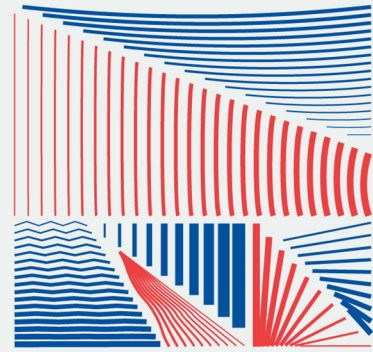


IN PROGRESS

A Graduate Journal
of North American Studies



Volume 1 | Number 2 (Winter 2023)

Academic Section

Indian Residential Schools and the Internet: Sites of (De)Colonialization

Lukas Fender

“She gloried in being a sailor’s wife”: A Postcolonial Reading of the Marriage Plot
in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*

Caroline Wachsmann

Exploring Gender in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* (2005) through the Lens of
Elementary Structures of Kinship (1949)

Christine Poljanskij

Independent Studies Section

Videographic Criticism

The Booker Prize: Reading New Literary Publications

Open Section

Literary Journeys and Screen Adventures: A Conversation

About Our Journal

In Progress: A Graduate Journal of North American Studies is a peer-reviewed online journal based at the English Department at Leibniz University Hannover, Germany. Launched in 2023, *In Progress* features academic work by graduate students in Anglophone literary, cultural, and media studies, focusing in particular (but not exclusively) on the field of North American Studies. To that end, we publish academic writing that demonstrates the excellence of graduate scholarship and strives to include diverse perspectives in our Academic Section. Beyond that, our journal provides a space for the documentation of student projects and other creative endeavors originating in and around Leibniz University's international master program North American Studies. In this capacity, the journal also publishes creative writing, reports of events organized by students, and other outcomes of seminars offered in the master program's "Independent Studies" module (such as video essays, podcast episodes, and book reviews) in our Independent Studies Section. In addition, the journal's Open Section is dedicated to a wide range of other themes, forms, and contents that graduate students produce specifically for each issue. *In Progress* is managed and run by a small core editorial team and produced with the active collaboration of graduate students who participate in the advanced seminar "Editing a Scholarly Journal." Seminar participants are involved in the blind peer review of the academic submissions and, together with the members of the core editorial team, they work on the editing and publication process. This also includes preparing the content of the Independent Studies Section for publication and the conceptual design and text production for the journal's Open Section. Our journal thus serves several purposes: It gives graduate students the opportunity to publish peer-reviewed articles, it introduces students to the work process involved in editing a journal, and it showcases projects that students developed at the English Department in Hannover. As a literal work *In Progress*, each issue's publication depends on the dedication, creativity, and cooperation of the people involved.

Editorial Board

General Editors: Felix Brinker & Kathleen Looch

Associate Editors: Eiman Alkhatib, Lukas Fender, Jessica Hille, Alissa Lienhard, Jia Shen Lim, Hanna Masslich, Shayan Rahmanian, and Marielle Tomasic

Editorial Team for this issue: Elisa-Margaux Bongartz, Evelyn Dossa, Mruga Kelkar, Michelle Pitson, Celina Plaß, Nathalie Rennhack, Ahmet Servet, Harishnavi Sriskanthan, Can Ulucan, and Carolin Wachsmann

Journal Website

inprogress.uni-hannover.de

Contact and Submissions

inprogress@engsem.uni-hannover.de

Contents

Editorial Note	1
----------------	---

Academic Section

Indian Residential Schools and the Internet: Sites of (De)Colonialization <i>Lukas Fender</i>	3
“She gloried in being a sailor’s wife”: A Postcolonial Reading of the Marriage Plot in Jane Austen’s <i>Persuasion</i> <i>Caroline Wachsmann</i>	17
Exploring Gender in Stephenie Meyer’s <i>Twilight</i> (2005) through the Lens of <i>Elementary Structures of Kinship</i> (1949) <i>Christine Poljanskij</i>	29

Independent Studies Section

Videographic Criticism (Winter Term 2021/22)

Introduction: Discussing Film in Film Language <i>Alissa Lienhard</i>	41
Bringing Across Emotions in <i>Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban</i> <i>Sofie Hilbrands</i>	44
<i>The Martian</i> and the Colonial Frame of Mind <i>Can Ulucan</i>	46
<i>Blade Runner 2049</i> as Slow Science Fiction <i>Alissa Lienhard</i>	48
The Male Gaze: A Look at Scarlett Johansson in <i>The Island</i> <i>Sanne Brands</i>	50
The Parody of <i>Austenland</i> <i>Alexandra Groapa</i>	52
Jane Austen in Film <i>Sophia Trayser</i>	54
Music as a Dialogue: A Video Essay <i>Setareh Ghasemireza</i>	56

The Booker Prize: Reading New Literary Publications (Summer Term 2022)	
Introduction: Book Reviews <i>Lukas Fender</i>	58
Book Review <i>Bewilderment</i> by Richard Powers <i>Kerem Ak</i>	60
Book Review <i>No One Is Talking About This</i> by Patricia Lockwood: Tragedy in the Time of Social Media <i>Carolin Wachsmann</i>	63

Open Section

Literary Journeys and Screen Adventures: A Conversation <i>Eiman Alkhatib, Lukas Fender, Jessica Hille, Alissa Lienhard, Jia Shen Lim, and Marielle Tomasic</i>	66
--	----

Editorial Note

Alissa Lienhard & Marielle Tomasic

Not so long ago, in the summer of 2023, we published the first issue of *In Progress: A Graduate Journal of North American Studies*, and we are thrilled to now present the second issue. In fact, this number can be understood as the second half of our inaugural issue since much of its content stems from the same pool of submissions and projects. As with our last issue, this one is divided into three different parts: an Academic Section that features three articles written by students, an Independent Studies Section that focuses on student projects at Leibniz University's English Department, and an Open Section, which, this time around, features a conversation about reading and our associate editors' favorite summer reads. We are convinced that offering this space to graduate students is important: it presents their unique perspectives, and allows them to contribute to their fields of study and form a community of young scholars, who are as passionate about their studies as they are about sharing their knowledge.

This issue's Academic Section features three peer-reviewed articles situated within the broad field of Anglophone Literary and Cultural Studies. The articles published here underwent a blind peer-review process as well as rigorous editing by our editorial team, ensuring their high quality. First, Lukas Fender examines the internet as a decolonial site, using the Indian residential school system as an example and analyzing how Facebook groups are used in a decolonizing practice. Then, Caroline Wachsmann's article discusses the marriage plot in Jane Austen's novel *Persuasion* through a postcolonial lens by applying Edward Said's method of contrapuntal reading. This is followed by Christine Poljanskij's article that examines the construction of gender in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* by applying Lévi-Strauss's ideas on systems of kinship as well as Judith Butler's feminist approach to Lévi-Strauss's writing. Taken together, this selection of graduate scholarship offers discussions of gender, colonialism, oppression, and violence, covering not only a broad historical range but also a variety of different forms and media, from literary classics to young adult novels to social media.

This issue also showcases student projects and other creative endeavors that originate from Leibniz University's international master program in North American Studies. We publish a variety of texts, art, and videos that emerge from seminars taught in our program's "Independent Studies" module. This issue's Independent Studies Section features a selection of video essays that were produced in the context of Kathleen Look's "Videographic Criticism" seminar, held during the 2021/22 winter term. This includes essays by Sofie Hilbrand ("Bringing Across Emotions in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*"), Can Ulucan ("*The Martian* and the Colonial Frame of Mind"), Alissa Lienhard ("*Blade Runner 2049* as Slow Science Fiction"), Sanne Brands ("The Male Gaze: A Look at Scarlett Johansson in *The Island*"), Alexandra Groapa ("The Parody of *Austenland*"), Sophia Trayser ("Jane Austen in Film"), and Setareh Ghasemireza ("Music as a Dialogue: A Video Essay"). In addition, the current issue contains two book reviews written in the 2022 Independent Studies course "The Booker Prize: Reading New Literary Publications," taught by Janna-Lena Neumann.



This includes Kerem Ak's review of Richard Powers' novel *Bewilderment* and Carolin Wachsmann's review of Patricia Lockwood's debut novel *No One Is Talking About This*.

Finally, the Open Section was created by our current team of Associate Editors. Eiman Alkhatib, Lukas Fender, Jessica Hille, Alissa Lienhard, Jia Shen Lim, and Marielle Tomasic engage in a written conversation that addresses common struggles and joys of reading – including reading slumps, long to-be-read piles, finding time to read for fun, and some favorite books we read over the summer of 2023. The conversation ends with a list of recommendations, which includes popular romances, Indigenous short stories, family dramas, and non-fiction.

As noted above, this issue of *In Progress* still profits from the work of our student editors who helped prepare our inaugural issue (vol. 1, no. 1). These student editors worked relentlessly over the winter semester 2022/23 to peer-review, edit and curate materials that ended up in this issue. Accordingly, we want to warmly thank them, again, for their time and effort. In addition, our thanks go to Felix Brinker and Kathleen Loock, our general editors, without whom *In Progress* would not exist. In their function as general editors they not only started this project, but they also keep on ensuring that all the necessary steps function smoothly as they supervise all other editors in their work. Of course, the work of our fellow associate editors, Sahar Al Kharsa, Eiman Alkhatib, Lukas Fender, Jessica Hille, and Jia Shen Lim, was also crucial for the publication of this issue. Among other things, they edited, proof-read, formatted, and uploaded materials; they provided introductory texts for the Independent Studies Section and the Open Section for this issue. We also want to acknowledge the work put in by our former editors Gülçin Dogan, Hanna Masslich, Shayan Rahmanian, and Harishnavi Sriskanthan, whose contributions were crucial during *In Progress's* founding period. Thanks to the efforts of all these editors, we are able to present this second issue that highlights both the graduate scholarship and the creative and explorative work being done by master students at the English Department in Hannover. And now, we invite you to read and watch the results of this shared labor. Enjoy the second issue of *In Progress*!

Author Biographies

Alissa Lienhard (she/her) is a former student assistant and current master student in the division of American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover (Germany). She holds a bachelor's degree in the Interdisciplinary Bachelor with English as first subject and Biology as second subject. Her bachelor thesis, “Don't Let the Bastards Grind You Down': Language(s) of Repression and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*” develops an argument about the power of language in the context of feminist speculative literature. In her studies in the North American Studies master program, she focuses particularly on film, television, comics, science fiction, feminism, neuro-diversity, and gender/queer studies. Alissa Lienhard is a founding member of *In Progress's* editorial board.

Marielle Tomasic (she/her) is a student of the North American Studies master program at Leibniz University Hannover and holds a Bachelor's degree in English and Philosophy. Her bachelor thesis “Liminality as Resistance in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* and *Dear Sentburan*” critically engages with boundaries of genres and examines who gets to write what. It approaches literary studies of life writing through a lens of curious empathy and decoloniality. Beyond this, Marielle is deeply invested in figuring out ways that literary scholars can think, write, and work in ways that make the (literary) world a kinder place. Marielle Tomasic works as a student editorial assistant for a publishing house, is a student assistant at the Leibniz University Hannover, and a member of *In Progress's* editorial board.

Indian Residential Schools and the Internet: Sites of (De)Colonialization

Lukas Fender

Abstract

Using the Indian Residential School (IRS) system as an example, this paper examines the internet as a decolonial site. To do so, I will draw on decolonial concepts as well as ideas from spatial theory. Through the analysis of Indigenous-led organizations and a Facebook group dedicated to the collective memory work of the IRS system, I argue that social media platforms can contribute to revitalize culture and foster communal bonds. Amongst others, digital storytelling, the establishment of common symbols, and the organization of joint actions in the offline world have emerged as digital strategies. These are complemented by collecting and sharing memories and educational materials online.

Keywords

Postcolonial Studies – Digital Resiliency – First Nations – Decolonization

Introduction¹

The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the
Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly.

Nous le regrettons

We are sorry

Nimitataynan

Niminchinowesamin

Mamiattugut

– Harper (2008)

These *words* by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper marked the official state apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools (IRS) on behalf of the Canadian Government in 2008. 13 years later, 215 unmarked Indigenous children's graves were identified on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia. The find started a series of

¹ As the author of this paper, I acknowledge the sovereign existence of First Nations on their traditional territories now known as Canada. Furthermore, I acknowledge their suffering over centuries due to European and Canadian settler colonialism. This, too, includes the Indian Residential School system, which aimed at the extinction of Indigenous cultures. I condemn any colonial activities by the Canadian government that continue to affect Indigenous peoples today and join them in calling for a just compensation for their suffering and the decolonization of their traditional territories. As a student with German citizenship, I will refrain from speaking for First Nations or qualitatively judging their decolonial actions in this paper.

further investigations of other former school grounds. Using ground-penetrating radar, more than 1,300 unmarked graves could be identified on just five former school sites (Voce 2021). It is important to note that the recovery of these graves did not come as a surprise but rather confirmed an atrocity already known among First Nations people for many years. The 2015 report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – convened at the same time as the state apology – had already confirmed the death of 3,201 IRS students (TRC 15).

In addition to the horrific colonial past of residential schools, it is often noted that a pan-Indian consciousness has emerged from the shared experience and suffering. With regard to the territory now known as the United States, this consciousness has had significant influence on the solidarity and resistance within the Native American community (Gibson 2). In a similar manner, the search conducted on the former school grounds at Kamloops by the Tk'emlups te Secwépemc First Nation did not only inspire other First Nations to search former school grounds, but also triggered an overwhelming surge of dismay and support on social media. This article analyzes social media platforms as potential sites of decolonization. Regarding the debate about the IRS system in Canada, I argue that social media platforms can contribute to revitalize culture and foster communal bonds.

First, I will give a short overview of the state of research on IRS in Canada. In a subsequent theory chapter, I will combine decolonial theory with spatial aspects that provide the foundation for my later analysis. It draws on the seminal works by Glen Sean Coulthard, Amical Cabral, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson as well as on Sarah de Leeuw's spatial analysis of IRS. Proceeding from this, I will develop the idea of the internet and social media platforms as decolonial places. Furthermore, this part will also feature sections on strategies of resistance and the usage of the internet and specifically social media platforms among Indigenous nations in the settler colonial state of Canada.

As the IRS system only had and still has negative effects for members of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit,² the subsequent analysis is based on data collected from groups, social media pages, and websites lead by Indigenous people. In contrast to many other scholarly approaches, the materials provided by governmental institutions are secondary in this analysis to acknowledge the unique expertise of Indigenous people. I will especially focus on the activities of the organization *Orange Shirt Society* and the open-access Facebook group *Every Child Matters*. Here, I will conduct a rather broad descriptive analysis of selected contents, as social media platforms, unfortunately, do not provide free access to in-depth quantitative data. In a final section, the results and implications of the analysis are summarized to provide a comprehensive overview of this specific decolonial discourse. Although it is important to critically remember the violence of colonialism and institutions such as the IRS system, this paper will not include a summary of the Indian Residential School system's history. This has already been thoroughly documented elsewhere, in particular by Indigenous scholars such as Glen Sean Coulthard, Phil Fountain and Aimée Craft, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson.

Reconciliation and Resentment

Research on the history of the IRS system and its far-reaching effects has produced an extensive yet still growing field. The majority of this research has mostly been concerned with the work of

² As not only children from First Nations but also Métis and Inuit had to attend IRS, I will use the term 'Indigenous' to inclusively denote every group suffering from Canadian settler colonialism. If it is applicable, I use the names of specific First Nations (i.e. Tk'emlups te Secwépemc First Nation).

the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP) and the TRC as well as their final reports published in 1996 respectively 2015. In short, both commissions were convened to investigate the full and complex history of the IRS system and its effects on the relation between Indigenous peoples and Canadian settlers. To uncover the truth about the violence of the settler colonial state of Canada to the public, both commissions interviewed survivors of IRS, visited sites of former schools, and analyzed documents such as enrollment lists. Based on their investigations, the commissions published final reports, containing calls to action for the Canadian government and public to promote reconciliation.

Glen Sean Coulthard, however, challenges the politics of recognition and reconciliation. In his extensive work *Red Skin, White Mask*, he argues “that Indigenous peoples’ individual and collective resentment [towards reconciliation]” is to be understood as an “awareness of and unwillingness to *reconcile* ourselves [Indigenous peoples] with a structural and symbolic violence that is still very much present in our lives” (126). The “structural and symbolic violence” (126) Coulthard refers to is settler colonialism and its ongoing effects, established by European colonizers and the Canadian government. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson offers a similar approach to Indigenous resistance. She, too, rejects the politics of the TRC as it was “controlled entirely by the state” and only serves “to placate Indigenous resistance and to appease the moral concern of Canadians” (239). In her book *As We Have Always Done*, Simpson offers an approach to resistance, based on Indigenous cultures, with the aim “that Indigenous grief can[not] be managed, exploited, and used by the state to placate Indigenous resistance” (238). Even though criticizing the TRC for enacting a “transitional justice for indigenous people in a non-transitional society,” Courtney Jung also points out the potential of the commission to emphasize that “the scope of Canadian government obligation toward its indigenous population extends far beyond the legacy of the residential school system” (26).

Apart from the scholarly writings about Indigenous resistance and the TRC, research also focuses on a growing body of testimonies by residential school survivors.³ The testimonies are often used to emphasize Indigenous voices and to provide educational materials, but they also offer insights into the psychological aspects of the IRS system. Hence, a number of research projects collectively emphasize the traumatic effects not only on a personal but also on a communal and intergenerational level (Burrage et al.). With regard to trauma, additional research on coping mechanisms and explicitly Indigenous strategies for coping with traumatic experiences has been conducted (Molyneux et al.).

Decolonization and Place

In order to understand decolonization, the extent of colonialism must be recognized first and foremost. Amílcar Cabral describes colonialism as the “theory of progressive *assimilation* of native populations, which turns out to be only a more or less violent attempt to deny the culture of the people in question” (54). Turning this definition around, it is evident that Cabral sees culture as the essential vehicle for resistance against the oppressor. To him, “culture is the vigorous manifestation on the ideological or idealist plane of the physical and historical reality of the society that is dominated” (54.) Hence, from a colonizer’s point of view, the destruction of Indigenous cultures through the IRS system in what is considered Canada today seemed to be an effective measure of

³ To name only one example, *Behind Closed Doors: Stories from the Kamloops Indian Residential School*, edited and published by an Indigenous organization, collected stories from the Kamloops Indian Residential School where the 215 unmarked graves were recovered in May 2021 (Agnes S. Jack).

assimilation which would break Indigenous resistance to colonialism. Paired with the deprivation of Indigenous land, unjust treaties, and economical negligence, European settlers thus implemented the structure of settler colonialism on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit territories by attempting to destroy Indigenous cultures.

Hence, just like colonialism, national liberation and decolonization emphasizes the role of culture. Following Cabral, the ultimate goal of national independence movements has to be “[reclaiming] the right, usurped by imperialist domination, namely: the liberation of the process of development of national productive forces” (56). This liberation will then lead to the revitalization of culture as a whole and national liberation is thus “an act of *culture*” (56; emphasis in original).

As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang state, “settler colonialism is a structure and not an event” (5). This structure may sometimes be invisible to people who are not affected, but it is always in place as long as the oppressor and the structures of their society are still present. The process of abolishing the ubiquitous system of colonization has to be decolonization, not reconciliation. Accordingly, Tuck and Yang argue that reconciliation only serves “settler normalcy [and is] about a settler future” (35), just like colonialism used to be in the first place. Like Simpson, they argue that reconciliation and recognition only serve to ease the settlers’ guilt. This desire for and the acceptance of recognition by the colonizer on the part of the colonized is what Frantz Fanon calls internalized colonialism (*Red Skin* 114). Decolonization, on the other hand, “is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity” (Tuck and Yang 5) only and does not seek recognition from the colonizer. With this, Tuck and Yang dwell on Frantz Fanon’s idea that decolonization has to be seen as an always evolving process which the oppressed go through, stressing that it takes time and cannot be foreseen. Decolonization is not achieved through a plain apology by the state nor when the settler deems it to be satisfactory (Fanon 36). Following this reasoning, it becomes apparent why members of First Nations like Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson reject the work of the state as well as settler-funded TRC or other settler initiatives. To put it in Simpson’s words, “there is no demand upon the state or its citizens other than to get out of the way and respect Indigenous self-determination and nationhood” (237). In line with Tuck and Yang, Rachel L. Burrage, Sandra L. Momper, and Joseph P. Gone identify four central components of decolonization with regard to Indigenous peoples: “a) making the dynamics of settler colonialism visible, b) privileging Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, c) restoring cultural and traditional practices, and d) returning land and resources to Indigenous peoples” (Burrage et al. 28). Considering these four components, it appears that decolonization is closely linked to the production of knowledge. This does not only include knowledge of the colonial history, but also knowledge about Indigenous epistemologies and cultures.

If decolonization cannot be dependent on the oppressor and has to deny its culture, what would “a radical alternative to the structural and psycho-affective facets of colonial domination” (Coulthard, “Subjects of Empire” 546) look like in an Indigenous context? What are possible ways to visualize the dynamics of settler colonialism or to revitalize Indigenous cultural traditions? Following Adam J. Barker, it is crucial to acknowledge that Indigenous resistance against European settler colonialism has always taken place (44). The strategies and ways of resistance are usually culturally embedded but varied and develop over time. Heather Molyneaux et al. single out “social capital, sharing stories, and networking” as major components of First Nations’ resiliency. Kirmayer et al. emphasize especially the power of storytelling among Indigenous groups and the potential of stories “to link generations, [transmit] knowledge, values, and a sense of shared identity” (81).

To offer an example of the potential of storytelling for the creation of a sense of identity, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson gives an insightful example of a traditional Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg story, combined with Indigenous epistemology, in her chapter “Land as Pedagogy.” Additionally, the story breaks with the conventional Eurocentric gender categories and emphasizes Indigenous values (Simpson 145-73). Every time Simpson or any other member of her Nation shares the story, many cultural aspects are taught rather than being suppressed, as was the case in the past. By creating a valuable bond between storyteller and listener, the act of storytelling here revitalizes and reflects on Indigenous cultures and at the same time refuses to normalize the colonizer’s culture.

Stories such as Simpson’s can also evoke another powerful sentiment that helps to restore continuity in life, namely nostalgia. Originally viewed as a medical disease similar to homesickness, nostalgia is now known as a personal bitter-sweet emotion that can be described as a longing for the past. This longing does not have to be delusional but can rather be seen as a coping mechanism in moments of discontinuity and distress. Although predominantly known as a personal emotion, nostalgia can also be witnessed on a group level (Wildschut et al. 861). A shared nostalgia can create a sense of belonging, foster social bonds, and offer a restorative yet progressive look into a potential future. To this end, it is not necessary that all members of a community have witnessed the remembered event, but rather that the memory or story of the event is meaningful to the group identity (859). Hence, nostalgia – evoked by practices and storytelling from the time before the arrival of the colonizer – may be helpful to reinvigorate Indigenous cultures.

Surely storytelling is only one of many traditional means of resiliency. It is, however, of crucial importance for my analysis. Regarding the desire for recognition based on internalized colonialism, Coulthard for example argues “that Indigenous peoples’ individual and collective resentment – expressed as an angry and vigilant unwillingness to forgive” (*Red Skin* 126) may be an adequate response. However, as already stated above, it is on the colonized to decide what measure shall be taken to decolonize. For us, European settlers and colonizers, there is only one thing to do: “get out of the way and respect Indigenous self-determination and nationhood” (Simpson 237).

(De)Colonialization, Place, and the Internet

Colonialism and decolonization have both been theorized mainly from a historical, cultural, and literary perspective. The discipline of postcolonial studies itself predominantly evolved within these three rather loosely defined fields of research. Thus, Cole Harris’s proposal to conceptualize (de)colonialization from a spatial perspective and “to investigate the sites where colonialism was [and still is] actually practiced” (166) is a valuable intervention that links perfectly with Burrage, Momper, and Gone’s first component of decolonization, namely “making the dynamics of settler colonialism visible” (28).

With regard to Canada and the IRS system, Sarah de Leeuw responds to Harris’ appeal and offers a convincing spatial analysis of IRS buildings in British Columbia. She argues that the buildings are places of colonialism that symbolized the gendered and segregated settler colonial discourse which Indigenous peoples were exposed to – and still are (de Leeuw 351). They are a constant reminder of the cultural deprivation and the recent recoveries of unmarked graves emphasized this. Even though IRS are places of colonialism, de Leeuw further argues that they are also a reminder of the resiliency of Indigenous peoples, drawing on oral testimonies of solidarity between and resistance by Indigenous students. By burning school buildings, for instance,

“students *used* the very places (residential schools) claimed by the colonial project in order to disrupt the material articulations of colonialism” (353; emphasis in original).

In connection with the uncovering of the graves, the IRS as places of colonialism reappear at the center of decolonial discourse – this time, however, particularly in a virtual space. Due to public and global attention and despite the existence of over 130 different schools, the Canadian IRS has now become one semiotic place that includes many different experiences and physical places on a virtual level. As a semiotic place, it conveys a symbolic meaning to the public and serves as a meaningful foundation in the public discourse on IRS (Dünne 2). Hence, the IRS is now more visible as a settler colonial structure than ever before and offers the opportunity for decolonization through digital means. Making colonial structures visible is a first step but also results in another important aspect of decolonization, namely the emergence of (self-)knowledge. As the following analysis will show, knowledge about IRS and the colonial past in general can be created and shared via the virtual place of IRS.

Making use of digital infrastructure for resistance is not new to First Nations peoples. In 2012 and 2013, the #IdleNoMore grassroots movement gained global attention with its protests against a number of legislations passed by the Canadian government, including changes in the Indian Act and environmental protection. These protests were largely organized online and included public performances of cultural elements such as round dances and drumming (Barker 48). Digital infrastructure is also important in other respects: As Brian Beaton and Peter Campbell show, the Canadian government mainly focuses on the expansion of broadband infrastructure in urban settler regions; Indigenous people living in rural areas are thus structurally disadvantaged. Whether purposely or not, “having unreliable infrastructure weakens the communities’ resilience” (Beaton and Campbell). However, with the help of small, Indigenous-led companies and reciprocal financial support, the First Nations are advancing the development of their own digital infrastructures. Beaton and Campbell consider this to be a further act of decolonization, pointing to the increased opportunities for networking between the nations. The rapidly developing success of the #IdleNoMore movement confirms their reasoning.

It becomes apparent that decolonization struggles are also benefiting from digital processes. Coupled with traditional strategies of resistance such as storytelling and networking, the increased reach of social media platforms might accelerate community-building processes and help to create a sustainable digital culture. This can create a stronger sense of community among First Nations, which is crucial in the struggle for cultural autonomy. To illustrate this point, I will discuss exemplary virtual activism related to IRS below. When it comes to research on digital activism, the latter’s impact is usually determined by the number of clicks and impressions as well as the reach of posts, or the usage of a movement-defining hashtag. This data is unfortunately not provided by social media platforms for free and requires paid third-party services. Thus, only selected contents can be analyzed in this paper. As a result, I focus particularly on content created by Indigenous people with a high number of interactions in the form of likes and comments.

Orange Shirt Society

Originating from a commemorative project and reunion of former students, the Orange Shirt Society was formed in 2013. Its name is derived from the personal story of survivor Phyllis Webstad, who was forced to attend an IRS at age six. On her first day, the new orange t-shirt, given to her by her grandmother, was taken from her forever with her other belongings. What started as a local project is now the most recognized symbol honoring the victims of the IRS system. Inspired

by the first day of the IRS school year, September 30 was declared Orange Shirt Day, and since 2021 a statutory annual holiday in most Canadian states. The orange shirt stands for resistance against the forced cultural assimilation of Indigenous children through the IRS system (“About Us”).

With its work, the Orange Shirt Society wants “to create awareness of the individual, family and community inter-generational impacts of Indian Residential Schools” (“Orange Shirt Society”). In other words, the members of the organization create and share knowledge about the colonial past, make it visible and create intergenerational bonds between survivors of residential schools and their families. The organization makes Canadian IRS known as places of colonialism and they refuse to “get over it” (Coulthard, *Red Skin* 126) and draw a line between today and colonial Canada’s past. It is an active refusal of reconciliation that according to many Indigenous peoples only serves to ease the settlers’ consciousness; at the same time, it is also an offer to any Indigenous people to join in a collective process of healing.

More than anything, however, the Orange Shirt Society exemplifies the power of storytelling. What has started as a local grassroots movement has developed into a nationwide community due to social media, as Phyllis Webstad argues (“Phyllis Webstad,” 02:29-02:40). It has not been about the orange t-shirt of six-year-old Phyllis for a long time. The t-shirt stands for a communal experience of suffering that must never be forgotten. But it also stands for the Indigenous rebellion against Canada’s system of settler colonialism and for solidarity among Indigenous peoples. With the discovery of the aforementioned 215 graves, the movement received renewed attention in the mainstream media. In this context, it seems only appropriate that the Canadian government proclaimed Orange Shirt Day on September 30 as the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in 2021. The Orange Shirt Society highlights the day as “a time for healing, a time to share knowledge” (“A Time for Healing”). Across the country, thousands of Indigenous people come together with non-Indigenous allies in orange t-shirts for communal actions. Whether in protest marches, traditional dances or spontaneous gatherings, at the center of it is the orange t-shirt as a symbolic means of storytelling that bears a crucial message: every child matters (CBC). To promote the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, Phyllis Webstad told her story again on Facebook, along with Rosanna Casimir, chief of Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc Nation, who initiated the search at Kamloops (BC Lions).

Facebook Group: Every Child Matters Movement

On June 2, 2021, a few days after the confirmation of the unmarked graves in Kamloops, the Facebook group *Every Child Matters* was created. As of the beginning of February 2023, it counts over 81,317 members, 10,000 of whom have joined within a week after establishing the group. In the first month, 448 posts have been published according to Facebook’s automatically generated group information. On August 9, 2022, the group’s name was changed to *Every Child Matters Movement*.⁴ The group is managed and organized by five administrators. Even though the number of members and posts makes the group look very disorganized at first glance, on closer inspection it serves as a good example of a viral decolonial place. The group aims to be “a community to provide educational resources, generate awareness, share events and actions and work together to create a world our 7 generations yet to come can feel proud to be a part of” (“About This Group”). For this purpose, the group is mainly organized according to three categories: ‘Events,’ ‘Guides,’

⁴ All numbers are based on the group information given by Facebook and were retrieved for the last time on February 08, 2023.

‘Discussion.’ The category ‘Events’ functions as a public calendar, where group members can add events that revolve around the IRS system. These are sorted chronologically so that all group members can see, share or participate in them. In this way, the Facebook group particularly supports networking as a crucial aspect in the struggle for resistance against settler colonialism.

Another means of decolonization is knowledge formation, as described above. In order to make knowledge more accessible to group members in a more organized way, the second organizational category ‘Guides’ is divided into eight guides, which thematically structure the numerous posts:

- Guide 1: Searches Underway;
- Guide 2: Educational Resources;
- Guide 3: Verified Sellers, T-Shirts and More;
- Guide 4: Funding and Compensation Resources;
- Guide 5: Residential/Boarding School Photos;
- Guide 6: Names of Children;
- Guide 7: Survivor’s Stories;
- Guide 8: Every Child Matters Art / Designs / Creativity. (“Guides”)

Guides 1 and 6 have a similar function as news tickers and inform about current searches on school grounds as well as the names of identified children. Their main purpose is to make colonialism visible and to inform people. Guide 2 is also about sharing knowledge, providing educational materials to address the glaring gaps in Canadian society’s knowledge of its colonial past. The lack of knowledge and the need for more in-depth education was alarmingly confirmed by a survey conducted by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) after the findings in Kamloops. In this survey, 67% of the Canadians interviewed stated that they were not at all or only slightly familiar with the past of the IRS system (Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Race Relations Foundation 11).⁵ Composed with the expertise of Indigenous people, this guide is important to amplify “Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies” (Burrage et al. 28) in the process of decolonization. Guide 7 corresponds to the central cultural strategy of Indigenous groups, storytelling. This guide also illustrates the particular advantage of digital formats such as Facebook groups: The powerful exchange between storyteller and listener, as well as the reach of the stories themselves, is multiplied many times over. Members thus have the opportunity for low-threshold interaction with the stories that are being told, and access is also possible at any time. This makes the storytelling strategy even more powerful than it already was prior to the use of social media.

Storytelling and networking, however, are complemented by the third category, ‘Discussion.’ In this category, which consists of the group feed, group members can post and discuss anything that revolves around IRS; accordingly, the contents in this category so numerous and diverse that sorting them would only be possible with keyword analysis using digital tools. Arguably, Facebook’s existence as a company was made possible by colonial structures; this, however, does not seem to limit the group in its development of content. Nonetheless, the functions and rights of public groups were changed by Facebook in 2022. Since then, members of the group are no longer able to interact in a private group chat. By taking away this feature,

⁵ The survey consists of a random sample of 3.000 Canadian adults. According to the authors of the survey, “The data were weighted according to census data to ensure that the sample matched Canada’s population according to age, gender, educational attainment, and region” (2).

Facebook complicated direct networking within the group. At this point, the power that Facebook and other tech companies have over how tools can be used becomes apparent. One might thus argue that using Facebook and other social media controlled by the colonizer represents a form of internalized colonialism and hinders resistance. The means of decolonization, however, should be chosen and evaluated by the colonized, not the colonizer. Ultimately, the group discussion offers the potential to reach more than 80,000 interested people from across Canada and around the world – significantly more than would be possible at locally organized in-person events.

In the category ‘Discussion,’ members can also share their own stories or those of family members and interact with each other. Depending on the topic, the posts may be assigned to the respective guides by administrators of the groups. This form of interactive discussion mirrors the storytelling that is essential to Indigenous modes of decolonization. It starts with an initial post by a group member, who tells the main story and sets the overarching theme of this particular group interaction. The audience consists of anyone interested or invested in the story or the theme. After the main story is told, the audience can react to and start a conversation about it by commenting below the original post. Unlike unmediated storytelling, where the audience is limited and has to be physically present, virtual storytelling has a potentially bigger audience. The same applies for passing on the story. Unless the original post is deleted by the author or restricted by privacy settings, the whole process of storytelling including the reactions and responses can easily be shared in different feeds and does not have to be re-told. Through the technical affordances of social media, the written story can be complimented by photos, videos, or voice messages. However, the differences between spoken and written language should not be underestimated as filler words, sounds, and body language may also contribute to the overall story. These attributions are usually lost in the digital and written form.

Amber Sherwin’s post about her grandfather’s story, for example, illustrates Indigenous and digital mechanisms of resilience discussed above. In particular, forms of storytelling and sharing of (self-)knowledge can be found here. Sherwin’s post is rather short in comparison, but still informs group members about the IRS her grandfather, who remains nameless in the post, had to go through. Within nine years at the “Mush Hole” (Sherwin), he attempted flight on multiple occasions including one successful attempt at age 15.⁶ Knowing the history of IRS, it is impossible not to imagine the brutal punishments Sherwin’s grandfather had to endure after the failed escape attempts – even though Sherwin does not mention punishment. By not explicitly describing the violence caused by the colonizer, she shifts the focus onto the strength and resilience and does not reiterate the violence onto the Indigenous community. In response, Sherwin receives solidarity by fellow group members in the form of orange hearts in the comment section and additional stories of family members that were forced to live at the “Mush Hole” (Sherwin): “My mother and her 8 siblings were at the mush hole too” (Wood, “Mush Hole”). Other responses express their anger about the colonial history and the state’s politics of reconciliation. However, most of the commentators – and Sherwin, too – commend her grandfather’s bravery and resilience. As Sherwin writes, “the memories and trauma were buried deep until he felt like he needed to tell his story.” The post is accompanied by a picture of her grandfather at a community event where he shared his story with other Indigenous people and participated in the (abstract) process of decolonization. By concluding with “I am here because he survived” (Sherwin), she, too, draws a direct intergenerational line between the IRS survivors and their descendants.

⁶ Mush Hole is a reference used by survivors to the texture of the food served at Mohawk Institute residential school in Brantford, Ontario.

A more recent post by Teresa Wood features another component of resiliency, namely “Indigenous peoples’ individual and collective resentment” (Coulthard, *Red Skin* 126) against settler colonial politics. The orange-colored share-picture with the line “There are just some wounds that apologies don’t heal” (Wood, “Apologies”) supplemented with a broken-heart emoji stimulated a lot of interaction and contributions by other group members compared to similar posts in the group discussion.⁷ In addition to the general agreement by other group members, the underlying tone indicates the unwillingness to accept the politics of reconciliation that only serves “settler normalcy [and is] about a settler future” (Tuck and Yang 35). Rather, the emphasis in the comments below this particular (but also other posts) is on the “Indigenous sovereignty and futurity” (5) that is essential to decolonization and does not need the recognition of the colonizers. This is also expressed by group member Gaylene Cromwell: “I agree. I don’t think the indigenous community will ever get a sincere apology from the Vatican or the Canadian Government. I feel it is time for the Indigenous to heal from within the community because outside forces don’t want you to heal.”

As many other posts within the group discussion, the two posts introduced above encourage general solidarity among group members and stimulate ongoing storytelling and networking among the group members in the comment sections. Through the interactive format of the group discussion, this part of the Indigenous-led group fosters the communal aspects of Indigenous resiliency and decolonial theory. Due to the size of the group and the small number of moderators, it cannot be ruled out that non-Indigenous people may inappropriately interfere in the decolonial discourse and that misinformation and hate speech may be spread. However, if anything this, is a more general problem of social media.

In connection with the more organized aspect of the group – the guides – the previously elaborated decolonial theories and strategies are echoed. These are digitized and applied to the semiotic space of the IRS, developing a virtual decolonial space around a diversity of Indigenous cultures. Especially Guide 3 and 8 demonstrate this aspect. Guide 3, on the one hand, creates a connection to the Orange Shirt Society, and on the other hand, promotes networking between and support for Indigenous-owned businesses. In doing so, they help create a shared and intergenerational bond that works through the common trauma of IRS. It is also beneficial to connect viral movements to gain a maximum reach. Guide 8 champions traditional Indigenous cultural productions and thus inspires to revitalize Indigenous cultures. These productions may serve as a refugium for older generations, but also as an educational resource and inspiration to younger descendants of Indigenous people. This, too, helps “to link generations, [to transmit] knowledge, values, and a sense of shared identity” (Kirmayer et al. 81).

Conclusion

Although all IRS have now been closed, this does not mean that their colonial influence ended with their termination. Especially their intergenerational psychological consequences and their deep impact on the lives of the Indigenous peoples are emphasized repeatedly. The findings at the former Kamloops IRS have once again made this clear and brought the issue back to international headlines. Even though the IRS system is only one component of the Canadian settler colonial structure, the buildings and sites of the IRS are places where Canadian settler colonialism materializes and becomes particularly visible to everyone.

⁷ This includes more than 750 likes or other reactions, 75 comments, and 150 shares over the course of two weeks (last updated on February 08, 2023).

As shown above with reference to Amilcar Cabral, among others, culture, and especially the revitalization of suppressed culture, can play a crucial role in the process of decolonization. With reference to First Nations, storytelling and networking are particularly important factors. Among other things, they enable increased social cohesion by evoking a nostalgia for a better, pre-colonial time and can thus lead to communal mobilization for decolonization processes. The #IdleNoMore movement in 2012/2013 has shown how the internet can be used to achieve greater public visibility for these movements. The example of the IRS system was used to show how cultural revitalization can be organized online as an act of resistance. The IRS serves as a semiotic place where experiences have been retold, mediatized and digitized. Through storytelling and networking on digital platforms, feelings of resentment but also empowerment are kept alive, representing “an entirely understandable [...] response to our settler-colonial present” (Coulthard, *Red Skin* 121). Whereas the Orange Shirt Society has provided a transnational symbol for solidarity with IRS survivors and missing children, the Facebook group Every Child Matters offers a place for creating social bonds and a communal feeling in the form of networking and storytelling. In addition, both champion the production and sharing of (self-)knowledge to create a better understanding of past and present. Combining several important components of decolonization, they exemplify the potential of digital resiliency and represent the Indigenous refusal to yield to the colonizer’s desire to detach the present from Canadian settler colonial structures that are still apparent.

Evidently, the internet can play a significant role in the ongoing struggle for decolonization. The examples chosen here exemplify a posting and interaction dynamic within the group that is as representative as possible. However, the study at hand has its limitations due to the small sample for analysis and restrictions to available data. A quantitative analysis of social media activities would thus be particularly interesting for further research. On the one hand, it would be helpful to examine the reach of and interaction with posts, and on the other hand, it would be interesting to categorize the posts on the basis of keyword analyses. At the same time, of course, the focus must also be on other social platforms such as X, formerly known as Twitter, and Instagram to achieve more representative results.

Author Biography

Lukas Fender (he/him) studies the double degree Master of Education (History & English) and Master of Arts (North American Studies) at Leibniz University Hannover. In 2020, he received his Bachelor’s degree in History and English from the University of Mannheim. His research interests are memory studies with a strong focus on nostalgia, popular culture and politics, as well as political education. He is currently working as a research assistant at the Institute for Didactics of Democracy at Leibniz University Hannover.

Works Cited

- Anonymous. *Every Child Matters Movement*, Facebook group est. 02 June 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/125050373031500>. Accessed 16 Sept. 2021.
- . “About This Group.” Facebook Group est. 02 June 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/125050373031500/about>. Accessed 17 Sept. 2021.

- . "Guides." Facebook Group est. 02 June 2021, https://www.facebook.com/groups/125050373031500/learning_content. Accessed 29 Sept. 2021.
- Assembly of First Nations, and Canadian Race Relations Foundation. "Canadians React to the Discovery of Remains at Residential School." *Assembly of First Nations*, 15 June 2021, https://www.afn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Residential-Schools_June-2021_National-Report_EN_TC.pdf. Accessed 12 Sept. 2021.
- Barker, Adam J. "A Direct Act of Resurgence, a Direct Act of Sovereignty": Reflections on Idle No More, Indigenous Activism, and Canadian Settler Colonialism." *Globalization*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2014, pp. 43-65.
- BC Lions. "Orange Shirt Day | Phyllis Webstad." *Facebook*, 25 Sept. 2021, 08:07 p.m., <https://www.facebook.com/BCLions/videos/608578330165807/>. Accessed 01 Oct. 2021.
- Beaton, Brian, and Peter Campbell. "Settler Colonialism and First Nations E-Communities in Northwestern Ontario." *World Social Science Forum, Montreal, QC, Canada*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2014, <https://openjournals.uwaterloo.ca/index.php/JoCI/article/view/2662>.
- Burrage, Rachel L., Sandra L. Momper, and Joseph P. Gone. "Beyond Trauma: Decolonizing Understandings of Loss and Healing in the Indian Residential School System of Canada." *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 78, no. 1, 2022, pp. 27-52.
- Cabral, Amilcar. "National Liberation and Culture." *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Columbia UP, 1994, pp. 53-65.
- Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. "How Canada marked 1st National Day for Truth and Reconciliation." *CBC.ca*, 01 Oct. 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1956954691847>. Accessed 02 Oct. 2021.
- Coulthard, Glen Sean. *Red Skin, White Mask: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. U of Minnesota P, 2014.
- . "Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the 'Politics of Recognition' in Canada." *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2007, pp. 437-60.
- Cromwell, Gaylene. "I Agree." *Facebook*, 21 Jan. 2023, 03:44 a.m., https://www.facebook.com/groups/125050373031500/posts/508887801314420/?comment_id=509006804635853. Accessed 08 Feb. 2023.
- de Leeuw, Sarah. "Intimate Colonialisms: The Material and Experienced Places of British Columbia's Residential Schools." *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe canadien*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2007, pp. 339-59.
- Dünne, Jörg. "Forschungsüberblick 'Raumtheorie.'" *raumtheorie.lmu.de*, 2004, <http://www.raumtheorie.lmu.de/sammelband.php>.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Weidenfeld, 2007 (1963).
- Fontaine, Phil, and Aimée Craft. *A Knock on the Door: The Essential History of Residential Schools from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. U of Manitoba P, 2015.
- Gibson, Abigail M. "The Last Indian War: Reassessing the Legacy of American Indian Boarding Schools and the Emergence of Pan-Indian Identity." *Global Tides*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2016. <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol10/iss1/2>.
- Harper, Stephen. "Statement of Apology to Former Students of Indian Residential Schools." Speech, Ottawa, Ontario, 11 June 2008, *Canada.ca*, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1571589171655>. Accessed 13 Sept. 2021.

- Harris, Cole. "How Did Colonialism Disposess? Comments from an Edge of Empire." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 94, no. 1, pp. 165-82.
- Jack, Agnes S. *Behind Closed Doors: Stories from the Kamloops Indian Residential School*. Secwepemc Cultural Education Society / Theytus Books Ltd., 2001, <https://arcabc.ca/islandora/object/tru:1611>.
- Jung, Courtney. "Canada and the Legacy of the Indian Residential Schools: Transitional Justice for Indigenous Peoples in a Non-Transitional Society." *SSRN*, 08 Apr. 2009, pp. 1-29. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1374950>. Accessed 19 Sept. 2021.
- Kirmayer, Laurence J., et al. "Community Resilience: Models, Metaphors and Measures." *International Journal of Indigenous Health*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2009, pp. 62-117.
- Molyneaux, Heather, et al. "Community Resilience and Social Media: Remote and Rural First Nations Communities, Social Isolation and Cultural Preservation." International Rural Network Forum, Whyalla and Upper Spencer Gulf, Australia, 24-28 Sept. 2012. Conference Paper. <http://firstmile.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/2012-Community-Resilience-and-Social-Media.pdf>.
- Orange Shirt Society. *Orange Shirt Society*, website, <https://www.orangeshirtday.org/>. Accessed 14 Sept. 2021.
- . "About Us." *orangeshirtsociety.org*, <https://www.orangeshirtday.org/about-us.html>. Accessed 30 Sept. 2021.
- . "Orange Shirt Society." *orangeshirtsociety.org*, <https://www.orangeshirtday.org/orange-shirt-society.html>. Accessed 30 Sept. 2021.
- . "Phyllis Webstad: On Orange Shirt Day." *YouTube*, 30 Aug. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuW4WbekhXy>. Accessed 01 Oct. 2021.
- . "A Time for Healing A Time to Share Knowledge." *YouTube*, 30 Sept. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbFukqHmbXQ>. Accessed 01 Oct. 2021.
- Sherwin, Anna. "Grandfather's Story." *Facebook*, 01 Oct. 2021, 12:38 a.m., <https://www.facebook.com/groups/125050373031500/permalink/201571322046071/>. Accessed 08 Feb. 2023.
- Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. *As We Have Always Done*. U of Minnesota P, 2017.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. *Canada's Residential Schools: Missing Children and Unmarked Burials. The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Vol. 4. McGill-Queen's UP, 2015.
- . *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. N. p., 2015.
- Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-40.
- Voce, Antonio, Leyland Cecco, and Chris Michael. "'Cultural Genocide': The Shameful History of Canada's Residential Schools – Mapped." *Guardian*, 10 Sept. 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2021/sep/06/canada-residential-schools-indigenous-children-cultural-genocide-map>. Accessed 13 Sept. 2021.
- Wildschut, Tim, et al. "Collective Nostalgia: A Group-Level Emotion that Confers Unique Benefits on the Group." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 107, no. 5, 2014, pp. 844-63, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037760>.
- Wood, Teresa. "Mush Hole." *Facebook*, 01 Oct. 2021, 02:37 a.m., https://www.facebook.com/groups/125050373031500/posts/201571322046071/?comment_id=201618475374689. Accessed 08 Feb. 2023.

---. “Apologies.” *Facebook*, 21 Jan. 2023, 02:59 a.m.,
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/125050373031500/permalink/508887801314420/>.
Accessed 08 Feb. 2023.

“She gloried in being a sailor’s wife”: A Postcolonial Reading of the Marriage Plot in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*

Carolin Wachsmann

Abstract

The British Empire and imperialism are crucial parts of Jane Austen’s novel *Persuasion*. To investigate how the novel represents and purports imperialism, this paper combines a structuralist with a postcolonial approach and applies Said’s method of ‘contrapuntal reading.’ In addition, the approach of cultural materialism is relevant for the novel’s representation of class. My argumentation first consists of an analysis of the character constellation, in particular the opposition of gentry and naval characters, and narrative situation before turning to the novel’s marriage plot. I argue that Austen’s realist novel *Persuasion* legitimizes British imperialism due to its use of narrative techniques, plot, and character constellation. The narrative does not question the represented empire which functions as an opportunity for wealth and social mobility for the characters. The marriage plot, in which the female protagonist chooses a naval captain over her cousin from the landed gentry, further corroborates the novel’s support of the British Empire and demonstrates the increasing importance of the navy as well as the professional classes for England at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Keywords

Postcolonial criticism – Jane Austen – marriage plot – contrapuntal reading – class

Introduction

“It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English” (243), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states in her influential essay “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism.” Although Spivak’s analysis focuses on the novels *Jane Eyre*, *Frankenstein*, and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, her statement is also relevant for the novels Jane Austen wrote around the turn of the nineteenth century. Ever since Edward Said demonstrated the method of ‘contrapuntal reading’ in his critical reading of Austen’s novel *Mansfield Park*, postcolonial criticism has investigated the representation of Empire, imperialism,

and Orientalism in English and European literatures. Concerning Austen's novels, *Mansfield Park* has remained the most studied novel in terms of postcolonial criticism as critics have discussed the implications of Sir Thomas's plantation in the Caribbean which probably employed slave labor. However, Austen's other novels also represent England and English society at the beginning of the nineteenth century and discuss Englishness and Empire, in particular *Persuasion*, Austen's last novel. As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan summarizes, recent criticism has located Austen's novels "in a geographically expansive world, the world that European travel, exploration, commerce, military adventure and imperialism brought into being and redefined in terms of colonial relations of domination, raced, classed and gendered," and demonstrated that they "constitute a colonial discourse, not only by partaking in this changed world, but by actively marking its transformations in these ways" (4).

The novel tells the love story of Anne Elliot and Captain Frederick Wentworth, who had broken off their engagement eight years earlier because her family had deemed him beneath their rank. Returning from the Napoleonic Wars with wealth and a higher social rank, Wentworth is now an eligible suitor for Anne. However, Wentworth has not forgiven her for ending the relationship, and Anne does not reveal that she has been in love with him all this time. Over the following months, Wentworth pursues Louisa Musgrove instead, while Anne is courted by her cousin William Elliot. In the end, Wentworth and Anne realize that they both still love each other and decide to marry.

Set in 1814, the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars at the turn of the nineteenth century form the historical context for *Persuasion* and the representation of the British Empire. Since the 1600s, the national character and pride of the British were based, in part, on the strength and military victories of the British Navy (Fulford 163). In the wars with France, this sentiment was strengthened and accompanied by a patriotism connected to military prowess and its symbols, such as the navy (Newman). The military struggle ended with Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. The naval characters and the references to the wars with France make imperialism and its implications for England a central concern of the novel and the object of investigation of this article.

Austen's novels in general and their marriage plots in particular have often been read and discussed by feminist critics. Their opinions on the marriage plot in her novels remain ambivalent, as for example Julie Shaffer argues that the marriage plot empowers women because it questions male power, whereas Christien Garcia argues that the marriages in *Emma* exacerbate loneliness. Regarding *Persuasion*, Anne's silence regarding her romantic feelings for Wentworth has been read as female repression before she disrupts patriarchal traditions as well as an expression of the incompatibility of female desire with speech (Garcia 87). Furthermore, Michael Kramp has argued that the novel investigates how expressions of suffering are gendered and that it represents a new masculinity and Englishness in the naval characters (35).

This paper combines a structuralist and postcolonial approach to investigate imperialism in Austen's *Persuasion*. As the novel's representation of class is relevant to this analysis, I will also draw on the approach of cultural materialism. My argumentation first consists of an analysis of the character constellation, in particular the opposition of gentry and naval characters, and narrative situation before turning to the novel's marriage plot. I argue that Austen's realist novel *Persuasion* legitimizes British imperialism due to its use of narrative techniques, plot, and character constellation. The narrative does not question the represented Empire which functions as an opportunity for wealth and social mobility for the characters. The marriage plot, in which the

female protagonist chooses a naval captain over her cousin from the landed gentry, further corroborates the novel's support of the British Empire.

Postcolonial Criticism, Contrapuntal Reading, Class, and the Marriage Plot

Most postcolonial critics agree that the English novel and imperialism are closely linked. For Edward Said, the novel is imperialist because it is a “cultural artefact of bourgeois society” and thus interconnected with imperialism (88). As Firdous Azim argues in his study *The Colonial Rise of the Novel*, “the novel is an imperial genre, not in theme merely, not only by virtue of the historical moment of its birth, but in its formal structure – in the construction of the narrative voice which holds the narrative structure together” (29). These ideas constitute some of the premises of postcolonial criticism. Based on this approach, critics re-read canonical English literature to examine past representations of colonial discourses, analyze the representation of colonized subjects in colonial texts, and read the new literatures from former colonies (McLeod 26-31). To investigate the representation of Empire, I employ Said's contrapuntal reading. This method seeks to re-read literature, especially canonical English literature, “with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (Said 63), and to “draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent and marginally present or ideologically represented in such works” (82). Another relevant method is colonial discourse analysis which situates the text in history and exposes how “ideological and historical contexts influence the production of meaning within literary texts, and how literary representations themselves have the power to influence their historical moment” (McLeod 46). Essential to this analysis are the concepts of imperialism and Empire. As Elleke Boehmer states, “imperialism was a thing of mind and representation, as well as a matter of military and political power and the extraction of profit” (23). She differentiates between imperialism and colonialism, the first being the “the authority assumed by a state over another territory” expressed, for example, in symbolism, military, or economy, the latter being involved in “the consolidation of imperial power, and is manifested in the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands, often by force” (2).

Another key concept in this analysis is class, which I will approach through the lens of cultural materialism. Similar to postcolonial criticism, this approach intends to relate literature to history and considers texts as indivisible from their historical context (Ryan xi). Cultural materialists understand texts as “the vehicles of politics insofar as texts mediate the fabric of social, political and cultural formations” (Brannigan 3). Raymond Williams offers three definitions of class: it is either a “group (social or economic category),” a “rank (relative social position),” or a “formation (perceived economic relationship; social, political and cultural organization)” (34). The first and second definitions in particular are relevant here. Besides the stratification of society into upper, middle, and lower class, I will also employ the older differentiation between aristocracy, gentry, and professional classes.

This article employs a structuralist approach to analyze the plot, narrative situation, and character constellation. Structuralism is a text-oriented approach that defines the system of literature itself as *langue* and the generation of actual texts as *parole* which allows for analyzing an individual text as a realization of the deep structure of its genre (Meyer 171). Structuralist approaches focus on the techniques of representation and “the processes of constituting meaning”

over the meaning or contextual aspects of a literary text (Nünning 40). In combination with narratology, which focuses on narrative and textual structures over content (Barry 233), structuralism establishes a detailed system of narrative voice and focalization, time, and the function of characters and plots (Meyer 174).

I will read *Persuasion* as a realist novel with a marriage plot. Realism is based on the presumption that “the novel imitates reality, and that that reality is more or less stable and commonly accessible” and employs accuracy and detailed descriptions of “the physical minutiae of everyday life – clothes, furniture, food, etc. – the cataloguing of people into social types or species and radical analyses of the economic basis of society” (“Realism”). In postcolonial criticism, the perspective and integrity of the realist novel are questioned or even criticized. Azim identifies the novel’s formal structure, in which the narrative voice controls the narrative structure, as evidence for the novel being an imperial genre (29). He furthermore criticizes the realist dichotomy between subject and object of representation in which ‘reality’ is seen as objective and “as something external to the narrating subject” (20).

Lastly, there are various definitions of the marriage plot. Lisa O’Connell offers a more general definition of the marriage plot as a “literary genre centred on courtship and marriage in the context of everyday life” (3) or “any narrative that ends, or simply ends, in a marriage or marriages and that is largely concerned throughout with courtship” (5). As an alternative, she proposes the concept of the modern English marriage plot, popularized in the novels of Samuel Richardson, for example, which are realist novels with “narrative and interpretative closure, marked in an Anglican proper wedding ceremony that legitimises simultaneously social status, states of feeling, Christian virtue and moral worth” (5). This plot purported middle-class ideals as it focused on family status, demonstrated human progress in their happy endings, and “reinforced readers in both their hope of a personal reward for good social behaviour and their faith that public progress promised the stability and continuity of their way of life” (198). Patrick Parrinder also suggests a national aspect of the marriage plot as it offers a potential national allegory in which the joining of two families in marriage symbolizes the “reconciliation of national differences” (32). This article will build on Parrinder’s idea and read the marriage plot in an imperial context.

“This peace will turn all our rich Naval Officers ashore”: Character Constellation and Narrative Situation

Class differences and the conflicts resulting out of these social distinctions are a recurring theme in Austen’s novels. Whereas most of Austen’s major characters are part of the landed gentry, the aristocracy, or the clergy, *Persuasion* introduces characters from another professional class: the navy. Unlike her previous novels, in which the country gentleman proved to be the most suitable partner in marriage to Austen’s upper-middle-class heroines (McMaster 114), Anne Elliot must decide between her cousin Mr. Elliot, the heir presumptive of the family estate Kellynch Hall, and Captain Frederick Wentworth, who acquired his fortune during the Napoleonic War. The plot navigates the differences between the English upper middle class, represented by the Elliots and the Musgroves, and the newly arrived naval characters. By contrasting the financially struggling and morally failing landed gentry with the characters employed by the navy, whose merits are their recently acquired riches and moral virtues, the novel supports the imperial ideal of the British Empire as an opportunity for wealth and social mobility.

The narrative situation in *Persuasion* is characterized by an authorial narrator and the frequent use of free indirect discourse. The narrator forms the narrative by deciding which aspects

to omit or which character's thoughts and feelings to narrate. This narrative technique can be read as a "discriminating subjectivity between readers and the romance story" (O'Connell 219). However, this article focuses on how the narrative situation purports the British Empire by representing the naval characters as heroes while omitting explicit references to imperialism as well as other subject-positions (Azim 29) outside the dominating colonial discourse. The narrator presents Anne as the focalizer and favors her ideas and attitudes over those of the other characters.

In the characterization of the Elliots as proud, prejudiced against lower-rank characters, and almost losing their estate due to mismanagement, *Persuasion* criticizes the landed gentry and their moral values, class rigidity, and aversion to change. Sir Thomas is introduced as "a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but for the Baronetage" (Austen 1) whose "vanity was the beginning and end of Sir Walter Elliot's character; vanity of person and situation" (4). These descriptions combined with the fact that Sir Thomas is the first character that is introduced, indicates the narrator's intention to criticize the upper middle class by describing them in an ironical manner. His daughters Elizabeth and Mary are presented in the same way. Elizabeth decides not to invite the Musgroves to dinner at Kellynch Hall for fear that their social inferiors should discover that the Elliots cannot uphold the lifestyle deemed appropriate to the upper middle class (179). Mary, who in her marriage to Charles Musgrove had "*given* all the honour, and received none" (5) due to the higher rank of the Elliots, criticizes the choice of suitor for her sister-in-law as "bad connexions" (62) and proves herself to be as conscious of differences in class and rank as her father. Sir Walter's shortcomings which result in his exile from his estate can be read as a punishment for and critique of his behavior.

In contrast, Anne, albeit an Elliot herself, is described as having none of the Elliot pride or prejudice and instead represents a possibility for change of the landed gentry as she embraces connections with characters from various ranks and classes. Although she had to end her engagement with Frederick Wentworth as a young woman due to their difference in class, Anne entertains friendships with her social equals as well as her inferiors, such as the widowed Mrs. Smith. Sir Walter criticizes her preference of "a mere Mrs Smith [...] to her own family connexions among the nobility of England and Ireland" (129) and complains that "every thing that revolts other people, low company, paltry rooms, foul air, disgusting associations" (128) seems to interest her. In her own words, she admires Mr. and Mrs. Musgrove for their neglect of rank and status in the potential suitors (178) and values the company of "clever, well-informed people" (122) over people of a higher rank and status than herself, much to the chagrin of her cousin.

Nevertheless, Mr. Elliot, presented as corrupt and focused solely on his inheritance, continues the novel's criticism of the upper middle class. In his role as deceitful villain and antagonist to Captain Wentworth, the future owner of Kellynch Hall represents the decline of the landed gentry. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator informs the reader that Mr. Elliot had chosen money, in form of "a rich woman of inferior birth" (7) over a marriage with Elizabeth Elliot and thus a closer connection to his family, which lead to the end of the relations between the Elliots and their cousin. However, after his reunion with the family, the narrator emphasizes his manners, virtues and appearance which convince the Elliots of his good character (e.g., 114). His insistence on "rank and connexion" (120) and his later revealed schemes to prevent Sir Walter from marrying to maintain his inheritance, demonstrate the consequences of valuing appearances over morality and character. This is emphasized in the contrast between Mr. Elliot and Captain Wentworth, representing respectively the landed gentry and the navy.

The representation of the navy characters in *Persuasion* has been a continuous topic of debate. Kathryn E. Davis reads Captain Wentworth as a representation of a national hero (17),

Patrick Parrinder as a social ascendant symbolizing social change (193-4), and Tim Fulford argues that his “career exposes the narcissism of an overdomesticated landed class” (188), as Austen’s representation of the navy offers a new definition of what it means to be genteel. Similarly, others argue that this representation criticizes the traditional high regard for gentility (Morris 144) and that the naval characters are presented as the “image of changing social leadership” who are protecting the nation (Gay 67). In order to read the representation and function of the naval characters with a postcolonial approach and read contrapuntally, it is necessary to consider the novel’s historical context, especially in terms of the British Empire and its imperialism and fill the silences of the narrative. In this article, I will focus on the most important naval character in *Persuasion*: Captain Wentworth.

Captain Frederick Wentworth symbolizes the opportunity of social mobility and wealth offered to the professional classes through the navy and implicitly the British Empire and imperialism. I agree with Pam Morris that the navy in *Persuasion* can be read as a synecdoche, although more of the British Empire than of a community of equals. Before his position in the navy, Wentworth was lower in class than the Elliots, as can be discerned from Sir Walter’s comment that Wentworth was no gentleman, no man of property and had no family connections except for his brother who had the curacy of Monkford (Austen 20). This would mean that Wentworth was from the middle or professional classes when he made Anne’s acquaintance. The narrator describes Wentworth at that time as “a fine young man, with a great deal of intelligence, spirit and brilliancy” (22), who had no fortune or living parents but was made commander after the action in St. Domingo and had the hope of becoming rich by having a ship and high station. His return marks the beginning of the opposition between the gentry, who are failing to maintain their fortunes and estates, and the professional classes, who are rising economically based on their moral virtues. This is symbolized in Wentworth’s promotion to Captain as he has distinguished himself in the navy and risen in rank. Before his arrival, the narrator voices Anne’s thoughts, based on navy lists and newspapers, that he “must now, by successive captures, have made a handsome fortune” and she “could not doubt his being rich” (25).

Because there are only few allusions to the manner in which Captain Wentworth acquired his fortune of £25,000 beyond his employment in the navy, it is essential to provide context for the proceedings of the navy at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Wentworth enters the navy after his engagement with Anne in 1806, during the Napoleonic Wars between 1803 and 1815, which were preceded by the French Revolutionary Wars and the Treaty of Amiens in 1802. During the wars, the British Navy blockaded ports, interdicted maritime trade, and annexed French overseas colonies (Carpenter 274). Wentworth’s first station at St. Domingo in the Caribbean, at the time of Austen’s novel called the “West Indies,” hosted many sugar plantations which employed slave labor. The British military was stationed there “to extend the fortunes of Britain’s slaveowners or to deplete those of her enemies” (O’Shaughness 765) also after Britain’s abolition of the slave trade in 1807. *Persuasion* emphasizes the national importance of the navy and represents it as a possibility for social mobility while omitting the colonial and imperial aspects in Captain Wentworth’s career. Because of this, I agree with Elaine Jordan’s reading of the novel that Wentworth and the other naval officers appear as heroes in a “sphere of naval adventure, supporting colonial trade and imperial ambition” (39), which implicitly supports English commercial and imperial interests. In presenting the colonial territories as “realms of possibility” (Said 79) in which men can make their fortune, Austen uses a colonial trope of the realist novel that demonstrates the interdependence between the novel and imperialism.

Whereas the narrator presents the naval characters as the heroes of the British Empire and examples for the gentry, the upper-middle-class characters remain ambivalent toward the navy and demonstrate their changing attitude towards the Empire and the rising professional classes. Whereas some emphasize the economic strength and “many a noble fortune [...] made during the war” of the “rich Admiral” and “wealthy naval commanders” (Austen 15), Sir Walter, representing the conservative part of the gentry, advocates against the social mobility of the professional classes. He exclaims that “the profession has its utility, but I should be very sorry to see any friend of mine belonging to it” (17), to demonstrate his opinion on the imperial merit of the navy but insists on keeping them lower-status and separate from the upper middle class. He supplies two reasons for his opinion, one being that the social rise of the lower classes would make them equal to the upper classes and diminish the status of his own rank, the other being that the navy ages men prematurely (17). Anne, on the other hand, appreciates the navy because they “have done so much for us” that would justify a comfortable home and privileges. As the novel discusses the social changes due to the navy, it tends to value Anne’s embrace of change over Sir Walter’s class rigidity.

The analysis of character constellation and narrative situation has demonstrated that a central concern of *Persuasion* is to construct a dichotomy between the crisis of the landed gentry and the newly acquired wealth and social mobility of the naval characters, who represent the professional classes. I do not completely agree with Todd’s argument that the novel’s central contrast is between “the Elliot family, obsessed with their genealogy but oblivious to the wartime combatants who have just returned to Britain after helping bring about the defeat of Napoleon” (335) because Anne Elliot, the novel’s heroine, distances herself from her family’s class rigidity and represents a changing attitude of the gentry at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The constructed dichotomy in the character constellation is later deconstructed in the marriage plot which unites Anne, a woman from the landed gentry, and Captain Wentworth, who has risen in rank and status through the navy. Reading Captain Wentworth’s character contrapuntally has demonstrated, however, that *Persuasion* supports the imperial mission of the British Empire by presenting the navy as an opportunity for social mobility and the acquisition of wealth without acknowledging the imperialism that enabled it. The novel thus participates in British colonial discourse and creates a national identity based on an idealized representation of the navy.

Choosing the Naval Hero: The Marriage Plot and the British Empire

The importance of the marriage plot for Austen’s novels is exemplarily expressed by William H. Galperin’s statement that “it is a truth universally acknowledged that Austen’s narratives are arrayed on the scaffolding of the ‘marriage plot’” (25). *Persuasion* offers variations on some of its conventions. Magee points out that the novel contains two courtships between Wentworth and Anne, the first being six years before the story is set, and that Anne also has other possible suitors in the form of Charles Musgrove, Captain Benwick, and, most importantly, Mr. Elliot (203). Lisa O’Connell argues that “the marriage plot’s professionalisation in Austen reflects England’s militarisation during the Napoleonic wars” (221), which also offers the genre to be read as a “moral basis of national life” (220). In contrast to Austen’s previous novels, *Persuasion* ends in an exogamous marriage, which Patrick Parrinder defines as a “union of opposites” outside of their own family or class with the potential to “humanize the aristocracy” (189). While I disagree with Parrinder’s last point, I will investigate how his idea of the “national marriage plot” (32) functions in *Persuasion* as an allegory for the British Empire. As the female protagonist chooses the naval hero

over her cousin and heir to the family's landed estate, the marriage plot corroborates the novel's support of the British Empire.

The opposition of Anne's main suitors, Captain Wentworth and Mr. Elliot, demonstrate how the novel discusses the future of the English nation and the British Empire. Wentworth, rejected six years earlier for his lack of money and family connections, returns as a wealthy naval captain and eligible bachelor to Anne, a woman from the landed gentry. Anne's first rejection can be read as the landed gentry trying to uphold the status quo, whereas after Wentworth's acquisition of wealth and rank, he is considered almost equal in rank to the landed gentry. The novel thus discusses the importance of the navy and poses the question in moral terms of who offers the better future to Anne, the landed gentry and England.

Upon Captain Wentworth's return to England, he is questioned about his life in the navy, especially by the Miss Musgroves. The representation of the British Empire and the men that uphold it does not question colonialism as much as it "celebrates (as a meritocratic alternative) the British navy that made it possible" (Fraiman 814). The novel contrasts the landed gentry with limited knowledge about the navy and possibly the extent of the British Empire with the worldly professional classes upholding the Empire through their service, such as their "touch with the Great Nation" (Austen 54), France. The Miss Musgroves reveal their ignorance about navy life, which Anne remembers from her own youth when she "had been accused of supposing sailors to be living on board without anything to eat, or any cook to dress it if there were, or any servant to wait, or any knife and fork to use" (53). In contrast, Captain Wentworth and the Crofts recount their employments all over the Empire, such as Gibraltar, the Mediterranean, Lisbon, and the East Indies. This scene demonstrates both the idealization of the navy in their merit for England and the British Empire as well as how passing remarks in English literature to the Empire and colonies reiterated a colonial discourse and supported the British imperialist project.

The plot's turning point occurs when the minor character Mrs. Smith, the widowed and impoverished friend of Anne, reveals Mr. Elliot's true character and his responsibility for the loss of her husband's property in the West Indies. Galperin understands Mrs. Smith as a manipulator whose main objective is to reacquire her plantation, which probably employs slave labor (233). While this is possible, the character can also be read as a plot device to criticize the landed gentry's moral values and management of their estates, which could lead to the demise of England and the British Empire. Captain Wentworth, however, symbolizing the professional classes, can retrieve Mrs. Smith's property "by writing for her, acting for her, and seeing her through all the petty difficulties of the case, with the activity and exertion of a fearless man and determined friend" (205). Said argues about *Mansfield Park* that "morality in fact is not separable from its social basis" and that the novel "affirms and repeats the geographical process of expansion [...] that predated, underlies, and guarantees the morality" (117). This is also in some ways applicable to *Persuasion*. After Mrs. Smith's revelation, Mr. Elliot turns into Captain Wentworth's antagonist. The former's loss of land and deceitfulness stand against the latter's involvement in the return of Mrs. Smith's colonial possession and the expansion of the British Empire through his position in the navy. The novel thus affirms colonial expansion by presenting Captain Wentworth as morally superior over Mr. Elliot.

Using plantations in the West Indies as a mere device to advance the plot is the implicit corroboration of Empire that Spivak and Said identify in canonical English literature. According to Fulford, the landed gentry, like Mrs. Smith and her husband, has generated profit from slave colonies, but Austen does not discuss this further in her narrative. Instead, "the immorality of profiting from West Indies sugar plantations only briefly disturbs the moral and social harmony

that Austen attributes to Captain Wentworth's profession" (Fulford 189). The novel does not supply any information about the property except for "though not large, [it] would be enough to make her [Mrs. Smith] comparatively rich" (Austen 171). This passing reference presents the relationship between England and its overseas territories as being characterized solely by the wealth that can be extracted from plantations and slave labor for the English upper middle class. Because the novel characterizes the naval characters as heroic and admirable for their virtues, *Persuasion* constructs a social change in favor of the rising professional classes that profits from the British Empire and thus supports imperialism.

Finally, the marriage at the end of *Persuasion* has inspired many different readings in terms of its implications of class. Whereas some read it as Anne's desertion of the landed gentry in favor of a "new social milieu" (Magee 203), others view it as Anne's initiation into the "active, hard-working and prosperous pseudo-gentry rank" (Copeland 139). The narrator expresses their opinion on the marriage quite directly and welcomes their union:

Captain Wentworth, with five-and-twenty thousand pounds, and as high in his profession as merit and activity could place him, was no longer nobody. He was now esteemed quite worthy to address the daughter of a foolish, spendthrift baronet, who had not had principle or sense enough to maintain himself in the situation in which Providence had placed him, and who could give his daughter at present but a small part of the share of ten thousand pounds, which must be hers hereafter. (202)

In addition to Anne's feeling of inferiority due to her lack of family to welcome her new husband, her sister Mary reflects that Anne is now "restored to the rights of superiority, and the mistress of a very pretty landaulette" but would not own a landed estate or be head of a family (203). Due to the lack of a landed estate, Anne thus leaves the landed gentry and marries into the wealthy and socially rising professional classes. Reading this marriage as Parrinder's "national marriage plot," Anne and Captain Wentworth's union represents the union of the landed gentry and the navy as a synecdoche of the professional classes. In the courtship of the two characters, the difference between the classes has been bridged due to the social rising and new wealth of the professional classes as well as their national importance for the British Empire. By representing the naval characters as morally virtuous, in contrast to the corrupt landed gentry who cannot manage their estates properly, the novel presents the navy as a viable alternative and protector of the Empire. Anne's cousin and heir to Kellynch Hall, Mr. Elliot, remains unmarried. By constructing a naval captain as a suitable partner in marriage over a cousin from the landed gentry, *Persuasion* partakes in British Empire and imperialism.

Conclusion

By reading *Persuasion*'s marriage plot with a postcolonial approach and Said's method of contrapuntal reading, this article has demonstrated how the novel legitimizes British imperialism and supports the British Empire. The narrator does not question the Empire the novel represents but frequently alludes to its existence and thus participates in the colonial discourse. This supports Azim's argument that the novel is an imperial genre due to its narrative voice that pretends to create an 'objective' reality but suppresses other subject positions. The contrapuntal reading demonstrates which information the novel chooses to omit. How the characters profit from their service in the navy or their property in the British colonies is excluded from the narrative's representation of the naval characters as heroes. The character constellation creates a dichotomy

between the landed gentry and the professional classes employed by the navy to discuss the latter's role in and importance for the Empire. The novel's protagonist Anne functions as mediator between the two classes. Captain Wentworth represents the social mobility and new wealth of the professional classes at the beginning of the nineteenth century, illustrating how this class profits from the imperialism supporting British Empire. The Elliots are presented as prejudiced against the social rise of the middle classes and want to preserve their rank and status but are ultimately exiled from their estate. Mr. Elliot functions as a representation of the landed gentry as corrupt and, together with Sir Walter, unfit to manage their property. As Anne chooses Captain Wentworth over her cousin, the novel chooses the advantages of the professional classes over the landed gentry. Due to the character construction, the naval characters are presented as morally superior to the upper middle class and therefore the better leader and protector of the British Empire. Furthermore, the plot substitutes a colonial discourse and supports imperialism. *Persuasion* presents the colonies and the navy as opportunities for wealth and social mobility in passing remarks to the colonies and in the character construction of Captain Wentworth. However, the underlying imperialism is not questioned and other discourses are excluded. Mrs. Smith's property in the West Indies is used as a plot device which functions both as a turning point in the marriage plot because it reveals the corruption of Mr. Elliot, and as an example for the corroboration of Empire in canonical English literature. Finally, the marriage of Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth symbolizes the union of the gentry and the professional classes. This marriage plot is a national allegory for the British Empire which emphasizes the increasing importance of the navy and the professional classes as England is in the process of relocating its global position at the turn of the nineteenth century. In conclusion, *Persuasion's* form and content support the British Empire which demonstrates the importance of literature in cultural representation and, in Spivak's words, the "continuing success of the imperialist project" (243), which legitimized the expansion of the Second Empire.

Author Biography

Carolin Wachsmann studies the double degree Master of Education (English and History) and Master of Arts (North American Studies) at Leibniz University Hannover. In 2021, she received her bachelor's degree in English and History. Her research interests are English literature, popular culture and fan studies, and postcolonial theory. When she is not reading or writing, she is often found discussing feminist literature with her book club.

Works Cited

- Austen, Jane. *Persuasion*. 1818, edited by Pat Rogers, Everyman, 1994.
- Azim, Firdous. *The Colonial Rise of the Novel*. Routledge, 1993.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 3rd ed., Manchester UP, 2009.
- Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. 2nd ed., Oxford UP, 2005.
- Brannigan, John. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*. MacMillan, 1998.
- Copeland, Edward, and Juliet McMaster, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*. 2nd ed., Cambridge UP, 2011.
- Copeland, Edward. "Money." Copeland and McMaster, pp. 127-43.
- Davis, Kathryn E. *Liberty in Jane Austen's Persuasion*. Leigh UP, 2016.

- Fraiman, Susan. "Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1995, pp. 805-21. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1344068. Accessed 11 Aug. 2021.
- Carpenter, Stanley D. M. "French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815)." *Britain in the Hanoverian Age, 1714-1837: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Gerald Newman, Garland Publishing, 1997, pp. 274-76.
- Fulford, Tim. "Romanticizing the Empire: The Naval Heroes of Southey, Coleridge, Austen, and Marryat." *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 2, 1999, pp. 161-96.
- Galperin, William H. *Historical Austen*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2003.
- Garcia, Christien. "Left Hanging: Silence, Suspension, and Desire in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*." *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 59 no. 1, 2018, p. 85-103. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/ecy.2018.0004. Accessed 11 Aug. 2021.
- Gay, Penny. "Emma and Persuasion." Copeland and McMaster, pp. 55-71.
- Jordan, Elaine. "Jane Austen Goes to the Seaside: *Sanditon*, English Identity and the 'West Indian' Schoolgirl." Park and Rajan, pp. 29-55.
- Kramp, Michael. Introduction. *Jane Austen and Masculinity*, by Kramp, Bucknell UP, 2018, pp. 1-24.
- Magee, William H. "Instrument of Growth: The Courtship and Marriage Plot in Jane Austen's Novels." *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 198-208. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/30225182. Accessed 11 Aug. 2021.
- McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. 2nd ed., Manchester UP, 2010.
- McMaster, Juliet. "Class." Copeland and MacMaster, pp. 111-26.
- Meyer, Michael. *English and American Literatures*. 4th ed., UTB, 2012.
- Morris, Pam. *Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and Worldly Realism*. Edinburgh UP, 2017.
- Newman, Gerald. "Nationalism." *Britain in the Hanoverian Age, 1714-1837: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Gerald Newman, Garland Publishing, 1997, pp. 489-94.
- Nünning, Vera und Ansgar Nünning. *An Introduction to the Study of English and American Literature*. Transl. Jane Dewhurst, Klett, 2009.
- O'Connell, Lisa. *The Origins of the English Marriage Plot. Literature, Politics and Religion in the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge UP, 2019.
- O'Shaughness, Andrew J. "West Indies." *Britain in the Hanoverian Age, 1714-1837: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Gerald Newman, Garland Publishing, 1997, pp. 764-66.
- Park, You-me and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, eds. *The Postcolonial Jane Austen*. Routledge, 2004.
- Parrinder, Patrick. *Nation and Novel: The English Novel from its Origins to the Present Day*. Oxford UP, 2006.
- Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder. "Austen in the World: Postcolonial Mappings." Park and Rajan, pp. 3-25. "Realism." *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, edited by Peter Childs and Roger Fowler, 3rd ed., Routledge, 2006, pp. 198-200.
- Roberts, Warren. "Nationalism and Empire." *Austen in Context*, edited by Janet Todd, Cambridge UP, 2005, pp. 327-36.
- Ryan, Kiernan. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism: A Reader*. Arnold, 1996.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 1994.
- Seeber, Barbara K. "Loneliness and the Affective Imperative of the Marriage Plot in Jane Austen's *Emma*." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 52 no. 3, 2020, p. 233-45. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/sdn.2020.0042. Accessed 11 August 2021.

- Shaffer, Julie. "Not Subordinate: Empowering Women in the Marriage-Plot. The Novels of Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen." *Criticism*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1992, pp. 51-73. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23113581. Accessed 11 Aug. 2021.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1985, pp. 243-61. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1343469. Accessed 11 Aug. 2021.
- Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. 3rd ed., Oxford UP, 2015.

Exploring Gender in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005) through the Lens of *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949)

Christine Poljanskij

Abstract

This article examines gender roles and relations in the young adult novel *Twilight* (2005) by Stephenie Meyer, utilizing the structuralist anthropological theory of the exchange of women as the basis of kinship introduced by Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1949. This theory with regards to its implications about gender is first analyzed through a feminist perspective and then applied to *Twilight*, focusing primarily on the protagonist and her love interest. Finding that what is presented in the novel in terms of gender is almost analogous to the Lévi-Strauss's ideas, this article argues that Meyer perpetuates archaic hetero-patriarchal gender relations in her work. This conclusion is given weight by framing it through Judith Butler's theory about the repetitive nature of gender performance.

Keywords

Twilight – Feminist Studies – Gender Studies – Young Adult Fiction

Introduction

When talking about contemporary young adult literature, no book series is as inescapable as Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga*. The saga, consisting of *Twilight* (2005), *New Moon* (2006), *Eclipse* (2007) and *Breaking Dawn* (2008), has sold over 100 million copies worldwide and has been adapted into a movie franchise spanning five films which made \$3,3 billion in total (Cain). While *Twilight* is more infamous than famous, having for instance inspired the phrase "still a better love story than *Twilight*," its influence and popularity are undeniable. *Twilight* and its sequels tell the story of 17-year-old Isabella "Bella" Swan, who moves from sunny Phoenix, Arizona to her self-imposed exile in gloomy Forks, Washington. Here, she lives with her father while her mother travels with her new husband, the coach of a minor league baseball team. In Forks, Bella meets the Cullen family (which consists of Carlisle and Esme as the quasi parents, and Rosalie, Emmett, Edward, Alice, and Jasper as the adopted children) and quickly falls in love with their youngest member Edward Cullen. The Cullens are vampires with superhuman strength, though Meyer's vampires eschew several popular vampire tropes: they do not burn in the sun (their hardened skin sparkles like diamonds instead), they do not sleep at all, and a wooden stake is not enough to kill them. Some of them even have special powers, such as Edward, who can read minds, and Alice, who has the

gift of clairvoyance. The Cullens live a different lifestyle from the majority of vampires because they do not drink human blood. They live on a strict diet of animal blood, and refer to themselves as “vegetarians” as an inside joke (Meyer 164). The main plot of the first novel follows the rapid blossoming of Bella’s relationship to Edward and culminates in her being severely wounded and almost turned into a vampire by an evil vampire who becomes obsessed with hunting her. In the end, she is rescued by Edward and the rest of the Cullen clan – just in time to attend the junior prom in the epilogue.

The aim of this article is to examine one of the most frequently criticized aspects of *Twilight*: its strict and outdated representation of gender roles. I will draw on the anthropological theory of the exchange of women as the driving force of kinship that Claude Lévi-Strauss put forward in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949). Despite the fact that this book was published almost 70 years ago, Lévi-Strauss’s central arguments can be found in *Twilight*, as I will elaborate in the next section. I will first focus on analyzing the dynamics of Bella and Edward’s relationship and then on finding instances of exchange, both with Bella and other female characters as the objects of exchange. Creating a link between the presentation of gender in *Twilight* and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), the final section briefly examines what vampires can represent in literature as opposed to their use in *Twilight*. This then leads into a brief discussion of why a feminist critique of contemporary young adult literature matters.

The Elementary Structures of Kinship (1949)

In his 1949 survey of kinship, published as *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* (*The Elementary Structures of Kinship*), structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss claims that the system of kinship across cultures is based on one cardinal principle: the exchange of women. Going even further to establish a link between language and exchange, Lévi-Strauss supposes that “the emergence of the symbolic thought must have required that women, like words, should be exchanged” (*Kinship* 496). This principle of kinship pertains to marriage first and foremost as its fundamental basis and is universally applicable to many systems of marriage (480). Serving as the driving forces behind the exchange of women between patrilineal clans are the incest taboo and the rules of exogamy. The incest taboo, or “the prohibition of the sexual use of a daughter or a sister,” is said to enforce the behavior of a man giving his daughter to another man in order to secure a right to the daughter or sister of another man (51), while the rules of exogamy simply refer to the rules compelling marriage outside the immediate group. Seeing as Lévi-Strauss talks about sisters and daughters, the immediate group here is assumed to be the immediate family. In addition to establishing kinship, he assigns a certain social value to the exchange of women, namely to “provide means of binding men together” (*Structural Anthropology* 480), the homoerotic undertones of which seem to be unintentional.

However, kinship does not only apply to marriage. Different examples of kinship and of exchange can be found in a variety of human interactions. Cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin summarizes that “[t]he exchange of goods and services, production and distribution [...] ritual and ceremony all takes places within the organizational structure of kinship” (170). In *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss gives several examples of exchange and reciprocity outside the context of marriage, ranging from the exchange of non-utilitarian objects such as painted bowls between Native Alaskans to Christmas gifts in Northern American society, or the act of sharing wine when seated next to a stranger in close proximity for an extended period, for instance at a restaurant (cf. 57-59). Once again drawing on Rubin, the pervasiveness of kinship and exchange appears rather immense, which “has led many anthropologists to consider its invention [...] to

have been the development which decidedly marked the discontinuity between semi-hominids and humans” (170). Therefore, considering the rules of the exchange of women and of kinship is relevant when analyzing any type of human relations.

The Implications of Exchange

More relevant for this article than kinship or exchange themselves are their implications, specifically concerning the status of women and what these social principles say about gender. Lévi-Strauss himself appears to have been slightly troubled by this, since one of the final chapters of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* concludes with a short paragraph mentioning that “each woman preserves a particular value arising from her talent before and after marriage,” as well as praising the “affective richness, ardour and mystery” of heteronormative relations between the sexes (496). This sense of attempted appeasement appears again in *Structural Anthropology* (first published as *Anthropologie structurale* in 1958), where Lévi-Strauss ostensibly concedes that “it may be disturbing to some to have women conceived as mere parts of a meaningful system,” and that women, unlike words, are not reduced to symbols within the structure of exchange (61). In spite of this, Lévi-Strauss does not reach the essence of the trouble of kinship systems, as they both create and naturalize a theory of oppression. Saying that “in human society, it is the men who exchange the women, and not vice versa” (47), implies that men are to be the agent enacting the exchange as well as the beneficiaries, while women – as the gift that is given – appear to not have a say in the exchange, and have no rights to themselves on the whole (Rubin 177). In linking the emergence of language and culture to the exchange of women, Lévi-Strauss suggests that “the world historical defeat of women occurred with the origin of culture and is a prerequisite of culture” (Rubin 176). Seeing as Lévi-Strauss does not confer the agency to women, it can be said that the origin of culture, according to him, is based not only on the defeat of women but also on the suppression of their desires and their personhood. As Judith Butler writes, “[t]he naturalization of both heterosexuality and masculine agency are discursive constructions nowhere accounted for [...] within this founding structuralist frame” (58).

In assuming heterosexuality and a lack of female agency as the status quo, Lévi-Strauss also fails to question the notion of gender at all. The apparatus of exchange is one which creates what ‘woman’ means within its system and this meaning is related to oppression. Despite asserting that women keep their talent before and after marriage, according to him, they only seem to exist in relation to men. Rubin writes that “[a] woman is a human. She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny [...] in certain relations” (158). However, based on Lévi-Strauss’s concept of gender the first part of Rubin’s quotation does not apply as women’s existence is based only on their relation to men. They are sisters, daughters, or mothers, not simply subjects on their own. The underlying notion of this is that there can only be the categories of men and women as “in human society a man must obtain a woman from another man who gives him a daughter or a sister” (Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* 46). The category ‘woman’ or ‘female’ in Lévi-Strauss’s system is defined by a lack of identity and agency, seeing how “the bride functions as a relation term between groups of men; she does not have an identity and neither does she exchange one identity from another” (Butler 52). ‘Man’ is then categorized by having an identity and by being a subject. There is no space for any concept of gender differing from the presented binary opposites of man and woman within Lévi-Strauss’s structure of kinship seeing as women are not granted an identity. There cannot be a spectrum if the only ends of it are something and nothing. Women are

the “prey of men” (Rubin 158) within a system which simultaneously denies their right to an identity while being considered as a necessary prerequisite for culture.

As a germinal text in the field of gender studies, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* serves as the link between the concept of gender present in *Twilight* and *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Butler’s analysis of the structuralist ideas of sex and gender in Lévi-Strauss’s work as “regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression” (46) provides the framework for the following analysis. Their idea of gender as a repetitive performance will be introduced in the last chapter as a crucial factor to why a feminist critique of media such as *Twilight* is important.

The Lion and the Lamb

*“And so the lion fell in love with lamb ...” he murmured.
I looked away, hiding my eyes as I thrilled to the word.
“What a stupid lamb,” I sighed.
“What a sick, masochistic lion.”
– Meyer, Twilight 240*

Although it might seem far-fetched to apply an anthropological theory from the 1950s to a young adult novel published in 2005, the way gender relations are portrayed in *Twilight* features numerous similarities to the conclusions drawn from Lévi-Strauss’s structures of kinship. This chapter aims to look at the relationship between the titular Lion and Lamb, namely the first-person narrator and protagonist Bella Swan and her vampire boyfriend Edward Cullen, focusing mainly on Bella.

What is most striking in Bella and Edward’s relationship is the overall power imbalance and Bella’s lack of agency. In one of *Twilight*’s iconic scenes, Edward and Bella describe their budding relationship in the following way: “‘And so the lion fell in love with a lamb ...,’ he murmured. ‘What a stupid lamb,’ I sighed. ‘What a sick, masochistic lion’” (Meyer, *Twilight* 240). This perfectly encapsulates their relationship, as Edward, not unlike a lion in direct confrontation with a lamb, is portrayed as superior to Bella in every way. Hanging on to the lion comparison, the imbalance of physical power and Edward’s willingness to exert it upon Bella is startling. The very first depiction of this is when Bella faints at the thought of seeing her classmate’s blood during blood type identification in biology class. Bella is taken to the school nurse’s office by another classmate, only for Edward to find her and lift her up despite Bella yelling “Put me down!” (83). An even more salient example of Edward using his vampiric super strength on Bella follows a few pages later, still a part of the same scene. When Bella tries to go to her own car to drive home, Edward is instead “towing [her] toward his car, pulling [her] by [her] jacket” (89). Bella even remarks how Edward would have most likely dragged her back had she tried to resist (89). Moments like this do not occur in isolation. Later in the novel, Bella describes how Edward’s hands were like shackles around her wrists and when carrying her to safety, Edward tosses her onto the backseat and even orders his older, stronger brother to hold her in place (264, 333). Edward’s use of force is justified by the plot of the novel itself, for instance when he uses it to save Bella from being crushed by a car (48). Just as men in Lévi-Strauss’s structures of kinship, Edward is granted agency both over himself as well as Bella because she is not able to defend herself from his supernatural strength. Edward’s “enormous physical strength not only signifies the supernatural, but also an ideology of hyper masculinity” (Shachar 157). The text appears to imply that Bella is only able to survive the world

due to Edward's preternatural strength. The frequent use of language in relation to anger in order to describe Edward supports this. After rescuing Bella from the potential assault, she describes his voice as furious, noting that "his expression was murderous again," his eyes blazing, and "the fury was plain on his face" (Meyer, *Twilight* 140-41). Just like the men in Lévi-Strauss's system of exchange, Edward is a predator, not only because he is a vampire and Bella his natural prey, but also because of how their dynamic is presented.

Edward stripping Bella of her agency and controlling her behavior is not only evident in terms of physical force as he often decides things in her stead or orders her to do something, only for the story to prove him right. After saving her from an attempted sexual assault by a group of men, Edward takes Bella to a restaurant, where he orders her to drink. "Obediently" taking a sip, Bella suddenly realizes that she is genuinely thirsty (147). Later in the novel, when Bella wakes up in the hospital after being attacked by the evil vampire James, she notices that she is in pain, her "ribs were throbbing" when she tries to take a deep breath (410). Edward calls for the nurse to administer pain medication to Bella despite her protests: "He reached for the button. 'No!' He ignored me" (416).

Furthermore, Edward also denies Bella her privacy and is rewarded for it. On the evening of the attempted assault in Port Angeles, Edward stalks Bella by looking for her in other people's thoughts as well as secretly following her in his car (153). This is not the only instance of him violating Bella's privacy. When bringing her home after the 'lion and lamb' scene in the meadow, Bella realizes that Edward knows where she keeps her keys and this realization leads to him admitting that he has been climbing into Bella's bedroom every night since a few weeks after their first meeting to watch her sleeping (255-56). After an initial shocked reaction from Bella, this reveal is turned into a seemingly romantic moment with the sleepless vampire admitting that "if [he] could dream, it would all be about [her]" (257). In actuality, this revelation is deeply troubling when considering the fact that Edward has been intruding on and effectively eliminating Bella's privacy, in a way stripping her of rights to herself and her personhood. Not only that, Bella cannot even escape him in her unconscious state. In addition to being physically present while she sleeps, he also constantly appears in her dreams, illustrating Bella's dependence on him (Hawes 168).

Edward is not only in control of Bella's physical well-being but her happiness as well. Taking her to the school prom in the epilogue of the novel, turns out to be a positive experience for Bella despite her dislike for dancing (Meyer, *Twilight* 431). This, and Edward's use of physical force to save her, cause Bella to depend on Edward. Melissa Miller accurately summarizes the couple's dynamic: "Without the Sun, the Earth is annihilated. Without Edward, Bella is annihilated" (167). This lack of agency is similar to the way the exchange plays out for the woman as gift according to Lévi-Strauss.

Another conclusion that Butler draws from Lévi-Strauss is that women "reflect masculine identity through being the site of its absence" (52) within the system of exchange, which can also be seen in Bella and Edward's dynamic. In her internal monologue, Bella is portrayed by what she is characteristically not, most often in relation to Edward. The most surface level illustration of this lies in Bella and Edward's appearances. The very first mention of Bella's appearance describes her as what she is not, namely a "tan, sporty, blond—a volleyball player, or a cheerleader" (Meyer, *Twilight* 9). Instead, Bella is both described as and describes herself as having a "pallid reflection" with white skin with no color (9). Additionally, Bella is extremely clumsy, lacking the "necessary hand-eye coordination to play sports without humiliating [herself]—and harming both [herself] and anyone too close" (9). Bella is portrayed as not elegant, as lacking coordination and not beautiful according to her own beauty standards. Edward, however, stands in direct contrast to this

as he is written to be everything Bella is not. Due to the absence of blood circulating through their veins, Edward and the rest of the Cullens are extremely pale, more so than Bella. Nevertheless, Bella frequently remarks on their beauty, especially Edward's, describing him as "pale [and] dreamlike in his beauty" (255). Through Bella's thoroughly described lack of coordination, the grace and elegance of Edward's movements appear exemplary. One occasion of this is when Bella describes Edward's exit from their biology classroom as swift and, more importantly, graceful (43).

Furthermore, another important aspect is that Bella seems to define her appearance through the male gaze or seems to draw her validation from it, which is only reinforced when Edward's reply to her referring to herself as ordinary is to tell her that she "didn't hear what every human male in [their] school was thinking on her first day" (184). Consequently, it is clear she has "internalized such a gaze as a form of self-criticism" (Shachar 151). This unequal dynamic goes beyond just Bella and Edward's physical qualities. Bella summarizes this rather accurately: "I'm absolutely ordinary – well except for the bad things And look at you" (Meyer, *Twilight* 184). In comparison to Edward, who had almost ninety years to study many different fields and get to know the world, Bella is rendered inferior just by virtue of being a 17-year-old human girl and is once again characterized through what she is not. Her non-existent sense of self-preservation in relation to Edward is epitomized when she is "filled with compassion for Edward's suffering [...] as he confessed his craving to take [her] life" (238). Bella does not appear to truly consider the danger her relationship with Edward poses on her life and, instead of worrying for herself and her identity being endangered by him, she feels compassion.

The exchange of women within the kinship system of Lévi-Strauss is, as previously stated, based not only on the denial of the women's identity but also on a suppression of female (sexual) desire. Again, this is also true for Edward and Bella's relationship, with Edward serving as the oppressor. During their first kiss, Bella is overwhelmed by her desire for Edward. She details that "blood boiled under [her] skin, burned in [her] lips," but this is immediately blocked by Edward who "turns to unresponsive stone" and pushes her back with "irresistible force" (247). This is by far not the only instance of Edward policing and blocking Bella's desire as when they kiss a second time, Bella's arms reach out to wrap around Edward's neck which elicits a similar reaction from him (317). It seems that in order for Bella and Edward's relationship to function, Bella must suppress her own desires and be brought back to reason by Edward. She internalizes this very quickly and goes on to ignore what she wants and to police her own behavior in order not to impose on Edward, describing it as being "good for him" (269). Edward's "restraint indicates not only his ability to dominate his relationship with Bella, but also implies that masculine strength is needed to restrain the wild feminine" (Donnelly 181). There is no space for any other version of this dynamic or any way for Bella to express her sexuality as a woman.

The Exchange of Bella

Having identified the ways in which the relationship of the protagonist and the main love interest reflects the anti-feminist implications of Claude Lévi-Strauss's structures of kinship, this chapter aims to analyze the instances in which exchange takes place with Bella as the gift or the object – albeit not within the context of marriage.

The most obvious instance of such an exchange is the climax of *Twilight*. The vampire James, who considers himself a hunter and dedicates his un-life to the pursuit of his prey, becomes obsessed with tracking Bella after encountering her and the Cullens. Her humanity is revealed to him due to an unfortunate gust of wind, with Edward's possessiveness of her stoking the fire (Meyer, *Twilight* 331). Bella flees Forks and returns to Phoenix along with Edward's siblings Alice

and Jasper, but this proves futile, as James tracks them there despite the other Cullens's attempt to find and then kill him. After staying hidden at a hotel for a few days, James manages to contact Bella and lures her to him by using a recording of her mother's voice on an old home video as bait (387). A confrontation ensues wherein it is made apparent that Bella is only a means to an end for James whose real desire is to fight Edward. During their brief conversation before he attacks Bella and wounds her severely, James is only interested in whether Edward plans to avenge Bella, questioning her further when she admits that she has asked Edward to refrain from it (388). "It was all for him, of course," James outright admits (390). In terms of the kinship system, James wants a connection to Edward, using Bella as the object of exchange. What is most remarkable about this is that Bella is completely willing to give her life to this exchange, quite similar to the lack of female identity and agency in the kinship system presented by Lévi-Strauss. The very preface of the novel, which follows the Bible quote about the lion and the lamb, hints at this with Bella stating that "surely, it was a good way to die, in the place of someone else, someone I loved" (1). This is then taken up again when Bella is on her way to meet James: "I had no choices now but one: to go to the mirrored room and die" (375). It is soon revealed that Bella does not have to sacrifice herself to save her mother, but she is nonetheless the object of exchange between Edward and James, being willing to give up her life for love. Miller reasons that "[b]ecause the Bella/Edward relationship is presented as fated [...] we permit Bella to respond in ways that would concern us if we saw it manifested in others close to us. We condone her continued disregard for her own personal safety" (171).

Another major conflict that spans the series – although it is only foreshadowed in *Twilight* – centers Bella as the object of exchange. The Cullens are not the only supernatural inhabitants of the area surrounding Forks. There is also the Quileute tribe, which is a Native American Tribe whose culture Meyer appropriates and changes in a highly racist fashion to consist of people who possess the ability to shift into wolves (Wilson 195). Bella only discovers their supernatural powers in the second book, but the dynamic between the Cullens and the Quileutes is revealed to her when she meets Jacob Black, the son of her father's friend Billy Black, on a beach that is located on the reservation (Meyer, *Twilight* 106). Jacob tells Bella that the Quileute are said to descend from wolves and that they have one mortal enemy: "the cold ones" which is their term for vampires. The only "cold ones" who are not immediate enemies of the Quileutes are the Cullens who settled on a truce, which would be violated if the Cullens stepped onto reservation territory or attacked another human (107-8). Due to her relationship to Edward and her family's friendship with the Blacks, Bella is caught in the middle of this conflict of patrilineal clans without knowing why, at least in the first novel, *Twilight*. Bella's status as the object that both the Quileutes and the Cullens want to keep, is hinted at when Billy warns Bella to stay away from the Cullens, telling her she should not "do what [she] is doing," i.e., dating Edward and being in close contact with his vampire family (308). When Bella returns from Phoenix, injured due to an incident that appears to be linked to the Cullens, Billy is worried about Bella and sends his son to tell her to end her relationship with Edward. Jacob emphasizes this by repeating Billy's words "[w]e will be watching," implying that the whole Quileute tribe is involved and marking Bella's part as the object in the exchange and in the conflict between two clans (428).

One other instance of exchange is interesting to examine because it echoes the main form of exchange of women that is part of Lévi-Strauss's structures of kinship, namely marriage. When Edward first meets Bella's father Charlie, the two seem to bond after one crucial interaction: Charlie tells Edward to "take care of [his] girl," to which Edward replies "[s]he'll be safe with me, I promise, sir" (Meyer, *Twilight* 313). Afterwards, Bella narrates that they both laugh, a clear indication

of a bond between the two having been formed (313). This exchange closely resembles the tradition of the father – or whomever is available to step in as patriarch – giving away the bride at the altar, the recipient of her, the gift, being the groom. This exchange crystallizes the bond that is then established between the two clans, and a bond is therefore also established between Charlie and Edward. Just like the bride is given away and is not walking along the aisle by herself to join her groom, Bella meekly protests this interaction by groaning but is ignored by the two men, essentially letting herself and her safety be in the hands of her father and then be given to Edward without so much as a “I can take care of myself, Dad” thrown in for good measure (313). Although this is not a central moment in the plot of the novel, it is the purest incarnation of the system of kinship and the exchange of women, as detailed by Lévi-Strauss.

Exchange within the Cullens

As Edward’s clan is the only family other than Bella’s own family whose dynamics are described in the novel, it is worth taking a brief look at parallels to the structures Lévi-Strauss discusses in *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, and examine how the characterization of the women of the Cullen clan relate to what Lévi-Strauss’s theory implies for women. The character Esme, Edward’s adoptive mother, is a clear example Lévi-Strauss’s theory as her only defining character trait is that of motherhood. When Bella first meets Esme, she describes her as having “pale, beautiful features” and a “heart-shaped face [with] [...] billows of soft, caramel-colored hair,” and – perhaps most noteworthy – a body that is “less angular, more rounded than the others” (Meyer, *Twilight* 282). It is abundantly clear that Esme’s appearance is as motherly as possible, due to the emphasis on her softness and roundness. Her personality is much the same, especially because the only thing known about her is motherhood. Despite not being the Cullen “children’s” biological mother, she treats them as if they were her biological children, stating “[w]ell, I do think of them as my children in most ways. I could never get over my mothering instincts” (321). She then adds that she committed suicide after losing her first and only child which led to her being found and turned into a vampire by Carlisle (321). In life and in her un-life, Esme “retains her core sense of herself as a mother” (Kane 111) and as it is her only defining trait throughout the book, for she exists only in relation with no true identity of her own⁸ with Carlisle “[denying] her both agency and choice” by turning her (Torkelson 217). Esme’s identity is thus always tied to other people: the child without whom her life is so meaningless that she takes her own life, and then Carlisle who claims her, and the Cullen ‘children’ she adopts. It seems that even death or un-life is not an escape from the system of exchange.

Moreover, Esme is not the only Cullen woman who can be analyzed through the lens of the anthropological system brought forward by Lévi-Strauss. The purpose of Rosalie’s entire un-life is based on the premise of exchange. In the same chapter where Bella is introduced to Edward’s “parents,” he tells her the story of how each family member was brought into the Cullen clan. The Cullen patriarch Carlisle had sired Rosalie “hoping she would be to [Edward] what Esme was to him,” which means that Rosalie was created to be a gift for Edward (Meyer, *Twilight* 252). Although Rosalie later chooses Emmett as her own partner, this does not negate the fact that her existence in the vampire clan was originally based on her serving as a gift from Carlisle to Edward in order to ensure that Edward can properly adhere to the hetero-patriarchal values they share. The most

⁸ What is most worrying about this, though it is beyond the scope of this article, is the fact that Esme is the direct opposite of Bella’s own mother, who does not adhere to the standards of a traditional family by being divorced for example. Bella’s mother is punished by the story Bella describes her as “erratic [and] harebrained” (Meyer, *Twilight* 4), which implies that following Esme’s model is the ideal for any woman.

insidious aspect of Rosalie's creation as a gift for Edward is made apparent in the third novel of the series, when Rosalie tells Bella what led her to end her mortal life: she was first raped and then mortally wounded by her own fiancé and his friends (Meyer, *Eclipse* 143). After her consent is violated by this sexual assault, it is again breached when Carlisle turns her both into a vampire and into an object of exchange who, just as the women in the structuralist critical exchange, has no agency in the matter. Though Rosalie is shown to be unhappy with the circumstances of her immortal life, Carlisle, the kind and gentle patriarch, is still written as someone who knowingly turned a rape victim into a gift for his son (Meyer, *Twilight* 286).

Twilight and Gender Trouble

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler sets out to examine and dismantle many different concepts of how gender is created, and comes to the conclusion that both biological sex and gender are constructed and reinforced through repetitive performances. According to Butler, "the subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals and reinforces its rules," and these rules are said to govern along the principles of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality (198). These performative practices are observed, internalized and then repeated which leads them to be naturalized, just as the very concept of sex, as fact. The only solution Butler sees for this cyclical nature of these repetitive performances to be broken is to engage in more subversive acts of repetition. The critical task is to "repeat and, through radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" which would then lead to a world in which "a new configuration of politics" could emerge that would no longer be based on fixed identities (203). Butler ends their book with an open-ended question: "What other local strategies for engaging the 'unnatural' might lead to the denaturalization of gender itself?" (203). I would argue that writing and reading *Twilight* – at least without engaging critically with the book – is the exact answer of what not to do in order to denaturalize gender.

Due to its immense popularity, it is fair to consider the *Twilight* saga a piece of literature that contributes to mass culture. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall says that "we give things meaning by how we represent them" and that "culture [...] permeates all of society" (3). The dominant reading of those pieces of mass media where meaning is being represented is said to be assumed as true, though the nuance may depend on the audiences' own beliefs (Modleski xi). What is being represented and given meaning in *Twilight* is a hetero-patriarchal system of gender roles as shown in the previous chapters. The novel creates a world wherein any character straying from these norms is punished, for example Bella's father who is still unhappy and unfulfilled after his divorce from Bella's mother, and Bella's mother who is almost unfit to care for her daughter, reversing the parent-child dynamic (Meyer, *Twilight* 4, 10). Any hint at not exhibiting heterosexual desire is deemed as a violation, most saliently summarized when Edward tells Bella that his adoptive mother thought "there was something missing from his essential makeup" when he did not show interest in finding a female mate before he met Bella (286). The women in *Twilight* that fit into the gender hierarchy are soft and beautiful, unlike for example James's mate Victoria, who is described as wild and feline (329), her alienness apparent. Considering *Twilight's* target audience, it is not far-fetched to think that young readers without the tools to read critically might accept *Twilight's* messages as gospel and "take on Meyer's ideals of heteronormative patriarchal dominance" during a critical phase in the development of their own gender identity and sexuality (Donnelly 183). Instead of

creating a space in which its young teen audiences could explore subversive acts and perhaps question systems of exchange they might find themselves a part of, *Twilight* reinforces the opposite

What is most disheartening about this is the potential of what could have been when writing a novel about vampires. As supernatural creatures, they exist on the fringes of society: they are “invaders of the normal” who can be “everything we are, while at the same time they are fearful reminders of the infinite things we are not” (Auerbach 6). Nina Auerbach goes on to say that vampires matter because “when properly understood, they make us see that our lives are implicated in theirs” (9). One of the uses of vampires in literature is an allegory for queerness. Not in the sense that queer people are monsters but rather because vampires are the ‘Other’ due to their nature. Vampires disrupt the natural order, as they are neither alive nor dead, and neither entirely divorced from humanity nor regular humans, just as “queer disrupts the order by evoking an identity that refuses and exceeds the binary system” (Kane 109). A book about vampires, even one intended for a teen audience, can very well be used to explore practices of subversive performative acts and to engage with the ‘unnatural,’ seeing as they are already supernatural and exist beyond societal constraints.

Conclusion

Stephenie Meyer’s novel *Twilight* presents a world in which hetero-patriarchal gender norms co-exist with vampires. This has become apparent through this article’s analysis of the novel’s female protagonist, the main relationship and other supporting female characters through the lens of the system of kinship introduced by Claude Lévi-Strauss. The exchange of women – which lies at the basis of the structuralist kinship – takes place with both Bella as the object as well as other women of the Cullen clan. Along with this, the novel is permeated by unsavory implications about female agency and identity, which are erased in both Lévi-Strauss’s kinship system and *Twilight*. The women in the novel appear to be at the mercy of the men, and every character straying from this norm is portrayed in a negative light. Additionally, Edward’s authority over Bella is proven as right because his dominating behavior constantly saves or benefits her. *Twilight* does not provide any alternative to this dynamic and there is no space provided for different gender norms. The same is true for female desire which is ignored (or even prohibited and policed) in both Lévi-Strauss’s work and the novel. When looking at the fact that *Twilight* was published 15 years after *Gender Trouble* and by a former student of literature nonetheless, it is unfortunate that none of its ideas can be found in the novel. Instead, it functions as the direct opposite of the ideas that Butler concludes their work with, serving repetitive performative actions to its primarily teen audience in Edward Cullen-sized bites.

Author Biography

Christine Poljanskij is a first-year graduate student of North American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover. Her primary research interests are Feminism, Gender Studies and Pop Culture, all of which can be found in her 2022 bachelor’s thesis which explores heteropatriarchal gender performance as well as its subversion in Suzanne Collins’s young adult trilogy *The Hunger Games*.

Works Cited

- Auerbach, Nina. *Our Vampires, Ourselves*. The U of Chicago P, 1995.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. 1990. Routledge, 2006.
- Cain, Sian. "As Midnight Sun Hits No 1, Stephenie Meyer Plans Two More *Twilight* Books." *The Guardian*, 13 Aug. 2020, www.theguardian.com/books/2020/aug/13/as-midnight-sun-hits-no-1-stephenie-meyer-plans-two-more-twilight-books. Accessed 31 Mar. 2022.
- Donnelly, Ashley. "Denial and Salvation: The *Twilight* Series and Heteronormative Patriarchy." *Theorizing Twilight: Essays on What's at Stake in a Post-Vampire World*, edited by Maggie Parker and Natalie Wilson, McFarland, 2010, pp. 178-93.
- Gillespie, Katherine. "Welcome to the *Twilight* Renaissance." *PAPER*, 19 Aug. 2021, <https://www.papermag.com/twilight-memes-renaissance#rebellitem63>. Accessed 31 Mar. 2022.
- Hall, Stuart. "Introduction." *Representation. Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, edited by Stuart Hall, Sage, 1997, pp. 1-12.
- Hawes, Janice. "Sleeping Beauty and the Idealized Undead: Avoiding Adolescents." *Critical Exploration in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, vol. 25, 2010, pp. 163-77.
- Kane, Kathryn. "A Very Queer Refusal: The Chilling Effect of the Cullens' Heteronormative Embrace." *Bitten by Twilight. Youth Culture, Media, and the Vampire Franchise*, edited by Melissa A. Click, Jennifer Stevens and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, Peter Lang, 2010, pp. 103-18.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Translated by James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer and Rodney Needham, Beacon Press, 1969.
- . *Structural Anthropology*. Translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, Basic Books, 1963.
- Meyer, Stephenie. *Eclipse*. Atom, 2007.
- . *Twilight*. Atom, 2005.
- Miller, Melissa. "Maybe Edward Is the Most Dangerous Thing Out There: The Role of Patriarchy." *Theorizing Twilight. Essay on What's at Stake in a Post-Vampire World*, edited by Maggie Parker and Natalie Wilson, McFarland, 2010, pp. 165-73.
- Modleski, Tania. "Introduction." *Studies in Entertainment. Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, edited by Tania Modleski, Indiana UP, 1986, pp. xiv-xix.
- Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, edited by Rayna R. Reiter, Monthly Review Press, 1975, pp. 157-210.
- Shachar, Hila. "A Post-Feminism: Love, Gender and Intertextuality in Stephenie Meyer's Saga." *Theorizing Twilight. Essay on What's at Stake in a Post-Vampire World*, edited by Maggie Parker and Natalie Wilson, McFarland, 2010, pp. 147-61.
- Torkelson, Anne. "Violence, Agency, and the Women of *Twilight*." *Theorizing Twilight. Essay on What's at Stake in a Post-Vampire World*, edited by Maggie Parker and Natalie Wilson, McFarland, 2010, pp. 209-23.

Wilson, Natalie. "It's a Wolf Things: The Quileute Werwolf / Shape-Shifter Hybrid as a Noble Savage." *Theorizing Twilight. Essay on What's at Stake in a Post-Vampire World*, edited by Maggie Parker and Natalie Wilson, McFarland, 2010, pp. 194-223.

Independent Studies: Videographic Criticism

Introduction: Discussing Film in Film Language

Alissa Lienhard

As a scholar of film, one can sometimes struggle with writing about film, as one never quite captures on paper what is seen on the screen. One way to overcome this problem is to find new ways to engage with films academically, for example by using film's own language: sound and images. Some students of the North American Studies master program at Leibniz University Hannover explored exactly this kind of engagement with film in an independent studies class. Kathleen Loock taught the seminar "Videographic Criticism" for the first time in the winter semester 2021/22 (with the help of student assistants Lida Shams-Mostofi and myself), and invited participants to engage with one film over the course of the semester with the end goal of producing a scholarly video essay. Most of the final video essay projects are published in this issue of *In Progress*. This introduction contextualizes these videographic works, as it briefly presents the scholarly practice of videographic criticism, addresses the principles and structure that guided our learning in class, and lastly, of course, also introduces the video essays featured here.

As Jason Mittell writes, "videographic criticism is the expression of scholarly ideas via moving images and sound in audiovisual form." In other words, videographic criticism produces videos (with sounds and images) – not written pieces – that aim to convey scholarly arguments. As an audiovisual form, however, videographic criticism includes more than just essayistic formats like the ones included here. While the latter are often produced in academic film, television, and media studies contexts, scholars like Drew Morton maintain that videographic criticism also includes more poetic projects and/or works that are not based on existing films or television series (131). After all, this form of working with, and creating, audiovisual material is, as Chatherine Grant puts it, generally "creative, critical, and performative" – leading to a broad spectrum of works that range from forms reminiscent of a lecture or written essay to very free, creative, imaginative, or figurative videos. In my experience, practicing videographic criticism is especially fulfilling when doing film analysis because one can use film language – such as the elements of music, editing, pacing, or color – when making arguments about films, oftentimes with the added bonus that one can show exactly those aspects one aims to analyze. Additionally, the process of working with film material in the editing software in itself has a "potential to enable discovery" (Grizzaffi), since cutting, re-editing, overlaying visual effects, or changing speeds – among many other methods – can lead to sudden observations about the filmic material at hand that watching in itself might not reveal.

Yet, as Mittell and Christian Keathley rightfully observe, to stop writing and start producing video essays requires some technical knowledge about video editing software that many (film) scholars simply do not possess or learn through the usual university education ("Introduction").

Mittell and Keathley teach upcoming scholars how to ‘do’ videographic criticism based on the principles that “one learns by doing” – meaning that participants in their seminars start creating short videos and using the software immediately – and that “formal parameters lead to content discoveries” (“Scholarship”). According to their experiences in teaching videographic criticism, “[they] have found that producing work according to often arbitrary formal parameters will reveal something about your object that would be hard to discover through more typical analytical means” (“Scholarship”). Our own instructor, Kathleen Loock, is a graduate from Mittell and Keathley’s “Scholarship in Sound & Image” workshop that takes place at Middlebury College in Vermont, and adapted the “Middlebury Model” to teach videographic criticism in Hannover.

In practice, our seminar walked us through the exercises used at the “Scholarship in Sound & Image” workshop. This meant that all participants were required to choose one movie at the beginning of the semester and keep working with this material for all exercises. Our first exercise of the semester was a “Videographic PechaKucha” assignment that required us to combine “10 video clips of precisely six seconds each, coupled with a continuous minute-long audio segment” from our chosen films (Keathley and Mittell, “Scholarship”). An important step before moving to the next exercise was to then get together to watch and discuss our PechaKucha exercises, first in smaller groups and then with the entire class. This pattern was then repeated for the subsequent exercises. In this fashion, we also made a voice-over exercise (non-academic voice-over text over a running scene), a videographic epigraph (unrelated on-screen text quotations over a scene with some added effects), and lastly a multi-screen composition for which we could also use the films our classmates were working with. Only after going through these assignments, we developed ideas, arguments, and a structure for our final video essay projects – starting with abstract trailers which were then successively expanded into longer videos.

As the course progressed, we learned how to use the editing software DaVinci Resolve and how to overcome a number of technical problems – and, of course, we also developed a deeper understanding of the movies we worked with throughout the semester. We screened our final projects in a Zoom event that was attended by many of our friends and family, in addition to fellow students and faculty members tuning in and enjoying the diverse projects produced during the course.

The students’ final video essay projects are featured in this issue of *In Progress*. They vary in tone, length, use of voice-over or on-screen-text, among many other things, and thus offer great examples of what videographic criticism can look like. Firstly, Sofie Hilbrand’s project investigates the mechanics of filmic point-of-view narration in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2004). In the next project, Can Ulucan engages with ideas of war and colonialism in the science fiction film *The Martian* (Ridley Scott, 2015). Staying within the same genre, my own video essay then positions *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017) as a slow and contemplative approach to science fiction film. This is followed by Sanne Brands’s work on the science fiction thriller *The Island* (Michael Bay, 2005), which investigates especially Scarlett Johansson’s character through Laura Mulvey’s notion of the male gaze. Then, Alex Groapa makes a compelling argument about parody in her video essay on *Austenland* (Jerusha Hess, 2013). Fittingly, Sophia Trayser’s work comes next and asks why Jane Austen’s work is so frequently adapted into film – and answers the question compellingly with scenes from *Pride & Prejudice* (Joe Wright, 2005). The video essay collection ends with a video essay on the use of music as dialogue in the animation film *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* (Kelly Asbury and Lorna Cook, 2002) by Setareh Ghasemireza.

Each of the projects is accompanied by a creator's statement which offers some further context to the creation process and/or the essay's argument. However, the video essays mostly speak for themselves – in writing, spoken words, music, and moving images.

Author Biography

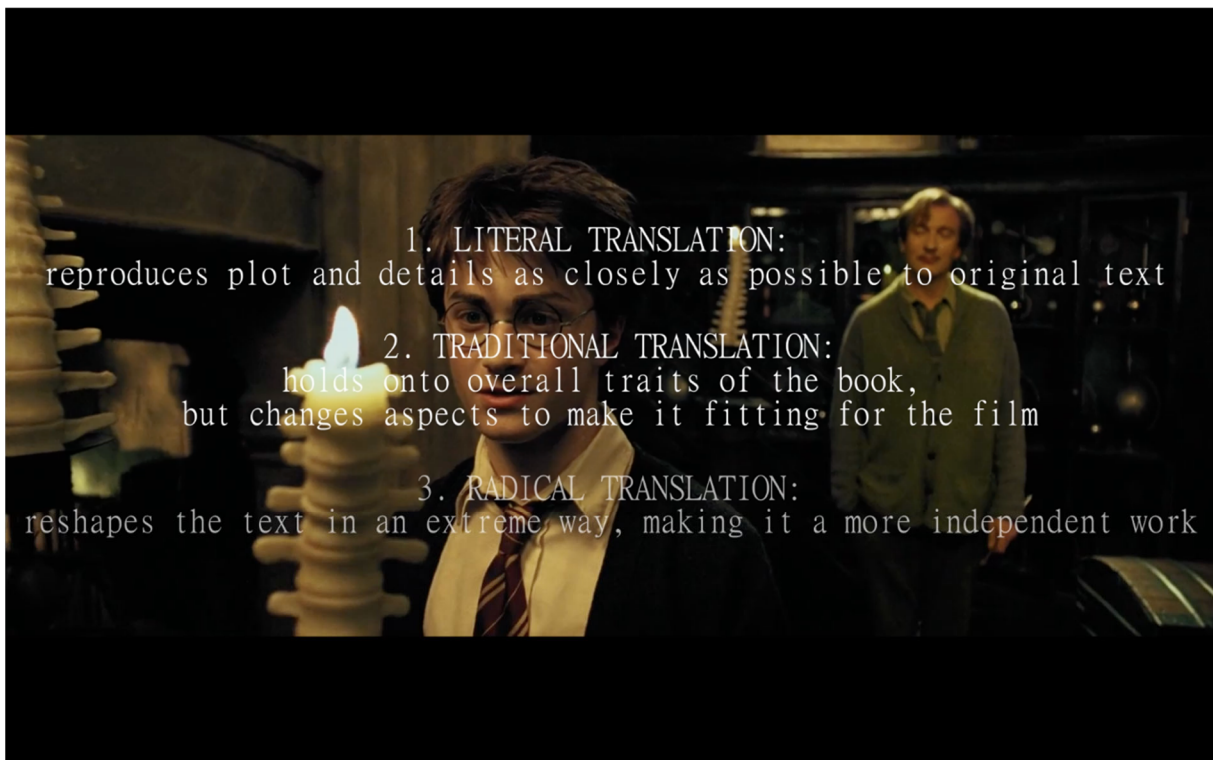
Alissa Lienhard (she/her) is a former student assistant and current master student in the division of American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover (Germany). She holds a bachelor's degree in the Interdisciplinary Bachelor with English as first subject and Biology as second subject. Her bachelor thesis, "Don't Let the Bastards Grind You Down?: Language(s) of Repression and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*" develops an argument about the power of language in the context of feminist speculative literature. In her studies in the North American Studies master program, she focuses particularly on film, television, comics, science fiction, feminism, neurodiversity, and gender/queer studies. Alissa Lienhard is a founding member of *In Progress's* editorial board.

Works Cited

- Grant, Catherine. "How Long Is a Piece of String? On the Practice, Scope and Value of Videographic Film Studies and Criticism." *The Audiovisual Essay: Practice and Theory of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies*, September, 2014. <https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/audiovisualessay/frankfurt-papers/catherine-grant/>.
- Grizzaffi, Chiara. "Between Freedom and Constraints: What I Learned from Teaching Video Essays." *Cine-Files*, vol. 7, fall 2014, <http://www.thecine-files.com/grizzaffi/>.
- Keathley, Christian, and Jason Mittell. "Introduction, Acknowledgements, and Further Reading." *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy*, by Keathley, Christian, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant, 2019, <http://videographicessay.org/works/videographic-essay/a-collection-of-writings-on-the-videographic-essay?path=contents>.
- . "Scholarship in Sound & Image: A Pedagogical Essay." *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy*, by Keathley, Christian, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant, 2019, <http://videographicessay.org/works/videographic-essay/scholarship-in-sound--image?path=contents>.
- Mittell, Jason. "Videographic Criticism as a Digital Humanities Method." *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, edited by Matthew Gold and Lauren Klein, U of Minnesota P, 2019, pp. 224-42. Digital Access: <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-f2acf72c-a469-49d8-be35-67f9ac1e3a60/section/b6dea70a-9940-497e-b7c5-930126fbd180#ch20>.
- Morton, Drew. "Beyond the Essayistic: Defining the Varied Modal Origins of Videographic Criticism." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 56, no. 4, Summer 2017, pp. 130-36.

Bringing Across Emotions in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

Sofie Hilbrands



This video essay discusses how storytelling in film differs from storytelling in book and highlights how The Prisoner of Azkaban translates emotions from book to screen through cinematic devices. Watch the video essay here: <https://flowcasts.uni-bannover.de/nodes/mrWEq>

Creator's Statement

Anybody who has ever read a novel or who has studied literature has come across the term and notion of 'point-of-view.' In books, there is always a narrator, someone who tells us a story. And it is also the narrator who directs our emotions, our feelings, and our empathy towards the characters, the action, and the narrative itself. In films, however, we do not read words, we do not pick up emotions by stumbling upon certain adjectives in descriptions. We perceive images, we hear music, we hear sounds, and these direct our emotions towards what is happening in a narrative.

I have always found it fascinating how films make us care. How they make us aware of emotions and events portrayed on screen and how they make us feel part of a story that is so distant from us, yet so close in front of us. I chose *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004, Alfonso Cuarón) because this film struck me when I was younger with its dark visuals and its distinguished use of camera perspectives. With this video essay, I want to elaborate on how the film uses point-of-view to adapt a story from book to film by translating its way of narration beautifully and in the most faithful way. I contend that this film thereby accomplishes to arouse viewers' empathy and sympathy towards the protagonist, namely Harry, and to awaken their attachment to his personal story, his feelings, and his following, yet to be unfolded, journey. I want to shed light on how this film differs from its predecessors, on what makes it special in its narrative style, and on why this film is inevitably essential for the entirety of the Harry Potter Saga.

When I started making this video essay, I did have an idea in mind where I wanted to go with this. However, the more invested I got in the material, the deeper I fell into a spiral and endlessly discovered more fascinating visuals, striking aspects of filmmaking, and Cuarón's incredible skills of telling Harry's story. I quickly noticed how easily and almost unnoticeably I got off track with regards to my original idea for my video essay, how I dived deeper into the crossroads of filmmaking. Thanks to my classmates' input after showing a work-in-progress, I decided to integrate text excerpts of the original Harry Potter book to emphasize the literal translation from text to screen. This implementation then guided me, and I think also guides viewers of this video essay, through my examination and visual assertions. And I daresay that this video essay covers how well the film translates Harry Potter's narration by smartly conveying his feelings through a combination of point-of-view shots, narration, and sound.

Author Biography

Sofie Hilbrands continued her academic education after receiving her Bachelor of Arts in English literary studies and, soon after, achieved her Master of Arts with focus on film and audiovisual studies. Her journey into film analysis started in her Master program where she deepened her knowledge about cinematic and videographic criticism. Her video essays highlight storytelling in film and, as a consequence of her background, compare it to literary storytelling. By doing this, Sofie Hilbrands focuses on the power in film storytelling and its impact on a single individual by translating emotions through images rather than text.

Works Cited

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban. Directed by Alfonso Cuarón, Warner Brothers, 2003.

The Martian and the Colonial Frame of Mind

Can Ulucan



The shot in which Dr. Mark Watney (Matt Damon) says, “... so technically, I colonized Mars,” is a clear example of the colonial frame of mind Can Ulucan’s video essay explores. Watch the video essay here: <https://flowcasts.uni-hannover.de/nodes/rzxeM>

Creator’s Statement

I have always been and still am fascinated by space exploration. Even today, learning, thinking, talking and daydreaming about the universe takes up a certain amount of my time (probably a tiny bit more than it should). Our technology and scientific knowledge have been growing exponentially, especially since the nineteenth century. I am not sure if our sense of ethics has always been able to catch up with that speed. “Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn’t stop to think if they should,” says the fictional Dr. Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum) in the movie *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993). This quote was one of the things I had in mind while working on the video essay. I take a skeptical stance toward space exploration in order to make people pause and think about its possible consequences – before getting excited about spending their winter vacation at a five-star hotel on Mars.

In the first half of the video essay, I present a very general timeline of the history of aviation and space travel to show how fast humanity’s collective technology has been developing, and in the second half, I wanted to remind people of how quickly the aforementioned technologies can be and have been used to the advantage of a certain group of people, instead of for humanity’s good as a whole.

Even though I have immensely enjoyed watching *The Martian* (Ridley Scott, 2015) both as a work of science fiction and a thriller, I could not stop myself from considering the possibility of bestowing all that technology on people whose primary goal is to possess things. To have simply more! I sincerely hope that my anxiety and skepticism will turn out to be unnecessary and false, and that humanity will be able to make use of our galaxy and its resources without leaving a big mess behind.

Author Biography

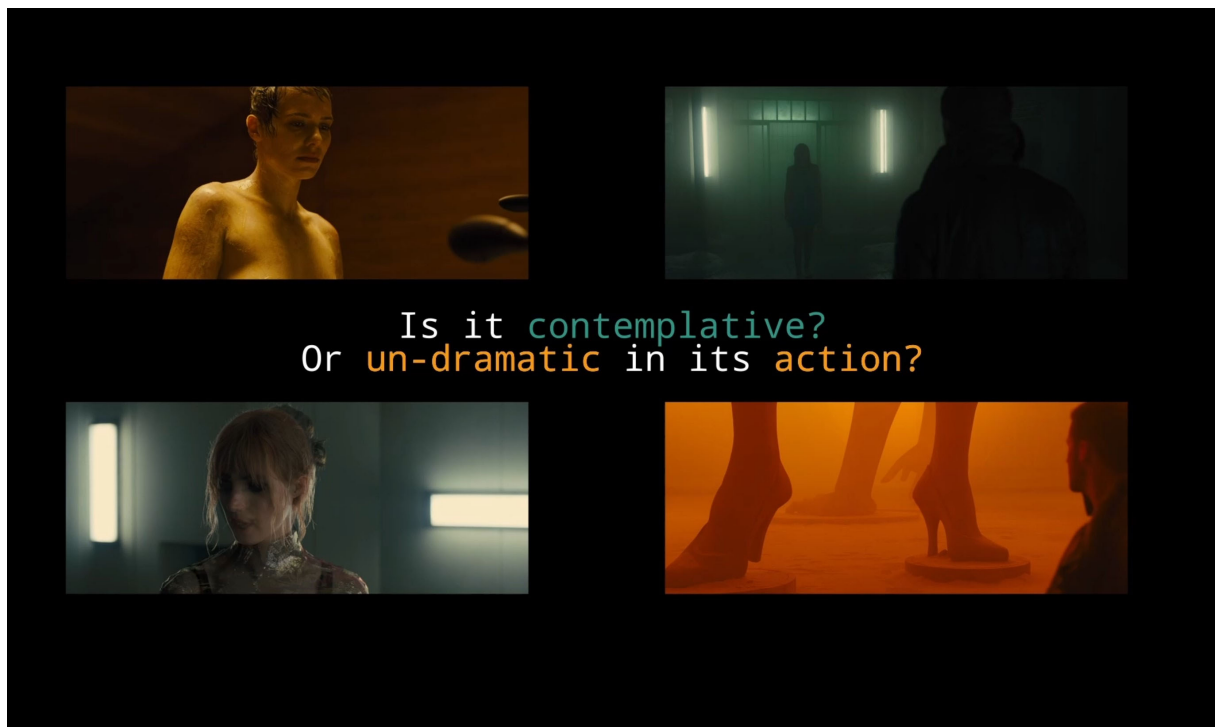
Can Ulucan (he/him) is a student of the North American Studies Master's program at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH) and holds a B.A. in English Language and Literature from Ege University, Turkey. His research interests are Science Fiction, movies of Spike Lee, and remakes and parodies of movies. He also enjoys rereading works of literature from a postcolonial point of view. He is currently working on an essay about spin-off movies from the 2000s.

Works Cited

Scott, Ridley. *The Martian*. Scott Free Productions, 2015.
Spielberg, Steven. *Jurassic Park*. Universal Pictures, 1993.

Blade Runner 2049 as Slow Science Fiction

Alissa Lienhard



Alissa Lienhard's video essay views Blade Runner 2049 as a work of 'slow science fiction' and investigates the interplay of contemplation, dramatic tension, and slow action sequences in the film. Watch the video essay here: <https://flowcasts.uni-hannover.de/nodes/GmPao>

Creator's Statement

My work on *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017) developed out of an assignment in which we had to pair a sequence from the movie with a text that was not directly related to the movie. The objective was to create a videographic epigraph. I struggled to settle on a topic or a text until I remembered reading Vivian Sobchack's "Science Fiction Film: An Overview." The quote from her text that I chose for my videographic epigraph defines science fiction films in a few sentences, focusing on their differences with regard to science fiction literature. Pairing Sobchack's definition of the science fiction film with a clip from *Blade Runner 2049* seemed intriguing, specifically because it creates contradictions. Sobchack argues that the science fiction film is "less contemplative and analytic and more spectacular and kinetic than its literary counterparts" (261). She also categorizes the genre as full of "dramatic action," another feature that does not necessarily apply to the film. For this first project, the videographic epigraph, I mainly played with the opposition created

between the film and the aforementioned quote while stressing the most contradictory parts of Sobchack's text through the use of color.

What started as an ironic juxtaposition then expanded into a more serious and larger project. While I kept parts of the original epigraph and quote for the introduction of my video essay, "*Blade Runner 2049* as Slow Science Fiction" makes a larger argument about the film's pacing and unusual storytelling. I argue that the film is slow, contemplative, and un-dramatic in its action. The video essay is separated into three parts that build upon each other. I firstly elaborate on definitions of science fiction film as a fast-paced genre and how this definition clashes with *Blade Runner 2049*. The second part then showcases how the action in the movie is un-dramatic, while the 'drama' mostly plays out on the level of dialogue. Lastly, a third section of the video essay explores the contemplative nature of the film with an exemplary close reading of one scene.

My argument on slowness is expanded beyond the essay's contents in its videographic form. Similar to *Blade Runner 2049* itself, this video essay takes things slow and moves calmly through its arguments. This results in a roughly ten-minute-long video that incorporates many of the film's visually stunning and slow shots. I also opted to use text-on screen instead of voiceover, both because the additional reading time adds to my thesis and because the film's slow music and dialogue enrich the essay more effectively than my voice would.

Author Biography

Alissa Lienhard (she/her) is a former student assistant and current master student in the division of American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover (Germany). She holds a bachelor's degree in the Interdisciplinary Bachelor with English as first subject and Biology as second subject. Her bachelor thesis, "Don't Let the Bastards Grind You Down': Language(s) of Repression and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*" develops an argument about the power of language in the context of feminist speculative literature. In her studies in the North American Studies master program, she focuses particularly on film, television, comics, science fiction, feminism, neurodiversity, and gender/queer studies. Alissa Lienhard is a founding member of *In Progress's* editorial board.

Works Cited

Blade Runner 2049. Directed by Denis Villeneuve, Warner Brothers, 2017.
Sobchack, Vivian. "American Science Fiction Film: An Overview." *A Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by David Seed, Blackwell, 2008, pp. 261-74.

The Male Gaze: A Look at Scarlett Johansson in *The Island*

Sanne Brands



Sanne Brands' video essay examines the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of Scarlett Johansson's character Jordan Two Delta in the science fiction film *The Island* (Michael Bay, 2005). Watch the video essay here: <https://flowcasts.uni-hannover.de/nodes/EymDv>

Creator's Statement

Michael Bay's films are known for their explosions and violence, which are mostly catering to a male audience. His films have been criticized as sexist. Rita Kempley from the *Washington Post*, for example, called his film *Bad Boys* (1995) "loud, shallow, sexist and a complete waste of time." His sexist approach to filmmaking especially came to light in his *Transformers* film (2007), which sexualizes actress Megan Fox, who was only 15 years old at the time of filming. However, the film *The Island* (2005) was made before his *Transformers* fame and therefore I found it interesting to see how sexism was portrayed in this film. In my video essay, I look at Scarlett Johansson's character, Jordan Two Delta, through the male gaze (cf. Mulvey). It becomes apparent, however, that the male gaze not only portrays Jordan as a sexual object, but also places her in relation to the

male lead who needs her to aid him in his heroism. In addition, the male gaze associates ideal womanhood with the notion of mothering. Therefore, the male gaze is not only visual, but a representation of how women should exist in a functioning patriarchy.

What was most challenging when creating this video essay was the fact that the film was very fast. For example, the film starts with a dream sequence where we see segments of Jordan on a boat intercut with disturbing images of cloning and drowning. Take out these disturbing images and you have a long scene of female spectacle. In my video essay, I use two songs, both of which are featured in the film, to help me tackle the speed problem. The first song, “Blow” by the Prom Kings, represents the fast masculine energy of the film. The second song, “Siboney” by Connie Francis, is much slower, but also contains a more feminine energy. Francis sings of how the absence of her lover would kill her, or, in other words, about her dependence of a male partner. The slow pace of the soundtrack, however, allowed me to slow down the film and highlight elements of the male gaze.

Author Biography

Sanne Brands (she/her) has finished her master’s degree in North American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover with a master thesis is on mother-daughter relationships in Disney’s animated films and their live-action remakes. Her research interest lies in representation in film and media, which includes gender studies and postcolonial studies. Having finished her studies, she is now working as a screen content manager at Vue Cinemas in Amsterdam.

Works Cited

- Kempley, Rita. “Bad Boys.” *Washington Post*, 7 Apr. 1995, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/badboysrkempley_c0105e.htm.
- Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, Autumn 1975, pp. 6-18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>.
- Weaver, Aaron. “Michael Bay Is an Epic Creep and We Owe Megan Fox a Huge Apology.” *CCN*, 23 Sept. 2020, <https://www.ccn.com/michael-bay-is-an-epic-creep-and-we-owe-megan-fox-a-huge-apology/>.

The Parody of *Austenland*

Alexandra Groapa

**That all Jane Austen adaptations must begin with
It is a truth universally acknowledged**

*This video essay by Alexandra Groapa examines how *Austenland* (2013) parodies Jane Austen adaptations. Watch the video essay here: <https://flowcasts.uni-bannover.de/nodes/KWGam>*

Creator's Statement

As a Gen-Z whose childhood was spent half outside and half on the internet, I grew up on the edge of the internet. Obsession with the internet comes at a price: bullying, insecurity, and isolation go hand-in-hand with having vast information at fingertips, being able to discover other cultures, and making friends halfway across the world.

The internet has provided many fascinating features, but none has scratched the itch in my brain like the video essay. I, alongside many other people, consume hours upon hours of video content that delves into why *Shrek* is the perfect anti-*Disney* film or offers sociological perspectives on the *Real Housewives* series. When researching a film to analyze in a video essay project, I instantly thought about *Austenland* (Jerusha Hess, 2013). It was a film I had watched before and that (shamefully) represented my own life. Of course, I was not as obsessed with Jane Austen as the main character, Jane Hayes (played by Keri Russell), but I was close.

Austenland tells the story of Jane, a 30-something-year-old, who spends her life savings on a two-week vacation at a regency-style resort called *Austenland*, hoping to find the love of her life. Except for the fact that everyone at *Austenland* is an 'actor' and that the romance is fabricated. Until it is not. The 'meta' aspect of *Austenland* is fascinating, as both Jane and the audience share a blurred perspective on what is real and what is not. The confusing muddle of authenticity versus

parody makes *Austenland* a more interesting watch than just simply watching an obsessive Janeite scurry around Buckinghamshire.

Thus, my video essay is concerned with answering the question: Does *Austenland* successfully parody Jane Austen or does it fall into its own parodical trap? The answer is ... kind of a bit of both? The first part of my video essay is concerned with the similarities between Austen's texts and the film: these elements help move the plot along, creating a tension between the novels, the authenticity of *Austenland*, and the modernity of the film. *Austenland* is concerned with what constitutes an authentic adaptation, but never realizes that it falls within its own parodical trap. It uses similarities to Austen's texts as running gags and plot devices but also as a way of mocking the obsessive Janeites.

Another important element I wanted to focus on in my video essay was the location of *Austenland*, which strives for authenticity but is not historically accurate. It uses a modern color palette, is scattered with modern paraphernalia, and blurs the boundary between modernity and authenticity. Does the film criticize the 'authentic' location or is it supporting it? Again, the answer could be one or the other. Truthfully, there is no single answer to my question.

Instead, I believe that the answer depends on the viewer: A Janeite would view the film differently than someone just watching it for fun. The film's refusal to stick to one side is why my criticism of the film cannot have a properly formed answer either. Whether the film wants us to think it is in on the parodical joke is ultimately up to you.

Author Biography

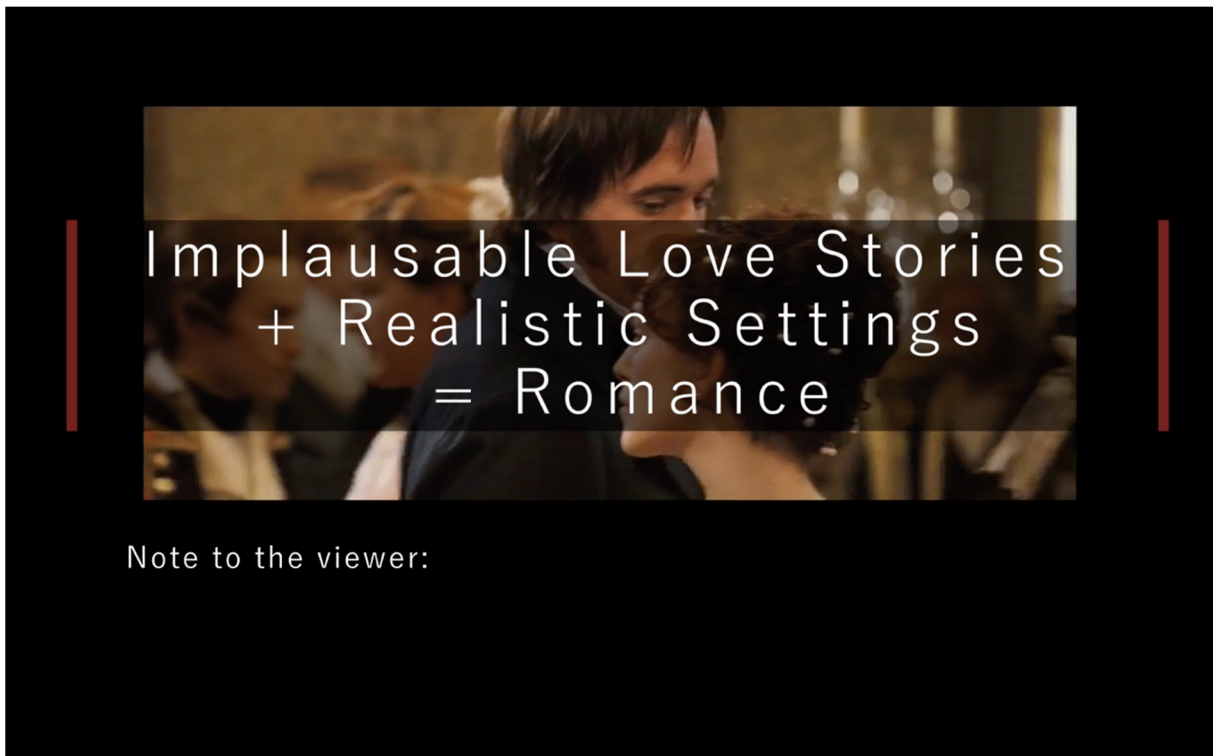
Alexandra Groapa (she/her) is currently working as an English/Social Science teacher in Berlin. She is originally from Ireland, where she completed her Bachelor's degree in English Studies at Trinity College Dublin. She graduated from Leibniz Universität Hannover with a Master's degree in North American Studies. Her research interests include horror, popular literature, and postcolonialism.

Works Cited

Hess, Jerusha. *Austenland*. 2013. UK: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment.

Jane Austen in Film

Sophia Trayser



Jane Austen is an indispensable part of both the literary canon and pop culture. Where does our fascination with Austen's plots come from? What elements explain Austen's enduring appeal? Watch the video essay here: <https://flowcasts.uni-hannover.de/nodes/yGkeZ>

Creator's Statement

Jane Austen's stories have captivated readers and audiences for centuries. Critics argue that in contemporary culture there are two Jane Austens. The first is an innovative literary genius with ground-breaking contributions to the art of the novel, especially in the use of consciousness through free indirect discourse (cf. Birk and Gymnich). However, the second Austen is a creator of romance, true love, and a fictional world that speaks to the readers of her novels until today. Therefore, Austen's texts, especially *Pride and Prejudice*, are an indispensable part of both the literary canon and pop culture.

Austen's novels are constantly being reinterpreted, in books as well as in film. Between 2009 and 2011 alone, at least 130 *Pride and Prejudice*-inspired novels were published. Additionally, since the 1990s, an increasing number of 'classic' novels have been adapted to film, for instance

Room with a View (James Ivory, 1986), and *Howard's End* (James Ivory, 1992). Jane Austen's novels, however, are by far the most widely and frequently revisited, as can be seen, for instance, with the famous 1995 BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice* and the most recent adaptation of *Persuasion* (Netflix, 2022). In addition to direct adaptations of the works, other films have been produced that are more or less directly based on Austen's story. *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Burr Steers, 2016), *Lost in Austen* (ITV, 2008), *Austenland* (Jerusha Hess, 2013), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Sharon Maguire, 2001), and *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995) are just a few examples of how films rework the original material.

Initially, I wanted to create a video essay that highlights the dialogic process between original material and film adaptation and look at the different film adaptations of the works. However, I instead turned to the much more fundamental questions: where does our fascination with Austen's plots come from? What elements make Austen's plots so timeless that they are revisited again and again? While this video essay cannot fully answer these complex questions, I believe to have identified three major aspects that explain Austen's enduring appeal: romance, comedy, and social commentary. The subcategories are acoustically separated from each other. I work especially with the visual form of the film and have only used the original audio when it helps to emphasize the argument. This leads to abstraction from the film material and a stronger focus on the content of the essay. I use Joe Wright's *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) as an example, but the attributes I have identified can also be applied to other film adaptations of Austen's works.

Author Biography

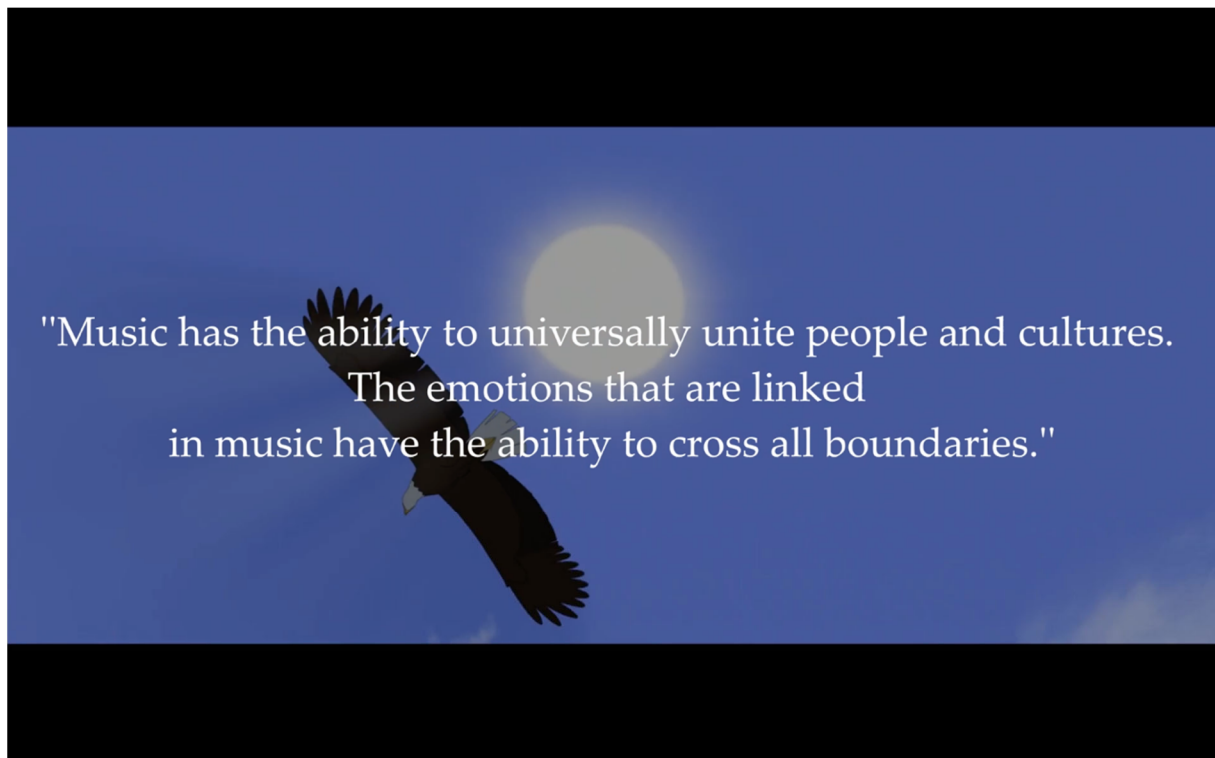
Sophia Trayser (she/her) is a graduate student of the Advanced Anglophone Studies Master's program at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH) and holds a B.A. in English and American Studies and Sociology from the University of Kassel. Her research interests focus on Gender Studies and Feminist Studies, especially in British texts from the nineteenth and twentieth century. While her bachelor's thesis dealt with the concept of the development of female privacy in British literature in said time, her master's thesis analyzed the representation of agency and masculinity in Jane Austen's texts. During her studies, Sophia worked as a tutor for a course on British Literary Studies.

Works Cited

Birk, Hanne, and Marion Gymnich, eds. *Pride and Prejudice 2.0: Interpretations, Adaptations and Transformations of Jane Austen's Classic*. Bonn UP, 2015.

Music as a Dialogue: A Video Essay

Setareh Ghasemireza



In her video essay on the animated film Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron (2002), Setareh Ghasemireza explores the role of Hans Zimmer's music. Watch the video essay here: <https://flowcasts.uni-hannover.de/nodes/qkDgg>

Creator's Statement

Music is a complementary factor in cinema, as it helps track the storyline. Interestingly, music has also been used in animation films like in the first animated film *Disney's Steamboat Willie* (1928) with synchronized sound on picture. Since that time, it has been discovered that music in animated films allows children's audiences to understand the content of the plot. It helps create feelings of anger, pain, happiness, and so on through sounds and melodies.

Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron (2002), directed by Kelly Asbury and Lorna Cook, is one of those animated films that tell their story through music. Bryan Adams, the singer, and Hans Zimmer, the composer, created a masterpiece that turned *Spirit* into a memorable animated film. Colleen Cavanaugh states, “[c]omposer Hans Zimmer crossed the boundary between humans and animals by creating a score that evoked the emotion of a horse and made it something a human audience could relate to” (1). The audience can empathize with the protagonist through watching

the film because music transfers the protagonist's sorrow and happiness through rhythm and rhymes. The soundtrack of *Spirit* profoundly contributes to the story because there is little dialogue. It might seem that *Spirit* is an animated musical, but this is not accurate as the characters do not sing. Instead, the film is narrated by Bryan Adams's songs. That is, along with Hans Zimmer's tracks that play a significant role in conveying the emotions of a scene, Bryan Adams's tracks supplement the film's narration. Cavanaugh also writes that

in order to convey genuine emotions, the directors decided not to incorporate dialogue directly into the horse's character for a more realistic approach. Thus, the thoughts and emotions of Spirit are told only through the score and supported by minimal narration. This unique story-telling method challenged composer Hans Zimmer to make music not just to fill the sound but also to express the emotion and even the dialogue of the characters.
(1)

By making this video essay, I wanted to emphasize the importance of music in making an animated film memorable for audiences. This video essay shows that music is influential in delivering a message through melodies and song tracks. By editing together scenes of the film, I have tried to show how the audience can emotionally connect with the protagonist. Overall, this video essay allowed me to make my argument by showing related scenes of the film.

Author Biography

Setareh Ghasemireza (she/her) is currently working on her master's thesis in American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH). She completed her bachelor's degree in English literature and language in Iran. She has written five papers, including one on the political aspects of Martin Luther King's letter, another exploring the theoretical concept of Autofiction in Franz Kafka's novel, two additional articles focusing on the culture of 'cool' in film, and a philosophical paper about personal identity. Her master's thesis delves into the intersection of feminism in cinema and the portrayal of actresses as materialist icons. Her research interests focus on cultural studies in the broader realm of cinema.

Works Cited

- Cavanaugh, Colleen. "Spirit: Stallion of the Symphony." *ESSAI*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2017, <https://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol15/iss1/14/>.
- Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*. Directed by Kelly Asbury and Lorna Cook, music by Hans Zimmer, DreamWorks, 2002.

Independent Studies: The Booker Prize – Reading New Literary Publications

Introduction: Book Reviews

Lukas Fender

Books are at the center of our studies. We read them, we analyze them, and some even write them. But what tells you that a book is a good book? You are right, literary prizes. At least according to the organizations who award them. *The Booker Prize*, for example, describes itself as “the leading literary award in the English speaking world” (“About the Booker Prize”) and claims to point “readers towards the best of the best” (“The Booker Prize”). But this is only one side of the story. Media and communications scholar Alexandra Dane argues that “the proliferation of prizes throughout the mid-to-late twentieth century has resulted in a cultural industry where prizes make significant contributions to literary tastemaking and national canon formation” (123). In their self-proclaimed evaluation, literary prizes “define notions of literary merit around which the field can coalesce, and identif[y] the authors who fit within these parameters and who are, therefore, worthy of celebration” (126). In other words, prizes have developed a defining cultural authority in the literary field and have become an economic signifier for the careers of authors, both award-winning and not. This critique, however, does not necessarily mean to devalue award-winning novels. Instead, it calls for a more critical engagement with the prizes awarded by the culture industry, as well as for a questioning of their role in taste-making and canon formation. Arguably, the majority of good books have not even won a prize (yet). It is therefore all the more important to read and share books that may not fit into the categories of literary prizes and that perhaps even challenge them.

Another form of book evaluation, and perhaps a more democratic one, is the book review. Usually published in a feature article, on websites, or in scholarly journals, book reviews discuss and assess publications of fiction and nonfiction extensively. Informed by reviews, readers can get a first impression whether a book suits their taste in books or has relevance for their current research project. Book reviews are therefore an integral part in the day-to-day business of a North American Studies scholar or student. In the Independent Studies class “The Booker Prize: Reading New Literary Publications,” taught by Janna-Lena Neumann in 2022, students of the North American Studies program at Leibniz University Hannover critically engaged with literary prizes, in particular the 2021 Booker Prize and four of the six shortlisted novels. In addition, participating students reviewed the novels discussed in the class. Two of these reviews are now published in this issue. Kerem Ak reviews *Pulitzer Prize* winner Richard Powers’ novel *Bewilderment* (2021) as “a science fiction novel telling the story of an astrobiologist father and his neurodivergent son while

cunningly unveiling wrongdoings of mankind in nature.” This is followed by Carolin Wachsmann’s review of Patricia Lockwood’s debut novel *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) in which “a woman’s life is turned upside down as she has to reconsider her priorities in life.” The two reviewers examine and evaluate the narrative strategies and themes of the novels, providing analytical insights into the diegetic worlds they depict. In doing so, they treat the novels as texts, without trying to fit them into specific parameters. As a result, the reviews featured here not only offer well-argued and comprehensive answers to the question of whether the books they discuss are ‘good’ – they also provide contexts and arguments that allow readers to themselves explore this question.

Author Biography

Lukas Fender (he/him) studies the double degree Master of Education (History & English) and Master of Arts (North American Studies) at Leibniz University Hannover. In 2020, he received his bachelor’s degree in History and English from the University of Mannheim. His research interests are memory studies with a strong focus on nostalgia, popular culture and politics, as well as political education. He is currently working as a research assistant at the Institute for Didactics of Democracy at Leibniz University Hannover.

Works Cited

- “About the Booker Prize.” *The Booker Prizes*, <https://thebookerprizes.com/booker-prize/about-the-booker-prize>. Accessed 26 Oct. 2023.
- Dane, Alexandra. “Eligibility, Access and the Laws of Literary Prizes.” *Australian Humanities Review*, vol. 66, 2020, pp. 122-36.
- Lockwood, Patricia. *No One Is Talking About This*. Bloomsbury Circus, 2021.
- Powers, Richard. *Bewilderment*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2021.
- “The Booker Prize.” *The Booker Prizes*, <https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-prize>. Accessed 26 Oct. 2023.

Book Review: *Bewilderment* by Richard Powers

Kerem Ak

A science fiction novel that tells the story of an astrobiologist father and his neurodivergent son and cunningly unveils wrongdoings of mankind in nature.

After the publication of the Pulitzer Prize-winning masterpiece, *The Overstory*, in 2018, a book about the interaction between people and trees, Richard Powers followed his earlier success with a brand-new book titled *Bewilderment* in 2021. The first thing that catches the eye is that both novels deal with environmental issues. But in his latest book, Powers presses the same issue with the voice of a young, neurodivergent boy who has lost his mother. *Bewilderment*, which was shortlisted for the 2021 Booker Prize and longlisted for the National Book Award, hints at the scientific and political causes of the growing environmental disaster, without bothering us with scientific explanations and details. Instead, the readers witness the impact of the global disaster on a troubled, yet special, young boy who keeps up his curiosity and care for the natural world throughout the novel.

In *Bewilderment*, Powers introduces the story of a father and his son. The narrator of the novel, Theo Byrne is an astrobiologist, who is based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and works on life outside planet Earth. After losing his wife, Alyssa, an environmental activist and lawyer, in a car crash, Theo dismisses the responsibilities of his job so that he can spend more time with his son, Robin. He is a nine-year-old boy who mourns the death of his mother and experiences bullying at school.

Robin is an extremely sweet and smart child with a voracious appetite for nature, tiny creatures, unknown planets, and possible intelligent life forms. On the other hand, he faces troubles such as oversensitivity to noises, lack of concentration, and difficulties to control his anger. Robin has been diagnosed with few neurodevelopmental conditions and disorders, Theo explains to the readers: “the votes are two Asperger’s, one probable OCD and one possible ADHD” (97). Despite the warnings raised by the authorities, Theo rejects putting his son on psychoactive drugs and holds on the idea that “life is something we need to stop correcting” (5).

Bewilderment falls into the genre of science fiction due to its dystopian tone and its special attention to alien life on exoplanets. Moreover, the novel introduces the Decoded Neurofeedback (Dec Nef), a fictional non-chemical procedure in which patients are placed in an fMRI machine and trained to alter their behavior and neural activities by making use of the neural patterns of other people. Rather than relying on Ritalin or other similar psychoactive drugs, Theo agrees to try this treatment on his son by using the mental picture of his dead wife, who participated in the project before. With this life-altering decision, the story takes a different turn.

Readers who are familiar with Power's earlier novels can effortlessly recognize striking similarities between them and *Bewilderment*. For instance, in *Galatea 2.2* (1995), the narrator who experiences a sort of career stagnation in writing teaches a computer to read literary texts critically. In another novel, titled *Generosity: An Enhancement* (2009), Powers questions the possible consequences both on the personal and social levels of finding the genetic code to happiness. Regardless of the main idea of his specific novels, Powers's fiction feeds on the scientific and technological developments and their great impact on both humans and the non-human inhabitants of nature.

Bewilderment is a novel that deals with big questions of astronomy and science whose answers remain still unknown to us. And yet, its story about the intimate relationship between a father and his son enables readers to picture the incomprehensible and to imagine extrasolar planets, other suns, and neutron stars.

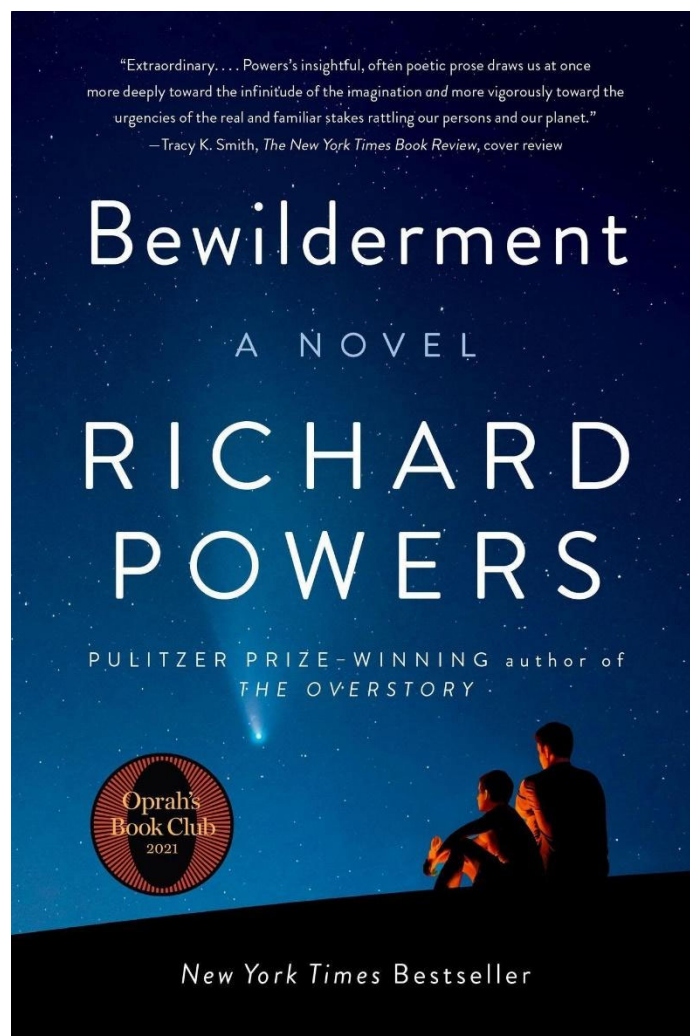


Figure 1. *Bewilderment* was published by Norton & Company.

Born in Evanston, Illinois in 1957, Richard Powers has always been interested in different art forms, particularly music and literature. While doing his major in physics, he took a U-turn and decided to study literature. Powers decided to build a career in writing and took inspiration from his former education in science and its merits and dangers as a theme in his novels. So far, he published 13 books in which he deals with the impacts of modern science and technology on distinct characters. For his debut novel *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985), Powers received the Rosenthal Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. In addition to that, he won several prizes such as the James Fenimore Cooper Prize for Best Historical Fiction with *Gain* (1998), Harold D. Vursell Memorial Award Prize with *Plowing the Dark* (2000), the National Book Award with *The Echo Maker* (2006), Pulitzer Prize for Fiction with *The Overstory* (2018). Powers's thirteenth novel, *Bewilderment* (2021), was praised for its original content and was longlisted for the National Book Prize and shortlisted for the 2021 Booker Prize.

Author Biography

Kerem Ak is a Master's student of literature and films at Leibniz University of Hannover. His study interests include fantasy literature, utopias and dystopias, nature writing, climate fiction, festival movies, and podcasts. He also contributed to the *T-Litcon: 1st Annual International Conference on Literature: "Human Rights & Literature"* (2023) with his abstract on Gilbert Imlay's epistolary novel, *The Emigrants* (1793).

Book Review: *No One Is Talking About This* by Patricia Lockwood – Tragedy in the Time of Social Media

Carolin Wachsmann

From chronically online to a baby born with “Elephant Man” syndrome – a woman’s life is turned upside down as she has to reconsider her priorities in life.

No One Is Talking About This is asking a relevant question in the age of social media: Why are we wasting so much of our time on irrelevant online discourses? Aren’t there enough real problems in our real lives? Patricia Lockwood’s debut novel won the Dylan Thomas Award 2022 and has been shortlisted for various critically acclaimed awards, including the Booker Prize and the Women’s Prize for Fiction. Events from Lockwood’s life served as inspiration for her novel, which consists of two parts. First, we follow the unnamed female protagonist as she navigates her life on the fictional social media platform “portal,” where she has risen to relative fame due to her post asking “Can dogs be twins?”(13). This all happens before a family tragedy radically changes her life. The second half of the book revolves around the protagonist’s newborn niece who suffers from Proteus syndrome. Also known as “Elephant Man” disease, this rare genetic disorder lets the skin, bones, muscles, fatty tissues, and blood and lymphatic vessels to grow indefinitely.

The novel deals with social media and the lives we lead online as well as grief and the importance of family. Lockwood experiments stylistically with stream of consciousness and other modernist techniques. While the first half of the novel functions without a plot, or what we would normally expect in terms of storytelling, the second half contains autofictional elements and depicts how the birth of a disabled child impacts the people closest to them. Lockwood’s novel thus defies traditional notions of plot and genre conventions. To a certain extent, her narrative style is reminiscent of Sally Rooney with her close focus on her characters and distinct narrative voice. The title refers to the feeling of the unnamed protagonist after the medical miracle of her niece’s birth who was deemed unable to live. As the protagonist “feels lifted out of the stream of regular life,” she feels the need to stop people on the street to shout at them “Do you know about this? You should know about this. No one is talking about this!” (145).

The narrative situation captures how scrolling on social media feels, jumping from topic to topic, from argument to counter-argument, being caught in the never-ending stream of infinite opinions. Lockwood’s writing evokes the endless scroll of social media so much that the readers



can simultaneously imagine the posts and images she alludes to. “Of course when the eclipse came, the dictator stared directly into it, as if to say that nature had no dominion over him either” (24) evokes the iconic photo of Trump staring directly into the sun.

The novel blurs the line between fiction and reality, literary and online language. The characters sometimes speak as if directly quoting from posts that they had read online the day before, emojis have become part of the protagonist’s internal monologue. The tragedy the family experiences is also represented in the language, which, as they take a step back from social media to show the little girl how beautiful life could have been, distances itself from the style of online discourses. While the first half of the novel kept my interest by simulating the experience of social media and discovering memes, discourses, and images I recognized, I couldn’t help asking myself: Where is this going? But as the tragedy unfolds and we are following the numbered days of the baby born with a genetic mutation, the irrelevance of the social media discussions on which we spend so much of our daily lives becomes even more obvious. *No One Is Talking About This* is not a novel about politics but it is political. Written in the Trump era, references to the then-president as “the dictator” seem a bit on the nose. But asking the question of who should be able to afford health insurance to keep living is a dividing topic in America today.

Although it is short (with only about 200 pages), the novel takes the reader on a journey from the depths of the internet to the question of what gives our lives meaning. Its experimental style challenges us to reflect more closely about the impact of social media and the emotional turmoil of grief.

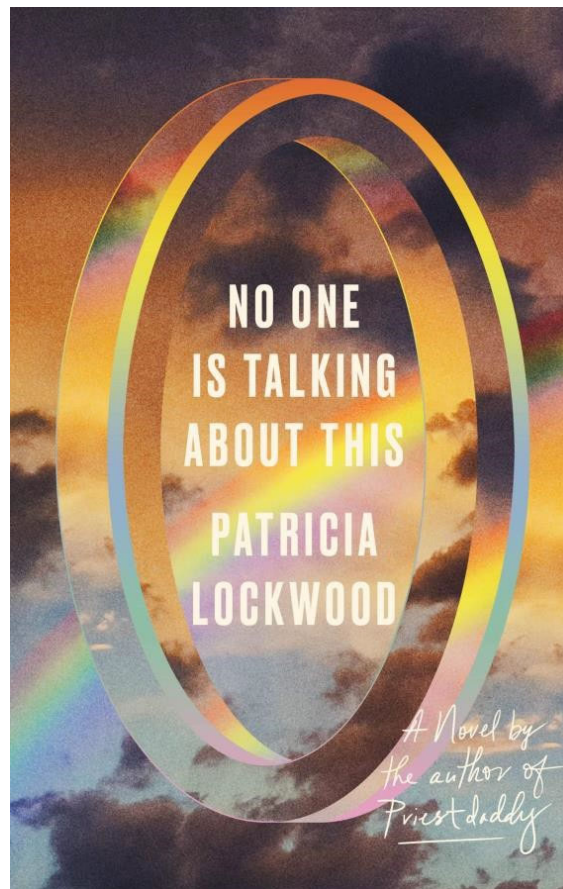


Figure 1. *No One Is Talking About This* was published by Riverhead Books.

Patricia Lockwood is a U.S.-American poet, essayist, and novelist. She has written for the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *New Republic* and is a contributing editor of the *London Review of Books*. Her debut novel *No One is Talking About This* was published by Riverhead Books in February 2021 and has been a strong contender for multiple awards. *No One is Talking About This* was shortlisted for the 2021 Booker Prize and the Women's Prize for Fiction 2021, was one of the *New York Times*' "10 Best books of 2021," and won the 2022 Dylan Thomas Prize. Lockwood has also written the memoir *Priestdaddy* in 2017, which won the Thurber Prize for American Humor, and the poetry collections *Balloon Pop*, *Outlaw Black* and *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals*.

Lockwood was born in Indiana and raised in "all the worst cities of the Midwest." She often lived in Catholic rectories because of her father's profession as a priest. She did not go to college but instead focused on her career as a writer and poet. After joining Twitter, she quickly amassed a following for her comedy, poems, and series of "sexts." Lockwood currently lives in Savannah, Georgia where she is working on a new novel and a collection of short stories.

Author Biography

Carolin Wachsmann studies the double degree Master of Education (English and History) and Master of Arts (North American Studies) at Leibniz University Hannover. In 2021, she received her bachelor's degree in English and History. Her research interests are English literature, popular culture and fan studies, and postcolonial theory. When she is not reading or writing, she spends too much of her free time on social media.

Open Section

Literary Journeys and Screen Adventures: A Conversation

Eiman Alkhatib, Lukas Fender, Jessica Hille, Alissa Lienhard, Jia Shen Lim, and Marielle Tomasic

The editorial board of *In Progress* did not meet during the summer break, so there is a lot of catching up to do. We quickly realized that apart from vacations and term papers, we all had one thing in common: we consumed various forms of textual media. Additionally, we also had something to produce for this issue's open section. Thus, we thought, why not combine these two things and catch up in a written dialog? So, here we are. Welcome to our conversation about our favorite summer reads, shows, and films! Let's begin by sharing our experiences, criteria, and tips when deciding about what to read or watch next.

Marielle: Okay, where do I even start? My TBR (To Be Read list) is ever-growing, and most of the inspiration for it I probably get from BookTube (which is also great to listen to while doing something else), Goodreads, or places like lithub.com. However, all of those sources tend to focus more on newer releases instead of backlists (that is, books that have been published a while ago), so I do well to remember to go back to authors whose work I have previously enjoyed. I used to be a mood reader, but found that for the past few months, creating a list of books that I would like to read (with a few spots open for mood-reading) worked pretty well. For these monthly lists, I tried to go for a mix between newer and older releases, fiction and non-fiction (specifically, memoirs and other forms of life-writing), maybe throw in a short-story collection as well. I find making a written-down list of what I want to focus on next helps me not get too distracted by everything else that is out there. How do you guys decide what you want to read or watch? And is anyone actively following publishers they like to find new reads? I feel like I should do that more, but somehow often forget.

Alissa: I also have a really long TBR list, mostly thanks to books being gifted to me for birthdays and Christmas, with the occasional Bookstagram book I bought on an impulse thrown into the mix. Right now, with the summer being taken up with my master's thesis, I rarely get to read in my free time. And if I do, it rarely is anything challenging and educational but more something fast, fluffy, and entertaining, because otherwise I will not finish it within a few days, and if I take longer than that, I will not finish it at all. There is an embarrassing pile of books on my bookshelf that are $\frac{2}{3}$ read and then never touched again. So, right now, I decide what to read based on impulses and moods – just like Marielle used to do – and I love to start books only if I am sure I will get through



them in less than four days. I really hope I will get to do more organized and educational reading after the thesis, and maybe I might even get to all of those unfinished books that taunt me from the bookshelf.

Marielle: Ugh, the $\frac{2}{3}$ read books is actually what made me start creating those monthly TBR-lists, so I feel you... And yes, I think a lot of us struggle with reading alongside working on bigger academic projects. And I, too, had a phase this summer where I desperately needed a lighter read for the very first time in my life – and you know what? I think that if one feels like one *has* to read something academic/educational that kind of misses the mark. Along those lines, something that I personally found myself struggling with this year was reading a lot of books that I felt like I might want to write my master's thesis about, only to then discover that they were not what I had hoped they would be, which led to a semi-reading slump. So, I feel like it can be quite tricky to find the very interesting, analysis-worthy stuff but also not have it feel like a never-ending quest. If anyone wants to share how they go about this, I would love to hear it!

Jessica: I find both of your ideas very insightful and might try some of these in the future. This year especially, I also really struggled with finishing the books I started, or even beginning to read them. Honestly, some books on my shelf are there because I would have liked to be someone who reads these kinds of books, but I just don't enjoy them at the end of the day. So, I definitely want to be honest with myself and more organized when planning my reading. This year, I mostly decided based on friends' recommendations, chose other works by authors I love, or bought what struck me as interesting in the bookstore. However, during the semester where we read lots of texts anyways, I prefer visual inputs. There, I choose shows for mainly the same reasons as with books, but I also rotate between my favorite shows and rewatch them because this gives me a strange feeling of comfort. I don't think I would ever do that with books, at least not with fiction.

Jia Shen: I resonate with Jessica's experience. I often start books with enthusiasm but tend to lose interest along the way. Fiction, in particular, just doesn't hold my interest like it used to. I'm more into movies and television series for my fictional fix. When it comes to reading, I gravitate toward scholarly materials – essays, reviews, exhibition catalogs. Not all of them are heavy reads so I don't wear myself out. There are also easy reads in the form of short articles or essays in books, magazines, and even online. There's something satisfying about reading a well-crafted analysis or an insightful critique. I think it's the aspect of discovering and understanding new ideas that appeals to me. Plus, there's the added bonus of staying informed and having my curiosity stimulated. Which makes me wonder, does anyone here find themselves gravitating towards non-fiction for leisure?

Lukas: Reading for pleasure was my aim for the summer holidays as well, especially because I started with my master's thesis afterward, too. What I usually do is to move as far away from North American Studies as possible by asking friends and relatives for their favorite light reads or authors. This usually results in a similar list or pile you all mentioned, but I think this is half the fun of summer reads!

Eiman: Unlike Lukas, this summer, I chose academic books, especially those that teach how to think and write academically. Of course, I didn't select these books randomly from any bookstore shelf; instead, I bought the three most recommended books by experts and professors I follow on Instagram. By doing so, I believe that I was spared from having to compile a list of books.

Marielle: Seeing “I have to read so much for uni so I struggle with reading for pleasure” as a theme here – has anyone tried audiobooks as an alternative? I could imagine them working quite well when you cannot handle staring at even more print but still want to be entertained.

Eiman: Well, I think we all agree that reading as an entertaining activity is associated with enjoyment and interaction. In my case, at least, audiobooks can’t provide the same kind of interaction or fulfill even half the pleasure that I experience when using all my senses to hold and engage with a printed book. Maybe somebody has a different point of view.

Jia Shen: In the past, I have tried getting into audiobooks but it is not my thing. However, I enjoy listening to podcasts when I am doing chores, cooking, and even when I shower. My podcast library includes a mix of educational shows like *e-flux* and *Talk Art*, comedy series like *The Useless Hotline* and the true crime podcast *Rotten Mango*.

Alissa: For me, audiobooks actually do help a bit. I like that I can listen to them while doing chores, going on walks, or commuting. I also like to listen to books that I am not really invested in to fall asleep in the form of a podcast that is called *The Sleepy Bookshelf*.

Jessica: I totally agree with Alissa! I love audiobooks for chores and also long walks, however, as they never get my full attention. I usually go for audio versions of books that I already know (*Harry Potter*, of course) or “easy reads” where I don’t have to grasp every single detail. Also (ignoring that our professors might read this as well), I sometimes listen to parts of novels we have to read for class when I run out of time, as I’m able to multitask that way.

Lukas: I do, too! When it all gets too much to read, I sometimes create audio files where I let some AI voice read out the PDF. You cannot annotate the text anymore, but if you just want to get an idea of the key concepts and overall content...

Jessica: So far so interesting, now let’s talk about the actual content we’ve consumed throughout the summer, based on our various reading approaches. I’m excited to hear what you’ve read and watched!

Lukas: I have two favorite summer reads by the same author. As I have mentioned, I sometimes read outside the North American sphere; hence, I read two books by the Swedish author Alex Schulman. His novel *The Survivors* is about a dysfunctional family that lives below the poverty line in Sweden. In a very engaging narration, Schulman discusses generational trauma, family and especially sibling relations, as well as poverty and class, and finishes the novel off with a shocking revelation. Despite the rather unpleasant topics, I found the reading particularly engaging because it is simultaneously narrated in two directions. One narrative strand moves from the protagonist’s childhood to the big reveal. The other strand consists of only one single day told in reverse.

Eiman: That sounds quite challenging, especially in contrast to our lighthearted audio books discourse. How did you come across this novel? Or, what made you go for Swedish literature in the first place? I find this very interesting, I don’t have any experience with Swedish books.

Lukas: I don't either (apart from the occasional Scandinavian thriller)! It was on a pile of books I 'borrowed' from my mother. She volunteers in a small library, and there she came across Schulman. Eventually, I picked books by a Swedish author because I went to Sweden this summer. Very creative, I know... The other book by Schulman I read is called *Burn All My Letters* and is something like an investigative biography of his own family trauma. Schulman tries to find out why his mother and her siblings always burst into conflicts with each other and eventually discovers that his grandparents, famous Swedish author Sven Stolpe and Karin Stolpe, are at the roots of the cause. He recreates his grandparents' relationship by going through their estate, visiting archives and libraries, and conducting interviews with the son of his grandfather's archrival. In doing so, he not only deals with his own family trauma but also brings patriarchal relationship norms and their dangers to the fore.

Jia Shen: Lukas, diving into Swedish literature sounds pretty cool. It's always interesting to see how a trip or new experience can nudge us toward different kinds of books. About a year ago, I bought the autobiographical novel *Returning to Reims* by French author Didier Eribon after it was recommended to me, and I finally was able to get around to reading it this summer. It is also the only summer read I managed to finish. The book is a blend of sociological analysis and personal memoir of Eribon, following the author's journey back to his hometown of Reims after three decades. Prompted by his father's death, Eribon confronts his working-class upbringing and the challenges he faced as a queer youth in that environment. The narrative further deals with family dynamics, memories, and the exploration of identity. He candidly unpacks his past, looks at how class, sexuality, and politics all intertwine, and then connects it all to who he has become today. On a similar note, I find that Eribon's 'return' to Reims is akin to the 'notes' in James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*. As someone who prefers non-fiction for leisure reading, I think the book offers a thoughtful and engaging look into how our origins shape us, and how we can understand and reconcile with them over time.

Alissa: After these books introduced by Lukas and Jia Shen, which all sound profound and serious, like Literature (with a capital L), I am almost a bit embarrassed to introduce my summer read...

Lukas: Don't be! We all have guilty pleasure reads, and most books are beautiful, right?!

Jia Shen: Exactly! Every book has its charm. So, Alissa, don't hold back.

Alissa: Well, as I said, with the master's thesis stressing me out, I really like something fluffy and entertaining to read, and as someone who grew up watching romantic comedies with my mother and friends, I do love books that read like a romcom as well. So, one of the few books I bought on a whim and then actually managed to read within a few days (well, actually it was one sitting in a day) was *Love, Theoretically* by Ali Hazelwood.

Jessica: So, is the book intensely romantic, as the title suggests?

Alissa: It really is as cheesy as the title sounds, but I would also say it brushes on some serious topics that interest me as well. The author herself is a professor for neuroscience and the protagonists in all her novels are women in STEM as well. The novel explores what it means to be a woman in this male-dominated field, and also more generally addresses the power imbalances

and sometimes ugly competition for jobs in the field. I think some of this applies to academia in general as well, and as someone who once studied biology, I also find the science aspects in the novel interesting. And I also love that there is asexual representation in the novel – a topic I am interested in especially since I wrote a term paper about *Loveless* by Alice Oseman that focused on asexuality in the context of metafiction, autofiction, and queer joy. But first and foremost, *Love, Theoretically* really is a cheesy romcom that makes you smile and maybe swoon a bit.

Jessica: This book is going to land on my list for sure! No book shaming at all. I love a good cheesy, romantic novel and also television series for times where uni reads consume a lot of time and brain work. That reminds me of a highly cheesy (and slightly problematic) show I watched during the summer. Fittingly (or not), it's called *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, and most of the time, it gave me as much of an ick as you would expect from the title. However, I found myself binging it within a couple of days and I asked myself all the time: Why does this teen show about the literal introduction of a young girl to society (with a horrible focus on her looks) get me so hooked?!

Marielle: I think reading more fluffy and lighthearted books is totally valid and cool! Like Jessica mentioned before, I also tend to go for easier reads as audiobooks, so my favorite read of the summer is more academic. I feel like it is responding to a few of the issues we have been discussing so far when reading outside of our academic projects. To be more specific: I started reading this already in the spring, and it took me well into the summer to finish it. Now you may be thinking that this could not possibly be a good sign for the book, but hear me out: it's a short story collection, which I think we have not yet talked about here as a wonderful genre – especially when wanting to read something in a shorter amount of time and/or with a more distracted mind and a decreased attention span. Chelsea Vowel's *Buffalo Is the New Buffalo* is, according to the publisher's description, a collection of "[p]owerful stories of 'Metis futurism' that envision a world without violence, capitalism, or colonization" (<https://arsenalpulp.com/Books/B/Buffalo-Is-the-New-Buffalo>). I was drawn to it because I am very interested in Indigenous storytelling and am trying to expand my personal internal catalog of ways in which this storytelling can take place.

Lukas: Oh yes, I have seen a few ads for the book! From what I've gathered, it reminded me a little bit of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's writings. She is a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and writes a lot about First Nation and Indigenous epistemology etc. Maybe this could go onto your TBR pile as well if you haven't read it yet. How did you like the *Buffalo Is the New Buffalo*?

Marielle: I have read some of Simpson's work, but not all of it yet. I really want to get to *Noopiming*... But yes, this is exactly along the same lines and something that I have been increasingly interested in. With this specific collection, I was leaving my comfort zone a little since it is marketed as speculative fiction/science fiction, which I often like in terms of what it can do, but almost quite as often find myself not feeling very engaged by. Somehow, I want to like it, but then rarely end up doing it, if I am being honest with myself. I think going for short story collections in cases like these can be very fruitful, because it offers an array of narratives – I may not love all of them, but some may very well end up working for me. In the specific instance of *Buffalo Is the New Buffalo*, what I found immensely helpful as well were the short explorations that followed each short story. In these, Vowel explores the themes of the story, explains a few concepts, at times also links the stories to one another. Yes, this makes the collection more academic, but I found myself deeply engaged and curious to learn more. But, of course, you could also always skip these explorations

and only go for the short stories themselves. In any case, I ended up really liking the entire collection a lot, and feel like pointing out the short story genre is really fitting for our conversation, too!

Alissa: Marielle, that sounds amazing. I will definitely keep it in mind for the future when I have more headspace to engage with this kind of intense and complex writing! But I also want to circle back to Jessica. I also binge-watched the second season of *The Summer I Turned Pretty* over the summer. And it is such a guilty pleasure of mine. I think it's so catchy because of all the drama and the high emotions, right? And also, sometimes, it is really enjoyable to be annoyed by characters.

Marielle: Alissa, yes, I highly recommend checking it out. And if you only read the short stories and skip the explorations, you could reframe it as something like *Black Mirror* told as Metis short stories ;)

Jessica: I am going to leave this conversation with 20 more books on my list. Yours are definitely going up there as well, Marielle!

Eiman: As I have said earlier, my focus for the time being is on academic books. One of the three books I chose is *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article* written by sociologist Howard S. Becker. In my opinion, the book is as a valuable resource because each of the ten chapters offers practical tips for social scientists (not specifically) grappling with the difficulties of starting or finishing a short or long piece of writing. I say “not specifically” because it turns out that his tips and solutions (which are drawn from his personal experience) are used by lots of writers in other fields as well and work perfectly. Moreover, I think that one of the reasons behind my choice to read this book lies in its latest version, the third edition was published in 2020, which makes its tips up-to-date.

Alissa: Your book of choice, Eiman sounds incredibly helpful and like something I should have read at some point. My approach to my master's thesis was basically just trying to wing it. Is there any specific advice that was impactful, that you remember really well, or that you think every student should know?

Eiman: Ugh, yeah, and it may be unfair to reduce the advice and tips to a sentence or even two. But I will try to get to the point. I think the most important thing that the whole book revolves around is that academic writing is not a talent, but a skill which can be learned and taught, something that is not built all at once, rather step by step. I believe this is the reassurance and the relief that every novice writer seeks. Then there are other tips about organizing the writing process.

Jessica: It's good to hear that academic writing can be learned! I will definitely come back to that book, Eiman. With upcoming term papers and also my master's thesis, I can definitely use some academic writing tips. Similar to Lukas, my favorite summer read is from outside the North American Studies sphere and I actively chose it because it's written by my (current) favorite author, Sally Rooney. She is an Irish writer and the book is her third novel. It's called *Beautiful World, Where Are You*. In classical Rooney manner, it combines various important topics, like sexuality, feminism, anti-capitalism, political questions, historical movements, and others. Basically, it perfectly captures struggles or questions that resonate with me on a daily basis, as she also writes from a POV that I

can very much identify with (her protagonists are usually female literature students or writers, queer, and lost souls in some way). At the end of the day, it is also a romance novel in many ways, but definitely not lighthearted. On the contrary, it can be very challenging at times, but in the best way as it made me reflect on our conception of love and how to break the status quo. I have to admit, though, that I expected more from this book, mostly because of the ending that I'm not going to give away here, of course. I still recommend it because Rooney's way with words is amazing, and I definitely want to mention her other novels *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* here as well.

Alissa: Eiman, that's reassuring. We are all not perfect writers and keep on improving! And Jessica, thank you! This is the push I needed to pick up my copy of *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, which is waiting for me somewhere on my bookshelf. Well, at least it's high on the to-be-read list now and will be read soon.

Jia Sher: I have heard so much about Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*, especially since both of the novels have been adapted into television series. I haven't gotten around to reading or watching them yet, but I should get to it soon. I'm curious to see how these novels which have garnered such a following, translate from page to screen. However, it seems like there is a consensus that books are often superior to their screen adaptations and that one should always read the book first before watching its adaptation. And of course, this is debatable. My impression is that – from a reader's perspective, it is a bit of a loss to watch an adaptation first as it can limit the personal interpretation that comes with creating your mental images – an imaginative process I think is unique to each reader. On the contrary, if one watches the adaptation first, the director's vision and interpretation can overshadow your own. This isn't to say that adaptations don't have their values, but they may alter or simplify the complex layers of the original narrative that a reader would otherwise discover for themselves. That being said, I often lean towards watching the movie or series first. I'm a visual person, so it sets a visual foundation for me, and then when I read the book, I can dive deeper and uncover all the details the screen version might have missed. It's like the movie is my introduction, and the book adds depth and nuance. Well, I think it's safe to say that our TBR list is now even longer than when we started our conversation. Thanks, everyone for such an engaging discussion and for all the great recommendations! Happy reading and watching ~

Our Recommendations

Novels and Short Story Collections

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Noopiming: The Cure for White Ladies* (2020)

Ali Hazelwood, *Love, Theoretically* (2023) – third installment of her series “The STEMInist Novellas”

Alice Oseman, *Loveless* (2020)

Sally Rooney, *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021)

Sally Rooney, *Conversations with Friends* (2017)

Sally Rooney, *Normal People* (2018)

Alex Schulman, *Burn All My Letters* (*Bränn alla mina brev*, 2018)

Alex Schulman, *The Survivors* (*De Overlevenden*, 2020)

Chelsea Vowel, *Buffalo Is the New Buffalo* (2020)

Non-Fiction Books

James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955)

Howard S. Becker, *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article* (1986/2020)

Didier Eribon, *Returning to Reims* (*Retour à Reims*, 2009)

Television Shows

Black Mirror (Channel 4, 2011-2014; Netflix, 2016-)

The Summer I Turned Pretty (Amazon, 2022-)

Podcasts

e-flux Podcast (<https://www.e-flux.com/podcasts/>)

Rotten Mango (<https://www.rottenmangopodcast.com/>)

Talk Art (<https://talkartpodcast.komi.io/>)

The Sleepy Bookshelf (<https://sleepybookshelf.com/>)

The Useless Hotline (<https://theuselesshotline.com/>)

Websites and Online Communities

Bookstagram (a community on Instagram that is all about books and reading)

BookTube (a subcommunity on YouTube that focuses on books and literature)

Goodreads (<https://www.goodreads.com/>)

Lithub (<https://lithub.com/>)

Author Biographies

Eiman Alkhatib (she/her) is a Syrian student. She is pursuing a master's degree in North American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover. In 2016, she received her bachelor's degree in English Literature from Damascus University, Syria. Her research interests are cultural studies, drama, and media studies.

Lukas Fender (he/him) studies the double degree Master of Education (History & English) and Master of Arts (North American Studies) at Leibniz University Hannover. In 2020, he received his bachelor's degree in History and English from the University of Mannheim. His research interests are memory studies with a strong focus on nostalgia, popular culture and politics, as well as political education. He is currently working as a research assistant at the Institute for Didactics of Democracy at Leibniz University Hannover.

Jessica Hille (she/her) is a master student in the division of American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover. After finishing her bachelor's degree in English and Geography (B.A.), she switched paths from a career in education to solely studying English literature in the master program North American Studies. Here, she focuses on television, feminist media studies, queer studies, and climate fiction. She has been part of the *In Progress* editorial board since January 2023.

Alissa Lienhard (she/her) is a former student assistant and current master student in the division of American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover (Germany). She holds a bachelor's degree in

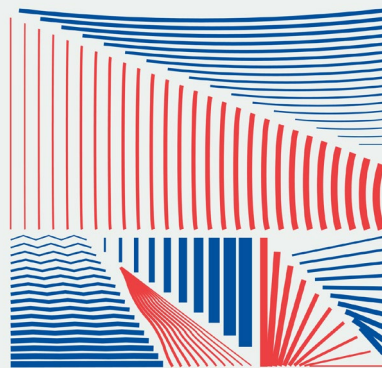
the Interdisciplinary Bachelor with English as first subject and Biology as second subject. Her bachelor thesis, “Don’t Let the Bastards Grind You Down’: Language(s) of Repression and Resistance in *The Handmaid’s Tale*” develops an argument about the power of language in the context of feminist speculative literature. In her studies in the North American Studies master program, she focuses particularly on film, television, comics, science fiction, feminism, neurodiversity, and gender/queer studies. Alissa Lienhard is a founding member of *In Progress*’s editorial board.

Jia Shen Lim (he/him) is a master student in the North American Studies program at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH). He holds a bachelor’s degree in Graphic Design and Art History from the University of Hertfordshire, UK. Following his undergraduate studies, he ventured into journalism, where he worked as a fashion and art writer for a national newspaper in Malaysia. His research interests at LUH are gender studies, transcultural identities in modern and contemporary visual art, archival studies, and periodical culture. He is part of the *In Progress* editorial board since January 2023.

Marielle Tomasic (she/her) is a student of the North American Studies master program at Leibniz University Hannover and holds a Bachelor’s degree in English and Philosophy. Her bachelor thesis “Liminality as Resistance in Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater* and *Dear Senthurán*” critically engages with boundaries of genres and examines who gets to write what. It approaches literary studies of life writing through a lens of curious empathy and decoloniality. Beyond this, Marielle is deeply invested in figuring out ways that literary scholars can think, write, and work in ways that make the (literary) world a kinder place. Marielle Tomasic works as a student editorial assistant for a publishing house, is a student assistant at the Leibniz University Hannover, and a member of *In Progress*’s editorial board.

IN PROGRESS

A Graduate Journal
of North American Studies



Leibniz Universität Hannover

In Progress: A Graduate Journal of North American Studies

English Department – American Studies

Königsworther Platz 1 | 30167 Hannover

www.inprogress.uni-hannover.de | inprogress@engsem.uni-hannover.de