the start of things and will be even around after the end of things. :. She has no idea. .: You know, privileged with all that's that. Like Google, only true.' (TFv1 193)

The Narcons recognize themselves in Xanther's description as timeless, omniscient "voices," but this privileged, untouchable position is increasingly challenged as Xanther, through her familiar, gradually gains access to the world behind her world, and there are more and more of the "glitches" that TF-Narcon[9] mentions as a consequence of narrative imponderabilities (cf. TFv1 566). When Astair draws a floor

plan of their house, the Narcons surprisingly do not have access to it, and the image is covered by black blots for readers as well: ":.Hold on! How is it that I can't see this but Anwar can? Is that possible? :˙ / :. It's impossible for me not to see this but I can't. :˙ / :. ERROR: uncategorized disturbance :˙" (TFv3 489). The Narcons increasingly recognize that the parameters are breaking down, so that TF-Narcon[27] is forced to do a reset at the beginning of the fourth volume: "Retrace COMPLETE. / Remap COMPLETE. / Overwrite SUCCESSFUL. / TFv3 pp. 322, 453, 837. / Peace" (TFv4 53).

However, the Narcons lose this struggle for the execution of the narrative program within its parameters, as Xanther herself becomes a glitch (or rather a virus) that can neither be corrected nor controlled and which fundamentally shocks the system as such as a presence that treads the line of narrative liminality. TF-Narcon[9] recognizes Xanther's exceptionality already in the Narcon exposition chapter, stating that it knows her "down to a near-atomic level—near because Planck-scale analysis must address quantum superposition resolutions which do not always resolve considerately and broach VEM IDENTITY suppositions" (TFv1 571). Yet this tiny rest of uncertainty will continue to grow in proportion during the course of the pentalogy—and as it does the Narcon parameters break down—so that, for example, TF-Narcon[9] can make its cross-references to earlier volumes that used to be reserved for TF-Narcon[27] (cf. TFv4 344). Especially parameter 3, "Narcons Cannot Interact With Non-Narcons. And Vice-Versa. No Matter What" (TFv1 574), becomes increasingly questionable. TF-Narcon[9] actually already has its doubts about that one when describing it:

> Sometimes I swear she can see—without mediation, without processing, without artifice, definitely without me—other people's Narcons! Sometimes she even seems close to seeing me and in a way too that suggests exceeding even my possible awareness. Which is impossible. Categorically impossible. I can't even see myself. (TFv1 574).

However, Xanther increasingly uses the very words that the Narcons use in their conversation, which they at first dismiss as coincidence (cf. TFv4 141). As she gradually opens herself to this plane of reality, her anchoring in her own plane becomes weaker so that, for example, she wants to spend an evening during her visit to New York City to see "this really popular musical," *Hamilton*, which however has not yet premiered in 2014 and of which no other character has even heard: ":. Confirming: not part of her historical possibilities … :˙" (TFv4 450). Xanther's transgression even leads her to repeat on the first page of her chapter the sentence that concluded Luther's preceding one (cf. TFv4 737-39). Yet her access to other textual levels merely marks the transition to her access to the material level of the book itself. The question "Is she smelling smoke?" (TFv4 751) overlays an image that suggests the

page itself is burnt, and the widening hole reveals Xanther's forest as a reality behind reality.

This dissolution of the boundaries of reality has already been suggested by the visual representation of the forest itself, which covers or displaces other markers such as page numbers or the colored corners. Yet, these pages retain the predominant beige and do not shift to the purer white of the Narcon exposition, and so Xanther does not simply change to this metalevel but remains in a contact zone between both realities. The changing fractals in the gutter of the book support this interpretation further. They may basically be read as signs of Narcon activity, which are "fractally locatable" (TFv1 565). When the fractals are missing, for example, near the blank of the Orb in Cas's chapters (TFv1 146-47) or next to the three large pink periods (e.g. TFv1 271) that signify the cat's cry for help, their absence points toward a level of reality beyond the Narcons that intrudes on their narration. Notably, Xanther rescues the cat precisely from such a transition zone as she reaches for it just when it is about to be flushed away by the torrential rain, "half of her on the sidewalk, the other half in the gutter" (TFv1 503), and this access to the gutter in her world is also access to the gutter of the book. Xanther's existence between these two worlds, on the most important narrative limit in *The Familiar*, is conveyed concisely in this situation, and the cat, after its rescue, is present in the book's gutter as much as the Narcons. The fractals occasionally change color from black to pink after the Narcon exposition, but this is never the case before Xanther's deed. The fractals usually remain in the gutter, but in one instance (cf. TFv2 779) they break onto the page as if to point at the branches next to it, which, if seen as redwood branches, would indicate the presence of Redwood and its constituent role in creating the forest that Xanther may enter. The fractals are missing accordingly in some passages relating to the forest.

This presence in the gutter becomes most significant at the end of the pentalogy when Xanther brings about the aforementioned ontological catastrophe. This was already foreshadowed by the complete breakdown of the Narcon parameters: "∴ She can't hear you. She mustn't. ∵ ∴ Would the world end? ∵ " (TFv5 803). The world does not end, but it is fundamentally reconfigured. During a confrontation with Jingjing, Xanther instinctively causes an event that could be described as setting off "the bomb the imagination constructs" (TFv5 577-78): Across more than fifty pages (cf. TFv5 570-625), a circular, pink and black blast wave is gradually expanding and its power is not only distorting the words on the pages but also the paratextual page numbers and the time stamps that begin and end each chapter. It even forces the fractals from the gutter (cf. TFv583). This event not only unsettles the narrative or the text but really *the book* itself, and in this remarkable section *The Familiar* assumes a unique multimodal form that cannot sufficiently be described in the conventional terms of a novel or a comic. The circles transcend all narrative strands and chapters, and the ontological catastrophe that

caused them affects all aspects of the work. Even the Narcons do not remain unaffected. TF-Narcon[9] has apparently suffered the narratological equivalent of blast trauma: "What's happened, happening, I don't understand, except like I'm deaf, in my right ear for sure, hearing there is definitely going cotton on cotton" (TFv5 614). Xanther directly picks up on the fight the other two Narcons are having, and so they all must accept the fact that Xanther can not only interact with them but also influence them: "Are we, uh, like, just as susceptible to distortions?" (TFv5 619). The question of these distortions is, however, already answered by the text in which it is posed, since it is itself distorted by the blast wave, and readers witness directly how VEM liminality has been revealed and breached at the same time.

6. Conclusion: Treading the Narrative Limit

As Xanther's cat finally comes awake, the Narcons admit to their failure with regard to this world and the counterforce that has arisen in it: ⠮ How The Verse speaks through us … ⠝ / ⠮ Voice is never enough. ⠝ […] ⠮ We tried to describe a world. ⠝ / ⠮ Therein lay our vanity. ⠝ / ⠮ But I never tried to circumscribe a world. ⠝ / ⠮ Therein lay your salvation ⠝" (TFv5 824-25). The Narcons remain active, but their access to "The Verse" is no longer privileged or exclusive, and the boundaries between the realities in the book (and not just in the text) are enduringly blurred—by a shock that may well be considered a deconstructive discharge of all the tension between narrative and nonnarrative elements that has built up in *The Familiar* and all of Danielewski's works up until this point. This is a revelatory eruption that exposes narrative liminality as such but does not eradicate either the line or what it distinguishes; instead, it reveals this limit as the aesthetic driving force of the book itself as it oscillates between narrative and nonnarrative semiotic modes, between text and image, between the materiality of the book and its content as a medium, and also between narrative instances and those they narrate into existence. In short, this is the dialectic of the multimodal narrative liminality of *The Familiar*: The pentalogy takes us to multiple limits at the same time from both respective sides. It always insists that any of these lines is best considered a potential interface rather than a boundary that circumscribes a world and that we had better be very careful about the hierarchies we may want to introduce in describing these sides.

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The Poetics and Politics of Staring
Spectacle and Disability in Chris Ware's *Building Stories*

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Abstract:
Challenging the idea that processes of 'closure' function as primary means by which comics involve their readers, this article investigates how Chris Ware's Building Stories uses spectacle as a symbolic form that disrupts narrative as much as it depends on it to engage its readers. My reading of Building Stories serves to illustrate that some comics offer a visual pleasure that is not strictly based on narrative and the sequentiality of their images. Spectacle in Building Stories, I argue, functions as both an element of disruption and of orientation. I propose that, by using spectacle, the book not only guides its readers through a hardly navigable narrative web but also allows them to participate in acts of staring. By inviting readers to stare, Building Stories turns the disability of its protagonist into a highly visible and disruptive element while, at the same time, narrativizing it as a part of ordinary, everyday life.

Introduction

A household name in the comics scene, Chris Ware has long been celebrated as one of the most avant-garde comic artists of the twenty-first century (Olsen 197; Lau 156; Dittmer 478). Alongside his published work in newspapers and magazines, his award-winning books *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid of Earth* (2000), *Building Stories* (2012), and *Monograph* (2017) have, among others, been praised for their experimental style (Cohn; Kashtan), their illustrative and typographic precision (Dittmer; Heller), and their (post)modernist take on recounting US-American everyday life in its past and present (Morini; Haddad). While critics and scholars have interrogated Ware's oeuvre from a range of different perspectives, most texts mention or discuss readers' increased engagement as a central feature of his work and specific mark of distinction. Todd A. Comer, for instance, asserts that Ware's widely acclaimed

Building Stories “radically exemplifies” practices of closure (44).[1] Comer’s claim not only highlights *Building Stories*’ narrative qualities but also stresses the book’s engagement of its readers through narrative. In a similar vein, scholars frequently emphasize and discuss *Building Stories* as both a ‘manifesto’ of the traditional print book and one of Ware’s most playful pieces (Chute and Jagoda 7). Published in 2012, the book received four Eisner Awards and was, according to Aaron Kashtan, the most critically acclaimed graphic novel of 2012 (421). Yet, while *Building Stories* has been praised for both its narrative complexity and its overall playfulness, its employment of spectacle has not received much attention. As a consequence, this article sets out to examine the use of spectacle in *Building Stories*. In doing so, I aim to further investigate and challenge the means by which Ware’s comics engage and thus fascinate their readers.[2] Instead of approaching individual readers and their responses to reading *Building Stories*, though, this paper focuses on the book’s affordances. Originally a term used in design studies, affordances, as Caroline Levine defines them in the context of literary studies, are “potentialities [that] lie latent—though not always obvious—in aesthetic and social arrangements” (6-7). Inspired by Levine’s study of the affordances of different forms, this paper foregrounds the potential uses and engagements that *Building Stories* offers its readers.

While the very format of *Building Stories*, a collection of fourteen comic pieces contained in an almost Monopoly-sized box, draws attention to its presumedly ludic qualities, this article highlights spectacle as one of the book’s central features. More than a liminal space between play and narrative (Grennan and Hague), the very format of *Building Stories* constitutes a spectacle that not only breaks with prevailing expectations of what a book supposedly looks like but also expands the medium’s common affordances. The first part of this article thus regards the ‘whole’ of *Building Stories* as a spectacle, elaborating on the overall structure and unusual appearance of the novel. In a second step, the article goes on to interrogate the

1 According to Scott McCloud, comics engage their readers in a distinct way, as the comic gutter demands readers to perform closure between panels (63). Since the publication of McCloud’s 1993 *Understanding Comics*, numerous scholars have critically discussed the concept of closure, analyzing readers’ engagement in comics more closely (Wildfeuer and Bateman 3). As will be discussed in the following article, the nonlinear fashion in which Ware frequently assembles his panels does not only mark a departure from the traditional structure of the comic gutter but also speaks to the potential failure of performing closure in some of his comics.

2 Ware’s comics are said to “demand extraordinary things from the reader” (Boxer) while, at the same time, being “so astute and compositionally engaging that they cannot fail but connect with their audience” (Heller). What is striking about these and other assessments of Ware’s work is the positive undertone with which critics and scholars generally approach his comics. David B. Olsen goes so far as to speak of a “Cult of Chris Ware” (197), a term that can also be understood as a sign of caution to engage more critically with Ware’s work.

functions of spectacle, narrative, and their interplay within and across the novel's fourteen individual pieces.

I propose that, by using spectacle, *Building Stories* not only guides its readers through a hardly navigable narrative web but also allows them to stare at the book's protagonist, a disabled woman. As I will illustrate, staring at disability—otherwise strictly regimented by social codes—is a practice that readers will most likely engage in when reading *Building Stories*. My analysis is interested in the pleasures that *Building Stories* and its depiction of disability offer their readers through their engagement with the stare. Similar to how some scholars have come to understand film (Bukatman; Partington; Littau), I argue that comics like *Building Stories* offer a visual pleasure that is not strictly based on narrative and the sequentiality of their images. Predecessors of today's comics studies, such as McCloud, emphasize "closure" as a fundamental process that engages readers in comics (63). However, Ware's book goes beyond that traditional formula and uses spectacle as a distinct symbolic form that, although it is dependent on processes of narrativization, also engages the reader via the disruption of narrative.

Building Stories between Narrative, Play, and Spectacle

Considering its overall format, *Building Stories* is likely to leave a lasting impression on its observers.[3] Placed in a big, colorful cardboard box, the fourteen objects that make *Building Stories* consist of two hardcover comics books, a gameboard-like folding screen, and a total of eleven, variously sized comics in either broadsheet, newspaper, or flipbook form—none of them containing page numbers. As Comer remarks: "While items in the collection 'may,' after a few readings, be placed in an approximately linear order, there is no way of ensuring linearity in a first reading" (44). Indeed, the novel provides few indicators of time and, as Simon Grennan and Ian Hague have calculated, there are over eighty-seven billion ways of placing the individual pieces of *Building Stories* into one reading (6). Next to its gamelike appearance, this nonlinearity speaks to the playability of the book. At first glance, reading the novel resembles the task of piecing together a puzzle. This specific puzzle, however, is not based on one coherent image that readers can neatly reassemble. Unlike most games, there are no rules to be followed, no goal to be reached.

3 Of course, it is impossible to make an exact claim about readers' first responses to the book. From experiences at conferences and talks, I can, nonetheless, describe a noticeable difference between an audience's reaction to more traditional comics (e.g., in magazines) and reactions to *Building Stories*. After presentations, audiences usually spent more time looking at and asking questions about the latter. Initial responses should, however, not be falsely equated with numbers of readership. Some audience members are even quick to admit that the mere size of *Building Stories* would keep them from purchasing or reading the novel.

In games, as Grennan and Hague point out, the order in which a player chooses to engage with individual pieces "determines both what happens and the causal relationships between events." In *Building Stories*, however, "what happens" is predetermined; agency, as a crucial characteristic of play, is only simulated.

Instead of changing the outcome, the book provides its readers with the possibility of retelling and, quite literally, looking at one story in multiple ways. Unlike most games, *Building Stories* does not afford its readers the pleasure of successfully finding one or a limited number of definite structures. As Nina Eckhoff-Heindl observes, *Building Stories* is likely to initially invoke expectations about its playability that, in the proceeding interaction between book and reader, will not be fulfilled ("Building Stories" 85). Yet, while the book does not fulfill the qualities of what Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman call "meaningful play" (33),[4] the box and its content certainly create a liminal space between narrative and play that draws immediate attention to *Building Stories*. More than playability, though, I propose that one of the major appeals of *Building Stories* lies in its interplay of narrative and spectacle. In its entirety, *Building Stories* constitutes a spectacle that is both visual and haptic and that is closely connected to the liminal space between narrative and play that I have outlined thus far.

Both the gamelike appearance of the book as well as its disruptive qualities emphasize the very physicality of *Building Stories*. Like other experimental novels of the last years, *Building Stories* "defamiliarizes the book's body" (Ghosal 78). Aligning all pieces of the box next to each other, the 'whole' of *Building Stories* constitutes a spectacle that readers are invited to marvel at.[5] This spectacle disrupts the usual reading process while, at the same time, it might also trigger an interest in reading the novel in the first place. *Building Stories* does not demand but certainly encourages its readers to assemble its pieces in unusual ways. The central setting, for instance, an apartment building that tells its own story, is printed on a folding screen which can be placed in a vertical position. While its story can also be read by placing it flat on the table, the relative novelty and self-reflexivity inherent in the vertical position of the comic offer a "pleasure of disruption" that is characteristic of the symbolic form of the spectacle (Bukatman 76).

4 According to Salen and Zimmerman, "[*m*]*eaningful play* in a game emerges from the relationship between player action and system outcome; it is the process by which a player takes action within the designed system of a game and the system responds to the action" (34; emphasis in the original). In *Building Stories*, there is little to no response to the action of the reader as there exist no apparent indicators that promote one order of reading the book over the other. One possible goal readers can set for themselves, however, is to roughly make out a chronological order according to which the individual pieces can be assembled.

5 A Google search reveals a general fascination with the book's unusual layout: Images frequently display all pieces of the book neatly aligned next to each other with some pieces placed in vertical and some in horizontal order.

The spectacle that *Building Stories* constitutes in its entirety is twofold: One the one hand, *Building Stories*' gamelike appearance defies usual expectations of what a comic book or a novel looks like and thus serves as an immediate eye-catcher. The reader's "mental model" (Norman 17) of the medium of the book is challenged.[6] On the other hand, the publication history of *Building Stories* also does much to turn the boxed set into a spectacle. Before the book came out as a 'whole,' excerpts of *Building Stories* were published in newspapers and magazines. Between 2007 and 2011, various parts of *Building Stories* appeared in a range of different outlets, from the acclaimed *New York Times Magazine*, to free-of-charge, local Chicago newspapers (Worden). During this initial time of distribution, no apparent order or logic to the development of an overall story was revealed. Before *Building Stories* was made available as a boxed set in 2012, one last piece—for iPad users only—was published in 2011 (Kashtan 441).

While this article is primarily interested in the final print version of the book, knowing *Building Stories*' publication history seems crucial to understanding one of its many appeals. The various publication venues certainly helped to spark interest in the novel long before its publication. Using these multiple venues—including both print and digital media as well as outlets of supposedly 'high' and 'low' culture—*Building Stories* is exemplary of what Henry Jenkins has famously coined "convergence culture." The publication of *Building Stories* did, as Jenkins explains with regard to the notion of "convergence culture," "encourage[] [readers] to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (3).

Readers were invited to actively seek out new content across media but they also had to patiently wait for the publication of *Building Stories* in its entirety. This mixture of participation and anticipation helped to generate interest in the book, making its published and final form a spectacle in and of itself. Spectacle, in this sense, is not a fixed property of the novel but created through the interaction between readers and the material before, during, and after its publication. As Douglas Kellner points out in his book *Media Spectacle*, although spectacles work through staging the unexpected and extraordinary, their use is by no means out of the ordinary. According to Kellner, spectacles function as a marketing tool that dominates American consumer culture in the twenty-first century (14). In less evaluative terms, this function neatly aligns with Scott Bukatman's understanding of spectacle, who argues that spectacles create attraction through their "direct address to the spectator, novelty, [and] a presentational (as opposed to representational) set of codes" (78). In other words, Bukatman defines spectacle as an open display of

6 Cognitive scientist Donald Norman uses the term "mental model" to describe "the models people have of themselves, [...] and of the things which with they interact. People form mental models through experience, training, and instruction" (17).

the unexpected and, furthermore, places it in strict opposition to narrative and its representational concerns.[7]

Rather than pitting different definitions of spectacle against each other, I propose that it is most productive to synthesize them. As my analysis has illustrated thus far, Kellner and Bukatman's different takes on spectacle do not need to be placed in opposition to each other. Rather, their work provides us with a multifaceted understanding of spectacle that becomes very much evident in *Building Stories*. Yet, *Building Stories*, with all its excess and novelty in appearance, is testament not only to how spectacles interact but also to how they overlap with other symbolic forms, making them inherently dependent on each other. Its suggested playability and the nonlinearity of its narrative are as much part of what constitutes the spectacle of *Building Stories* as is its unusual appearance. The spectacle of *Building Stories* is thus created through a coming-together of different elements: its unusual publication history and nonlinearity, the haptic interactions it offers, as well as its unusual gamelike appearance.

Staring at Disability as Moment of Disruption and Guiding Practice in *Building Stories*

The broad scope of its story increases the challenge that *Building Stories* sets out for its reader. The novel covers a time span of approximately one hundred years, from the early twentieth century to the present, and includes the stories of six characters—the most striking character being the apartment building itself. The apartment building not only tells the story of its own erection in Chicago ninety-eight years ago but also reveals much about its former and current residents, thus connecting the central characters of the book: On the first floor lives the elderly landlady of the building. The landlady's story mainly features impressions of her past while, in the present moment, her life seems to be marked by an eerie absence. On the second floor of the building resides a couple that constantly argues, mostly about the fact that she has gained too much weight over the last years—they, too, seem to be trapped in a static present that clings onto moments long past. While the couple is either at work or at home fighting, a fifth character, a small bee, tries to collect pollen outside the building.[8] The majority of the fourteen artifacts, how-

7 Following Tom Gunning, who also thinks of spectacle as separate from narrative (Gunning 66), Bukatman ascribes an experiential pleasure to spectacle that is distinct from the pleasures that narratives offer their readers.

8 Paying homage to traditional children's books of the 1940s and 1950s in style, the story of Branford the Bee takes a number of unexpected turns, including the character's early death. For an intriguing in-depth reading, see Eckhoff-Heindl, "Branford the Best Bee."

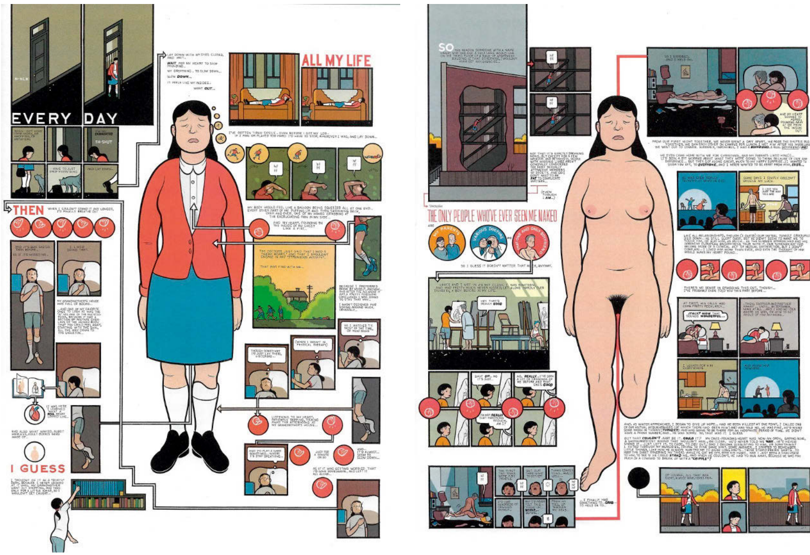
ever, concentrate on the sixth character, a lonely woman who lives on the third floor of the building—the daily life of the unnamed protagonist is exhibited in eight of the fourteen pieces. While main parts of her story are set in the apartment building, the unnamed protagonist eventually leaves the place to start a new life with her husband and daughter in the suburbs—a life that turns out to be not any less lonely. Encouraging a sympathetic reading of her character, the book also includes snippets about the protagonist's previous relationships, her failed attempts at becoming an artist, and an accident during her childhood that resulted in a below-the-knee amputation of her left leg.

While, narratively speaking, the protagonist's disability does not take up much space, the visual space of the comic is deeply marked by her disability. Not only does the comic's medium demand the disabled body to be omnipresent, but the book also openly plays with the visibility of its character's disability. While partially obscured by furniture in some panels, other parts of the graphic novel show the protagonist's disabled body enlarged across the page. In some of these images, the protagonist is shown undressed and without a prosthesis, further foregrounding the physicality of her body. Unlike in comics that follow a clear gutter, these images do not advance the narrative of the book as they make closure difficult to impossible. By displaying the protagonist's naked body across the page, *Building Stories* turns disability into a spectacle that disrupts narrative.

By staging disability as a spectacle, the book grants readers the opportunity to openly stare at the visibly disabled body. While staring is a natural ocular response to what we do not expect to see (Garland-Thomson, *Staring* 3), it is also an act that is commonly frowned upon. Far from being a mere biological response, staring can best be understood as a cultural practice that is interwoven in a web of sociohistorical meanings. As such a cultural practice, staring is, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson remarks, "drenched with significances, scrupulously regulated, and intricately ritualized" ("Staring at the Other"). The enlarged images of the protagonist's body in *Building Stories* therefore do not constitute a spectacle in and of themselves. Instead, the social regimentation that denounces acts of staring in everyday life generates both, the spectacle of disability and the potential pleasure of staring at it.

The spectacle of the disabled body and the potential pleasure that comes from looking at it are thus no inherent properties of *Building Stories* but are produced by an interplay between reader and text. The pleasure of staring offered by the novel is culturally and socially situated and depends to great extent on whether a reader's response to the protagonist's displayed body is one of surprise or familiarity. Just like the spectacle of disability, staring is not an act inherent to reading *Building Stories* but something that it makes possible—an affordance. Next to its open display of the disabled body, the privacy in which books in general, and a book of this size in particular, are read, affords the reader to stare without much external restric-

Fig. 1 and 2: Two consecutive pages from Chris Ware's Building Stories, centering the protagonist's body.



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tion. Like other popular comics about disability and illness,[9] *Building Stories* makes use of the fact that the usual codes of social interaction do not apply to readers' interaction with the images of a fictional character.

Although the spectacle of disability disrupts the narrative of *Building Stories*, it also provides a focus from which to discover the nonlinear structure of the novel. Next to the book's unusual format, the individual layout of some of its pieces is likely to disorient readers. On several of the variously sized pages, the panels do not adhere to any particular structure as they are assembled without any clear order and are also differently sized. In line with this, the typographic layout frequently lacks consistency and does not seem to follow an apparent logic—readers will encounter up to five different typographic layouts, all presented on one page. As Vincent Haddad points out, trained reading habits—to move from the upper left to lower right—are thus challenged. In this experience of disorientation, the symbolic form of the spectacle functions as a focus, a starting point that structures

9 Comics about disability and illness—also known as graphic pathographies—have become increasingly popular over the last decade. For a list of primary and secondary texts, see www.graphicmedicine.com.

the reading at least a little. Across and within the individual pieces that make up *Building Stories*, images of the disabled body—and more generally of human and non-human bodies—draw attention to specific pages and, within these pages, to specific parts of the story. Due to their size and their potential novelty, the novel's images of disability are likely to be among the first things that catch the eye. They thus become one of the book's guiding elements,[10] a visual anchor from which reading experiences develop individually and in manifold ways. Spectacle, in this case, is not only used to disrupt the narrative but to guide the reader. In doing so, *Building Stories* challenges any strict opposition between narrative and spectacle that understands narrative as a stabilizing form and spectacle as a mere form of disruption. Spectacle in *Building Stories* functions as an element both of disruption and of orientation.

The Politics of Presenting and Representing Disability in *Building Stories*

Questions of embodiment are central to both the format and content of *Building Stories*. Not only does the book foreground its own physicality but it also emphasizes the embodiment of its characters: from repeatedly addressing the weight of female characters, to depicting processes of aging, for instance by displaying characters naked at different points in time or by including enlarged images of the protagonist and her daughter. While *Building Stories* exposes both, the disabled and the nondisabled body as central means by which we 'build' and experience the world, the disabled body is used as a particular marker of embodiment. Disability in *Building Stories*, I argue, functions as a 'special effect,' an epitome of embodiment that is based on the idea that the body becomes palpable, first and foremost, whenever it breaks with normative expectations, when it hurts, looks, or moves differently than expected.

Building Stories simultaneously depends on and challenges medical ideas of the disabled body. Several of its pages resemble anatomy books in that they place bodies center stage, attaching lines to them that lead to individual panels. Also closely linked to medical practice is the act of undressing that the book performs on its protagonist. While several characters are shown naked throughout the comic, three of its splash pages stage the undressing of the protagonist. Each page strips the protagonist of layers of clothing and of protection: On the first page, she is depicted fully dressed; on the next page, she is shown naked, and on the final page, the muscular and skeletal system of the protagonist is all that is left to see. In this

10 Other guiding elements that I see at work are the broad indicators of time given within the overall story and the format of each of the novel's artifacts, with oversized objects and a book in golden cover drawing more attention to themselves than other pieces.

moment, the disabled body is openly marked as a medical spectacle that, at first glance, does not fulfill any narrative function. This is, however, precisely the moment in which the cultural dynamics of narrative liminality are at work. On the one hand, the cultural work done by these images closely follows established medicalized patterns that objectify the disabled body and cast it as deviant. On the other hand, the interplay of spectacle, placed at the center of the page, and the narrative that unfolds at its margins opens up the possibility of questioning and further manifesting these patterns.

While the open display of the protagonist's body does not fulfill a narrative function as such, it provokes narrative, encouraging the reader to piece together a coherent story across the pages. In an ableist world, as Lennard Davis has argued, disability demands a story—it cannot simply be (3-4). If disability always requires a story then the quest of finding out "how the protagonist became disabled" is provoked by the depiction of the protagonist's visible disability and thus inherently part of the reading experience of *Building Stories*. Depending on the individual order of each reading, the book sooner or later satisfies this need to know 'what happened.' Instead of naturalizing disabled embodiment by refusing to give any explanation, the book eventually reveals that the protagonist's impairment was caused by a boating accident around the age of eight or nine. By providing this information, *Building Stories* follows a medical rhetoric that strictly demands a cause as the starting point of any disability narrative.

The spectacle of disability, however, does not only demand a narrative but, considering the larger cultural script, also influences what is perceived and defined as spectacle in the first place. Spectacles of the body require narratives to precede and follow them, making the liminal space between these symbolic forms the basis for their very existence. Put differently, in an ableist world, the presence of disability does not only continue to trigger the question of 'what happened,' but this very question also marks the presence of disability as exceptional. Its use as spectacle is dependent on the fact that the image of a disabled body is experienced as something unexpected. This status as exceptional, in turn, provides the basis for displaying disability as spectacle and helps to uphold an "ideology of ability" as a structuring principle of Western modernity (Siebers 7).

Disability is, in the traditional fashion of a medical book, staged as a spectacle, yet the surrounding panels lead to a narrativization of the disabled body. The narrative that unfolds reveals decisive and unexceptional moments of the protagonist's life alike, thus transforming the body into a person. Contrary to Margaret Fink Berman, though, who claims that *Building Stories* negotiates the ordinariness of disability, I propose that the appeal of *Buildings Stories* lies in its seeming contradiction: Its presentation of disability as spectacle merges with both its medicalized rhetoric and the book's representation of disability as ordinary. The protagonist is mostly shown performing ordinary acts while being surrounded by ordinary things

and people. At the same time, though, it is important to emphasize once more that, while the overall narrative is not overly concerned with the protagonist's disability, the comic's images nevertheless mark it as something highly visible. *Building Stories* negotiates the ambiguousness of difference and normality by visually casting disability as extraordinary while, at the same time, narrativizing it as a part of ordinary everyday life. Doing so, the visual pleasure of spectacle that engages the reader via the disruption of narrative (potentially) functions to keep the reader of *Building Stories* interested in the ordinariness of its story. Spectacle is, in other words, used to balance the ordinariness that is otherwise depicted. It is precisely this liminal space between spectacle and narrative that the disabled body comes to inhabit, that fills acts of staring at disability, as Garland-Thomson has claimed, with a productivity that can lead starers to new insights (*Staring* 6).

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"No Show Dissed Quite Like This One"
Invective at the Borderlands of Narrative and Spectacle in *Veep*

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> At the end of the day, this is why we ended the show. The stupidest, dumbest, craziest things we could think of to make a president and his staff say and do ... I bow to my betters. We're being outdone regularly.
> *—David Mandel, Executive Producer and Showrunner of Veep (qtd. in Andrews)*

Abstract:
This essay draws on the concept of narrative liminality to theorize performances of insult and vituperation in HBO's Veep (2012-19)—a signature element of the show and part of its satiric portrayal of political Washington as a world governed by narcissism, incompetence, and opportunism. The essay's analysis proceeds in two steps: First, it argues that Veep's invective performances rely on symbolic logics that are best understood as spectacular. Second, it outlines how the show's invective spectacles interact with narratives in complex and culturally potent ways—both with narrative strands manifest in the show's storytelling and with metanarratives that are invoked yet remain tacit. In unfolding this analysis, the essay, on the one hand, aims to highlight how Veep offers valuable reflections on the kind of contemporary, mediatized, and politicized invective culture that found its epitome in the Trump presidency. On the other hand, it pursues a theoretical project whose main concern is to move beyond simplistically binaristic conceptions of the relationship between narrative and spectacle.

When HBO's *Veep* was cancelled in 2019, there was much talk about how the show had been no longer working in the age of Trump: how its hyperbolic portrayal of narcissism, incompetence, and venomousness in the nation's highest political offices had lost its satiric drive in the face of a real-world White House that rivaled

the show's supposed exaggerations on so many counts. One of these counts was the energetic use of insult and vituperation by holders of political office—a signature element of the show, which it stages as a clandestine, latently outrageous habit that contrasts with the kind of hyper-polite speech that its fictional politicians practice in public. With a real-world president Trump, who had made invective a key tactic of his public presidential performance, the show's presupposition of standards of civility for presidents was as much out of date as the invective it staged was quickly, if outrageously, becoming normalized.

While many obituaries for *Veep* thus focused on the erosion of its satiric premise and its consequent anachronism in the age of Trump,[1] I want to suggest a different perspective on the show, one that, to the contrary, highlights its timeliness and the ways in which it can help process the distinct culture of invective that sustained Trump. My point of departure is to approach the invective staged in the show as observations of and reflections on real-world dynamics of insult and vituperation in the political realm and the media ecosystems to which it is tied. In this engagement with cultures of invective, I see the show tease out two key dynamics that I want to discuss in the following. First, *Veep* throws into relief how a good deal of invective does not rely on the symbolic form of narrative but rather generates its cultural power out of symbolic logics that, I argue, are best understood as spectacular.[2] The show regularly stages invective spectacularity at work, offering a rich platform to study the distinct dynamics by which it operates—its unique affective potentials, for instance, or its ability to accumulate attention. Second, *Veep* demonstrates how invective spectacles—while symbolically different from the narrative elements that putatively govern a show like this—regularly and powerfully interact with narratives. *Veep*'s invective spectacles interact both with narrative strands that are unfolded in the show and with metanarratives that are evoked yet remain tacit. The show highlights how a contemporary, mediatized, and politicized invective culture draws its cultural potency from these interactions between the spectacular and the narrative: It is in the interlacing of the distinct affordances of spectacular affectivity and narrative worldmaking, of presentist affect and a narrative causation that can remain tacit, where *Veep* locates the power of mediatized invective and which it allows its audience to observe from different perspectives. This is what makes the show a complex and timely reflection on symbolic abuse in politics and the poli-

1 This sentiment is very explicit, e.g., in D'Addario and in Desta.

2 I have explored the spectacular implications of invective performances in previous publications, most notably in "*Veep*, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine," which also deals with the HBO show, yet with a primary interest in the antiheroic construction of its protagonist Selina Meyer. My essay here builds on and expands the thinking that went into such previous publications.

tics of symbolic abuse. At the same time, it offers a rich case study for theoretical reflections on the nature of spectacle and on its relationship to narrative.

Veep and Its Invective Signature

Veep—one of the most highly awarded TV comedies of the early 2000s[3]—is a somewhat loose adaptation of the British comedy *The Thick of It*, and, like the British show, it was created by acclaimed political satirist Armando Iannucci. It focuses on the character of Selina Meyer, initially Vice President, later for a short period of time also President of the United States, and her team. The show's satiric premise is to depict political Washington as a world of grotesque opportunism and failure. Its plots revolve around things going wrong, consistently and often cringe-worthily so, ranging from the small and quotidian—like the fundraiser that is at the center of the show's pilot ("Fundraiser")—to the big—like policy initiatives or electoral campaigns. The show's protagonists are imaged in an equally grotesque light: self-centered and opportunistic, governed by desires for power and glory, and showing not the least bit of interest in political, let alone moral, principles. The show makes a point in depicting all political players as selfish and opportunistic; its storyworld is systematically free from any heroic characters or actions.[4]

In this caricaturistic portrayal, one of the character traits that marks the protagonists—political office holders and aides alike—is their extensive use of invective: While their public speaking tends to be so spin-doctored and controlled that it often ends up saying nothing, they routinely indulge in profanity-laced and wholesale uncivil speech whenever they feel to be in private. Insults are a key element of this performance of incivility. Characters regularly hurl invectives at present or absent others—in fact, doing so is the major mode of interpersonal relations in the show's storyworld. On the one hand, it is this consistency and sheer quantity of abusive language that is remarkable. On the other hand, it is the quality of these invectives that stands out: their excessiveness, their sometimes crude and crass, sometimes colorful and creative flavors. To illustrate, here are a few examples, randomly picked from the first minutes of the first episode:

> [Meyer on her way to a reception, asking her Chief of Staff about various people who might attend]

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3 Among other things, Julia Louis-Dreyfus won the Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy for a record-breaking six times. For a complete list of awards, see www.imdb.com/title/tt1759761/awards.

4 The character of Gary—Selina Meyer's personal assistant and 'body man'—might count as an exception: He primarily figures as the butt of jokes and insults, but he is also the protagonist who is furthest removed from any form of political power.

> "What about Senator Reeves? Is he dead yet?"
> [Chief of Staff:] "Not yet. He's mostly intravenous. He has so many tubes in him, he looks like a set of bagpipes."
> [...]
> [Meyer's Chief of Staff doing small talk with a Senator's aid]
> "So, Dan, are you enjoying working for [Senator] Hallows?"
> [Senator's aid:] "Not really. She's middle of the road. She's mediocre, really. Of all the 'ocres,' she's the 'mediest.'"
> [...]
> [Meyer asking her Chief of Staff about the Senator's aid]
> [Chief of Staff:] "Dan is a shit."
> [Meyer:] "You want to expand on that?"
> [Chief of Staff:] "Sure. He's a massive and total shit. When you first meet him, you think surely, to God, this man can't be as big a shit as he seems, but he is—"
> [Meyer:] "See, I—"
> [Chief of Staff:] "—because like if there were a book with covers made of shit, you'd think: 'That's intriguing. I wonder what's in this book that they saw fit to give it covers made of pure shit.' And then you open it and: shit." ("Fundraiser")

To some extent, these moments of invective help build the pilot's narrative. For one, they contribute to the larger, episode-spanning narrative arc which, as is to be expected of a pilot, focuses on establishing characters and their relationships: Meyer's grappling with the relative insignificance of the Vice Presidency and her desperate desire to get political Washington's attention; her Chief of Staff's seemingly infinite knowledge of political Washington and her complicated relationship to Dan, the Senator's aid, who would soon join Meyer's team; Dan's careerist opportunism. In addition, the invective moments help build the episode's own contained narrative that revolves around Meyer's appearance at a fundraiser, where she wants to promote an environmentalist policy initiative that she hopes would boost her political profile, and around the many ways in which this plan goes wrong. The invective that characters perform clearly helps advance and flesh out these different levels of narrative in the episode; it has a narrative function.

While this kind of narrative integration is important in ways I will discuss in a moment, what I want to highlight here is how these performances of insult notably go beyond any measure of narrative necessity. They are, in many ways, too much for mere narrative functionability—too frequent in the episode's temporal unfolding, too extensive, too flamboyant. This conspicuousness turns invective performances into a key thematic signal of the show: *Veep* thereby describes itself as being 'about' such moments of flamboyant insult, at least to a considerable extent. Discourses and practices around the show illustrate how such signals of 'aboutness' have gained traction. There is, for instance, a plethora of online articles, blog

posts, and videos, both by professional and fan authors, that feature and discuss the show's 'best insults' (see, e.g., Fitz-Gerald, "Greatest Insults"; Rankin; "Swearing-In"). Such practices not only engage with *Veep* through an exclusive focus on its invective performances, they also approach these performances as detachable from the episodes in which they were originally featured—as something that can be enjoyed and circulated independent of their narrative contexts. The same applies to the comparable plethora of memes that *Veep* has inspired, many of which are dedicated to the show's insults (see, e.g., Rackham). And many review articles on the show—especially those written in the wake of its cancellation—expressly reflect on the distinct, possibly even rivaling appeals of its narrative and of its "baroque, obscene insults" (Alter). As one reviewer puts it:

> One of the constant joys of tuning into *Veep* every week was sitting on the edge of your seat, waiting to see how one character would torch another. Of course, that's not all the HBO show will be remembered for—it'll go down as one of the sharpest political satires to grace the small screen—but it's hard not to look back on all the wonderful jabs, comebacks, and self-owns that emerged from Selina Meyer's kooky version of D.C., and lament, 'No show dissed quite like this one.' (Fitz-Gerald, "Anatomy")

Media practices tied to the show thus suggest that *Veep*'s performances of invective extend an appeal of their own, one that seems largely independent of the appeal of its satiric narrative.

Invective Spectacle

My first major argument in this paper is that this perceived distinctness of the show's invective moments can be fruitfully conceptualized as spectacularity. Approaching performances of invective as spectacles may seem counterintuitive: Spectacles are commonly assumed to revolve around visual display and engagement, which is also what the word's etymological roots in the Latin *spectare*—to watch—emphasizes. By contrast, *Veep*'s invective performances, albeit mediated by moving images, are primarily about words, about verbal display. When Film Studies scholarship applies the notion of spectacle to movies,[5] its point of reference is typically also the visuality of its objects of study. For example, Laura Mulvey,

5 The branch of scholarship that is most relevant to my project overwhelmingly focuses on cinematic spectacle. With the remarks that follow, I suggest that the insights of this scholarship can be extended to other filmic media, such as television. Of course, such extensions always have to take into consideration the specificities of different filmic media—the big screen visuals and Dolby Surround systems of movie theaters do have particular affordances for spectacularity, and the type of spectacles they enable has been foregrounded in the ex-

whose work on the male gaze arguably laid the groundwork for much of this line of inquiry, conceptualizes spectacle as tied to the "visual pleasure" that film has to offer. The particular visual pleasure she focuses on concerns how classical Hollywood cinema stages the female body in a way that "connote[s] *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (11; emphasis in the original). Another example is Tom Gunning, working on a different set of films, who theorizes early cinema as a "cinema of attractions" that revolves around film's "ability to *show* something" (382; emphasis in the original), around "inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle" (384). And also work on the most recent formation of cinema that is commonly associated with spectacle—the special effects blockbuster—emphasizes the visual allure of CGI and related technologies in delineating the spectacular quality of such films (Lavik 175-81).

The visuality that such scholarship highlights is clearly tied to how film operates as a medium: Throughout cinematic history, film has appealed to its audiences through its "ability to *show* something" and its continuously evolving technologies to do so. Yet even the most canonical constellations of cinematic spectacle are not just about visuality but about a particular way in which the medium's visual affordances are performed. It is this distinct performative mode of spectacle which, I want to suggest, also marks moments of invective in *Veep* and elsewhere. Scott Bukatman is one of the film scholars who make a case for conceiving spectacle as a mode of performance rather than as a type of image (76). He theorizes spectacle as one of the elements of cinematic form through which film appeals to its viewers—more precisely, he conceptualizes it as an element next to and emphatically different from the narrative element that scholarship tends to foreground. Spectacle, he writes, offers a type of "experiential" pleasure that is distinct from narrational pleasure (78); it follows a "presentational" logic, foregrounding itself as an on-screen event. Making a similar argument, Erlend Lavik adds that this eventful quality of spectacle's performativity implies a temporality that is different from that of narrative: Narrational pleasure "is related to our emotional and intellectual involvement with a *sequence* of events"—with the past, present, and future of a plot—whereas "[o]ur fascination with spectacle […] is instant, here and now" (172; my emphasis). Spectacle tends to acquire this eventfulness, Lavik suggests, through strategies of excess—by presenting more than is necessary for the unfolding of a film's narrative, by lingering and loading up, "overwhelm[ing] viewers" (176) with its 'too-much-ness.' Accordingly, the experiential pleasure of spectacle is typically described in terms of an affective intensity (that is often framed as dangerous), a visceral stimulation or heightened emotional impact, which is again

isting scholarship. One of the points I want to make is that spectacle in other filmic media, with their slightly different affordances, might look differently than in cinemas.

contrasted with the type of engagement that narrative affords—allegedly involving more thinking than just feeling, ideas rather than somatics.[6] Thus delineated as a mode of performance, spectacle can help conceptualize many of the aspects of *Veep*'s invective moments that I have outlined above: their conspicuous excessiveness, their self-presentational eventfulness, their orientation toward affective stimulation. *Veep* demonstrates that verbal display can also operate as spectacle and that the transgressive use of language that is involved in invective has a unique potential for such verbal spectacle.

In a second step, I now want to use this conceptualization of invective spectacle as a platform to critically revisit the binaristic framing of spectacle and narrative on which theorizations of spectacle tend to rest. As my discussion of the scholarship indicates, spectacle is often theorized as that which is not narrative, relying on narrative as a negative foil to advance conceptualizations of spectacle as a distinct element of filmic media. The binaristic frame of this conceptual work also informs perspectives on the relationship between spectacle and narrative in cultural materials, which are typically conceived as symbolic forms that "work against" each other. Mulvey, in her pioneering article, uses exactly these words to describe spectacle and narrative as fundamentally antagonistic, with spectacle "freez[ing] the flow of action" and narrative working to contain the disruption that spectacle provides (11).

More recently, scholars have begun to question whether spectacle and narrative "are in some way antithetical" (Lewis 215; cf. also Lavik 173) and necessarily evolve an antagonistic relationship. Bukatman, going one step further, contends that Mulvey's influential reading of spectacle and narrative as antagonistic is predicated on the debatable assumption that film is first and foremost a narrative medium, faulting her for "exaggerat[ing] both the centrality and efficacy of narrative *telos*" in the disruption-containment dynamic she diagnoses (76). Without getting into a discussion whether or not film is primarily narrative, I want to make a case for approaching filmic media not from the vantage point of the presumed 'heartlands' of their narrative operations but of the 'contact zones' where narrative meets the symbolic form of spectacle (see the introduction to this volume). Such a shift in focus promises to advance our understanding of both symbolic forms beyond the insights that are possible within a strictly binaristic framework, while also promising to throw into relief the multitude of ways in which narrative and spectacle come together in cultural materials. *Veep* provides a productive case study to probe into these borderlands, for one because the somewhat defamiliarized (because verbal)

6 This is a more than debatable binarization of spectacle as revolving around affect and emotion versus narrative as revolving around cognition. The scholarship I discuss never goes so far as to spell out this kind of binary, but it is implied in much of its argumentation. My somewhat polemical reductionism here is meant to highlight how approaching spectacle as binaristically related to narrative leads to frustratingly reductive insights.

spectacularity of its invective moments might help in breaking free from established patterns of thinking about spectacle's relationship to narrative;[7] and, for another, because media practices around the show indicate that much of what makes *Veep* pleasurable and meaningful for audiences comes, in fact, from its interlacing of narrative and extranarrative.

Borderlands Between Spectacle and Narrative in *Veep*

I want to probe into *Veep*'s interlacing of narrative and invective spectacle by focusing on one particularly prominent type of invective moment, along with its contexts: the Jonah insult—i.e., the insulting of Jonah in which virtually all characters participate.[8] Jonah is a minor character who goes through various job positions in the course of the show's seven seasons: He starts out as a low-rank staffer, later works as a political consultant, then as a pundit who runs a populist political blog, and finally goes into politics himself, getting himself elected first to the House of Representatives and then to the office of Vice President. Jonah might well be the most despicable and despised among *Veep*'s characters. He shows not even traces of empathy nor moral conscience and is willing to do anything for his own advancement, from kissing up to his superiors to courting the NRA or right-wing voters. He also unhesitatingly sells out anybody he does not deem useful and relies on derision—often of a confidently misogynistic type—to boost his ego. This narcissism and ruthless opportunism in his character is paired with a blatant incompetence and stupidity: Jonah is regularly staged to botch even the most basic tasks. Yet despite his utter lack of skill and interest in politics and his equal lack of even rudimentary integrity, he climbs the career ladder in Washington, with various setbacks, but as a quite striking success in the longer run.

One thing that the show establishes early on about Jonah is that he is hated wherever he works, and this certainly applies to all the constellations in which he interacts with *Veep*'s other characters. They express their disdain for Jonah through

7 Of course, utilizing such an extraordinary formation of spectacle makes my reading vulnerable to charges that it says nothing about 'real' spectacle. I very much agree that my findings about the complex interactivity of spectacle and narrative have to be tested with other formations of the spectacular.

8 The corpus of Jonah insults is much too large and too diverse to give a sense of in the space that is available here. It encompasses name-calling (twenty-one of those compiled in the "Jonad Files" that are addressed in the episode "Testimony," including e.g. "Spewbacca," "Scrotum Pole," and "Cloud Botherer"), more elaborately set-up invectives (such as: "You're not even a man. You're like an early draft of a man, where they just sketched out a giant mangled skeleton, but they didn't have time to add details, like pigment or self-respect." ["Andrew"]), and endlessly creative variations of the injunction to f*** off.

energetic, often creative insults, which are performed with such regularity that media practices around the show treat them as a distinct genre of *Veep*-invective.[9] The excessiveness and 'staginess' of Jonah insults, the way in which media practices circulate them independent of the narratives of the episodes in which they occur, the intense affective responses to which viewers testify—typically encompassing various shades of laughter, from schadenfreude-type mirthful, over admiring, embarrassed, to shocked—all indicate how these scenes operate as spectacles. However, as much as their symbolic operations and their appeal to the audience are thus distinct from those of the show's narrative elements, I argue that these operations and appeals emphatically relate to and draw from narrative elements. And it is this interaction between spectacle and narrative that, in many ways, makes the Jonah insult interesting and complex.

First of all, the invectives directed at Jonah, as spectacular performances, are tied to the accumulated narratives about Jonah's character: narratives, for instance, about how he rubs it in everyone's faces that he goes in and out of the White House (during his employment there in seasons one and two) while the Vice President and her team not only lack this access but are hardly noted to exist by the President; or about how he uses and sensationalizes any kind of information he can get—from the most private to the clearly fake—to garner attention for his blog "Ryantology";[10] or about the nativist and racist platform on which he runs as a Presidential candidate in season seven. These narratives establish Jonah as a despicable character who, at least to some extent, seems to deserve the abuse that is hauled at him. They could be argued to create a space for the experiential pleasures that the spectacle of the Jonah insult has to offer—a space where this spectacle can be experienced guilt-free, where the hurtfulness and aggression of the invectives are sanctioned as forms of emotional hygiene that are legitimate, even necessary, given that such a despicable character is rewarded with fame and power in the storyworld.

Yet there are other narrative strands that complicate this in interesting ways. For one, while virtually every character in the storyworld claims that Jonah is the most loathsome person ever, the ways in which we see characters act challenge this claim of exceptionalism. Jonah's opportunism and narcissism are not fundamentally different from those of a Selina Meyer; the vile and vulgar way in which he speaks is rivaled by a whole league of other characters; and more often than not, his despicable actions are manipulated or otherwise used by Meyer or members

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9 Cf., e.g., the Reddit thread "Top 5 Jonah Insults."

10 E.g., one episode has him spread clearly made-up claims that an army veteran who currently competes in a presidential election, Governor Chung, tortured prisoners in Iraq ("Clovis"). Or, in "Alicia," he humiliates one of Meyer's aides who begs him not to use a gaffe Meyer made, only to end up using both the gaffe and the aide's self-deprecation (Jonah has him go down on his knees and sing a Civil War song).

of her team.[11] In many ways, he is not worse than the others. Furthermore, it is quite noteworthy that Jonah insults serve a much needed social function in the storyworld: While Meyer and her team are at each others' throats most of the time, the one thing through which they come together is their dissing of Jonah. Jonah insults are veritable team-building work, filling a need in the storyworld by providing a type of social glue that would otherwise be missing.[12] What these narrative strands suggest, then, is that the Jonah insult also signifies on the other characters by establishing how they need it for their own social functionability and how they need it to mark that Jonah is fundamentally different from themselves. In other words, on this intersection of spectacle and narrative, the spectacular Jonah insult, serially performed, contributes to characterization. In addition, I would argue, this particular intersection also affects the eventful affordances of the Jonah insult, recalibrating the experiential pleasures to which it invites: If the stings do not so much, or not only, serve as a critique of Jonah but also as a critique of the characters who perform them, then the endorsement that is implied in laughing along becomes more complicated. These narrative strands thus ambiguate the pleasure that is offered by the invective spectacle, destabilizing the potential mirth of schadenfreude or the admiration of invective skill and bringing in the possibility of laughter slipping into self-consciousness.

This potential of a reflexivity that is generated at the borderlands of spectacle and narrative is advanced even further by a final layer of interaction between the spectacular and the narrative in *Veep*'s Jonah insults that I want to discuss. The invectives directed at Jonah—as is typical for insults—are tied to broadly circulating, often very enduring metanarratives of marginalization or abjection: metanarratives (of ableism, homophobia, etc.) that effect the othering of certain subjects, constructing them as different from and inferior to an in-group of the socially privileged, whose trappings are simultaneously framed as normative and 'normal.' Jonah insults conspicuously tap into metanarratives on nonnormative bodies and sexualities: They regularly invoke his tallness, along with other ways in which his body allegedly does not fit social norms,[13] and they just as regularly allege sexual

11 The rumors that Jonah spreads about Governor Chung participating in torture are a case in point: Planted by Meyer's aides, they are part of their efforts to weaken Chung as Meyer's competitor in the race to the White House.

12 This kind of social function can be observed in many instances of invective performance: Ellerbrock et al. argue that "invectivity" has unique potentials in catalyzing processes of group formation, and that these potentials account for the key role that invective practices play in so many social constellations.

13 See, e.g., among the epithets listed in the "Jonad Files" ("Testimony"): "60 Foot Virgin," "Pointless Giant," or "Guyscraper." There are also more elaborate insults that invoke bodily nonnormativity, for instance when an uncle, meaning to say something about Jonah's (lack of) politi-

preferences that range from excessive masturbation to incest.[14] As, too, is typical for insults, the invectives directed at Jonah do not have to spell out the metanarratives that construct certain bodies and practices as deviant, abject, other—these are inscribed in the insults as latent narratives, reiterated while remaining tacit each time such insults are used. The tacitness of ableist or homophobic metanarratives in Jonah insults not only boosts their mobility—shorthands travel more easily—but it also, crucially, allows for their piggybacking with spectacle: The spectacular performance of witty, excessive, crass invectives against Jonah lends such latent metanarratives an affective punch, laminating them with an intensity of visceral, emotional experience that comes with a distinct promise of pleasure. Thus, they extend a strong pull toward audiences to indulge in the performance of strength and humiliation that acts of insult always aspire to be.

Veep directly addresses this mobilizing potential of invective spectacle, fittingly, through the character of Jonah: While most of the other protagonists try to keep their habits of insult and incivility private, Jonah also uses them strategically, first in his blog "Ryantology" and later in his electoral campaigns. Jonah's strategic use of invective's spectacularity to win attention and to sell himself as a strongman politician is satirically (over)drawn and clearly framed as a commentary on Donald Trump's invective practices. Take, for instance, this snapshot from a campaign rally in the seventh-season episode "South Carolina," in which Jonah says:

> [M]ath was invented by Muslims. Yeah. [dramatic pause] And we teach this Islamic math to children. Math teachers are terrorists. Algebra? More like Al Jazeera. Under a Ryan presidency, I will ban this Sharia math from being taught to American children. [...] [Starting to chant and prompting his audience to join in:] No more math! No more math!

The scene—while conspicuously invoking dynamics at real-world 'MAGA' rallies—offers a poignant observation on the discursive power that resides at the intersection of the spectacular and the narrative in invective practices: Insults performed in a presentational mode of verbal display mobilize a diegetic audience to affirmative, endorsing acts of chanting, while tapping into and invoking anti-Muslim metanarratives. The invocations—slipping from Arabic to Muslim to Islamism to terrorism to Sharia—of course, do not make any sense, and spelling them out in a narrative mode would have probably exposed how they do not add

cal talent, ends up commenting on his body, figuring it as "this mangled abortion coat hanger you should be ashamed to call your body" ("A Woman First").

14 See, again, among the epithets enumerated in the episode "Testimony": "12 Years a Slave to Jerking Off," "Gaylian," "Benedict Cum-in-His-Own-Hand." Incest does not only appear as a disparaging insinuation but as an actual plot line in season seven, when it is revealed that Jonah's wife is his half-sister and that he himself is also the result of an incestuous relationship.

up. But anti-Muslim metanarratives are merely conjured up as a tacit backdrop, manifesting only as a vague, but no less intense, sensation or feeling (of Muslims as evil, a threat, etc.). And it is precisely this sense of 'feeling' in which the spectacular performance of the insults invests, which it heats up all the way to a communal acting on that feeling—the chanting—that has the potential of escalating the felt hatred or fear even more. Faces in Jonah's audience indicate that some of the people there are puzzled and grapple with the chain of logic that supposedly stands behind the chanting against math, but, indicatively, they still join the chant.

Jonah's use of invective in scenes like this is clearly set up to encourage a critical distance in the televisual audience: Its ideological work of fanning anti-Muslim sentiments is all too obvious, and it also lacks in invective finesse. Yet, as I suggested above, the interplay between invocations of metanarratives and spectacular performance that is critically observed here also marks the Jonah insult, in which the TV audience is arguably addressed like the intradiegetic audience in the scene of Jonah's campaign rally, to share and endorse the bashing. *Veep*'s invective moments—in thus rotating their mode of address toward the audience, variously positioning them as targets of these performances' affective pull and as critical observers of such affective dynamics—encourage reflections on the power that resides at the intersection of invective spectacle and ideological metanarratives, a power so destructively yielded by a Trumpian brand of populism. Crucially, the reflexivity to which *Veep* invites there does not stop at observing from a distance, but it rather includes a moment of self-observation, of using one's own visceral experience of invective spectacularity as a platform for critical reflection.

Conclusion

In a skit for *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* on 9 May 2019, just a few days before *Veep*'s final episode aired on HBO, Colbert—in a kind of metaleptic conceit—crosses from the 'real world' in which his show operates to the fictional world of *Veep*. There, he implores Selina Meyer and her team:

> Stop! I beg you, stop! [...] The things you are doing on this earth then happen in my world—over and over again. [...] Foulmouthed president who tweets like a child, blaming everything on the Chinese, election interference, a completely moronic press secretary. [...] You are killing my world.

Colbert's plea is, of course, not taken seriously; he ends up getting brutally mocked when he reveals that he is the current host of CBS's *Late Show* ("you look like Letterman took the least funny dump of his life into a child's suit").

In terms of cultural history, the skit's suggestion that the cultural efficacy of a format like *Veep* had been eroded by the political realities of the Trump presi-

dency—a sentiment shared by many of the show's obituaries that I mentioned at the beginning—is, of course, intriguing. And along these lines, more inquiries are necessary into how this presidency and the social climate that made it happen have changed the cultural work that popular culture has to do. My concern here, however, has been to outline how *Veep*, though created in and for a different moment in cultural history, does offer valuable impulses for thinking through some of the conditions and consequences of MAGA culture. This value of the show becomes visible when attending to the ways in which it interlaces the spectacular and the narrative in its staging of invective. It provides a lab-like environment to examine how some invective performances—certainly the type current in MAGA culture—draw on the symbolic logics of spectacle to deliver their affective punch and how interlacing such spectacles with narratives, be they present or implied, marries that punch to ideologically potent scripts of worldmaking. At the same time, *Veep* offers a rich case study to critically revisit theorizations of the relationship between narrative and spectacle, helping to move them beyond simplistically binaristic conceptions, and drawing attention to the complex and powerful work that can happen at the borderlands between them.

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Repetition, Rhythm, and Recital
Lyrical Strategies and the Ritualistic in Twenty-First-Century US 'We' Narratives

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Abstract:
In this article, narrative liminality is employed as a conceptual lens with which to describe and analyze elements of rhythm and repetition in a specific corpus of narrative texts: namely, contemporary US novels and works of shorter fiction which are narrated in the first-person plural. In this context, narrative liminality is used to approach rhythm and repetition in these narrative texts as liminal (textual) practices which travel between narrative/ity and other (symbolic) forms. As is argued here, these practices move beyond narrative/ity and partake in the qualities of (the) lyrical/ity as itself an interplay of fictional and ritualistic elements. To conceptualize rhythmic and repetitive elements in this manner, this article utilizes Katie Owens-Murphy's concept of 'lyrical strategies.' By further drawing on Jonathan Culler and Nele Janssens, this contribution seeks to relate these strategies to narrative/ity, lyrical/ity, and the ritualistic as different (symbolic) forms. The main section of this article then applies and contextualizes these elucidations in an analysis of rhythmic and repetitive elements in TaraShea Nesbit's 'we' narrative The Wives of Los Alamos. This analysis first traces the intersections among lyrical, ritualistic, and narrative tendencies in the primary text. In an ensuing second step, the discussion then seeks to shed more light on the extratextual affordances and politics of these intersections in twenty-first-century US society and culture by relating them to Lauren Berlant's theoretizations of US national collectivity and civic belonging in what she refers to as a "post-normative phase."

Recital I: From Narrative Limitations to Narrative Liminality/ies

Over the course of the last decades, US literary fiction has seen the publication of a number of texts which can best be described as 'we' narratives—that is, novels

and works of short(er) fiction which represent and are narrated by a collective explicitly referred to as 'we'[1]—including, among others, Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* (2012), Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End* (2007), TaraShea Nesbit's *The Wives of Los Alamos* (2014), and Anne Valente's *Our Hearts Will Burn Us Down* (2016). Given its still comparably rare and arguably unconventional status, this narrative situation and voice has been the object of increased attention among literary theorists and narratologists alike.[2] In addition to their narrative situation, however, these texts are also remarkable in another sense: A high percentage of 'we' narratives, such as those listed above, contain and highlight elements which, traditionally, have not been associated with the form and logic of narrative—namely, repetition and rhythm on different textual and formal levels. Despite having been mentioned in a small number of works on 'we' narratives and narratives of community more broadly (Bekhta, "A Definition" 107; Jobert 544; Zagarell 450, 454), the function and/or meaning-making of these textual strategies as well as their interaction with, and effects on, narrative dynamics in this specific corpus of texts still remain to be sufficiently analyzed. More often than not, discussions of such repetitive and rhythmic elements in prose texts have started from a rather limited, or dualistic, approach to narrative/ity: They have either discussed these elements exclusively within the assumed boundaries of narrative/ity or, conversely, posited a relationship of conflict and opposition between narrative/ity on the one hand and rhythm or repetition on the other hand. In addition, to the extent that twenty-first-century US 'we' narratives in particular have not yet been adequately related to their historical and cultural contexts (cf. Maxey 2),[3] this lack of research also pertains to the use of repetitive and rhythmic elements in these texts.

This article aims to address these issues and blind spots by approaching such repetitive and rhythmic elements in contemporary US 'we' narratives through the conceptual lens of narrative liminality. For one, this means examining these strategies not by way of an expanded or expanding concept of narrativity but instead a

1 This understanding of 'we' narration draws on Bekhta's definition of "we-narrative proper," which pertains to only those narrative situations in "which the first-person plural pronoun is used on both the level of discourse and on that of the story to designate the narrating instance(s) that are also the narrated entities" ("A Definition" 113; cf. "We-Narratives" 168-71).

2 See fn. 3 for examples.

3 Although by no means lacking in terms of number, analyses of 'we' narration in literary fiction have not yet examined these 'we' narratives in relation to their specific US cultural and social contexts, as they have often proceeded from a formalist or rhetorical stance, and/or have discussed literary 'we' narratives in a culturally and historically comparative manner. The works by Margolin ("Telling"; "Plural"), Fludernik ("The Category of 'Person'"; "The Many"), Bekhta ("A Definition"; "We-Narratives"), and Richardson ("Plural Focalization"; *Unnatural*; "Social Minds") are cases in point.

concept of the lyrical and, more specifically, of lyricality as a combination of fictional and ritualistic elements. Moreover, this approach entails tuning in to the dynamics of conflict and cooperative interaction among narrativity, lyricality, and the ritualistic as different, yet gradable and interpenetrating symbolic forms which each govern practices of communication, experience, and knowledge. Lastly, in the context of the present analysis, it also means tracing the politics, or 'cultural work,' of these lyrical strategies and their effected interrelations between narrativity, lyricality, and the ritualistic within the contexts of contemporary US society and culture.

To pursue these aims, the following discussion first introduces the concept of lyrical strategies and explicates their connections with narrativity, lyricality, and the ritualistic. In the ensuing analysis of rhythmic and repetitive elements in TaraShea Nesbit's 'we' narrative *The Wives of Los Alamos* these elaborations will be related to works of research on 'we' narratives so as to delineate the intersections among lyrical, ritualistic, and narrative tendencies in the primary text. In the process, this analysis also seeks to trace the extratextual meanings of these intersections in twenty-first-century US society and culture by relating them to concerns about and models of collectivity and civic belonging in the contemporary United States. In so doing, this article develops a twofold argument: First, the liminal dynamics of lyrical strategies in Nesbit's novel are crucial to projecting and constituting a coherent and stable 'we'—in other words, a narrated/ing community. Second, insofar as these strategies help envision a coherent as well as historically continuous national identity and sense of belonging while allowing the authorial audience to establish affective ties to such an imagined collectiveness, they contribute to the novel's addressing and making sense of a set of uncertainties, transformations, and ruptures in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American society and culture.

The Liminalities of Lyrical Repetition and Rhythm in Prose

As has been hinted at already, narrative/ity and lyric/ality have been largely approached as not only distinct but also as contrasting forms in narrative and literary research (Owens-Murphy 4). As such, the relation between these forms has most often been theorized in terms of conflict and/or mutual exclusivity (Dubrow 254, 258)—the lyric as solipsistic, private, and monologic discourse representing the thought and/or utterance of an individual 'I,' versus narrative as public and social

discourse (Culler, "Theory of the Lyric" 121-25; Owens-Murphy 6-8; Michael 265).[4] This notwithstanding, recent research has focused on texts and textual practices which combine narrative and lyrical elements and have theorized narrativity and lyricality in more dynamic and complex terms—that is, as sets of prototypical and gradable tendencies (Wolf 75-76) which are more or less present in a given textual artifact or practice and whose relation is marked by both conflict and cooperation (Dubrow 264).[5]

Within the range of these works, Owens-Murphy's *Lyrical Strategies: The Poetics of the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (2018), Jonathan Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), and Nele Janssens' discussion of lyrical prose and the ritualistic (2018) are most pertinent to the present analysis. Owens-Murphy's research offers a most comprehensive analysis of lyrical components in a variety of canonical American novels, focusing on highly dramatized narrators, direct address, the protraction of metaphor, as well as on the use of repetitions and rhythms. Being perhaps most readily associated with lyric texts, repetitions can function as specifically lyrical strategies to the extent that they "return[] our attention to the same sound, word, line, [...] phrase," or other components (19).[6] In the process, repetitions establish associative connections between the repeated elements, thereby emphasizing a textual logic of synchronicity and recurrence (16) and "obstructing the forward momentum and temporal logic on which narrativity hinges" (19, cf. 44).[7] With regard to rhythms as structured patterns of repetition, Owens-Murphy traces a slightly different, though similar dynamic. As she explains with the example of polysyndeton, the frequent use of coordinating conjunctions constructs rhythmic patterns which evoke a logic of both accumulation—the enumeration of discrete entities—and repetition—the reiteration of the respective conjunction and parallel sentence structures or phrases (48-54). In turn, such rhythmic patterns in prose—whether on the syntactic level, as in the case of polysyndeton, or on the level of sound, meter, and potentially even narrative structure (cf. Caracciolo 49)—also complicate the movement of narrative progression: In Owens-Murphy's words, such "patterned movements of repetition"

4 Engaging critically with this tradition, Culler argues that such readings of lyric not only fictionalize and individualize this form but also gloss over its ritualistic or musical features and its public dimensions ("Theory of the Lyric" 125; cf. McHale, "Narrative in Poetry" 13).

5 Apart from those already mentioned, more prominent works in this context include the analyses by Friedman, Hühn, McHale ("Narrativity and Segmentivity"; "Narrative in Poetry"), and Phelan (*Living to Tell*; *Experiencing Fiction*).

6 This lyrical tendency is of course not inherent in all repetitions in narrative texts (Owens-Murphy 18).

7 This is not to argue that repetition is generally linked to stasis. Lyrical repetition can involve dynamic movement on different levels (Owens-Murphy 20; cf. Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction* 152-53).

"impede narrative development, blurring the contours of plot by obscuring distinctions of time, importance, and causality" (50).

(Lyric) repetition and rhythm do not only involve tendencies of narrativity and lyricality, however. As Culler and Janssens have argued in line with Roland Greene's propositions,[8] lyricality is itself marked by a tension between ritualistic and fictional elements; in other words, between "elements that provide meaning and structure and serve as instruction for performance and those that work to represent character and event" (Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 7; cf. Janssens 108). Within the former category of ritualistic elements, repetitions and rhythms take an arguably central position. Not only are scripted repetitions considered to be integral to rituals and rites more generally (Ryan 28; Snoek 10-11), but repetitions and rhythms in literary texts can also be understood as nonrepresentational "instructions for performance" in Greene's sense: They effect and produce language "that you want to repeat, to reread, to recite" (Culler, "Theory of the Lyric" 125; cf. Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 137-38; Janssens 108-09). By thus evoking ritualistic speech acts and performances,[9] these lyrical strategies are also closely tied to the community-building aspects and effects of ritual (cf. Ryan 30). As Janssens explains, "ritualistic texts encourage recitation, which has an inclusive effect. When someone repeats a lyrical text or, more specifically, participates in a ritual, the individual affiliates themselves with a certain community" (Janssens 116; cf. Greene 7). Importantly, these processes of community-building effected by rituals do not necessarily depend on linguistic (or literary) representation and reference. As Janssens emphasizes: "What invites citation is not a shared ideology [...], but a shared experience" which is "social rather than individual" (116).

As needs to be noted in light of these observations then, lyrical repetitions and rhythms play a key role in the impersonal or social dimensions and meaning-making of the lyric: If we follow Culler's arguments that the lyric does not represent a merely subjective experience or utterance but instead constitutes a "public discourse about meaning and value" and that this public discourse is further "made distinctive by its ritualistic elements" (*Theory of the Lyric* 350), then lyrical rhythms and repetitions are indeed vital to and afford such communal significance and authority of the lyric. Moreover, as Janssens's analysis of ritualistic tendencies in lyrical prose texts has shown, these dynamics and implications are not limited to the

8 According to Greene, "lyric discourse is defined by the dialectical play of ritual and fictional phenomena, or correlative modes of apprehension that are nearly always available in every lyric" (5).

9 In the context of this article, 'ritual' and 'ritualistic' are understood in a broad sense, with the term 'ritual' referring to culturally constructed and sanctioned actions or speech acts which are (mostly) collective, repetitive, symbolic, and scripted (cf. Snoek 10-11), irrespective of their relation to religious and/or sacred contexts.

genre of lyric poetry, but they may equally be traced in narrative fiction. As will be seen in the following analysis of Nesbit's novel, attending to these elements with a specific focus on the intersections among lyricality, the ritualistic, and narrativity thus constitutes an important avenue to exploring both the poetics and the politics of lyrical strategies in contemporary US 'we' narratives.

Rhythm, Repetition, Recital: Lyrical Strategies in Nesbit's *The Wives of Los Alamos* (Per)Forming a Narrating/ed 'We'

TaraShea Nesbit's *The Wives of Los Alamos* (*WLA*) is predominantly marked by narrative tendencies. Overall, the novel represents, and reads as, a sequence of events, thereby following a trajectory of equilibrium, disruption, and resolution—or beginning, middle, and end. As is indicated by its title, Nesbit's novel is concerned with, narrated by, as well as focalized through the wives of those scientists who participated in the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos. Representing the daily and private lives of the women at the military site, the novel traces how the group of these women from the US and different European countries coalesce into an all-American community, and it interlaces these small(er)-scale developments and happenings related to the narrating 'we' with the larger-scale sequence of political and social events entailed by the historic progression of WWII. In the process, Nesbit's text not only represents but also comments on and evaluates the women's thoughts, actions, and emotions in retrospect: The narrating 'we' is—although identical with the collective of characters in terms of person—clearly removed from the experiencing 'we' in terms of time and knowledge.[10] Being narrated from such a posterior position and perspective, *WLA* unfolds the events and processes at Los Alamos in chronological fashion, opening with the women's move to and arrival at Los Alamos in 1943 and ending with their departure three years later.

At the same time, *WLA* also contains repetitive and rhythmic elements which interact with these narrative dynamics. As is argued shortly, this interaction can be theorized in terms of both conflict and cooperation. Repetitive and rhythmic elements obstruct the movement and temporal logic of narrative progression in Nesbit's novel,[11] yet in the process they also contribute vitally to the representa-

10 For instance, the narrating wives explicitly reference their own past lack of knowledge (and power) regarding the war efforts, the Manhattan project, and its outcome to deflect or come to terms with having participated in and having contributed to these developments (Nesbit 181, 196).

11 In proposing such a reading of lyrical repetition and rhythm, this article also aims to delineate an avenue to further developing Phelan's concept of "lyric progression" (*Living to Tell* 158-59): While Phelan's elaborations on the subject center on the potential absence of change, the focus on the present situation (of a character-narrator), and the absence of the audience's

tion, performance, and maintenance of a communal 'we' on the levels of story and discourse. Overall, these lyrical elements manifest in the form of repetitions as well as rhythms on the lexical, syntactical, and structural levels of *WLA*. Throughout its little more than 50 short chapters, the novel features a combination of polysyndetic sentence structures and anaphoric repetitions of words or phrases. Pronounced examples for these strategies can be found in the very last chapter, titled "We Left," from which the following quote is taken:

> We left and lectured on atomic energy. We left and wrote autobiographies about life on the Hill. [...] We left and many things turned atomic [...]. We left and founded organizations that opposed nuclear weapons. We continued atom research, we become social works, we became grandmothers, we became blacklisted [...]. We left and moved to places where air raid sirens blared [...]. We left happy, we left relieved, we left thinking we had been a part of something unique, we left with doubts about our husbands, or about ourselves, or our country, or all of these, or none of it. [...] We left pregnant, we left tired, we left, in some ways, just as we arrived [...]. (227-30)

As is perhaps most readily observed, the chapter's title is reiterated in anaphoric fashion at the beginning of several paragraphs, consecutive sentences, and phrases. Moreover, these repetitions are combined with frequent parallelisms on the level of syntax and the use of coordinating conjunctions such as "and" and "or." As a result, the combination of (anaphoric) repetitions as well as polysyndetic and parallel sentence structures in this section contrasts the narrative logic of causality, temporal progression, and movement with a logic of repetition and accumulation.

Although this section and the last chapter as a whole arguably narrate a main event—the women's final departure from Los Alamos—it does not transmit the temporal progression of this departure in linear fashion. Instead, it catalogues the different experiences, opinions, and thoughts of individual members and subgroups of the narrating 'we' in this context by presenting them as synchronic alternatives. As such, this chapter is also structured and thematically integrated by the repeated reference to this event—"[w]e left"—as continuously present, with the progression of plot being almost completely obstructed by an iterative and list-like form and logic. As the same dynamic is visible in almost all chapters,[12] the described obstruction of narrative progression equally applies to Nesbit's novel as

ethical judgement of the character-narrator as the central characteristics of lyric progression (*Living to Tell* 158; *Experiencing Fiction* 152), they focus much less on the linguistic and formal elements that may contribute to these characteristics.

12 Other pronounced examples can be found in the chapters "Our Husbands" (41-46), "Growing" (52-56), "Help" (57-62), or "Our Older Children" (169-71).

a whole (cf. Richardson, "Social Minds" 209).[13] Consequently, the sequential unfolding of large-scale events and changes in the storyworld is repeatedly subordinated to the synchronic exploration and representation of the (narrating/ive) collective—its internal differences, similarities, and developments—in relation to these events and changes.

Tied to this dynamic, the rhythmic and repetitive elements in the previous quote also contribute to a ritualistic form and logic[14] in which the phrase "we left" comes to function as a scripted speech act that—at least partly independent from the referential content of these words—invokes and constitutes a coherent and continuous 'we' in the storyworld and on the level of discourse. Of course, as is the case in 'we' narratives more generally (Bekhta, "A Definition" 106-07; Fulton 1106), the frequent use of the first-person plural pronoun in the quoted section emphasizes the notion of community and as such also contributes to the textual performance of the collective character-narrator by directly denoting a 'we.'[15] At the same time, however, the repetition of the phrase "we left" and the use of parallel and polysyndetic sentence structures combined establish a rhythmic pattern in which these two words assume the function of a scripted, communal refrain—a refrain whose recital and 'recitability' establishes a 'we' that is both synchronically coherent and continuous over time: On the one hand, the repeating of this refrain constitutes and highlights a textual structure which organizes the novel's last chapter and, in turn, also integrates the variety of discrete entries that it catalogues. By extension, this formal-structural integration of textual elements thereby implies a symbolic integration of the wives and their differences into a coherent, experiencing 'we.' On the other hand, the recital of the words "we left" also functions as invocation and performance of an identical, yet posterior narrating 'we': In one sense, the invocation of a coherent experiencing 'we' in *WLA* can be understood as the premise and origin for articulating a narrating 'we' that is continuous with, and based on, the notion of such a prior community.

In a more general context, a very similar understanding has been promoted by Fulton. As he argues: "In order to speak as one and identify itself as a group, [...] the *we* assumes a prior union through which this common voice is articulated. The vocalization of a first person plural perspective [...] can thus extend backward and forward in time, restoring continuity, or, in a sense, providing the illusion that

13 As such, Nesbit's novel is also marked by what DuPlessis has defined as "the underlying characteristic of poetry as a genre"—that is, "segmentivity" (51). Overall, segmentivity describes a way of creating meaning "by selecting, deploying, and combining segments" which are "operating in relation to chosen pause or silence" (51; cf. McHale, "Narrativity and Segmentivity" 28).

14 The chapters listed in fn. 12 offer further examples for ritualistic forms and dynamics in *WLA*.

15 This argument is grounded in a rhetorical model of fictional representation (cf. Walsh 35), which is also central to Bekhta's elaborations ("A Definition" 101-02; fn. 1, 2).

this continuity was never lost" (1106). Apart from this reading, the reiteration of the words "we left" may equally be approached as a (fictional) ritualistic recital for the narrating characters; that is, a scripted and shared performance which itself integrates its participants—the plurality of narrating wives—into a narrating 'we.' In any case, the described ritualistic dynamics thus help textualize a coherent and continuous narrating/ed collective which incorporates not only diversity, conflict, and dissent, but also the different narrative levels, historical positions, and stages of knowledge ascribed to the experiencing and the narrating 'we' in Nesbit's text.

As the previous elaborations already indicate, this twofold consolidation of the narrating community does, however, not necessarily depend on a specific characteristic, perspective, or ideology that is commonly shared. Indeed, *WLA* formally conveys and represents the partly enforced homogeneity of its all-American narrating collective[16] while also emphasizing the women's shared circumstances at Los Alamos as a source of solidarity and collectivity (77). At the same time, the novel very much highlights the diversity, difference, and an actual lack of unity among the wives—whether in terms of their different national, cultural, or racial backgrounds (4, 22, 50-51, 84); their personal experiences regarding marriage and motherhood (52-56, 115-17, 134-36, 145-50, 169-71); or their political opinions on the war and the Manhattan Project (13, 198, 228).[17] As such, the textual coherence and continuity of the communal character-narrator instead largely depends on, and is performed by, rhythmic patterns, repetitions, and ritualistic recitals such as the one described above. By reading this projection of community as, and in relation to, model(s) of US national collectivity and civic belonging in the twenty-first century, the last part of this article will inquire into the politics and cultural work of the novel's lyrical strategies in a contemporary US-American context.

(Allegorical) Repetition: Projecting the National 'We'

To delineate the extratextual implications of lyrical strategies in *WLA*, we can first situate the novel within a more recent literary trend that Caren Irr has identified as the twenty-first-century US national allegory: a genre in which "a restricted set of characters and scenes" is used to "speak to national themes" (522). Such an allegorical reading of *WLA* is primarily warranted by the reference to World War II

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16 Apart from more explicit references to the women's enforced homogeneity during their time at the military site (Nesbit 50-51, 64), these notions are conveyed through a very consistent use of the 'we' pronoun and the anonymity of almost all members of the narrating/ed 'we' (cf. Richardson, "Social Minds" 207).

17 In addition to the list-like form and logic of many of the novel's chapters, the use of frequent particularizations, such as "some of us" or "most of us," contributes to the impression of diversity and difference within the narrating 'we.'

as the historic context of the narrating/ed 'we.' Like other recent US pop-cultural texts which employ representations of World War II to negotiate "a certain idea of what it means to be a 'good citizen'" and to delineate a "renewed sense of national belonging" for contemporary US audiences (Biesecker 394), the novel's portrayal of the formation of its all-American 'we' during WWII equally speaks to and negotiates larger concerns about (national) identity, belonging, and continuity in twenty-first-century US society and culture: Whether on account of racial discrimination, inequality, or conflict in the context of 'post-racism,' 'new racism,' or 'color-blind egalitarianism' (Bonilla-Silva and Ray 60, 62; Gallagher 41-42, 47-48); socio-economic disparity and precariousness (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 3, 19; Samuel 140-41); or cultural pluralism and concomitant anxieties about a homogenous national and cultural identity (Berlant, *Queen of America* 2-3, 110-11; Renshon 3; Tillett 227, 233-34)—the twenty-first-century United States have arguably seen the advent of a "post-normative phase, in which [...] clarities about the conditions for enduring collectivity, historical continuity, and infrastructural stability have melted away" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 225).

Against this backdrop, the meaning-making and cultural work of *WLA*'s lyrical strategies—and the allegorical signification of the novel's narrating collective—emerge from their contributing to a projection and performance of national collectivity that allows for integrating the instabilities and ruptures of the present moment. These strategies help delineate a form of communality that promises and invokes national coherence and belonging. As has been demonstrated, the use of lyrical strategies in *WLA* serves to textualize a narrating/ed 'we' whose ultimate cohesion depends on rhythmic patterns and repetitive or ritualistic performances rather than on its members' similarity or agreement. On an allegorical level, these lyrical strategies and their ritualistic effects thus serve to model and convey an arguably affect-based vision of (US) national belonging that can be productively theorized as an "intimate public sphere" in the sense of Lauren Berlant's definition of this term (*Queen of America* 5).

WLA generally delineates a form of (national) communality that—insofar as it is an allegorical extension of the coherent, fictional 'we' centered around shared, repetitive performances and rhythms—promises a sense of inclusive and immediate togetherness which is equally grounded in shared (and repetitive) performances and which potentially elides the need for consensus or sameness. Moreover, the novel itself offers its authorial audiences such a sense of unmediated togetherness through the use of lyrical repetitions and rhythm. To the extent that repetitive and rhythmic elements in the novel generate "language that you want to repeat" (Culler, "Theory of the Lyric" 125), these lyrical strategies invite contemporary authorial audiences to participate in a repeated, ritualistic performance—in other words, the returning to, (re)reading, or reciting of certain sentences or phrases in Nesbit's novel, such as the phrase "we left." In turn, this performance affiliates its partic-

ipants with a(n imagined) community that equally offers a sense of inclusive and immediate belonging, as it is not so much based on representation and readerly identification as on the shared act and experience of this performance.[18]

It is this sense of immediate connectivity which Berlant deems central to the affective politics of intimate publics in a contemporary US cultural and social setting. Analyzing the desire for public intimacy and social belonging in this context, Berlant argues that "[a]n intimate public promises the sense of being held in its penumbra. You do not need to audition for membership in it. Minimally, you need just to perform audition, to listen and to be interested in the scene's visceral impact" (*Cruel Optimism* 226). What intimate publics promise is thus a sense of belonging which—insofar as it depends on a shared performance of participation and the affective sense of such a common participation—elides political debate or action, ideological consensus, or sameness. In turn, such a sense of belonging allows for effectively "displac[ing] […] instability and contradiction from the center of sociality" (224-26).[19] In the same way, *WLA*'s highly similar modeling and conveying of (US national) collectivity based on communal and repeated performances can equally be said to offer such a sense of intimate social and national belonging which integrates—yet also contains—disparity, conflict, and the perceived dissolution of social connectivity in the contemporary moment.[20]

The novel's lyrical strategies and ritualistic dynamics are likewise central to evoking a sense of national and collective historical continuity. As has been argued, lyrical repetitions and rhythms in *WLA* not only emphasize notions of temporal continuity by interrupting or impeding narrative progression but also establish and function as ritualistic recitals which bind the different narrative levels, stages of comprehension, and historical standpoints of the experiencing and narrating 'we': each before and after the women's stay at Los Alamos, the United States' development and use of the atomic bomb, and the clear emergence of the US as a global power. By extension, the ritualistic effects of these lyrical strategies also evoke a transhistorical continuity between contemporary authorial audiences and each of the contexts and perspectives of the fictional experiencing and the narrating 'we.' Just like the novel's rhythmic and repetitive elements invite readers to participate in a text-based recital and ritualistic performance which establishes a sense of synchronic connectivity, so do these same strategies affiliate the authorial

18 The frequent repetition of first-person plural pronouns as part of and within the reiterated phrases further contributes to this effect.

19 Of course, as Berlant has explicated in great detail throughout her works, such an affective, juxtapolitical sense of connectivity bears its own limitations and constraints. Apart from her elaborations in *Cruel Optimism* (223-63), see, for instance, Berlant's *The Female Complaint* (6, 12-13) and "The Epistemology of State Emotion" (47, 73).

20 On the functions and meanings of ritual in relation to cultural pluralism more broadly, see also Seligman and Weller, *Rethinking Pluralism: Ritual, Experience, and Ambiguity* (2012).

audience with the fictional narrating collective. That is, the readers' repeating, returning to, or reciting reiterated phrases and elements in Nesbit's text also elicits a sense of continuity with the fictional narrating 'we' on account of an assumed common performance—the reiteration or recital of said phrases and elements. In turn, given the described linkage of the narrating and the experiencing 'we' in Nesbit's novel, this performed continuity also ties contemporary audiences to the experiencing 'we' and its respective historical perspective and position.

Indeed, other representational and/or narrative strategies additionally promote readerly identification with the novel's experiencing and narrating 'we'—such as the consistent use of internal focalization and the representation of consciousness or the accumulation of differences among the female character-narrators to such an extent that, as Richardson has rightly pointed out, "the depiction threatens to approach universality" ("Social Minds" 207). Nevertheless, the described sense of communal continuity generated by readers' ritualistic recitals is both more immediate and inclusive: It is not, or at least not only, based on the similarity of the characters and the actual reader but based on a shared ritual, and it constitutes more than the mere return to an idealized past by effectively tying together (narrated) past, present, and future. In this way, lyrical repetition, rhythm, and their ritualistic effects in *WLA* indeed allow contemporary US audiences to make sense of, navigate, and accommodate the uncertainties, changes, and ruptures of the present moment (cf. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 3, 19): They not only contribute to envisioning communal and national coherence or belonging but also serve to establish a sense of transhistorical continuity.

Recital II: One Account of Narrative Liminality/ies in Contemporary US 'We' Narratives

As the present analysis has demonstrated, the lens of narrative liminality proves to be essential for shedding light on the textual dynamics as well as the extratextual signifying, or the cultural work, of Nesbit's novel. For one, looking at and beyond the border zones of narrative by way of this lens affords analyzing rhythmic and repetitive elements in *WLA* as distinctly liminal strategies which operate at the intersections of narrative/ity, lyrical/ity, and the ritualistic. More precisely, lyrical repetition and rhythm as well as their ritualistic effects interact with the novel's narrative tendencies by way of both contrast and cooperation: They impede the forward movement of narrative progression and, in turn, help textualize a highly dramatized, coherent, and continuous narrating/ed 'we.'

At the same time, approaching the aforementioned elements in *WLA* as such nonnarrative, lyrical strategies also showcases the extratextual significations and politics of such (narrative) liminality in relation to contemporary US culture and

society. As has been elucidated, lyrical strategies and their ritualistic dynamics in Nesbit's text not only contribute to the novel's proposing a stable model of cultural identity and (intimate) civic belonging within the framework of the nation, but they also allow for the authorial audience to become affectively tied to such an imagined collectiveness. In effect, these liminal strategies and workings arguably play a vital role in negotiating, making sense of, and containing, the described uncertainties and transformations at work in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century US society and culture, insofar as they help (re)formulate models of national collectivity in this historical and cultural setting.

What is left then is, perhaps, a closing repetition: Moving analyses of (literary) texts towards and beyond the limiting borders of narrative/ity and, specifically, zooming in on the intersections among narrative/ity and other (symbolic) forms constitutes a highly productive approach. It is productive not merely for gaining a better understanding of the (extra)textual dynamics of contemporary US 'we' narratives, but also for further showcasing the relevance and, indeed, the prevalence of narrative liminality in and for twentieth- and twenty-first-century US literature and culture. As such, these further advances remain an objective for hopefully repeated explorations in the future.

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Home Front Autobiographies of the 'War on Terror'
Narrative Liminality, Tacit Knowledge, and Affective Labor

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Abstract:
This chapter engages the phenomenon of narrative liminality by zooming in on the genre of home front autobiographies from the so-called 'War on Terror.' It examines three case studies: Jenn Carpenter's One Army Wife's Tale (2012), Lily Burana's I Love a Man in Uniform: A Memoir of Love, War, and Other Battles (2009), and Taya Kyle's American Wife: Love, War, Faith, and Renewal (2015). Written by military spouses, these books draw on readers' emotional knowledge about family and romantic love and use their authors' experiential knowledge as authorization. In the process, they create affective agency for military spouses, manage public feelings about US warfare in the twenty-first century, and invite readers to focus their attention on the domestic sphere—i.e., the home and the homeland—rather than the major battlefields of the War on Terror abroad.

Introduction

Narratives of war constitute a notoriously male-dominated genre that tends to revolve around the figure of the soldier. With the professionalization of the military in the post-conscription era, the changing gendered culture of the military, and the so-called New Wars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (that, among other things, increasingly involve private contractors), narratives of war have seen significant revisions. A plethora of works—fictional, nonfictional, and scholarly—has emerged that prominently feature female soldiers, negotiate warfare in the post-Cold War global order, and/or focus on military families. Especially in the aftermaths of 9/11, there has been a proliferation of texts that center on the military spouse—including songs, fictional accounts (e.g., TV shows, films, literature), self-help books, magazines, and online forums. Military spouses themselves have used autobiographical texts to claim their voices in narratives of war and US

imperialism, to mark their contribution to the war effort, and to narrate their pain, suffering, and sacrifice.

The broad resonance of many of these cultural products attests to the military spouse's central role in the cultural imaginary. She[1] serves, among other things, as a mediator between military culture and civilian society and performs "affective labor," i.e., "labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion" (Hardt and Negri 108) for the nuclear and extended military family as well as the imagined community of the nation. As Deborah Cowen and Emily Gilbert point out, the political rhetoric of the US homeland intimately connects the heteronormative family with national(ist) ideology: "The idea of homeland reinscribes the nation-state as the apotheosis and most legitimate form of political organization, and affirms affective attachments to the nation-state through its familial reference" (267). This discourse provides part of the context for the military spouse as a central figure in political rhetoric and cultural imagination; but also, the life of military families itself has changed in the post-9/11 era. Vicki Cody, an Army wife and mother, explains: "The terrorist attacks changed the life of anyone serving in the military or who had loved ones serving. For all of us, it was the beginning of a war on terrorism that would mean multiple deployments, in different countries, for the next decade" (189).

Writings by military spouses are neither central to a corpus of war literature—as their knowledge of war is usually second-hand and focused on the home front—nor do they take up a significant place in women's writing—as their protagonists tend to reinforce traditional gender roles and lack the seemingly more emancipatory potential of female soldiers. Yet, they are crucial to contemporary discourses of US exceptionalism and imperialism. "Home front autobiographies" from the post-9/11 era not only create "affective agency [i.e.] the ability of a subject to have her political and social circumstances move a populace and produce institutional effects" (Wanzo 3) for military spouses but, more importantly, they also manage public feeling about the 'War on Terror' and bolster dominant narratives about US warfare in the twenty-first century. Readers are encouraged to focus on the domestic in its double meaning of home and homeland and to follow the example of their heroines in supporting the war effort and accepting the limits of their knowledge about things 'outside the home.'

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1 Military spouses are primarily imagined as women. This is well in line with the military's gender politics: "The Army is a profoundly gendered institution that places men and women, and masculinity and femininity (to the exclusion of other configurations of gender), in compulsory intimacy with and highly structured opposition to one another. The Army, the profession of soldiering, and the making of war are all ostensibly masculine domains" (MacLeish 18). Despite queer families, transgender soldiers, and male spouses gaining more and more public attention, the dominant image of the military spouse continues to be coded as feminine.

As they navigate the *unnarratability/unrepresentability* of the experience of war[2] at the home front, these texts draw on and activate readers' emotional knowledge about family and romantic love and they use their authors' experiential knowledge as authorization. These strategies are especially crucial to affectively interpellate a civilian readership that is largely detached from its armed forces and increasingly ignorant of military culture and the effects of war on military families.[3] Ultimately, home front autobiographies rely on various forms of tacit knowledge—especially on "bodily knowing" and "emotional understanding" (Shotwell x)[4]—in order to expand the limits of their narrative form and to fuel their highly ambivalent "cultural work" (Tompkins). This work entails promoting US warfare while simultaneously showing its detrimental effects on the home front. It also means empowering military spouses by making their sacrifice and resilience visible while at the same time transposing the war almost exclusively to the home front and potentially losing sight of the battlefields and of the victims of US warfare.

In the following, I analyze three home front autobiographies of the War on Terror that differ strikingly with regard to the symbolic capital of their authors and publication venues, their narrative registers, and their ascribed literary merits: Jenn Carpenter's self-published *One Army Wife's Tale* (2012), Lily Burana's acclaimed *I Love a Man in Uniform: A Memoir of Love, War, and Other Battles* (2009), and Taya Kyle's *American Wife: Love, War, Faith, and Renewal* (2015), which captured media interest as part of what Deborah Cohler has termed "the *American Sniper* oeuvre" (72). Despite

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2 "[W]riters about war frequently struggle to convey ideas and experiences for which existing literary strategies and forms seem inadequate" (Haytock 3), i.e., they operate on the limits of narrative form. Experiences of violent conflict and warfare are to some degree even considered to lie completely beyond the scope of (visual) representation and (verbal) explicability. As Elisabeth Bronfen states with recourse to Fredric Jameson: "Our access to the real atrocity of war is only through the textual effects it produces even while eluding their grasp" (12). "[T]he suspicion that war is ultimately unrepresentable" not only draws attention to the narrative liminality that texts about war necessarily navigate but also brings into focus "the impossible attempts to represent it" (Jameson 1533). In other words, the experience of war exceeds the boundaries of the symbolic forms of language and literary genre.

3 The "familiarity gap" between civil society and the US military (Golby et al. 102) has been problematized with renewed urgency in the aftermaths of 9/11 and in the context of the War on Terror (Owens 72-73; Golby et al. 98-99). Recent survey findings suggest that there are "many gaps between the American public and its military" (Schake and Mattis, "A Great Divergence" 4). While the support for the military seems to have grown, the overall knowledge about the armed forces among civilians has decreased: "[T]hough support for 'the troops' has become a kind of American civil religion, these ritualized gestures sometimes seem only to emphasize the distance between the military and civilian society" (Brooks 21-22).

4 Alexis Shotwell distinguishes between "practical, skill-based knowledge; somatic or bodily knowing; potentially propositional but currently implicit knowledge; and affective or emotional understanding" (x).

their differences, these three books share (1) a reliance on forms of tacit knowledge as a means to tackle the limits of narratability of their protagonists' experiences on the home front and to authorize their account, (2) an ideological agenda that serves to manage public feeling towards the War on Terror by activating readers' emotional knowledge and thus seeking their sympathy and support for military families and by extension the military and the US nation's (neo)imperial mission at large, and (3) a commitment to drawing attention to the situation and suffering of military spouses at the expense of denying the "grievability" (Butler) of the lives of others.

Deployment and the War at Home: *One Army Wife's Tale*

Jenn Carpenter's *One Army Wife's Tale* was originally published online as a daily deployment journal while her husband Dax was in Iraq. Carpenter writes on her website: "The day after Dax left, I started a blog called One Army Wife's Tale. I started it just for the two of us, but now it's read by people all over the world" ("One Army Wife's Tale"). The self-published book version retains part of the diary format with short chapters that have titles but no dates; and it uses an image of an old-fashioned typewriter for its cover that stands at striking contrast with the text's emergence from a blog, which has since been taken down. In her farewell post on January 16, 2014, Carpenter emphasizes the therapeutic aspect of her writing: "[W]hile I've heard from hundreds (thousands? maybe…) of military spouses over the past few years about how cathartic my blog has been for them, it has been the best therapy in the world for me" ("New Year"). It may well be read by readers from all walks of life, but the text claims to be primarily for the purpose of its author's and her fellow military spouses' well-being, self-assurance, and self-understanding.

Carpenter uses her experience as authorization and, at several points, addresses the limits for others to relate to her situation: "My friends, my family, even my own children can only feel sorry for me. […] All they can do is empathize, because they've never been through this" (*One Army Wife's Tale* 4). In line with Michael Polanyi's famous dictum that "*we can know more than we can tell*" (4; emphasis in the original), Carpenter claims that "[u]nless you've lived it, it's impossible to understand what it really means to be a Soldier's wife" (52), i.e., that only those who have acquired the tacit knowledge of living as a military spouse can fully understand her situation. "[T]here are no words" for how she feels (155) and her account emphasizes the visceral, bodily reactions to the husband's absence as a form of bodily knowing that can only partially be explicated, if at all. For instance: "I miss my husband with every fiber of my being, sometimes so much that I feel like the entire world is crashing down around me, like my chest is caving in. […]

It makes me sick to think about all the memories we could and should be making right now" (158).

One Army Wife's Tale, in implicit and explicit ways, portrays the military family home, and by extension the homeland at large, as integral part of the war effort: "[W]hat keeps [the soldiers] going is what they have at home. What they fight for isn't political, it's primal. […] we fight right along with them" (23). The War on Terror is transformed from an imperial project of the US nation-state into a 'primal' battle for survival that affects the gendered arenas of the battlefield and the home front alike. In the domestic sphere, routine and ritual, e.g., the daily blog post, household chores, etc., take on a central meaning: "[S]urviving a deployment is done [on] a day by day basis" (85). While the text communicates the experience of war in the US family home by drawing on its readers' "affective or emotional understanding" (Shotwell x), it also asks us to accept the limits of the military spouse's—and our own—knowledge of the war: Dax "wasn't able to tell [her] much, of course, […]" (87), and Carpenter herself, "[f]or security reasons […], can't share many details" (226). Army life entails coming to terms with the insecurities of not-knowing: "Always waiting, always in the dark, always being told one thing, then another, then something that completely contradicts the first two things you were told" (169).

In order to convey the trials and tribulations of military spouses, the text resorts to sentimental tropes, including direct address and appeals to the reader, depictions of crying and emotional excess, and a focus on the domestic. It clearly points towards the confines of its narrative form for explicating the experience of its author/narrator: It draws on a tacitly shared emotional understanding about suffering, family, and romantic love in order to make its civilian readers *feel* the consequences of war at home rather than to explain them argumentatively. The diary format enhances this effect as it creates intimacy and suggests direct access to the presumably unfiltered thoughts and emotions of its author. This cultural work of mediating the 'civil-military divide' is particularly relevant at times when people, who "[i]n full hustle mode, hell-bent for whatever scrap of happiness can be grasped, […] have almost no time to feel the pain of war" (Gilman 8).

One Army Wife's Tale not only intimately connects the battles at home with those in the theaters of war (for instance, when it draws analogies between the deployed soldier's fight and the eldest son's struggle with epilepsy, cf. 72, 139, 313) around a family that "win[s] wars" (72) but also likens the experiences of military spouses to other highly emotional moments readers might be more familiar with. Deployment is described as a "constant grieving process" and as a "nightmare" (1, 143/223); and despite the claim that "there is nothing romantic about a woman sending her husband off to war" (1), the autobiography takes recourse to the romance formula. It presents a "fairytale" narrative, the "great love story" (251) of Jenn finally marrying her high school sweetheart Dax; it labels him a "Prince Charming" (109), imagines Jenn as a "princess," and casts the US Army as the "evil stepmother" (6). After

their wedding, Jenn expects to live “happily ever after” (111). Dax’s deployment to Iraq is described as causing perpetual heartbreak (cf. 82), it is evident that “he’s worth waiting for” (192), and the period of separation is shaped by moments of courtship. The overarching sentimental(ized) narrative of their relationship is embedded in military culture as it revolves around Veterans Day, the day that Jenn claims first prompts her to consider the realities of marrying a soldier, the day of their engagement, and, a year later, a day on which she has become “the proud wife of an Iraq war veteran” (268).

The love story provides affective cues for the reader to sympathize with the Army wife or create a “feeling-with,” which also “implies a kind of distance” (Shotwell 109). *One Army Wife’s Tale* offers a venue for military spouses to feel part of a “sisterhood” (213), but also addresses a civilian readership in an attempt to exercise affective agency and to allow for them to affectively relate to the suffering of military wives: “Our men risk their lives for the sake of our country, and we sacrifice our well being [sic], our happiness, even sometimes our sanity, for the sake of our men” (129). At the tenth anniversary of 9/11, Jenn articulates her discomfort with “all the reporters […] talking about it like it was over,” because it continues “for the thousands of […] military families with loved ones deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan” (177). Despite its modest claim to tell only one Army wife’s tale and its focus on therapeutic writing, Carpenter’s story works against this national forgetting as it asks readers to feel along with the author/narrator and imagine the consequences of war for those at the home front.

The Trauma of War on the Home Front: *I Love a Man in Uniform*

Like Carpenter, Lily Burana presents her “take on life as an Army wife as [hers] alone” (4). As a journalist and author of a novel—*Try* (2006)—and an acclaimed first memoir—*Strip City: A Stripper’s Journey Across America* (2001)—Burana is a seasoned writer when she documents her path to army wifedom in *I Love a Man in Uniform*. She offers a detailed account of her marriage and her attempts to find her role and identity as a soldier’s wife—beginning with an ‘unlikely’ romance and a hurried wedding as “a War on Terror bride” (53). This includes two periods of separation, one due to Mike’s deployment to Iraq and another when the couple breaks up and Burana struggles with trauma and depression.[5] After Mike’s deployment, the war

5 Burana remarks on the different perceptions of these periods of separations: “When a woman is alone because her husband is at war, she’s Penelope pining for Odysseus, prepared to wait an eternity for her beloved’s return. When a woman is alone because she and her husband are separated, she’s just some anonymous schmo wondering if she should sign the divorce papers from the law offices of Loser, Dumb-Dumb, and Wank. It’s the difference between epic longing and epic failure” (264). However, she also emphasizes the parallels when she

recedes further into the background of the narration. First of all, because at West Point,

> [n]o one discussed the war. [...] Among the wives, we talked about where the war had taken our husbands, what it was doing to our families, our plans, our careers, our dreams, our psyches, our souls, and our marriages. [...] So the glue that binds the Army community is common experience rather than shared opinion. (154-55)

Secondly, because dealing with the separation and PTSD, it "had slipped below the fold in my life's big news, bumped by the headline *Rookie Military Wife Has Meltdown*" (259). In the end, the couple is happily reunited and Burana seems to have found her place by Mike's side and within the military community. In the process, she realized that being an Army wife entailed a specific emotional and embodied knowledge: "[M]ilitary-wife life meant painting with a new emotional palette" (119) and "there was much more to being a military wife than courtesies and customs and regulations—things I couldn't learn by simply putting my nose in a book" (124). This knowledge cannot be explicated in narrative form and thus also exceeds her own autobiographical account.

While the memoir interpellates its audience as subjects with a shared tacit understanding of love, trauma, and (bodily) pain, Burana also explicitly enters a contract and an intimate relation with her readers that allows her to share "undiluted dispatches from one military wife's real, imperfect life" (6). She explains early on that there is a "Green Curtain rule in effect when it comes to communicating about the military with people who are strangers to that world" (4). Her account is premised on the notion that there are things about the war and her husband's involvement in it that neither she nor her readers are supposed to know:

> I never asked Mike about anything he'd seen in combat [...]. I didn't feel it was within my rights to press him for details, and womanly intuition guided me to soothe rather than pry. [...] He was part of a world that I could not—and likely would not—ever know. (63)

Yet and despite these limitations, as a military spouse, i.e., as a civilian who is intimately connected to the world of the military, she is in an ideal position to explain and translate military rules, lingo, and lifestyle to a broader readership, and her memoir takes us along on her initiation into this parallel universe of the US mil-

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describes the couple's breakup with reference to the deployment in terms of its duration as well as its outcome ("we were lucky to have survived. The mission was complete" [278]).

itary.[6] She emphasizes, time and again, that she was the most unlikely candidate to fall for a soldier and originally had no sympathy for the military at all.[7] One implication of this narrative is, of course, that if "Anarchy Girl" (2) could overcome her strong ideological reservations towards the military, even love a man in uniform, and do her part as a military spouse—so can we.

She also adds a certain degree of glamour to the military world: Burana compares entering the Army to posing for *Playboy* (cf. 57), not getting involved as a military spouse to "not riding Space Mountain" when going to Disney World (124), and "[m]eeting a general" to "meeting Madonna" (146). Despite its wit and 'glam,' the memoir addresses the problems of military spouses during and after deployment, especially issues of mental health that affect war veterans and their families. It creates affective agency for military spouses not primarily by employing sentimental tropes but in a narrative register that relies on irony, defamiliarization, and pop cultural intertexts to make the experience relatable to the readers. "I was supposed to be the suffering Saint Wifey, crying while I adjusted the yellow ribbons on the tree, and instead I was rolling my eyes all the time" (83), writes Burana;[8] and she does not hide the fact that she did not fully support the War on Terror: "I married into the military-industrial complex, yes, yet I reserved the right to judge. Love is tolerant; it is not at all blind" (89).

She is "upset" about the Abu Ghraib scandal "in a way [she] couldn't have imagined" and, again, offers an analogy that readers might be able to relate to: "If you've ever had someone cheat on you—the feeling was the same" (297). This analogy marks the events at Abu Ghraib as a moral transgression and a breach of trust, yet it also trivializes them. Readers are asked to identify with the shocked military spouse and her feeling of betrayal and disappointment rather than the victims tortured and killed by American soldiers. We are asked to sympathize with Burana's "visceral, gut-felt battle" between her ideals and military culture (312) and follow her towards reconciliation:

> I knew that if I were to ever reconcile the horrors of war and military corruption with the goodness of my marriage—and the military itself—I would have to go

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6 Cf. especially the beginning of chapter 2, "Simple as Alpha Bravo Charlie," which discusses and translates "Greenspeak" (22-24), "the dictionary definition of *hooah*" (31-32), and the explanation of acronyms and (military) rules throughout (e.g., 55, 106-07, 124, 137, 145, 208, 232).

7 "I never thought I would say yes to a date with an Army man," Burana explains and points out her "disdain for authority" and her "passion for alternative culture" (14, 15). She describes her past as "an accidental teenage communist" as a stripper, who—among other things—appeared in *Playboy* (34).

8 Still, the memoir also capitalizes on its protagonist's tears, on showcasing emotional excess and distress, and on the domestic sphere in its double meaning of home/homeland (cf., for example, 95, 97).

> beyond Rumsfeld's smarmy advice to overlook the 'few bad apples' and work the grid in reverse: For every crooked soldier, there are hundreds of thousands more who are honorable; for every hurtful military tactic and policy, there are scores more that help. (309)

In the end, Burana finds her place in the military community by merging her past as a stripper and her present as a military spouse:[9] She starts a burlesque class for military wives called "Operation Bombshell" (328). The emphasis on postfeminist-style[10] glamour and empowerment plays out in line with the confessional mode in which Burana reveals her struggles with loneliness, anxiety, and PTSD (which she calls "post-traumatic spouse disorder" [287]), but it also counters a potentially critical perspective on the war and the military. She relies on a "makeover paradigm" (Gill 262) to create a feeling of control and sense of mission on the home front[11]: "Could I control the outcome of the war? My husband's safety? The date of his return? No. But I could fit into my clothes. [...] I could choose my battles, and this was mine: Woman vs. Scale, and I was winning" (80). Burana depicts both "self-advancement" and consumption as coping mechanisms during her husband's absence (87, cf. 77).

I Love a Man in Uniform sets out to generate sympathy for military spouses and to draw attention to the suffering of families as it enlists forms of tacit knowledge—emotional and embodied—as an instance of narrative liminality, pointing beyond (verbal) explication, and as a powerful way to connect with a civilian readership. Its protagonist engages with "the pain of those at home who hurt by proxy" (287) and relates that experience with humor but also with a serious agenda. Burana concludes that "[t]he Army asks a lot of its families" (340) and that Army wives are, in a sense, "truly heroic" (348). It is the "sisterhood" (152) of West Point wives, then, that she turns to as "fellow travelers who understood, where so many other people couldn't, exactly what I was going though" (151), because the actual experience of being a military spouse cannot fully be conveyed to outsiders: "[...] when some well-meaning civilian, a neighbor or someone at the gym, would say, 'I know

9 She explains: "I'd kept those two parts of my self completely separate—the wife and the wild girls—as if they might contaminate each other. How nice it was to finally accept that, instead, they complemented each other. I could knit these two halves together, then give them as a gift to other women: Have fun. Be glamorous. Be free. Be yourself. Enjoy" (334).

10 Burana explicates her gender politics: "I'm not one to advocate a retro gender politics [...]. But after two centuries of feminism, I still prefer a man to open the car doors and the pickle jars" (109).

11 Rosalind Gill argues that "a makeover paradigm constitutes postfeminist media culture" and it relies on people—particularly women—"to believe first that they or their lives are lacking or flawed in some way, and secondly that it is amenable to reinvention or transformation by following the advice of relationship, design or lifestyle experts, and practising appropriately modified consumption habits" (262, 263).

how you feel,' I'd be so pissed, I was sure my brain would melt and pour out of my eyes. *No, you most certainly damn* don't *know how I feel*" (86; emphasis in the original).

The Aftermath of War: *American Wife*

Taya Kyle's *American Wife* was published in 2015 when she was already a publicly known figure through her husband's bestselling memoir *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in US History* (2012) and its film adaptation *American Sniper* (2014) directed by Clint Eastwood and starring Bradley Cooper and Sienna Miller. Written with Jim DeFelice, who had already been involved in publishing Chris' life story, her book not only functions as a companion piece to her husband's autobiography[12] but also covers the time after Chris' death in 2013. It begins with her family history, career, and marriage and continues with her becoming a military spouse, a mother, a public figure, and a widow. Rather than zooming in on the home front exclusively, her memoir includes stories from the battlefield that are based on second-hand knowledge and retrospective accounts[13] but are presented from a position of authority derived from her closeness to her husband. It evidently seeks to set her husband's record straight and take on the public criticism that has been directed against his military activities, public presence, and political opinions. Taya explains "that the U.S. public was not getting a full view of the war" (34) and addresses various criticisms towards her husband:

> Many people not familiar with current military tactics criticized Chris and all snipers for somehow fighting unfairly in Iraq, as if they were hiding far from danger when they went into combat. (72)
>
> People have criticized him for his willingness to shoot a woman and her child who had a grenade and were about to blow up American Marines. (88)
>
> [W]hen he's called a racist or anti-Islam, I just shake my head. (117)

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12 *American Wife* frequently references *American Sniper* and its reception, capitalizing on its bestselling status, expanding its perspective, and drawing attention to the intimate connection between the authors as well as the texts: for example, "Chris and I told the story of how we met in *American Sniper*" (10); "[i]f you've read *American Sniper*, you know what had happened to him" (66); "Chris said in his book that the incident was nothing. From his point of view, he was right […]. But from my perspective, he shouldn't have deployed at all." (67); "[t]he beauty of *American Sniper* is that it is raw" (118). *American Sniper* already included part of Taya's story—according to her, because Jim DeFelice "argued that [her] contribution would make the book truly unique: to that point, no one had included the family in a military memoir, certainly not one involving a SEAL" (114).

13 In fact, Taya Kyle emphasizes that "Chris didn't share most of what had happened on the deployments when he got home" (36) and that during his deployments "[w]ar rarely entered our conversation" (32).

She further tries to appeal to civilian readers' tacit understanding of family relations in order to feel for the soldiers, even if they are unable to fully grasp their specific experience of war:

> People have no idea how horrendous war is until they've lived it. [...] It seems especially hard for civilians to understand violent emotions against the enemy. (37)
>
> Imagine if you are out somewhere with your family, and one of them gets shot and killed. The next day, another one gets shot. Then another. Sooner or later, no matter who you are, you will hate the person who is killing your family. And that hatred extends to the others who are supporting him. It runs deep. (38)

Taya's agenda to create sympathy for her husband, but also for US soldiers in general is spelled out directly and more implicitly promoted through the text's reliance on tacit knowledge as a form of narrative liminality:

> I think it is one thing to protest the war and quite another to criticize the soldiers [...]. They've given their country a blank check on their lives and the lives of their loved ones; we should at least show our sympathy. (35)

She takes on a role that women have fulfilled at least since the heyday of the "cult of true womanhood" (Welter); she serves as a moral authority that readers are supposed to trust—more than, for example, media reports. In fact, despite her attempts to fashion herself as a modern, independent, and empowered woman, Taya Kyle's memoir could easily be read as a modern reiteration of the four cardinal virtues that dominant image once prescribed for white middle- and upper-class women: She is shown as being pure in her commitment to her husband—even beyond his death—and as being pious in her steadfast Christian faith and her belief in divine providence. She is presented as being submissive, as she is happy to support Chris' decisions—though not always without a fight—and to defend his legacy. As such, she is also shown to be domestic in her decision to become a full-time mother and wife and in her charity work that focuses on the families of first responders and veterans. At the very least, hers is "a very conventional construction of femininity" (Spychala 120) and her identity is predominantly derived from her husband's life and career.[14]

Chris Kyle's public image has, from the start, been based on him being an exception and his story has been marketed as extraordinary and readily made for Hollywood. Like her husband, Taya, however, goes to great length to claim that both she and her husband are representative of the military community if not of the nation at large. After the success of his book, more and more people started to

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14 Fashioning herself as a reluctant public figure, she remarks, for instance, that she "enjoyed being who I was—wife of an American hero. Chris Kyle's wife. That was my identity; I was wife and mother, but you don't get famous for that. Which was fine" (141).

thank Chris for his service. Taya interprets his public role as a stand-in for the military community: "Thanking him was people's way of thanking everyone in uniform" (129). She also picks up on his self-fashioning as a cowboy (cf., e.g., 58, 106, or 190), emphasizes his Texan identity, and his "love of the Old West," which "appealed to him" because of the "clear sense of right and wrong, of frontier justice and strong values" (126). The foundational mythology of the American West and the imperial scheme of 'going West'[15] are projected onto Chris Kyle, i.e., the modern-day soldier-cowboy, and thereby used to legitimize the contemporary imperial strivings of the US. As a culturally specific form of tacit knowledge that could be explicated, but usually does not have to be explained, it serves as a means to connect with civilian readers within and beyond the confines of narrative form.

The clear demarcation of good and evil that is central to the American Sniper oeuvre further aligns it ideologically with US popular culture since 9/11, which "has broadly presented the United States as a global force for good, a reluctant hegemon working to defend human rights and protect or expand democracy from the barbarians determined to destroy it" (Laderman 5). *American Wife* is steeped in an American exceptionalism that is bolstered by the protagonist's belief in "God's plan" (69) and "divine intervention" (231), i.e., a sense of providence, which shapes the lives of both, *American Sniper* and *American Wife*, and thus the American nation.

While the American Sniper oeuvre neither destabilizes the "heterosexual matrix" (Butler) nor the "traditional gendering of the home front as a feminine and the battlefield as a masculine space, it [...] troubles what can be considered war experience and entrenched notions of the home front and the front line" (Spychala 121). As Mareike Spychala observes, "[t]he births of both of the Kyles' children [...] are included in the part of the book titled 'War,' [which mixes] descriptions of life with young children [...] with descriptions of Chris Kyle's time in Iraq" (120). Taya writes, for instance: "In November 2004, while Bubba and I were negotiating nutrition and breast-feeding, Chris was heading to Fallujah to help Marines retake the city" (51). *American Wife* not only blurs the distinction between home front and battlefield but also describes the long-term effects of war that continue to trouble veterans and military families beyond their active engagement in military conflict. "Leaving the war zone, didn't translate immediately into leaving the war," Taya Kyle explains (104), and calls for more attention to the situation of service members after they have left the military (95). The non-profit organization that she founds to honor her husband's legacy and to support military and first responders' marriages and families (cf. 226-27, 320-22) puts that call into action. Though her husband was shot by a mentally ill veteran, Taya advocates for being "sympathetic towards the victims of PTSD while not letting them use it as excuse" (266).

15 For an overview of the myth of the American West, see chapter VI in Heike Paul's *The Myths that Made America: An Introduction to American Studies.*

American Wife includes photographs as well as emails from Chris (cf., e.g., 56-59, 73-77, 81-82, 86-88, 90-91) that offer evidence of her husband's good character and their shared feelings. They create intimacy and humanize the 'most lethal sniper in US history.' Readers are thus interpellated to feel for the soldier and the military spouse by the explicit arguments presented in the text, its (visual) paratext, and its multiple references to a shared tacit knowledge about family and love, (civil) religion, and faith. Once more emphasizing emotional understanding, Taya Kyle praises Clint Eastwood's filmmaking because it "[does not] show and tell everything in an obvious manner; [it] get[s] [its] message across in subtle ways, but make[s] you feel it" (243) and embraces *American Sniper* specifically because it reveals "the deeper truth about what our veterans go through, what their families go through" (307-08). She clearly marks the limits of narrative to capture and to convey the experiences and feelings of military families while also pointing towards the fact that cultural representations—such as Eastwood's films or her own book—may gesture beyond their own symbolic forms: They explicate and implicitly impart some instances of tacit knowledge and affirm the impossibility of fully explaining the embodied and emotional knowledge of military spouses to outsiders.

Conclusion

Albeit in different ways, all three autobiographies engage in the management of feelings, public and private, and they rely on strategies of "sentimental storytelling" (Wanzo). They seek to generate sympathy for military families and raise awareness for the immediate and long-term consequences of war for those on the home front. To that end, they draw on their readers' emotional understanding of love, family, and kinship as well as on their authors' experiential and embodied knowledge. After all, as Alexis Shotwell reminds us, "[t]he implicit is what provides the conditions for things to make sense to us" (x). Jenn Carpenter, Lily Burana, and Taya Kyle set out to prove that they are more than "the stock figures of aggrieved military mother, wife, or widow" (Adelman 27), and they create affective agency for military spouses by appealing to their readers' tacit knowledge and by sharing their experiences within (and beyond) the confines of narrative form, verbal explication, and propositional knowledge.

This, however, comes at a price: Not only do home front autobiographies transpose the narrative of war onto the domestic sphere and, in the process, divert attention from the battlefields and victims of US warfare abroad. They also serve to reinforce what Elisabeth Anker has described as "the melodramatic political discourse" of the so-called 'War on Terror,' which

> casts politics, policies, and practices of citizenship within a moral economy that identifies the nation-state as a virtuous and innocent victim of villainous action. It locates goodness in the suffering of the nation, evil in its antagonists, and heroism in sovereign acts of war and global control coded as expressions of virtue. (2)

Home front autobiographies by military spouses tend to be complicit in advancing the "imperial ideology [that] has been naturalized in American life" (Laderman 10). Even though their emphasis on the suffering of military families might allow for reading them 'against the grain' as documents of the detrimental effects of war on the presumably safe space of the American family home and thus as a subtle critique of warfare, they implicitly and explicitly lobby for their readers' support of the troops. They affirm the moral goodness of the men fighting for the US, and, at least to some degree, bolster the righteousness and legitimacy of US military actions and assert the nation's "imperial benevolence" (Laderman and Gruenwald).

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Form and/in Modernity
The Brownies, a Case Study

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Abstract:
This essay puts the spotlight on fictional characters called the Brownies, which were introduced in serialized, illustrated stories in the children's magazine St. Nicholas in 1883 but quickly proliferated into multiple three-dimensional consumer items. It examines how through 'form'—the creatures' distinctive design on the one hand and the printed series in which they appeared on the other—they created cultural significance in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. It argues that the Brownies' reproducibility in and transferability across different storytelling formats, genres, and commercial media—which is a key driving force of the cultural work they performed—are enabled by a narrative depletion that is tied to seriality. To analyze the (non-/narrative) forms of the Brownies and their affordances allows for an enhanced understanding of the mechanisms that shape the expanding, commercialized (youth) consumer culture and the capitalist ideologies on which they thrive and which they helped to disseminate.

Introduction

The following chapter engages with fictional characters named the Brownies by the Canadian American writer and illustrator Palmer Cox (1840-1924) in order to show how they functioned as forms of articulation and sense-making of/in American modernity. The Brownies are little sprites that originated as recurrent characters in different serialized, visual-verbal narratives that were printed in periodicals such as *St. Nicholas* and the *Ladies' Home Journal* in the last decades of the nineteenth century

and the first decades of the twentieth.[1] Cox drew the goblins and also wrote the couplets that complement the illustrations. They all have the same body shape: a round stomach, long, thin legs, pointed feet, and a round face with large eyes. The Brownies are said and shown to come out at night from their hiding place, the dark woods: either to "enjoy harmless pranks while weary households slept," to "perform good and helpful deeds" (Cox, "Origin"), or to imitate human activities, such as singing, skating, or biking. As such, they are also said to explore new technologies and scientific devices, to learn something new, such as how to build a toboggan or a raft, or to travel to nearby and far-off regions and around the globe. They are not bound to any specific location, are unnamed, and ageless. Soon after they appeared in *St. Nicholas* for the first time in February 1883, the Brownies exited their original carrier medium and narrative space to become one of the first consumer culture sensations in North America in the late nineteenth century.

The Brownies are portable figures, transgressing all kinds of aesthetic, medial, and material borders: They move back and forth between different serialized storytelling formats ('series,' 'serials'[2]), genres (e.g., adventure, fantasy, fairytale, travel writing), and different periodical publications (juvenile and women's magazines and, a bit later, newspapers). Furthermore, they migrate across different media (in books, advertisements, and in the form of musical compositions; they were also appropriated for diverse theater plays and appeared in the form of a huge variety of three-dimensional consumer wares) while always remaining immediately recognizable.

In my essay, I will use the concept of 'form' as an analytical paradigm to discuss the cultural significance of the Brownies in the context of a rapidly growing industrial, urban, and consumer society. Form means two things here: On the one hand, the term serves to describe the particular, emblematic, serialized *design* of the Brownies—that is, their outer appearance: their clothes and their body shape, as described above. On the other hand, the periodicals' 'series' and 'serials' in which

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1 *St. Nicholas* was a monthly children's magazine that began serialization in November 1873 under the editorship of Mary Mapes Dodge. The target audience was the white middle-class. For further information, see Gannon et al.

2 Roger Hagedorn proposes to distinguish between "series proper" and "serial proper" (7-8). Series are made of self-enclosed, "independent […] episodes or chapters" (8) with recurrent elements such as a protagonist or a specific behavior or gesture of a character, or a setting—a "basic diegetic situation" (8)—to create a coherence between the respective installments. As Hagedorn claims, series do not have an "overall narrative structure" (8). Serials are also made of several installments but are based on a principle of continuous, chronological storytelling with a linear development within an "extended narrative" (8) and operate with short breaks in between the installments (often in the form of cliffhangers to build up tension). Both of these means of storytelling (and publishing) are informed with different dynamics of iteration that drive the narration and constitute reading publics.

the Brownies appeared in words and pictures are understood here as concrete and meaningful forms, i.e., as aesthetic, social, and material forms that order and serve to make sense of modern urban life, as I will illustrate. In what follows, I first examine a selection of episodes from the Brownies series printed in *St. Nicholas* and reflect on their affordances. Next, I discuss the Brownies' movements outside of their original setting and carrier medium. My contention is that the Brownies' adaptability, mobility, and portability to and across different commercial media—which is a chief engine of the cultural work they performed—are enabled by a deflation of narrative that is tied to seriality. The framing argument for this paper is that the career of Palmer Cox's Brownies—their emergence and evolution in the periodical press and beyond the printed page—gives insight into the mechanisms of the expanding, commercialized (youth) consumer culture and the capitalist ideologies on which the Brownies' forms thrive and which they helped to disseminate.

The Iterative Scheme

Palmer Cox began working for *St. Nicholas* magazine in 1878 and he produced the first Brownies-like fabled beings in illustrated stories in 1879 (cf. Cox, "Fairies'" 524-25; see also Cox, "Alphabet" 976-78), but only with the regular appearance of his Brownies stories from February 1883 onwards did he gain popularity. Cox acquired meanings for his Brownies from sources of European folklore (cf. Carpenter and Prichard 85-86) and adjusted the elf-like creatures to modern times and the context of the expanding North American nation in the late nineteenth century. There is not much plot to be found in the installments. The Brownies series are formulaic. Each episode begins in medias res with expressions such as "one night," "one evening" or "the next evening," "once" or "one time." The Brownies' home, their shelter, their place to hide is "a forest dark and wide" (Cox, "Brownies at the Sea-Side" 763; see also Cox, "Brownies Tobogganing" 229). From the woods in which they live they come out at night, they "gather," "cluster," "muster" (these are verbs often used to describe their coming together by night), or "[dart] from the sheltering trees" (Cox, "Brownies at the Sea-Side" 764) and "[bunch] together in a crowd" (Cox, "Brownies and the Bicycles" 71).

Rhythmically, that is with each new episode printed in the children's magazine, the Brownies appear during the night and disappear when the day begins. First, the Brownies see something they consider interesting and/or entertaining, such as a toy store, a sporting ground, canoeing people, skating children, a gymnasium, or a circus coming to a town. Then, they express their wish to explore a place, to play a game such as baseball or tennis, to listen to a tale they have not heard before, or to build a device such as a ship or a bicycle. Afterwards, they usually go somewhere—as for instance a factory or a "country school-house" (Cox, "Brownies

at School" 920)—and spend the night doing different kinds of things, always "in quest of fun" (Cox, "Brownies at the Sea-Side" 763), "to keep the fun alive" (Cox, "Brownies' Circus" 390), and to "make the most of every night" (Cox, "Brownies Tobogganing" 229). When the morning comes, they run, "[i]n eager haste to disappear / In deepest shade of forests near" (Cox, "Brownies at School" 923).

This repetitive structure is found in each episode, but this does not mean that there is no innovation and that there is no reading pleasure. To use Umberto Eco's wording here, the reading of the Cox's series "presumes the enjoyment of a scheme" (162). The series follows a principle of recurrence of the Brownies and of innovation regarding the setting and doings. As a contemporary of Cox emphasized: "The variety [...] was all but infinite. Through all imaginable adventures, on earth, in air, and in the sea, in all parts of the world, [Cox] led his train of merry sprites, [...] without a single failure or lapse of interest" ("Father" 6). The expectation to meet the same group of Brownies but in a different surrounding is fulfilled with each new installment appearing in *St. Nicholas*, but the specifics of each new episode, referring to Eco again, "only serve to reconfirm the permanence of a fixed repertoire of *topoi*" (164). Redundancy is what made the series so successful. Each reiteration allows the readers to "recover, point by point, what they already know, and what they want to know again" (164). In brief, each installment in the series is "an *instant*, which is loved precisely because it is recurrent" (164). Because of their rhythmic reappearance each month, the Brownies also functioned as structuring elements in the lives of the series' audiences.

Other formulaic elements that afforded (serial) pleasure are the goblins themselves. Cox's Brownies all show the same features, which were presented to readers in "tangible face and figure" ("Palmer Cox, 'Father'" 9): They have long, thin legs, round bellies, round faces with large, round eyes, and they wear pointed caps and pointed shoes. Over time, Cox added about fifty individualized 'types' to his original crowd. As Nick Mount writes, Cox "[gave] them a limited but distinct set of attributes that children could easily identify" (62; see also Cross 88). Some of the Brownies were meant to represent social types such as 'the Cowboy' or 'the Dude'; the attire and gesture (and behavior in the respective episode) would make them identifiable to consumers, and one of the reading joys was to find each of these and other Brownies types in the illustrations (see, for instance, T.P.C. 794-95). The "aristocratic dude, [the] gentleman of leisure" with his suit, hat, cane and monocle was one of the most popular Brownies (T.P.C. 794; see also Lucia 234; Ella F. 874). The Dude was relatable, meaningful to many because "he reminds me so much of a good many *(very) young men of this city*," as one reader of the series explained (Clyde C. 475, emphasis in the original). Next to these, there were those Brownies created to represent ethnic and national (stereo)types: The band had an Irishman, an Italian, a Chinaman, a Dutchman, and a Turk, for instance. Last not least, there were Brownies that were defined by their profession—a policeman, a school teacher, a

student, a soldier, or a sailor. Each of these and other easily discernible Brownies types playfully replicate the real world, and they offer a whimsical attitude toward the experience of modernity (for a detailed discussion, see Meyer).

Non-/Narrative Engagements

Readers of the serialized stories can enjoy—and are encouraged to emulate—the Brownies' bravery, ingenuity, philanthropy, and industriousness, and their understanding of teamwork as a prerequisite for communal life. They are independent but depend on each other. The stability of proved values—values such as self-improvement and self-assessment and the importance of education in life and for progress—is ensured in the series. Brownies persevere, and they always find a solution. They are industrious creatures, eager to learn, to educate themselves, and to acquire knowledge: "The Brownies labor heard and hand / All mysteries to understand" (Cox, "Brownies' Singing-School" 303). They are skillful and build their own devices "without the aid of steam or glue" (Cox, "Brownies Tobogganing" 228), are energetic, curious, and adventurous, have "strength and patience" (228), and have "active minds" (Cox, "Brownies in the Gymnasium" 69). They familiarize themselves with all kinds of machines, scientific principles (and the application of these for useful purposes), and new technologies such as the microscope (see, for example, Cox, "Brownies in the Academy" 465; see also Mount 62).

By browsing through the so-called Letter-Box of *St. Nicholas*, one can get a glimpse of activities triggered by the Brownies tales and in particular by the distinct Brownies types such as "the dude, the policeman, and the one with the Tam o'Shanter" (Ella F. 874). The letters explain how readers of the series imitated scenes and characters, dressed up as Brownies, and sometimes also did performances in which they combined elements of the Brownies and of other characters from *St. Nicholas* magazine, such as Mother Goose (cf. Sorby 69). The words of the rhyming couplets describing activities of the Brownies and the illustrations that show the Brownies in action encourage different consumption practices or different forms of play (such as disguising and/or emulating) and world-building (such as expanding the adventures of the fictional characters by imagining them to interact with fictional characters and animals from other popular stories).

Continued engagements with the Brownies such as those just described were also generated by means of other print features as, for example, Brownies doll theaters, which were distributed in the form of cut-out sheets in newspapers.[3] In the 1890s, most city papers included extra sections, in color, for their Sunday editions,

3 Toy theaters and the practice of tinseling were common leisure activities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe and a bit later in the US.

and in some of these supplements readers would find fold-out and cut-out features, such as do-it-yourself paper dolls, or center-spread prints showing a circus arena.[4] These and other printed features were supposed to be cut out and glued onto cardboard so that consumers would then be able to play with them, including 'adaptations' of Palmer Cox's Brownies series. These were presented to the readers of the *Boston Globe* in 1895, for example, just before Christmas. The Art Supplement had a stage 'scenery' sheet, meant for different uses, and a selection of Brownies 'players' ("Play Theater"). The newspaper emphasized: "There are very few persons who will not acknowledge but that, except in rare instances, the stage is a great factor in the elevation and education of the public" ("Brownies on the Stage").

In that issue of the *Boston Globe*, the paper's supplement set out to present "something that would be instructive and amusing" ("Brownies on the Stage"). Once the newspaper readers would be done with the cutting and gluing, they "will have the 'Brownie' show [...]. After you have put it up [...] you can then put these figures about in the different slits to please yourself. A very pretty effect is obtained with this theater at night by putting it under the gas or electric light, so that the light falls among the players and scenery." The instructions then explain in all detail how to preserve the page as a meaningful souvenir, what to do with the scenery and the players, and what to expect in the Sunday supplement of the paper in the following weeks. Thus, while the Brownies serve as engines for practices such as role-playing, they also afford non-narrative engagements—activities such as folding, cutting, gluing, etc.; activities, simply put, that do not turn on narrative. Against this backdrop, I will now discuss the reason for the Brownies' reproducibility and adaptability in different media, genres, and storytelling formats and the implications of such transgressions.

The Border-Crossing Brownies

The Brownies were not only easily discernible types in the visual-verbal stories printed in the periodical press that offered repeated—that is, serial—pleasure. They were also recognizable in the material culture, in products such as card games, puzzles, or three-dimensional toys (cf. McLoughlin Brothers) that circulated in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. As a contemporary of Cox claimed: "[T]he Brownie is a most adaptable figure" (Hamersly 144). Their portability is contingent on narrative depletion. In their article on 'serial figures' vs. 'series characters,' Denson and Mayer write that serial figures are

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4 Fold- and cut-out sheets were marketing strategies by the newspaper and tools to lure readers to buy the paper regularly. For other examples, think of paper dolls. Readers were first given a model figure, and new dresses (to cut out) would follow each week.

able "to extract themselves fully from the diegetic construct of a narrative world [...] and even from the medium itself through which a fictional world is otherwise invisibly constructed. This is why serial figures can so easily take up residence in new narrative worlds" (69). In brief, they "are liminal and operationally-expansive" (74).

Though Denson and Mayer have formulated these claims with regard to popular figures such as Batman, the criteria they describe fit some of the principles of the Brownies. While they were introduced as protagonists in visual-verbal narratives, the Brownies quickly proliferated outside of their original carrier medium—the children's magazine—and their original narrative world. In print, they showed up in various magazines and newspapers in the US and abroad. The Brownies were also available in bound volumes, which were sold in other countries, too, and were translated to different languages (e.g., French, German, Russian). In the early twentieth century, the Brownies entered the medium of comics. They appeared in the form of multi-panel comic strips in the Sunday comic supplements of different newspapers (cf. Cox, "Brownie Clown"). In addition to these print versions and the numerous copies by other artists and ardent admirers of Cox's stories, the Brownies were adapted to the theater stage. Diverse and competing Brownies plays with sensational stage-crafts, amazing sceneries, costumes, and hundreds of actors as well as spectacles such as shipwrecks, last-minute rescues, and erupting volcanoes toured the US in the 1890s (cf. Teal; see also Cohen; "The Playhouses"; "Cox's Brownies"; "Star Theater"). Furthermore, they were celebrated in various musical compositions; these appeared in the form of song sheets or folios that were meant for sing-along or musical sketches/operettas to be performed by children. Last not least, the Brownies were also available in three-dimensional formats,[5] and they served as promotional tools for a variety of products in a series of advertisements.

Cox was quite enterprising when he licensed the Brownies to advertisers as well as to manufacturers, which was also an attempt to reclaim economic (if not authorial) control over them (cf. Olivier; Morgan; Morgan and Ingram). He regularly drew illustrations for picture puzzles or portrait blocks, for example, and wrote short verses that were printed on such toys as nine-pins (McLoughlin Brothers 89, 93, 108).[6] More and more Brownies items started to flood the market that would make "contemporary tie-in merchandising seem restrained," as Cary Nelson and

5 Mel Birnkrant's website shows a collection of Brownies items, such as rubber stamps, trade cards, cigar boxes, candy containers, and more (see Birnkrant).

6 Cox had rights to and control over his serial stories—as the *Catalogues of Title Entries of Books and Other Articles* of the Treasury Department show—but the characters themselves (their distinctive body shape and their clothing) defied legal as well as authorial control. Copyright law in the late nineteenth century did not include a specific 'design' of a drawn cartoon character or character of a graphic narrative (yet).

Mike Chasar state, "[t]he effect was to thoroughly blur the line between original and collateral Brownie artefacts, between the impulse to buy a book of Cox's poems and the impulse to buy a patent medicine, a doll, or a box of soap" (144).

The iconic design of Palmer Cox's Brownies migrated in and through different print formats and permeated consumer culture. As a newspaper comment summarized: "The Brownies lived for their public not only in books and the monthly pages, but on the pencil boxes and school rulers, on the wall-papers of the nurseries, on handkerchiefs, scarfs, pins, toys and stationery" ("Harking"; see also "Brownies"; Whiting Paper Company). The most widely advertised and spreading tie-in product was the Brownie camera by the Eastman Kodak Company.[7] The Brownie camera was introduced in 1900 and promoted through numerous advertisement campaigns that were launched by the company in the US and circulated internationally in the trade press, in newspapers, and in diverse magazines.[8] Cameras had existed before that time, but the small Brownie camera was the first mass-produced camera available to a large consumer base. It was simple in design, easy to handle, dependable and "durable" (Eastman Kodak Co., "Kodak and Brownie"), of high quality but at a low price. In sum, a portable camera with which any amateur would be able to take good pictures, a product of and in everyday life—or at least this is how it was advertised. Not only was the camera promoted with the help of the Brownies characters in many of the ads running in the periodical press between 1900 and 1908, as well as in the form of lithograph posters sent to sellers. Illustrations of them also appeared on some of the camera's cardboard packaging box, as for instance on the box for the Brownie Kodak No. 1 Model B and No. 2A.[9]

The Brownie cameras with Brownie drawings on the cardboard box were made and shipped nationwide in the US as well as in Canada. A successful business strategy: By selling a limited number of Brownies cameras placed inside a packaging box with Brownies drawings, the company created specific consuming desires and triggered, one might say, "attitudinal shifts" (Baker et al. 37). The Brownie camera

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7 The Kodak Brownie camera cost between eighty cents and two dollars—the prices depended on the seller and on whether or not the camera had a viewfinder.

8 In advertisements, Eastman Kodak often included photos of children—taken by someone who is not seen in the pictures—who prepare, are about to, or have just taken a portrait-photo of a Brownie toy placed in front of them to promote the Brownie camera (cf. Eastman Kodak Co., "Let the Children"). These photos showing or staging a picture-taking moment with a Brownie were either made by Frederick W. Barnes (who was an assignor to the company) or sent in by amateur photographers for the many prize competitions introduced by the Eastman Kodak Company. The company then reused them as advertisements. Whatever the case, the active cooperation between photographers and the company was secured.

9 The digital collection of the Eastman Museum in Rochester, NY, holds photographic images of the cardboard boxes ("Two Rare Rolls").

was no longer just, or exclusively, a functional apparatus and a device bringing entertainment but became an aesthetic object, a rare merchandise item. Those who had grown up with and admired the Brownies characters were now able to buy, own, and collect/preserve the apparatus and its box, or maybe even boxes.[10] The Brownie camera, its boxes, and the Kodak advertisement promoting the Brownie camera served both to create a desire to consume and to own such a commodity as well as to familiarize consumers with a new technology. Therefore, Brownies commodities and the many promotional announcements that used the Brownies to advertise a new product or to advertise Brownies items give insight into expansionist tie-in marketing strategies during the nineteenth century as well as into how consumers were being habituated to expand their consumption practices.

Conclusion

The Brownies are specific configurations of the production and consumption of serialized mass culture. Their long-lasting career—roughly between 1880 and 1930—was contingent upon a network of interconnected practices by different social 'actants' (to borrow a term by Bruno Latour). These included individuals such as the readers of *St. Nicholas* and institutional 'agents' such as syndicate agencies, advertisers, and lithograph companies; furthermore, newspaper and magazine editors and publishers as well as theater producers, but also the stagecrafters, actors, actresses, and music composers; and, finally, retailers—through their shop window designs—as well as different toy manufacturing firms. Their success was regulated by rubrics of law, such as copyright, and was enmeshed in the increased, accelerated mechanization of the dissemination of goods that happened in the post-Civil War era (cf. Meyer). This chapter has used the emergence and evolution of the Brownies as a case study to inquire into how they created cultural significance through form, through their design and their print series.

I have mentioned above that the distinct Brownies (stereo)types that Cox and his toy manufacturers created afforded a playful replication of the social world of modern America. Here I would like to reevaluate my own statement. What requires further research, I believe, are the valuations that are operative in these types along the lines of gender and race, for instance. Using the wording of Caroline Levine in a different context, the social form of racial hierarchy of post-Civil War society

10 The circulation of Brownies trading cards, such as those by Foster, Besse & Co. in Bridgeport, Connecticut, which promoted baseball sportswear with the help of the Brownies, or those by cigar manufacturers, such as Criterion Cigar Co, may have had similar effects. These Brownies trading cards could turn into collectible and tradable aesthetic items.

structures the aesthetic experience of the *St. Nicholas* magazine, and of the Brownies series as well: "Enclosures afford containment and security, inclusion as well as exclusion" (6). Cox created a group of ethnically diverse members—the depictions of which relied on stereotypical imagery and cultural clichés—but in none of the stories do we find a female Brownie or a black character. They remain invisible. Fern Kory has put it succinctly: "Cox's vision [...] did not encompass African American children as implied audience or as subject matter," he "is either unwilling or unable to portray African Americans" (99-100). The ways in which "various distancing strategies—linguistic, geographic, temporal—insulate [the] readers [of *St. Nicholas*] from confrontations with contemporary African Americans, even fictional ones" (94) is an aspect that needs further critical discussion because it directs us also towards the question of the politics of form.

This critical reading would need a thorough analysis of Cox's commissioned work, too, which he produced for diverse manufacturing firms (e.g., McLoughlin Bros. or Clark's O.N.T. Spool Cotton) and for newspapers; furthermore, an analysis of the racial and ethnic stereotypes he created in advertising booklets or in graphic narratives printed in the Sunday newspaper supplements. I am thinking of *The Jolly Chinee*, for example, which held stories by the author E. Veale and illustrations by Cox, first produced as a supplement for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in January 1897, and which was reproduced for many years in both softcover and hardcover bindings by such publishers as Hubbard Publishing, in Philadelphia, or W. B. Conkey Co., in Chicago. This would also need a thorough discussion of the "exclusionary ideology" (Kory 99) on which Cox's folk creations were built, which they helped to perpetuate, and with which most fairy tales in dominant juvenile magazines of the nineteenth century were operating. Last but not least, this would need an examination of the counter-hegemonic forms that appeared in the (juvenile) periodical press. As examples, think of W.E.B. Du Bois, Augustus Granville Dill, and Jessie Redmon Fauset's children's magazine titled the *Brownies' Book* (1920-21). It aimed at revising mainstream texts published in leading juvenile magazines, such as *St. Nicholas* and the *Youth's Companion*, and at rewriting the history of children's literature (cf. Kory 92; see also Meyer).

Children's magazines of the nineteenth century, such as *St. Nicholas*, and the role they played in the conceptualization and meaning of childhood and consumer identity in post-Civil War American society, as well as the question of how they functioned as media of knowledge, expression, and experience are still marginalized aspects in the scholarship on North American culture and literature. This paper has attempted to remedy this neglect and to offer glimpses into reading materials and consumption habits of the nineteenth century, focusing on the career of the Brownies. In my analysis, I put special emphasis on the concept of form to reflect on the design of the Brownies figures, which lent itself to numerous recontextualizations and to transmediatization, on the one hand, and to exploring the

serialized stories in which they appeared, on the other. In the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, the Brownies existed in multiple two- and three-dimensional versions, in commercial media, and in various practices, such as reading or singing, or cutting and gluing. *St. Nicholas* magazine, the Brownies series, and the numerous Brownies consumer wares are largely forgotten today, but they offer unique perspectives on social, aesthetic, and material forms of the Progressive Era and the cultural work they performed. Henry Turner has claimed that "form *does* things, it doesn't simply mean things" (586), and Palmer Cox's Brownies offer a good starting point in this regard.

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Embodying Narrative, Staging Icons[1]

The Liminal Space of Embodied Performance

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Abstract:
The cultural practices of contemporary cosplay and medieval mystery play are showcases for the phenomenon of narrative liminality in that they are clearly and necessarily tied to narrative sources but have a tendency to deplete the narrativity of these sources. The argument will move along four aspects of the practices that mark their movements from narrative into a liminal space. These aspects are first of all the storyworlds from which the practices draw their significance. Iconicity is the second aspect that is the connector between the storyworlds with their recognizable existents and the performance that is at the core of the cultural practices. Performance is therefore the third aspect, which directly leads into the final aspect of embodiment, the significance of the real body of the performer, which further removes the practices from their sources. The notion of 'moe,' or adoration, is introduced as a way to understand the motivation for the phenomena described.

Introduction

What I want to sketch in the following is the way in which certain cultural practices, like cosplay and medieval mystery plays, can be understood to occupy a particular liminal space between narrative and other symbolic forms, such as play, spectacle, performance, and ritual. To understand the distance that has to be travelled to get to this space, we will pass through four sites that will lead from the center of narrative to a place that is related, but also distant. These sites are storyworlds, icons, performance, and finally embodiment.

1 The following essay is a substantial reworking and refocusing of a text that originally appeared in *Acta Sapientia*, vol. 9, 2014, pp. 125-139, under the title "Staging Icons, Performing Storyworlds—From Mystery Play to Cosplay."

But before we can look at these stages, it is probably necessary to first characterize the two objects of inquiry and to explain in what respect they are comparable, since they will appear at first glance to be as far apart from each other as possible. But all historical, cultural, and religious differences aside, both medieval mystery plays and contemporary cosplay take elements of a storyworld well-known to its audience—we will focus mainly on characters here—and then use a live performance to visualize these elements or characters by having them embodied through actors.

To start with the mystery plays, these are biblical dramas that were staged all throughout Europe from the thirteenth to the later sixteenth century. They were the only form of dramatic entertainment at the time, and they were usually produced each year by a town and its different guilds on the occasion of special religious holidays, most importantly the feast day of Corpus Christi. The purpose of the mystery plays was to instruct the laity about the essential features of the Christian faith, but they were also very elaborate, highly spectacular, and logistically complicated affairs. They surely provided as much entertainment and aesthetic pleasure to their audience as they did divine instruction, something that contemporary critics lamented (Aronson-Lehavi 2). After having endured almost unrivaled for centuries, the mystery plays vanish as theatrical practice in the course of the sixteenth century. The most important reasons for their demise were the introduction of the Reformation with its hostility to the creation of icons and, especially in England, the emergence of a mimetic stage with the theater companies of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

Cosplay, on the other hand, is a compound of the words 'costume' and 'play' (with play additionally referencing role-play). It describes the activity of fans dressing up and posing in a *visually recognizable* way as characters from popular media franchises such as manga, anime, TV series, or superhero comics. Arguably, this recognizability is a crucial difference to other costuming activities, such as Halloween or Mardi Gras and one that is of great importance to our concerns: Whereas for Halloween you might dress up as *a* cowboy, Cosplayers always represent a *specific* character that preexists in one or, more often, several stories. Like the mystery plays, cosplay is not an everyday activity but also usually happens on designated 'feast days,' most often conventions about comics or video games where there are designated areas for cosplayers and often also cosplay competitions. This significantly adds to the ritualistic character of the performances.

Cosplay is a truly intercultural phenomenon in which especially American and Japanese cultures interrelate in a complex and intricate way. Both cultures have developed their own source iconography. American fans dressing up as characters from the *Star Trek* series in the 1980s were the original inspiration for manga and anime cosplay in Japan, which has developed by now into a whole subculture (cf. Winge 66f.). On its way there cosplay has also developed its own performative rituals.

Storyworld

As has already been stated, the first thing that makes mystery plays and cosplay comparable is the source from which the characters are taken for the embodied performance, and it is this that roots both practices firmly in narrative. This is because the *source* from which the performative remediations take their material are narrative storyworlds. In the case of mystery plays, their sources are the traditional stories of mythology as codified in biblical narrative. All mythologies and religions have used narrative and stories to communicate their ideas, their explanations of the origin, and the purpose of life. Thus, they have always created narrative worlds: stories of titans, gods, and the sons of gods. In the case of cosplay, these are the consciously created narrative worlds of large story franchises like superheroes and manga.

Without this source, both practices would remain pure spectacle without (narrative) signification. Traditionally, narrative and spectacle have been understood to be at odds with each other (cf., e.g., Bukatman) but in this case only the combination of the spectacular and the narrative source generates the complete form. They derive their meaning in this way, both for the producers and for the spectators. But this relation between the narrative source and the resulting performative practice is not a straightforward case of adaptation; in fact, the narrative source does not even have to be a definably concrete text, which is why it is more accurate to say that they derive their meaning from storyworlds (rather than concrete stories). We make sense of our world, of what we come to know about our world, by narrativizing it (cf., e.g., Boyd 131), and therefore by mentally projecting storyworlds in which events take place and things exist. That is, we constantly construct storyworlds, and we relate all medial representations of existents (be it people, objects, or events) to the storyworlds that we construct. Both the religio-mythological worlds of the mystery plays and the franchised serial worlds of superheroes and manga are notably complex and multiple in their source texts.

Mystery plays and cosplay thus both operate by invoking storyworlds, and these storyworlds are rooted in narrative (and derive their meaning from being so), but, as we will see, these practices only activate partial, narratively depleted aspects of these storyworlds. They are not adaptation nor even necessarily story-telling. Thus, both mystery plays and cosplay have their origin in narrative because they establish concrete references to characters from narrative worlds that pre-exist the performance. The main purpose of the representational aspect of their performance is therefore recognizability: You have to 'get' the performance for it to really work: *That* must be Jesus and *that* must be Megaman. The interesting question for our purposes here is: When do the existents that make up the respective source material (need to) take on iconic properties?

Icon

As long as every single story creates its own storyworld, elements do not have to be memorable in the sense of being recognizable. Hemingway can call the protagonists of his short story “Hills Like White Elephants” simply “the American and the girl”—making them virtually indistinguishable from millions of others—because they exist only in and for this one story and, more importantly, this one text. But as soon as characters *reoccur* in *several* stories or when the same story is being told in different ways, maybe even through several different media (often without a concrete single source text), the reoccurring elements need distinctive attributes to make them recognizable. The easiest possibility to create recognizability is the use of proper names: Don’t call your characters “the American and the girl,” but rather Humbert Humbert or Ulysses. Then you can simply say: Let me tell you another story about Ulysses and his adventures, and everyone will know that it is *another* story about the *same* Ulysses. And yet readers will most likely still crave for more convincing proofs of the identity of the ‘new’ with the ‘old’ Ulysses. They might, for example, eagerly wait for the point where he proves his superior cunning and therefore proves that he really is ‘the’ Ulysses.

We can therefore recognize iconicity as a quality that is liminal in the way that it is rooted in narrative texts and their narrativity but is at the same time removing this narrativity to reduce the ‘icon’ to a static, narratively depleted object. Its recognizably iconic nature ties it to the narrative source, but it becomes necessary precisely to the extent that it is decoupled from the original narrative content.

Moving back to our main examples, we can say that only with the Reformation, with its strong emphasis on scripture (greatly helped by promoting vernacular translations) and its emphasis on actual acquaintance with the source text, does Christianity’s fundamentally text-based nature become available. In the medieval catholic context the concrete text base was not readily available to the mass of people. And yet the same people would be very well acquainted with the respective storyworlds. They knew the stories and the characters without being able to refer to a single, concrete source. This is where the visual arts come in, creating a vast number of adaptations of the biblical stories in all available media that do not rely on language. And in order to do that, they developed an elaborate iconography, that is, a number of visual signs such as specific colors, forms such as the halo, or objects that are all to be understood as directly referencing specific characters, events, or concepts.

This iconography is also of prime importance to the staging practice of the mystery plays. Certainly, they were never intended to be used as reading matter (cf. Davidson, “Positional” 66f.; Tydeman 1). They were experienced much more like living images than as a modern stage performance. Within the dramatic framework of the medieval plays there was only very little time to establish the numerous char-

acters appearing—from St. Joseph to Herod. Also, the lack of fixed seating made it doubtful that everyone would understand all the words. But then, of course, all the spectators already knew the different stories very well—the only precondition was that they recognized *which* story they were being presented with. The performances therefore had to draw on the vast pool of visual symbols that had developed throughout the history of Christian art in order to ease identification beyond the written word. Elaborate masks, iconic costumes, halos, and the carrying of attributes are all important parts of the performances (cf. Carpenter and Twycross 191-232). Aronson-Lehavi talks in this respect of "religious and iconic personae" as well as "iconic 'molds' that can be filled and refilled by different performers" (4f., cf. also 95-106).

When we look to the storyworlds created for superhero comics or manga and anime franchises, we can immediately spot some interesting similarities. First of all, they are also modeled on the structure of mythological narratives: They project complex worlds filled with a large cast of characters that interact but who also fill their individual and independent narrative arcs. They are concerned with origin stories as well as, often, eschatological stories (stories about the end of the world). They are told through multiple texts and often several media by multiple authors that refer to a shared understanding of the storyworld. Indeed, the original understanding of 'canon' is regularly applied to discussions of whether a concrete instantiation (like a movie adaptation or a new comic series) is in accordance with the original storyworld. On the other hand (and this is also a similarity with mythical narrative), they are often retold with slight or substantial alterations ('let's tell the story of Superman's origin again!') to the point where the source text is lost (or at least loses its authority). The 'canon' of the Superman story is not defined by its first telling, in the comic book *Action Comics No. 1* from 1938 (where Superman is not even able to fly).

Compared to the invented mythology of superhero narratives or the almost infinite pantheon of manga and anime characters, Christian mythology seems almost reduced in its *dramatis personae*. The website *Anime Planet* is a database of anime and manga characters and lists almost 50,000 different, named characters.[2] And given this incredible number of recurring characters who need to be highly recognizable in order to create fans or followers, it is hardly surprising that iconic properties play as big a role as they do. Considering superhero narratives and their origin in the visual medium of color printing, it is the iconic color schemes that make these characters so instantly recognizable. Just imagine a black-and-white version of one of the larger team ups in the Marvel or DC universes and the difficulty of telling all the characters apart in a fight sequence. In manga, these color schemes

2 Cf. www.anime-planet.com.

routinely also include outrageous colors for a character's hair and their eyes, which true cosplayers are eager to imitate as well.

Performance

Beyond physical trappings such as color coded costumes, masks, or props, mystery plays, and cosplay use another aspect that is especially useful for their chosen medium and that situates them on the fringes of narrative as a symbolic form: the live performance. The limited space of the medieval mobile stages did not allow for much realistic acting but of course actors did not stand still. One thing they used to great iconic effect were gestures. These gestures, many of which were well established in Christian iconography, had to be distinct, visible, and recognizable, that is, characteristic (cf. Davidson, *Gesture* 66-127; Aronson-Lehavi 106-115). The same is true for most cosplay performances, where acting space and viewing time is limited. Like important religious figures, most manga and superhero characters also have their own specific and characteristic pose, and any cosplay performance usually includes these. This bridges the stages of purely visual iconic properties and performance.[3]

Performance can be described for our purposes as an activity of representing a narrative character through a combination of iconic properties, enacting of narrative events, ritual actions, and bodily presence. Since they are staged representations of events, mystery plays are clearly performative. In this case, one rather has to argue that their staging and performance practice actually differentiates them to an extent from theater as we might conceive of it. The most common form was that of a cycle of a number of mini-dramas or pageants. It is important to note, though, that, compared to our own notions of narrative drama, these very much constituted reduced, truncated, or depleted narratives. Devoid of the spectacle of their performance, mystery plays do not make great reading.

The complete cycle of, e.g., the Corpus Christi plays would contain nothing less than a history of the universe from its creation all the way to Judgment Day, but the individual pageants would represent well-known episodes like the temptation

3 The identity of the person of the performer and the visual, iconic trappings of the performance also highlight the craftsmanship involved (cf. Aronson-Lehavi 90), and this aspect has been and still is a very important part of the practice. Already in medieval plays, the motivation of showing religious devotion became mixed with a strong element of civic pride and artistic showmanship (cf. Twycross 42). The guilds spent a lot of effort and money on their performances, and there was frequently a direct (and sometimes rather macabre) relation between their specific play and their trade. And today, no self-respecting cosplayer would dream of appearing at a convention in a ready-made costume, maybe ordered online. Thus, the act of creation is really and visibly inscribed into the performance.

of Eve, the building of the Ark, the annunciation, or, of course, the crucifixion. The most common staging practice used so-called pageant wagons that were each created and paid for by a different guild on which the mini-dramas that constituted the cycle would be staged. These mobile stages would then be pulled through the city along a predetermined route with a number of fixed stops, or 'stations.' At each of these stations, the respective episode was then performed once before the whole trek moved on. For the spectator, the effect was very much that the whole spectacle took on a processional quality. If the spectator remained stationary the episodes would pass by him like a procession, which after all was one of the sources for these staging practices. And if the spectator moved around the experience would be similar to watching a story unfold through a number of stained-glass windows in a church or the pages of a Book of Hours (see Twycross 45). As Twycross writes, "spectacle can speak more strongly than words" (37)[4]. Both mystery plays and cosplay crucially restrict the use of spoken language and thereby further emphasize physical presence. Cosplayers almost always perform silently, and in the mystery plays the silence of the suffering Christ is both a central performative and doctrinal aspect (cf. Aronson-Lehavi 87, 120f.). This quality is of prime importance here, not the text or even the rudimentarily enacted events, the acting or action, but rather the relative predominance of a tableau-like presentation, of relatively static live performances that were to a large extent understandable merely by looking at them.

Cosplay itself "is understood as a performance activity" (Lamerichs, "Stranger" 0.1) and it is often described as "performance art" (Gn 583; Lotecki). Norris and Bainbridge refer to the cosplayer as a "textual performer" (4). But again, the differences of the cosplay performance in comparison to theater acting need to be emphasized. Even more than in the case of the mystery play, cosplay performers do not base their performance on a clearly recognizable script, they do not speak lines of dialog that could be found in a source text or act out sequences of events. According to Nicolle Lamerichs,

> [f]or performers, the point of cosplaying is not role-playing or acting; it lies in more subtle gestures and its connection to fandom. Michael Kirby [...] conceptualized this sliding scale between acting and not acting [41]. He opposed acting to not-acting as a 'non-matrixed performance', which relies on representation and the symbolic power of the stage or costume. However, in this type of performance, the actor is hardly acting at all. Kirby explains: 'When the performers, like the stage attendants of kabuki and no, are merely conveyed by their costumes themselves and not embedded, as it were, in matrices of pretended or represented character,

4 For detailed descriptions of the stage settings, stage effects, and costumes of medieval mystery plays, cf. Anderson 115-170.

> situation, place, and time, they can be referred to as being 'non-matrixed" [...]. ("Costuming" 118)

I want to argue, though, that cosplay is not simply "non-matrixed" because it is after all rooted in the matrix of a represented character which is acknowledged by the spectator through the act of 'recognition,' an act that is in turn enabled through the use of iconic properties. Thus, cosplay performance brings to life this one aspect of the original storyworld—character—but in a way that divests it from more traditionally narrative content such as the events that such a character enacts or experiences. Yet it cannot get rid of that narrative residue without losing its whole identity.

The liminal nature of cosplay and its distancing from adaptation and normal theater performance is also recognizable in the fact that it adds performative elements that have nothing to do with the original source material but instead include the spectator in an anti-illusionist way. This breaking of illusion further divests cosplay from narrative, as it deemphasizes the immersive qualities that are usually understood to be central to narrative.

> The spectators of cosplay do not admire costumes from their armchairs in a darkened theatre room, but in a vibrant festival space. They admire them as they pass by and perhaps even hug them. Cosplay is a lively, visceral and haphazard performance. The players and spectators form a similar group and constantly mirror each other since both groups are commonly dressed up. These communal, celebratory aspects of costuming are foregrounded in cosplay. (Lamerichs, "Costuming" 118)

We could call this the ritualistic aspect of cosplay performance or its staging rituals. Indeed, cosplay developed from activities that were closer to role-playing into its current, highly ritualized, and predominantly static form only through its symbiosis with amateur photography. A cosplay performance is of course something that can and should be (passively) watched by spectators but it really comes into its own through the ritual act of taking a picture. In cosplay, the spectator—in the form of the cosplay photographer—is not merely passive; his participatory and performative role becomes obvious. There is, especially in Japan, a very formalized ritual: The photographer approaches the cosplayer and asks for the permission to take a picture, the cosplayer agrees and starts to strike a number of characteristic poses or gestures, the photographer takes one or several images, and *both* participants thank each other in an acknowledgement that they both have performed their function.

The photographer's presence points to the performer's awareness that what he or she engages in is a staged representation, made for someone to watch, and not a move into a different world or identity. We can see this also in the fact that the cosplayers themselves very often take pictures of each other. This is a very dif-

ferent emphasis from some of the more extreme forms of role-playing, such as live action role-playing, or Renaissance fairs, where every element that is 'out of character'—such as a modern camera—would be regarded as an illusion-breaking intrusion.

Embodiment

When analyzing the performance practices of mystery plays and cosplay, one thing that is notable is a constant doubling of presence and representation: Both the performers and the spectators are constantly and simultaneously aware of the bodily presence of the performer *and* of what he is representing. This is another dynamic of in-betweenness (a 'blurring' of presence and representation) that denarrativizes the cultural practices of mystery plays and of cosplaying and places them on the fringes of narrative. Aronson-Lehavi, who has analyzed and theorized medieval performances in depth, stresses particularly that "in late medieval theatre, emphasizing the duality between an actor and a character reflects an aesthetic concept of theatre. Moreover, the relationship between the two entities—the actor and the character—both embodied by the actor becomes a site of special inquiry in religious theatre," mainly because of "the tension between the liveness of the theatrical event and its enacted/fictional (and sacred) world" (1-2). Similarly, "the construction of the body in cosplay depends on multiple bodies: those of flat, fictional characters and those of the player themselves" (Lamerichs, "Costuming" 121).

In the context of both the mystery plays and cosplay, one element that foregrounds this duality or doubleness is the fact that the same narrative character is embodied by several performers *at the same time*. Within the complete mystery play cycle, multiple actors would perform the same role. In York, for example, where the same cycle of plays was performed from the mid-fourteenth century until their suppression in 1569, there were at least twenty-two actors employed for the role of Jesus Christ because he appears in the same number of individual pageants, who performed simultaneously and therefore could not use the same actor. Thus, all of these actors would be understood to embody and to signify Christ but nobody would have *identified* them with him. They were all merely serving as images—icons—of the character. Something of that medial and conceptual-philosophical doubling is also present in the practice of cosplay. The first obvious similarity is the multiplication of performers of the same character within one setting. At most cosplay conventions one can notice the multiple presence of some of the more popular characters, like Spider Man or Sailor Moon. Obviously, such a proliferation of single characters does not work for narrative, conventionally understood, thus placing these practices on the fringes of the symbolic form.

When it comes to explaining cosplay as an individual activity, the most common assumption for the relation between the cosplay performer and the represented character is identification. The arguments usually run like this: Someone who dresses up as a fictional character wants to *be* that character (and not be himself or herself). Even without arguing against the existence of such a motivation, one can note that the phenomenon goes beyond that, since cosplayers are not only trying to enter into the storyworld (by way of identification) but also trying to bring forth, to embody the storyworld in the actual world. As Erika Fischer-Lichte has argued for any performance, these performances do not escape reality but constitute it (cf. 27).

'Moe'

The *motivation* for the remediation that happens in the performance of mystery plays and cosplay lies in the desire not only to make visible the source material in medial representations (as would be the case with illustration, for example) but to embody it, to give it bodily presence in the actual world. The *reason* for this motivation is another anchor back into the realm of the originating storyworld because it has a paradoxical attitude towards it. This attitude understands the storyworld as not only having a symbolic or referential relation to the actual world but as having its own ontological level of existence that is equal or even higher than that of the actual world. In the case of the medieval mystery plays we call this attitude religious belief or adoration, the belief that stories about the transcendental, about angels, miracles, and the incarnation of God in human flesh refer to realities. In the case of cosplay, an important term that we might use is 'moe.'

'Moe' is a Japanese slang word. It is highly controversial, both concerning its origin and its meaning, but it has also become central to discussions of Japan's pop culture.[5] The term and its use in Japan is bound up with debates about subcultures and concrete representational forms but my approach to the term is more abstract, since I am interested in it as a general relation between a recipient and a fictional existent. In this sense, 'moe' is, negatively speaking, a confusion of categories: It means attaching kinds of or intensities of feeling to a fictional object that should

5 At the Japan Pavilion of the 9th Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2004, Morikawa Kaichirou placed the word 'moe' alongside 'wabi' and 'sabi,' Japan's distinguished aesthetics (cf. Galbraith). In a sense, 'moe' is almost the opposite of the 'wabi' 'sabi' aesthetics: Where one designates the acceptance and celebration of imperfection in reality, 'moe' means the unwillingness to accept that a perceived perfection is unattainable (because fictional).

be reserved for actual objects.[6] The most well-known example would be that of a person falling in love with a fictional character. The person that experiences 'moe' therefore regards a fictional object as if it were real—not cognitively (he still knows the character is fictional, he is not yet Don Quijote) but emotionally. The main reason why this 'should' be regarded as a mistake is a rational one: because there is no reason to desire something that does not exist.

Of course, we all know that our reactions to fictional events or characters are never purely rational: We have hopefully all been scared when reading a book or cried while watching a movie, or maybe even when playing a video game. In fact, this 'mistake' is one of the main reasons why we enjoy fiction, the reason why we *need* fiction. 'Moe' just means that the experience is not limited to the actual process of reception (the time spent reading a book, watching a movie, or looking at an image). It is the *continuation* of this experience, of this emotional attachment, that is certainly part of the motivation for cosplay: the desire to make tangible, to give a bodily, three-dimensional presence to a storyworld and its existents *beyond* its original source text or image. This paradoxically supports the object's perceived claim of actual existence in a very similar way that the 'staging' or embodying of the body of Christ is a proof of the real existence of that body and its doctrinal message.

I would therefore argue that the waning of religious belief does not eliminate the emotional relation that has brought forth the desire for embodiment of story-worlds. On the contrary, I would like to argue for the primacy of that relation and the resulting urge. 'Moe' attitudes are also often addressed in quasi-religious terms, Galbraith for example talks about "the culture of idolizing fantasy characters."

In this sense, the doubling of representation and embodiment in the Christian context also serves a real theological purpose; the medial change effected by the performance reflects the reality of a religious belief, the move from word to flesh, from image to incarnation. By giving bodily presence to Jesus Christ, the actors with their own body signify the incarnation, the word made flesh, in what we might call an intermedial performance of transubstantiation (cf. Stevens 38-39). We should remember here that the most important feast day for the staging of mystery plays was Corpus Christi, which has the main doctrinal purpose of celebrating the Real Presence of the body and blood of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

In the Christian context, the physical presence of the body of Christ is a central doctrinal element. Interestingly, this element was one of the ideas that were fought by Protestant theology—here, the presence of the text substitutes the presence of

6 "Takuro Morinaga believes 'moe' is a much stronger sentiment, and is about being in love with an animation character [...]. This is not just a strong penchant in the sense of being a fan, but love for and the need to be with the character as if it were human" (Sharp 66f.).

Christ, as can be seen in the reinterpretation of the doctrine of transubstantiation (cf. Beckwith 59ff.). And suddenly, staging icons comes dangerously close to worshipping idols. Thus, in order not to commit a sacrilege, the body of Christ on the stage is substituted with the body of mere mortal man, and the story of a humanist and realist renaissance theater can begin. In terms of media history, it is not least the introduction of printing that enabled the protestant emphasis on the concrete textual basis of Christianity (by making identical copies available), valuing the proper name over recognizable visual iconography.

Some four hundred years later, European theater in the twentieth century—Benedetti, Brecht, Barba, A.C. Scott—becomes interested in Asian theatrical performance practices and actor training, the main difference being the relative emphasis that the latter put on embodiment over "matrixed" performances (Zarrilli 92). Concepts of "total acting," but also of Antonin Artaud's "theatre of cruelty" try to integrate the bodily presence of the actor into the representational level, often to the detriment of the latter. We can understand these theatrical developments as shifts away from fictionality, either through illusion—the spectators forget that they are experiencing fiction and start to 'believe' the reality of the performance—or through substitution—the performer's presence becomes more important than what he or she represents. This is for example expressed in Jerzy Grotowski's notion of an "[o]bjective [d]rama," as Zarrilli has pointed out:

> Grotowski's work in 'Objective Drama,' like his earlier paratheatrical projects, has moved completely away from any concern with performance as a fiction, to a (hypothetically) irreducible and nonrepresentational mode of experience. Grotowski's use of 'objective' suggests the search for an absolute state beyond the Western dualistic separation of the fictive from the real—a movement from theatre to ritual/transformational process where he locates a 'real' beyond the representational. (92)

This connects not only to Asian forms of theater performance, but also to medieval mystery plays, who used a similar concept of "total acting":

> Such 'total acting' was often required in the Passion sequence and in the performance of the Crucifixion episode. In such cases, the image and idea of the 'real' character (Christ) is brought to mind while the corporeal physicality of the performer acquires a strong presence as well. Thus, the actor emphasizes the intangibility or 'fictionality' of the character while simultaneously establishing his or her own presence. Such demanding scenes, in which an actor is required to perform extreme physical feats—for example, when an actor is tied to a cross and lifted by four other actors while remaining silent—create a phenomenologically overwhelming theatrical experience. (Aronson-Lehavi 6)

Grotowski's interest in the presence/embodiment of the actor led him to a rejection of most of what is usually considered the 'machinery' of theater, such as spectacle, makeup, or decoration: "Theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costumes and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without sound effects and lighting, etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, 'live' communion" (Grotowski 19). This marks a decisive difference to cosplay. On the one hand, "embodiment plays a unique role in cosplay that should be interrogated closely" (Lamerichs, "Costuming" 113). But, on the other hand, that embodiment cannot exist without the costumes that link the performance, through recognizable iconic properties, back to the originating specific storyworld. In this sense, cosplaying stays truly liminal: The iconic properties of the costume design, the props, and the gestures or poses tie the performance back to the original fictional storyworld, even though it has lost everything that classical narratology would recognize as narrative or narrativity.

The necessity of retaining these ties for the cultural practice of cosplay becomes even more apparent when looking at variations that in some respects move away from the original source, such as playing with the gender of the original character. These are usually described as "crossplay (the performance of a character with a canonically different gender than their own) and gender-bent cosplay (the performance of a character with a different gender than that of the canonical original)" (Gackstetter Nichols 3). Elizabeth Gackstetter Nichols goes on to describe one such cosplayer, who represented an originally male character from the *Walking Dead* franchise:

> For her cosplay, Hail wore a battered leather jacket, black leather gloves and carried a baseball bat covered in barbed wire. She also wore traditionally feminine make-up and made no effort to cover or hide her waist-length, feminine hair. She was, however, immediately recognizable to fellow convention-goers as femme Neagan. (10)

While the combination of traditionally male and female appearances could be understood as mere performance of gender play, the iconic properties of the prop used—the bat with barbed wire—make sure that (for those who recognize it) the connection to the character remains and the performance is understood as cosplay. This nicely illustrates once more the liminal nature of cosplay, which it shares, albeit to a somewhat lesser degree, with medieval mystery plays. Both practices, as we have seen, emerge from narrative into something that is not completely separated from narrative but that constitutes at least a depleted kind of narrative in which the iconic, the spectacular, performative rituals, and embodiment have all added to create something truly genuine.

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Narrating Authorship
The VFX Career and Protest Through 'Social-Actor-Networks'

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Abstract:
This chapter considers the role that social-networked, self-curated, precarious career narratives play in the visual effects (VFX) industry labor market. Specifically, the chapter focuses on networked protest and the negotiation between human, technological, and corporate actors in the VFX industry and beyond. An examination of 'green screen' protests that took place almost a decade ago asks what we can learn about liminal labor, inequality, networked protest, and the role that narrative plays in constructing shared meaning and collective value in a precarious and decentralized sociotechnical world. Concluding with a comparative evaluation of the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, this piece argues that networked protests of the 2013 visual effects industry were a glimpse of a future in which resistance narratives and networked protest function together to redefine liminal labor.

In 2013, visual effects (VFX) animators began to mount a global and vocal protest over the structure and working conditions of their industry. In what was to become a textbook case of the ills facing the VFX industry and the precarious nature of its economic model, the production company Rhythm and Hues suffered bankruptcy just as its most recent film (*The Life of Pi*, directed by Ang Lee, 2012) secured widespread commercial and critical success. Within days of these events, a highly visible wave of protest spread throughout much of the industry. For many beyond the industry itself, these protests might have gone unnoticed had they remained localized in the Los Angeles area. But what was initially located within a few blocks of the Dolby Theatre quickly moved online, where open letters addressed to director Ang Lee were published protesting the treatment of artists and the structure of the industry's economic model.

Beyond open letters, other forms of protest emerged on global social networks, most notably on Facebook. First, VFX artists and their friends began to change their social network profile pictures to green: a representation of the green screen

so central to the industry and a signifier of solidarity with the artists who felt that their treatment at the hands of a deregulated, increasingly outsourced, and precarious short-term contract system of employment had gone too far. Next, VFX artists around the world began making and circulating a new meme entitled "Your Movie Without VFX" ("Movies Without CGI"). These images, often humorous in tone, invariably featured a photograph from the set of a well-known blockbuster movie with a large green or blue screen dominating the picture and a tag line "[movie title] without VFX." In effect, these meme images aimed at making visible the quantity of screen real estate now reliant on VFX production and, more specifically, made explicit the threat that movie production studios could face crippling paralysis should industrial discontent escalate.

The images, like the green profile pictures, did more than function as signifiers of protest, however: They contributed to an emergent public narrative regarding the lives and labor of VFX artists making Hollywood movies increasingly built upon invisible exploitation. The green profile pictures made visible the usually hidden or unacknowledged artists of what I shall call the 'social-actor-network' of the visual effects industry. In a corporate structure governed by above- and below-the-line hierarchies in which artists have little or no legal authorial right to the material they produce, social networks are emerging as platforms on which authorship, participation, and stakeholder identity of liminal labor and the VFX industry career is narrated (Stahl, "Nonproprietary Authorship"; Stahl, "Privilege"; Banks). From green profile pictures and blue screen memes to tagged credit sequence snapshots and shared show-reel videos, the social network and its corollaries (LinkedIn, Vimeo, and IMDB) are emerging as the means by which VFX professionals informally narrate their personal role in the authorship of the movies they work on. In so doing, they contest the invisibility brought about by what Matt Stahl has described as "copyright's doctrine of *work for hire*" (Stahl, "Privilege" 55; emphasis in the original). This chapter will consider the impact of such developments in the ongoing negotiation and narration of the visual effects industry and its place in Hollywood's larger production culture. Specifically, I shall consider the role that the green profile picture protests played around the time of Rhythm and Hues's demise in providing a brief and frenetic burst of negotiation between human, technological, and corporate actors in the VFX industry and beyond. Though the green screen protests took place almost a decade ago, they are still important today for what we can learn about liminal labor, inequality, networked protest, and the role that narrative plays in drawing these together in a decentralized sociotechnical world.

In his work on Actor Network Theory (ANT), Bruno Latour famously proposed a new model by which the social sciences could articulate the relationship between

what he described as "actors," "actants," and the "networks" they existed within.[1] For Latour, ANT was proposed as a means by which the relations between people and technologies could be understood through the intentionally oxymoronic juxtaposition of the centered performative "actor" on the one hand and the decentered "network" on the other.

I shall, in this chapter, refer to the 2013 VFX profile picture protests as a visible example of social-actor-networks. Much has already been written on the relationship between precarious labor in the creative industries and the role of social networks (Greg; Ross; van Dijck; Papacharissi; Bervall-Kåreborn and Howcroft). Similarly, historical studies of Hollywood's social networks have been undertaken, as have contemporary appraisals of this work (Rosten).[2] So far, however, there is little work on the relationship between the social network, broader structures of sociotechnical relations (technologies, software, and working structures) of the creative industries, and the ways in which creative professionals perform and narrate their industrial experience.

In accordance with both Melissa Gregg's and Andrew Ross's descriptions of the way in which social networks function for those in the creative industries as a fuzzy space where the lines between personal and professional are blurred, many VFX professionals have Facebook open throughout the day, posting and commenting on topics both intimate and industrial. For many in the industry, the social network provides a crucial platform through which to stay abreast of the formation of new alliances, the posting of new material (music, movie, advertisements, and more), the development of new technologies, and the emergence of new ideas central to the industry. This, then, is what I mean when I refer to the 'social-actor-network': a platform through which the relationships between human actors and technological actants are constantly renegotiated, narrated, and updated. If, as John Law points out, ANT requires recognition of the performative aspects of this constant sociotechnical renegotiation (4-6), then the social network timeline functions as a massively multifaceted, open-ended, crowdsourced script at the same time as it provides the stage on which the drama plays out.

Credit Where Credit is Due: Tagging the Professional Network

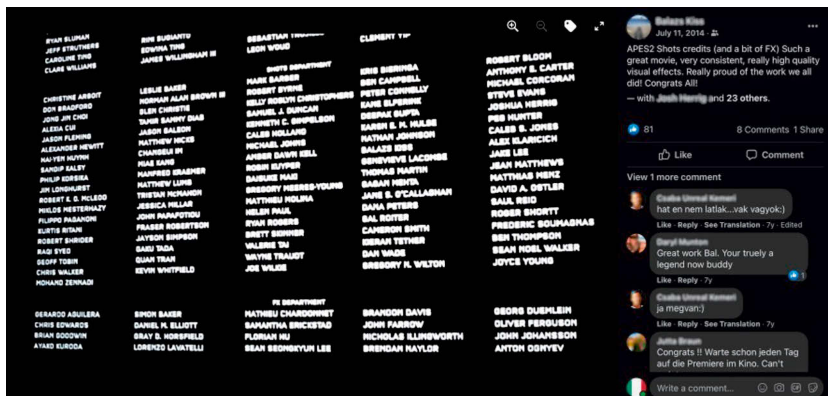
Before turning to a close analysis of the green profile picture protests, I wish to address a particular public networked performance by VFX artists that first drew

1 For a succinct summary of the difference between ANT terminology such as 'actant' and 'actor' as it refers to movie production, see Mould.

2 For an excellent account of the historical study of Hollywood social network in Leo C. Rosten's work, see Sullivan.

my attention to the idea of the 'social-actor-network' and functioned as a precursor of the protests to come. Following the release of any given major Hollywood movie, I noticed a flurry of photos appearing on the Facebook news feed containing 'tags' of multiple VFX professionals' profile names. To an outside observer, these images might appear to be surprisingly unremarkable, literally featuring a black background and some blurry white text containing names (Fig. 1). These images are photos of a section of end titles in which a VFX professional and their departmental colleagues are credited and then tagged. Given that these credits are generally public knowledge on IMDB by the time of a film's release—in fact IMDB lists are more detailed than those that can fit on the end of a Hollywood movie—there is little need to capture such images for public record. Nevertheless, it has become a tradition that VFX professionals share these images and, in doing so publicly, act out the fact of their shared authorial participation in such huge Hollywood productions. An initial reading of such images might suggest that they informally and collectively assert authorship in an industrial context where VFX professionals have little legal contractual claim to authorship over the material they help produce (see especially Stahl, "Nonproprietary Authorship" and Stahl, "Privilege" on this subject). While such a reading—thus, my initial response to observing such photos—would be valid, it would fail to give a full account of what is happening in a number of telling ways that provide insight into the narrative of the profile picture protests that followed.

Fig. 1: The tagged credit list on Facebook



While we could argue that tagged Facebook photos of movie end credits are a public assertion of shared participatory authorship, in reality such photos are not publicly witnessed by a great deal of people. If a photo tags twenty VFX professionals and each has five hundred friends, then such photos will reach a maximum of

ten thousand people. Furthermore, such images are generally circulated amongst people already acquainted with the fact that these industry professionals are involved in the business of producing Hollywood movies. Finally, the majority of VFX artists (including the two thirds who, for various reasons, do not make it into the credit list at the end of a movie) make sure to register their involvement in a movie with IMDB (a process that is then fact-checked and verified by the VFX production houses). This being the case, it makes more sense to understand such images less as a performance to an unknown broader public and more as a personal and professional performance to family, friends, and, most significantly, colleagues in their close social network. In other words, these photos serve to build a narrative of shared community, or, in the words of Benedict Anderson, who argued that the notion of nationhood rested upon constantly reaffirmed shared narratives, we might say 'imagined community.'

We might ask how these images constitute a narrative in any recognizably conventional sense, and, considered in isolation, it may be hard to attribute narrative to them. But while these images might appear purely symbolic on their own, they do not function as discrete units but, rather, exist within an ongoing series of similar images distributed across the network of participants. It is, then, in the context of their ongoing function that they constitute a narrative: a shared story of networked, decentralized labor, authorship, and community. Here the tagged image serves as a public reminder and acknowledgement of a professional's place in a large-scale, globally distributed culture industry. This last point is particularly significant: In this industry—an industry in which both the companies and its workforce are globally mobile—a photograph of a collection of tagged friends serves as a means to solidify a record of working relations at a particular moment in time and at a particular moment in a VFX artist's career. Taken as a series of images, these photographs constitute an ongoing public reading of developing careers, networks of friends and colleagues, ongoing labor, and work authored. Given that many of the people featured in these photos may not work together again for considerable periods of time, if at all, the tagged images serve as a memento of that particular moment at the same time as they represent ongoing life narratives.

Elsewhere, I have considered the double-edged sword of global mobility and short-term contracts in the VFX industry (Gurevitch). On the one hand, global mobility is regarded by many professionals as a signifier of the cultural and industrial capital their skills embody. Here, their mobility places them in a global elite for whom the usual migration restrictions are waived in light of the capital—which economists since Marx have long noted travels more freely than labor—that their skills represent. On the other hand, the flip side of this is less glamorous. As tech-

nical director Daniel Lay[3] stated, notably anonymously at the time, on his blog *VFX Soldier* in 2010:

> Vfx facilities are now becoming 'rent seekers' where they move from country to country, state to state to take advantage of free government money. This has led many vfx artists to become permanent nomads where some are forced to leave their partners and newborn children to find temporary work in the far reaches of the world. I know of senior colleagues who purchased homes with a false sense of job security only to end up being laid off months later and forced to foreclose when they could only find work in another country.

Rhythm and Hues, to be fair, was a company known in the industry for the humane treatment of its staff, paying them well, and providing above industry standard benefits. As Michael Curtin points out in his excellent analysis of Rhythm and Hues's demise, the company was highlighted by John Caldwell for resisting some of the more extreme examples of 'rent seeking' (Curtin 224). Nevertheless, the consequence of an industry-wide tendency toward mobility, flexibility, short-term contracting, and high workloads has been an undeniable and pervasive sense of insecurity and competition amongst the professionals that make up its workforce. Following Michel Bauwens's description of a global "cognitive working class" increasingly reliant on the peer-to-peer network as an insulation against the precarity of flexible capital/labor (207), I have argued that Facebook performs a particular role in this dynamic. Specifically, it acts as a means by which VFX professionals constitute informal professional networks that aid them in a context in which responsibility for job security has been outsourced to the individual. Consequently, the Facebook protests that followed Rhythm and Hues's demise and Ang Lee's acceptance snub at the Oscars can be characterized as an example of peer-to-peer protest that arose as much as an indirect result of corporate neglect of subcontracted labor as it was a direct result of the immediate circumstances around which the VFX community rallied. That is to say, because contemporary VFX professionals have had to turn to the social-actor-network to narrate their professional stories of career progress and highlight their currency as a hedge against future job insecurity, the personal/professional network pathways and the experience of using these pathways as global communication conduits had already instituted long before the *Life of Pi* debacle.

As both academics and industry bloggers have noted, the dynamics behind the current VFX industry labor woes are complex and multivalent (Caldwell; Curtin;

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3 Lay's CV includes posts as a technical director at Sony Imageworks, Dreamworks, and Digital Domain ("Daniel Khin Lay"; Cohen).

Gurevitch).[4] To most outsiders, it would appear that the film industry and the visual effects industry are one and the same entity, but this is not the case. Rather, the film industry, the studios that were formed in the 1920s and 1930s, commission films and hold the economic power in the industry. These studios were regulated and unionized during the Great Depression era of their rise. Visual effects houses, on the other hand, can be regarded as a product of the IT industry of the 1980s and 1990s. In contrast to the film studios, the VFX industry emerged in an era of flexploitation and DotCom mania. Like the rest of the tech industry, the VFX industry is largely non-unionized. When making movies, the studio majors divide up visual effects production across a network of VFX companies and drive down costs by running a sometimes ruinously competitive bidding process. All of this results in working conditions that are often brutal, shouldered by freelance artists who migrate around the world for precariously short-term contracts. The economic pressures of this model mean that a not insignificant number of these artists have experienced the collapse of companies they worked for. This was precisely the situation that Rhythm and Hues found themselves in when they filed for bankruptcy shortly before the movie they had made the bulk of won the Oscar for Best Visual Effects.

Going Green: From Name-Tagged Networks to Faceless Profiles

Against this background, the VFX profile picture protests of 2013 were as much an articulation of deep frustration amongst global VFX professionals over the broader structure of their industry and its place in Hollywood generally as they were an expression of anger over the treatment of Rhythm and Hues employees by their company specifically. In both the open letters and the green profile protests there emerged a nuanced and sophisticated acknowledgement of the industrial circumstances in which jobs had moved overseas. Perhaps more important, however, was the palpable sense of insult sustained on the part of visual effects industry professionals when Ang Lee did not acknowledge the artists who helped him make his movie. Lee's public 'snub' and the subsequent discussions over the number of seconds of airtime he was granted at the Oscars ceremony when compared to Rhythm and Hues's VFX supervisors was crucial. In particular, it was seen as symptomatic of the contempt in which the VFX industry is held by the established power brokers in Hollywood. To some degree, we can see this as a tension between an old industrial monopoly holding a new and potentially disruptive industry in check. If one looks closely, this tension can be seen playing out at the Oscars every year—Ang

4 For industry commentary, of which there now is an overwhelming quantity, see, for instance, Snyman; Barkan; Rome.

Lee's blunder was just one example. Each year that passes there is a new, groundbreaking visual effect that stirs debate on the nature of the awards given out and their celluloid inheritance. This leads to an unusual dynamic in which VFX studios and their employees are upheld as the cutting edge of Hollywood's movie innovation at the same time as they perceive a shortfall in the Academy's capacity to recognize and/or keep up with the pace of this innovation. Unsurprisingly, the contradictory combination of short-term contracts and stringent non-disclosure agreements only compound this feeling of frustration among VFX professionals.

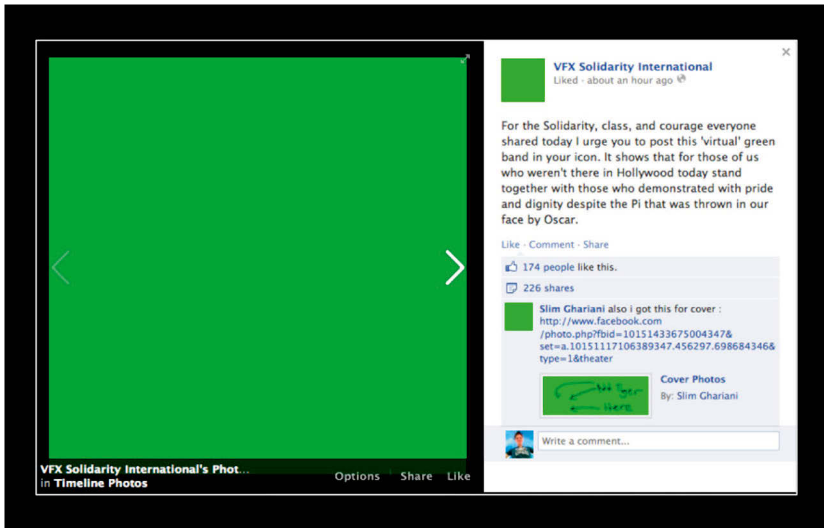
Ultimately, what plays out across the visual effects industry labor environment is an oddly schizophrenic sense of both insider and outsider status at the same time. In her excellent work on ethnographic access in Hollywood, Sherry Ortner describes the "inside[r]/outside[r]" dynamic as one which onlookers from the margin must necessarily negotiate when studying the film industry (176). Scholars, industry watchers, and popular writers, she argues, must at some point face a social and industrial wall in which they are either on the inside or on the outside. In the VFX industry there is not simply an "inside" and an "outside," however, but multiple layers of 'in' and 'out.' For VFX studios themselves, from the animators up to the creative directors, there is a sense that they are partial outsiders when it comes to Hollywood's economics and awards system alike.

Unlike labor disputes in many industries, the VFX industry is characterized by an unusual and somewhat indirect form of labor relation tension. Many artists in the industry express the sense that the studios in which they are employed face as equally precarious a position as they themselves do, giving rise to an unusual landscape of industrial relations in which many VFX artists both sympathize and identify with their employers as victims of a larger, bullying Hollywood corporate complex. Perhaps the best example of this can be found in the short documentary *Life After Pi*, in which owner John Hughes and the artists employed by him express their devastation that they could not save their company from bankruptcy. In this scenario, then, the major Hollywood studios are regarded as disenfranchising entities against which global VFX professionals are engaged in asymmetric protest. To take the profile picture protest as an example, the green chroma key color square functions as a peculiarly indirect symptom of an industry in which its freelance workforce are unable to take more overt action for fear of losing what tenuous positions they have attained.

The green profile squares were adopted en mass amongst the global VFX community as a sign of solidarity and marked a telling point of contrast with the tagged credit images described earlier. Where these credit lists were very much based around the proud identification of individual artists, the profile pictures, by contrast, functioned according to the logic of anonymity through mass conformity. As a metaphor, the green profile images could not have been better chosen, literally neutralizing the core of individual identity around which the social network pro-

file usually functions and replacing them with faceless images that foreground an industry standard chroma key color value.[5] As a concrete manifestation of protest and resistance, however, the green profile images are considerably more ambiguous in their functionality. Like traditional protest, the green screen images function by combining high aggregate visibility with an individual anonymity that comes from mass protest. Unlike traditional protest and activism, which relies on the power of physical mobilization and the visceral expression of anger, the profile pictures were virtual. If the protest had had a nineteenth-century slogan it would have been a somewhat ineffectual: 'Workers of the World Unite! You Have Nothing to Use But Your Social Networks.' By virtue of remaining largely virtual, the green screen protests were limited in their demands and effectiveness.

Fig. 2: VFX Solidarity International encouraging users to adopt the green profile picture



In their book *Inventing the Future*, Srnicek and Williams suggest that limited and timid (if not altogether absent) demands amongst twenty-first-century protest movements are the result of what they call "folk-political sentiment." Folk-politics is, they argue, characterized by a series of widely accepted values: "[S]mall is beautiful, the local is ethical, simpler is better, permanence is oppressive, progress is

5 Furthermore, the images referred directly to a reality of the visual effects industry: that it is based upon the premise that successful VFX are those in which the circumstances of their production are obscured by their indistinguishability from the physical reality of people, objects, and places that they are merged with.

over." These limitations, then, are favored over any counter-hegemonic project that could contest capitalism "at the largest scales." Instead, folk politics is driven by a profound pessimism that large-scale collective social change is possible. Crucially, entwined in this is a fear of returning to the grand narratives that characterized the progressive utopianism of nineteenth-century socialist movements and fell out of favor amongst postmodernists for obvious reasons:

> Such folk-political sentiments blindly accept the neoliberal common sense, preferring to shy away from grand visions and replace them with a posturing resistance. From the radical left's discomfort with technological modernity to the social democratic left's inability to envision an alternative world, everywhere today the future has largely been ceded to the right. A skill that the left once excelled at—building enticing visions for a better world—has deteriorated after years of neglect. (Srnicek and Williams)

One could see these green screen protests as an example of precisely this "posturing resistance." If the unifying narrative of the green screen protests was hard to identify, perhaps it was because it was so by design. In an era of protest that rejected the grand narratives of social and political progress that were apparently so comprehensively defeated by late twentieth-century neoliberalism, the green profile pictures operated as a communication device that reached the same local network ecosystems of the tagged credits photos. Like the title credits photos, green profile pictures themselves became a means of communicating industry membership, participation, and identity. At an individual level, they may have functioned positively for VFX professionals: signaling solidarity amongst each other in a manner that was difficult if not impossible for the large studios (who were not their direct employers) to counteract or object to. In the absence of labor mobilization or even concrete demands beyond recognition and incremental improvements in labor conditions, however, there was a palpable degree of distributed passivity about the protests. In an environment where professionals under short-term contracts with extremely stringent non-disclosure clauses are cautious to the degree of paranoia about making public pronouncements, especially over labor rights,[6] the green profile pictures represented a form of passive resistance to the events taking place over Rhythm and Hues.

What was especially noteworthy about these protests, however, was the instantaneously global nature of them, an early manifestation of the potential for the workers of the world to unite in Western countries (given that much focus on social media's role in galvanizing protest at this time was concentrated on the Arab

6 Note for instance that Daniel Lay anonymously founded VFX Soldier in 2010—a blog that gained great traction during the protests and which took on the green chroma key signature—but did not 'out' himself publicly until long after the Oscars protests in late 2013.

Spring of 2010). In doing so, the green screen protests demonstrated one of John Law's key claims of what characterizes the actor network and Actor Network Theory:

> Actor-network theory articulates some of the possibilities which are opened up if we try to imagine that the sociotechnical world is *topologically non-conformable*; if we try to imagine that it is topologically complex, a location where regions intersect with networks. (7; emphasis in the original)

There are probably few places where Law's description of the "*topologically non-conformable*" is more applicable than the global VFX industries online presence. The VFX protests reveal the rapidity with which an initially geographically and temporally specific local protest outside the Dolby Theatre on Oscars night transitioned into globally dispersed communicative performances that lived on through the Facebook newsfeed and which also proliferated around the internet more broadly. Interestingly, this was a chain of events that ran contrary to previous and subsequent experiences of protest that often start online and then morph into physical street protests. They potentially represent an important shift in the nature of protest narratives. If physical protest could spark online social awakening, it suggests a more complex model is required to understand the real-time online growth and interaction of symbolic resistance with emergent narratives of protest.

Conclusion: Labor Liminality and the Future of Networked Protest

The very rapid rise of green profile picture protests marked a public, networked display of community identity. But they also displayed the astonishing degree of topological non-conformity inherent in the social-actor-networks of the VFX industry. Suddenly, outsiders were party to the tumult taking place within the industry: something which, as Ortner points out, the majors have long regulated physically—via high walls and security gates on their studio lots—and mentally—via a community in which the boundaries between insider and outsider are significantly more compartmentalized (176-79). One could, of course, argue that there is little point in being an 'insider' if one does not perform such a status publicly from time to time. Indeed, the public performance of belonging to a group is what constitutes that group. Nevertheless, something the profile picture protests revealed was the degree to which the boundaries between insider and outsider are shifting in an age of social-actor-networks.

In the past few years, a number of fundamental events have unfolded that complicate both our understanding of the VFX green screen protests and of the structure of the industry more broadly. With the emergence of the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2019, the world went into lockdown. In an attempt to continue functional

output, the VFX industry implemented work-from-home practices. This was something it had previously been unwilling to allow on data security grounds in light of Sony BMG's huge data leak of 2014. As thousands of VFX professionals worked from home, the nature of both workplace and work practice changed radically, as it did for many industries. At the same time, other social-actor-networks witnessed a rapid and profound upsurge of online and in-person protest.

The Black Lives Matter protests that spread across America quickly became a global phenomenon. Some commentators suggested these waves of protests were partly a consequence of the devastating impacts of a global pandemic and the resulting lockdowns, but most were rightly careful to point out that this was at best a secondary influence upon what was a long burning fury of generational racial inequity and state-tolerated murder. Early the following year, another form of online social-actor-network metastasized into an attempted, fascist-inspired coup at the US Capitol. Interestingly, while the Capitol attack was profoundly significant, an element of its execution reflected a degree of the "posturing resistance" described by Srnicek and Williams above. Having stormed the Capitol building, the attackers appeared at a loss of what to do once inside. As Caitlin Flanagan has described, "when they got to the National Statuary Hall, on the second floor, where velvet ropes indicate the path that tourists must take, they immediately sorted themselves into a line and walked through it. [...] They were dazed by power and limited in their conception of what to do with it."

By contrast, the Black Lives Matter protests demanded far-reaching change and staged ongoing widespread civil disobedience that left no doubt that this was more than posturing. The significance of the BLM movement is multifaceted. Firstly, BLM is the most visible example of a protest in the era of social-actor-networks that spread rapidly from the network onto the streets at a global level. Secondly, BLM demonstrates that networked shock and street-level mobilization is a phenomenon not lost to progressive movements of Western countries, as Srnicek and Williams had suggested. Finally, the BLM protests that swept the streets of capitals around the world were underpinned by profoundly clear understandings of the actors involved and the power struggles in play. It would be problematic to reduce the BLM movement to questions of narrative when the lives and deaths of oppressed people are in the balance. And yet, the BLM movement identified a social cancer, placed a spotlight upon the perpetrators, implemented a unifying theme, and asserted demands for change no less significant in scope than the 'grand narratives' of progressive workers movements of the nineteenth century.

In this context and with the benefit of hindsight, the green screen protests of 2013 in the VFX industry look more and more like an important precursor to a growing culture of networked activism. Walkouts and unionization at Google over workers' rights, not to mention outcry over Google AI ethics researcher Timnit Gebru's firing, suggest significant shifts are now underway. While Srnicek and Williams

ask why right-wing political forces are winning the battle of ideas and of mobilization, the past year suggests the jury is still out on such a claim. That is not to negate or underestimate the profound dangers presented by a resurgent neofascist movement built upon a globally networked torrent of conspiracy narratives. But to understand the progressive forces operating across social-actor-networks we must also recognize the unifying narratives emerging in the progressive cracks of the ongoing collapse of neoliberalism. More to the point, we must undertake more work to understand the process by which unifying narratives emerge across the social-actor-network. The narrative liminality of progressive protest and change will surely shape the decades to come. In the meantime, the nature of the visual effects industry, its geographies of labor and the corporate economic structure of Hollywood is changing profoundly. Under pandemic lockdowns, cinema exhibition models have undergone one of the most profound shocks of their 125-year history. While Hollywood scrambles to articulate a response to streaming models previously anathema to their existence, visual effects production, rooted as it is in its networked IT origins, has continued apace to supply insatiable streaming content demand. It seems likely that post-pandemic VFX artists may not be so concerned with their status as Hollywood insiders or outsiders. To what degree this impacts long-term industrial stability and labor conditions remains to be seen, but 2020 suggests that the future of social-actor-networked protest will be forever changed. It is the next green screen protests, rather than the last, where the demands of liminal labor will be articulated. The narrative of protest has changed.

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Endings and Sustainability

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Abstract:
Most critics read narrative endings—and especially happy endings—as points of closure where the instabilities of the plot come to conservative resolutions. Yet, endings are often in fact moments of transition where narratable plotted action shifts into the promise of stable and predictable routines extending forward. This prospect of stability is politically important right now, as fossil fuels radically disrupt longstanding ecosystems and millions of people struggle for reliable food, clean water, and safe shelter. Arguing for the importance of revaluing stability and routine as the climate catastrophe worsens, this essay rethinks happy endings as thresholds to sustainability.

The happy ending has seemed to many readers like the most static and most conservative of aesthetic forms. It is where the dynamics of plotted instability and social contradiction go to die. The standard critical name for the ending is closure, as if it walled or sealed off action. Critics also commonly refer to the ending as a resolution, with connotations of both harmony and firmness. It's all about settling down, tying up loose ends, bringing action to an end.

The most influential critics have theorized endings as conclusive. For Walter Benjamin and Frank Kermode, narrative closure is a figure for death, the ultimate ending. Peter Brooks argues that it is only from the clear-eyed vantage point of the end that we can look back and make sense of the middle: "[We] are able to read present moments—in literature and, by extension, in life—as endowed with narrative meaning only because we read them in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot" (94). Critics in the Marxist tradition, including Franco Moretti and Terry Eagleton, have read endings as illusory but final, ideological strategies that seem to resolve social, economic, and political contradictions, while in the world beyond the text these remain painfully unresolved. As the traditional plotted novel wraps up with bourgeois domesticity or career success for the individual protagonist, it lulls us into acceptance of the status quo.

In our own moment, most critics read endings—and especially happy endings—as politically conservative and have sought out texts that trouble or elude conventional resolutions. Feminist critics like Deanna Kreisel, for example, have shown how women's stories leave loose ends that belie and unsettle dominant patriarchal ideologies. And queer and disability theorists have launched especially powerful arguments against teleological stories that impose a normalizing linearity to contain or 'straighten' queer, trans, and disabled lives (Cheyne; Funke).

In short, if we turn to liminality because we are interested in disruptions and transformations, the ending seems like exactly the wrong place to look. But what if endings are less closural, and more liminal, than critics have understood them to be? I will argue here that even the most teleological narratives do not in fact bring all action to a close. Rather, they show us stable routines that extend predictably into the future. They are moments of transition when dramatic, exciting, and unstable plotted action turns into the promise of sustainable life. This essay will read happy endings as thresholds to sustainability.

And so, I will make the case here that happy endings are politically valuable, even urgent, as climate catastrophe rushes upon us. Predictability and security have been bad words for artists and intellectuals, but they have also been much too easy for the privileged to take for granted. Right now, as neoliberal economics undoes hopes of secure work and as fossil fuels radically disrupt longstanding ecosystems, the most terrible threat facing people around the world is not oppressive stasis but radical instability—intensifying poverty and food insecurity, floods and droughts, violent conflicts over resources and the rapid extinction of species. For the poorest and most vulnerable, that is, instability and unpredictability are not exciting sources of disruption, but massively unjust daily hardships. In literary and cultural studies, we have been so focused on open-endedness and unsettling that we have developed few resources for desiring, understanding, and working to guarantee the most basic conditions of ongoing survival.

I turn to the term sustainability in this essay, though it has been roundly criticized by humanists. Taken up by corporations, sustainability has often implied the continuation of life as we know it, including capitalism, which brings with it the devastating effects of continued extraction, exploitation, competition, and wealth disparity. 'Sustainable growth' fantasizes a global economy that can continue to expand forever. As Leerom Medovoi argues, "sustainability seeks to gauge the kind and amount of life that must not be killed now so that the process of surplus value extraction can continue indefinitely into the future" (142). And yet, current rates of extraction and emission are making all current systems dramatically unsustainable. Severe weather, mass migrations, and escalating violent conflicts caused by climate change are likely to bring about "institutional breakdown and population collapse," which will radically destabilize all aspects of life as we know it, including capitalism itself (Burke et al. 584).

What I want to propose, then, is what I call a *genuine* sustainability, a set of conditions to maintain collective life over time with some degree of equity and mutual care. Any vision of social justice demands some version of sustainability: material conditions for sustaining living bodies over time, including adequate nutrition, clean air, clean water, and stable shelter. The thinker who best captures the urgent political work before us, I think, is indigenous philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte, who coins the term "collective continuance" (355). Whyte argues against the common stereotype that indigenous societies are static. All collectives, he points out, have to develop strategies for adapting to new conditions. Food systems, for example, are both integral to the survival of both bodies and communities, while they are also always subject to external forces, such as storms and floods. "Collective continuance," he explains, "is a society's overall adaptive capacity to maintain its members' cultural integrity, health, economic vitality, and political order into the future and avoid having its members experience preventable harms." Some adaptation, some transformation, will always be necessary, and this means not an opposition between conservation and innovation or between traditional and modern societies, but a requirement to think justly about what and how to maintain in the face of inevitable change. Integral to this approach is the prevention of foreseeable future harm—a basic political responsibility to try to ensure the conditions for intergenerational flourishing.

What would it mean for literary and cultural studies to embrace the vast and urgent project of collective continuance in the face of the existential threat of climate catastrophe? I want first to revalue routines of daily maintenance and conditions like stability and security as goods necessary to social justice. And then I will argue that endings can help us to recognize and mobilize politically for these conditions.

Rethinking Routine

Embracing routine is not an easy task for literary studies, since the resistance to routinization and habit has for many thinkers since the late eighteenth century been central to the very characterization of art itself. From Percy Shelley up through the Russian Formalists, to Zora Neale Hurston and the Frankfurt School, critics have defined art against the routines of industrial modernity. Literature's value lies in its "evasion of rules and definitions"—in its innovation, uniqueness, and alterity (Attridge 1). Euro-American criticism for two centuries has valorized—and canonized—the artist who invents new forms, experiments with generic conventions, subverts norms, or surprises us with fresh images and ideas. "What we really mean by originality is the modification of ideas," writes Hurston: "So if we look at it squarely, the Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilisation, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use"

(27-28). Paradoxically, perhaps, it has become routine for artists and critics to celebrate art's rejection of routine.

And yet, routine is not always oppressive. Around the world today, millions of people are desperately longing for reliable, regular provisions of food, water, safety, and rest. Adults in the US who do not have enough to eat report that they suffer not only from faintness, pain, and weakness, but also from excruciating, ongoing anxiety: "'I am worried. Worried each day where the next meal is going to come from,'" "'[a]lways there's a sense of anxiety I am feeling'" (qtd. in Dutta et al. 651, 656). There are few universals, but when it comes to food, water, and sleep, the vast majority of human bodies benefit from some measure of repetition and regularity. Our bodies return, day in and day out, to face these same necessities. Of course, it is possible to survive with unpredictable food and radically disrupted sleep, and many people have done so, but for most the irregularity is painful—and it can be tortuous, even catastrophic.

For decades, feminist thinkers—including Luce Giard, bell hooks, Silvia Federici, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles—have argued that the emphasis on the excitements of innovation and revolutionary disruption have meant too little respect for the routine labor that is crucial to keeping bodies alive. This includes maintenance and caretaking, from literal reproduction to the ongoing work of preparing food, hauling water, nursing, sweeping, mending, and washing. Often dismissed as monotonous and dreary, trivial and tyrannical, the daily work of keeping lives going has drawn little enthusiasm from thinkers or artists. It is also largely done by women: "Women do two-thirds of the world's work, produce roughly 70 percent of its food, and are responsible for over 80 percent of its domestic (socially reproductive) labor" (Gahman 82). Much of this is so routine—so non-narratable—as to be unrecognizable. As Susan Fraiman writes, "[t]he illusion of sameness—bodies still breathing, food still edible, rooms salvaged from the forces of entropy, goods flowing in, waste flowing out—actually requires a never-ending expenditure of effort, tireless running simply to stay in place" (123).

And yet, the ongoing work of daily care can also be pleasurable. As bell hooks puts it, "[h]istorically, black women have identified work in the context of family as humanizing labor, work that affirms their identity as women, as human beings showing love and care, the very gestures of humanity white supremacist ideology claimed black people were incapable of expressing." Far from being a source of oppression, ordinary daily tasks like cooking and childcare promise a joyful corrective to the "stressful, dehumanizing, and degrading" work many African American women must perform outside of the home (133-34).

Literary and cultural critics have been quick to dismiss not only routines of daily maintenance, but also the value of stable shelter. We have closely associated home with the heteronormative bourgeois family and private property. But human bodies do need spaces protected from violence, involuntary dislocation, and

extreme weather. In *Extreme Domesticity*, Fraiman argues for revaluing the benefits of stability for those on the margins. She focuses on examples of what she calls "extreme domesticity," where queer, economically insecure, homeless, and displaced people fight to create shelter under inauspicious conditions.

Even if we make the political case for stability and security as necessary to collective continuance, however, we still have an aesthetic problem to solve. Predictability is monotonous. Ongoing daily routines lack drama, innovation, and complexity. In this sense, sustainable life poses a major a challenge for literary studies, which has been so relentlessly drawn to breaks, surprises, and innovations.

Rob Nixon argues that it has been difficult for us to register the violence of climate change because of the unexciting narrative forms it takes:

> Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. In so doing, we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence. Climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively. (2)

Being gradual and imperceptible, climate change does not lend itself to the shock and excitement of the news story, the spectacle, or plotted narrative. My own argument here is that *sustainability* does not lend itself to thrilling or sensational forms, either.

The problem for literary studies, then, is not only that sustainability is politically and economically difficult, but that it also presents us with a specifically narrative problem. D. A. Miller famously defines "the narratable" as being dependent on "a logic of insufficiency, disequilibrium, and deferral" (265). Stability and security are boring. Plot depends on unsustainability.

Sustainable Futures

Until—that is—the end. What I want to suggest here is that the most comforting endings typically offer not the conclusion of all action, but rather stable routines that will extend predictably and indefinitely forward. Anthony Trollope gently mocks his readers' desire for a happy ending in the last chapter of *Barchester Towers*: "The end of a novel, like the end of a children's dinner-party, must be made up of

sweetmeats and sugar-plums" (266). But if we look closely, what actually ends this novel is ongoing, repetitive labor: Mr. Arabin "lives constantly at the deanery, and preaches nearly every Sunday" (270). Meanwhile, Mr. Harding "does such duties as fall to his lot well and conscientiously." Here, narrative closure does not entail the end of all action but specifically the end of uncertain, sensational, *plotted* action in favor of regular and predictable routine.

Of course, Trollope was no radical, and his ending might seem to exemplify the most conservative impulses of the realist novel. But I want to suggest here that the routines that govern narrative endings can also point to a more promising politics of justice. Take, for example, George Moore's 1894 novel about an illiterate servant, *Esther Waters*. For most of the novel, we follow this economically precarious character through numerous moments of crisis, including a pregnancy out of wedlock, a spell in the workhouse, unemployment, gambling wins and losses, trouble with the police, and a long struggle to raise an illegitimate child. The novel ends, however, with Esther falling into a life of regularity with her employer. In the final pages, they settle into a pattern of sewing, reading, sharing regular meals, and going to Sunday meetings. Esther's employer asks her if she would like to marry, and she responds: "Marry and begin life over again! All the worry and bother over again! Why should I marry?" (324) In place of the "worry and bother" of the marriage plot, the two women agree to "[w]ork on, work on to the end," the exact duplication of the phrase conveying the sameness of the sequence to follow (325). This is not the stuff of narratable adventure, but it is for Esther the first genuine prospect of a sustainable life—reliable food, regular labor, and religious observance. In explicitly refusing the marriage plot, here, Esther draws our attention away from the illusion of stability promised by marriage and points instead to the actual material routines that sustain bodies and communities. This seems especially valuable in a moment of radical precarity. This is art that invites us to appreciate the importance of routine for those who live with the constant risk of hunger and homelessness.

As in *Barchester Towers*, the end of *Esther Waters* does not bring all action to a close but rather offers us the expectation of the same actions, repeated over and over again into the future. Or to put this another way: Closure often marks precisely the *transition* from precarity to sustainability. It is the liminal moment—the hinge—between plotted instability and the ongoing. I want to suggest that there is something politically productive in the very movement between plotted instability and the routines implied by the ending. Narratable disequilibrium, or plot, is well suited to conveying experiences like hunger and homelessness—these are exactly the kinds of instabilities that can easily propel a plot forward. And if the narratable is a logic of "disequilibrium, insufficiency, and deferral," then the *logic of the narratable* is also the *logic of precarity*: an instability, a yearning, an ongoing lack. Closure has the potential to offer not only false or illusory resolutions, but also the necessity and desirability of reliable ongoing material conditions. *Esther Waters* is

particularly insightful in this regard, pointing out explicitly that it is not marriage that provides this stability for women, as many other plots would suggest, but the ongoing repetitive labor of daily maintenance.

The relation between narratable upheaval and the stability implied by the end seems especially important for those of us, like me, who enjoy the benefits of both adequate food and stable shelter. After all, it is easy to crave instability when your basic needs are being met, and it is easy to find security boring or oppressive when you are not facing the daily struggle to find food and shelter. As a form, plotted narrative may be particularly good at pushing even the most comfortable among us to yearn for a settled resolution to the distressing insecurity of hunger and homelessness. I have learned this lesson in part from the Victorian novel, which is famous for its ideologically troubling resolutions, but equally famous, too, for drawing our attention to the hardships of hunger and poverty.

There may be no more well-known example than Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. The whole plot of this novel is sparked by the condition of ravenous hunger:

> Oliver Twist and his companions suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months: at last they got so voracious and wild with hunger, that one boy, who was tall for his age, and hadn't been used to that sort of thing (for his father had kept a small cook-shop), hinted darkly to his companions, that unless he had another basin of gruel per diem, he was afraid he might some night happen to eat the boy who slept next him, who happened to be a weakly youth of tender age. (13)

This threat of violence prompts Oliver, himself "desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery," to make his famous request: "'Please, sir, I want some more'" (14). This statement is a classic example of narratability—what captures the logic of insufficiency and deferral better than hunger?—and it is what gets the plotted adventure going in earnest. Oliver is forced into exploitative and criminal labor in order to survive. Drawing public attention to the cruelty of the Poor Laws and the workhouse system, Dickens uses Oliver's story to make poverty appear innocent—the angelic Oliver is certainly not at fault for his hunger—and also intolerable: a boy so hungry that he threatens to eat another instigates a whole novel's worth of excitement. The plot will only come to an end when Oliver is adopted by the wealthy Mr. Brownlow and settles into a life shaped by the promise of ongoing plenty.

One could certainly argue that Dickens fails badly when it comes to structural solutions to poverty. Oliver's own situation is resolved by a combination of unlikely coincidences, Mr. Brownlow's personal kindness, and his own saintly goodness. Dickens does not imagine for us an entirely different economic system that would guarantee food and shelter to all. *Oliver Twist* is hardly revolutionary in this respect.

And yet, although Oliver's singularity as a virtuous protagonist focuses too much on individual solutions, Dickens does deliberately broaden the frame briefly near the end, when Oliver tries to use his newfound wealth to save Dick, a child-

hood friend from the workhouse. "'We'll take him away from here, and have him clothed and taught, and send him to some quiet country place where he may grow strong and well'" (418). As it happens, Oliver arrives too late to save him. Dick's brief mention reminds us that the novel has failed to change the world beyond its immediate protagonist and implies an untold number of similar stories that it has not been able to tell. The ending does therefore hint at the need for a structural solution. And the very narratability of Oliver's story has affirmative affordances for a leftist politics: It invites us to crave resolution to the ups and downs of unjust scarcity and to replace them with a sustainable life.

Endings for Collective Flourishing

Dickens fails to imagine a collective solution, but he does get us much of the way there. I want to end, myself, with a recent narrative that combines the narratable instability of plot with structural solutions for collective continuance. Matthew Desmond's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Evicted* is a sociological nonfiction intended to expose the injustices of rental housing in poor areas of Milwaukee and the huge rise in evictions in the US over the past two decades. It includes data and the history of housing policy. These sections are interwoven with a series of stories that feature precarious central characters. These narratives have led reviewers to praise the book for its 'novelistic' qualities (Schuessler). What I want to suggest here is that *Evicted* shares some crucial forms with the novel—including gripping plot lines organized around precarity—while it also manages to combine these with prescriptions for large-scale structural change.

Desmond organizes the text around eight struggling renters, some Black and some white, some in a trailer park and others in rundown urban neighborhoods. Arleen, a mother of two boys, is evicted because a stranger has broken down her front door, and the landlord holds her responsible for the damage. As she struggles to keep her children under a stable roof, she has to choose between food and rent, and between rent and school clothes. Vanetta, a mother of three, falls behind on her rent and electricity bills and is threatened with eviction. Worrying that her children will be taken away from her, she participates in a robbery to cover her bills. She is then arrested, fired from her job, evicted from her apartment—and loses her children.

Perhaps surprisingly for a social scientist, Desmond gives us not only a set of sympathetic victims, but also a villain. One of *Evicted*'s most compelling characters is a landlord named Sherrena. She is determined to make as much money as possible from her tenants in the poorest neighborhoods in Milwaukee. She evicts anyone who reports her failures to keep up the property, including broken plumb-

ing. After a fire that kills an eight-month-old baby, she celebrates the fact that she is not liable for any monetary damages.

Sherrena's personal greed and selfishness are not the root cause of her tenants' woes, however. *Evicted* carefully tracks the legal and economic structures that allow landlords like Sherrena to make money from the poorest and most vulnerable people. For example, landlords can refuse to rent to tenants who have been evicted before, which means that renters who have eviction records often become desperate to settle for any housing at all and can be coerced into paying high rates for poor conditions. Arleen, wrongfully evicted in the first place, is then rejected eighty-nine times in her search for an affordable apartment. With precious few alternatives, she becomes easy prey for landlords like Sherrena who can readily profit from her desperation.

Evicted, like *Oliver Twist*, spends pages detailing the heartrending precarity of its vulnerable and innocent protagonists. But what most clearly differentiates Desmond from Dickens is the focus on structural causes: *Evicted* shows in detail how government programs, the collapse of the industrial sector, and a history of segregated housing law together afford the shape of the lives of both the mean-spirited rich and the deserving poor. It moves between novelistic forms—like scenes of wrenching grief for characters we have come to know—and accounts of structuring social forms—like the history of US eviction law—to give us both painful individual stories and a powerful analysis of the relations between individual agency and large-scale structures.

It is not surprising that *Evicted* shares so much with the realist novel. Desmond's eight protagonists, like so many classic characters of the realist novel, yearn for a stable home. Suspenseful scenes of narratable instability revolve around the threat of homelessness. For example, when Arleen falls behind on rent, we wait anxiously as Sherrena prepares to evict her. But then chance intervenes. Sherrena shows the apartment to a young woman named Crystal, who says she will take it and agrees to allow Arleen to stay there with her. Here begins a new plot: the complicated story of Arleen and Crystal, which ends in physical violence and another eviction. Along the way, Arleen loses everything she has ever owned because she cannot afford to store her things between evictions and is robbed of all that she has. Rents rise; her children move in with relatives and she borrows money to bring them back to her.

How does Desmond bring his plots of precarity to a close? Here is where *Evicted* seems particularly shrewd. Arleen's story comes to a surprisingly conventional end, though it is an explicitly illusory one. In the final pages of the book, as the family settles into a new apartment without a stove or refrigerator, Arleen's son fantasizes about becoming a carpenter so that he can build her a home. Arleen says:

> I wish that when I be an old lady, I can sit back and look at my kids. And they be grown. And they, you know, become something. Something more than me.

> And we'll all be together, and be laughing. We be remembering stuff like this and laughing at it. (292)

Here, Desmond gives us the husk of the happy ending without its actual fulfillment. That is, Arleen imagines what it might be like to conclude her own story happily—laughing together in a house built by her sons—while in fact she ends very close to where she began, in uncertain shelter with inadequate food. Desmond uses insufficiency and instability to structure the story around the *desire* for security, but as Arleen's endlessly precarious story makes clear, that desire cannot be satisfied under current conditions.

But this is not quite the end of the story, after all. Desmond writes an epilogue, which offers a second ending. Here he proposes that a well-designed universal housing voucher program could change the shape of all of the lives *Evicted* has unfolded for us. He uses the narrative arcs of the book, with their multiple quests for stable shelter, to set us up for a *structural* solution. Or to put this another way, Desmond borrows narratable insufficiency and desire from plotted narrative, and then, cannily, he doubles the experience of the happy ending: In the first ending, he reveals the conventional novelistic ending cannot be more than a fantasy. The scene of the family at home, rewarded for the mother's sincere hard work and love, is tragically impossible given conditions now. In the second ending, Desmond shows how the happy ending could still be fulfilled, though this time we see it take shape through large-scale social reform rather than the image of a single family at home.

The plot of *Evicted*, then, is not just an entertaining form borrowed from popular novelistic plots to make the book appealing to a broad audience. Like conventional storytellers, Desmond structures the propulsive forward movement of his text around precarious protagonists on a desperate quest to find a stable home. It makes sense for the domestic novel to be a good model for a book about housing injustice. But in order to convince us that home should be a universal condition—a human right—Desmond teases us with the desire for a conventional family ending, only to switch it for the large-scale political goal of stable shelter for all. Brilliantly, he has it both ways: He trains us to desire the security of regular food and protective shelter by showing us how precarity hurts individual people we come to care about, without encouraging us to double down on the separation of some lives at the expense of others. He proposes stable shelter as a collective happy ending.

Sustainable Futures

We might seem to have wandered far from the question of sustainability, but I want to suggest that collective happy endings are precisely the aesthetic form that we

need most urgently now, in this age of mass precarity. It is estimated that 690 million people went hungry in 2019 (Kretchmer). Extreme weather, including droughts and forest fires caused by climate change, are increasing the numbers who suffer from acute hunger. Homelessness and violent conflicts over water are predicted to intensify over the next few decades. There are predictions that there may be a billion environmental migrants in the world by 2050 (Bassetti). In this context, I am arguing for a revaluing of stability, predictability, and routine—which are precisely the opposite of our usual values in the arts and humanities.

A little to my own surprise, then, I have begun to turn back to the consoling and repetitive forms critics have so often dismissed as conservative and especially those associated with the uncritical passivity of mass culture, including pop songs, rhyming poetry, and the most formulaic plots. Increasingly, these seem to me generative for a newly sustainable aesthetics. If we set aside our longstanding insistence on rupture and innovation in literary and cultural studies, we can begin to see that the repetitive formulas of popular culture bespeak a longing for predictability and routine that has an untapped affirmative political potential in this time of rapid and destabilizing change. To revalue formulaic mass culture of course means turning away from the Frankfurt School's understanding of the 'culture industry' as a top-down purveyor of a self-serving ideology. It means interpreting mass audience pleasures as indexes of authentic desires.

I understand my own work in the traditions of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, beginning with E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall. Those critics argued for taking working-class people seriously, not as passive dupes of the culture industry, but as thoughtful agents working through cultural materials, which they translate into a range of dynamic social practices. Publics do not need to be shaken into a new and unfamiliar consciousness to recognize the importance of stability and security, and in this respect they may be more savvy than most artists and intellectuals have been. Precarity is the stuff of global injustice, and it might even mobilize large numbers to political action. Not all popular forms will encourage the making of just worlds, to be sure, but they can and some—already, sometimes—do.

In this context, endings offer us a range of intriguing possibilities—opportunities to reflect on the project of keeping life going beyond narrative instability. It may seem surprising to find radical political potential in the happy ending, which we have so long dismissed as conservative, but which I prefer to call conservationist. The liminality of the ending is crucial: It marks the threshold to ongoing conditions—including the promise of food security and stable shelter. It is doubly liminal, in fact, marking not only the shift from precarity to stability but also the boundary between narratability and the non-narrative beyond. And it may be the best form we have for provoking us to recognize and desire the urgent need for collective continuance.

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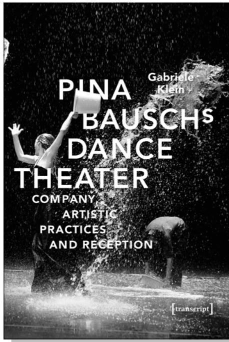

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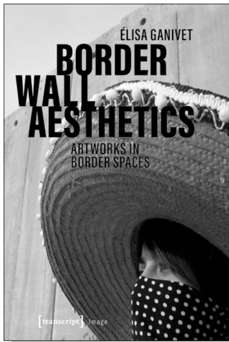

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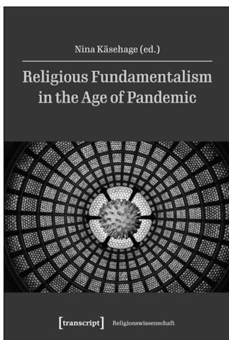

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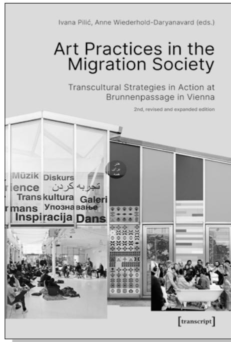

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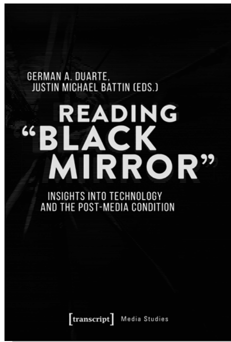

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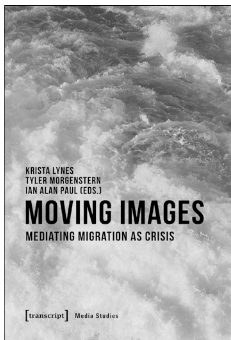

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