



TECHNISCHE  
UNIVERSITÄT  
DRESDEN

Friday, May 6, 2022

TUD W48/016

# Regional Colloquium 2022

The American Studies team at the TU Dresden is pleased to host this year's Regional Colloquium in American Studies. As in previous years, the idea of the Regional Colloquium is to bring together scholars of American Studies from the universities in Chemnitz, Erfurt, Halle, Jena, Leipzig, and Dresden to discuss work in progress by PhD students and postdocs. After the virtual meeting in Jena last year, this will again be an on-site meeting, which we are very excited about.

The presentations of the projects will last about 15 minutes, followed by 20 minutes of discussion each. After the presentations and discussions, we will all have the opportunity to exchange ideas and discuss ways to continue working together.

**A note on health:** the federal 3G regulation for workplace access has been dropped at TU Dresden, but we encourage everyone to adhere to the 3G standard and follow the AHA-L rules (distance, hygiene, mask, ventilation). This means we will encourage everyone to wear FFP2 masks – and we will open windows frequently.

On behalf of the whole team

**Prof. Dr. Carsten Junker** ([carsten.junker@tu-dresden.de](mailto:carsten.junker@tu-dresden.de))

**Anna Pauder, M.A.** ([anna.pauder@tu-dresden.de](mailto:anna.pauder@tu-dresden.de))

## Program

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**10:00**

**Welcome and Introduction**

Prof. Dr. Carsten Junker

**10:05-10:50**

**Anna Pauder**

TU Dresden

"Serenading Secession: Confederate Women's Musically Framed Responses to the Civil War"

**10:50-11:35**

**Annika Schadewaldt**

Leipzig University

"Zany Aesthetics: Theorizing Literary Style in the American Postwar Novel"

**11:35-11:50**

**Coffee Break**

**11:50-12:35**

**Max Rosenzweig**

University of Erfurt

"Identity Politics and the Literary Imagination in Contemporary U.S. Literature"

**12:35-1:00**

**Closing Remarks and Outlook**

## **Serenading Secession: Confederate Women's Musically Framed Responses to the Civil War (working title)**

### **1 Project Objective**

More than two decades after the end of the American Civil War, diarist Judith McGuire prefaces her now published wartime journal by lamenting to its future audience, "The days are dark and dreary still. The old South has passed away; her music is all dead" (7). Still grappling with the transformations which four years of warfare had brought upon her world, McGuire thus conceptually maps the domain of music onto her understanding of wartime disruptions—as did countless of her contemporary diarists. Their numerous wartime journals illustrate white Southern women's aural responses to a particular epistemic and institutional order disrupted by the Civil War.

The American Civil War period embodies a particular point of amplification regarding social and cultural disruptions, especially in the South where home and battlefield often merged. During this time of upheaval, as scholars have illustrated, the American public, both North and South, also experienced a pronounced outburst of popular music (Root 37). This increase in the presence and relevance of popular music and related performance practices thus needs to be considered in the context of the Civil War's disruptive impact. As such, the manner in which this music could aid in framing individuals' experiences of the conflict and its consequences, and partially also in generating the very narrative in which future proponents of the Lost Cause would ground themselves, deserves extended exploration.

This project addresses precisely the question of how transformative social and cultural forces are framed musically in individuals' and groups' attempts to resist or embrace their disruptive effects in a specifically acoustic sense. To facilitate such an approach, the question will be explored through that "great laboratory of American history" (Peskin qtd. in Kelley 36) that is the Civil War. The analytical focus will thereby lie on white Southern women's life writing, particularly their diaries and memoirs of the war period. As white women, these diarists spoke from a very specific position situated between racial and oftentimes financial privilege on the one hand and patriarchal

subjection on the other. This particular group of white female diarists was selected in part due to the abundance of material they offer from that specific position, not least with the economic and temporal means to take on such writing. Those women of the upper-classes not only could spare the time and financial resources but experienced musical practices as pivotal to their understanding of their own position in society (Bailey 15). Unlike most men, particularly after conscription was increasingly expanded upon, white women of the South had to remain on the home front. This project aims to address civilian impressions of the war's disruptions to a familiar environment. Therefore, female Confederate diarists offer access to their experiences of the conflict's disruptive forces in a particularly pronounced context of an immediacy of warfare unparalleled in the North (Faust 5).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in order to provide a comparative framework between white Confederate women, Southern women of color will not simply be subsumed under the same header, as both their social position and our narrative access thereto deserve separate attention.

In approaching the project based on Mark Smith's premise that "aurality was important enough to contribute meaningfully and significantly to the construction of what it meant to be northern, southern, slave, or free in nineteenth-century America" (6), white Southern women's diaries will thus be examined with a similar premise of auralty shaping responses to the war's infringements upon the parameters defining such discursive and social positions acoustically. Thus, the project is to address the overarching research question of how white Confederate women employed references to certain musical practices in their life writing of the war period in order to frame their experiences of its social and cultural disruptions in a distinctly aural way. This question is to be explored across several sub-dimensions of conceptual transformations regarding notions of gender, class, race, and nationalism, examining how these concepts are put forth by the respective texts through references to contemporary musical practices. Ultimately, within a prospective frame, the project will link its findings to the question of how this musical engagement with the war's transformative forces

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the project, the concept of 'experience' is not to be treated as a static, objective source of information, but in the sense that gender historian Joan Scott has postulated, as "at once already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted" (797).

may have come to determine components of the Lost Cause narrative, as it remains a source of (acoustic) stability amidst present-day cultural disruptions for its contemporary proponents.

## **2 Literature Review**

Although the Civil War period has garnered extensive scholarly attention, only somewhat recently have scholars begun to explore the functions of music facilitated by, written about, and popularized during the conflict. Starting in the early 2000s and accelerating around 2010, an increasing number of publications has been devoted to the particular role(s) and character of music during the war period. Studies have largely explored the manner in which the lyrical content of music popular during the period represents the war's impact on individuals on an economic, social, and cultural level. Publications range from broader assessments of popular songs and practices during the war (McWhirter; Cornelius) to more focused explorations of the musical formation of sectional consciousness and patriotism (Abel; Davis, *Maryland*) and the importance of music in exercising (political) power (Coleman). While this scholarship provides a substantial impression of the conflict and the individuals wrapped up in it by construing both through a lens of popular song lyrics, it has largely failed to address the experiential character of music, particularly the manner in which it may come to organize experiences for its creators and audiences. Those studies which reflect on music's experiential qualities have either focused on soldiers during the war (Davis, *Music*) or, in the case of civilians—specifically Confederate women—have explored musical practices largely detached from the war's transformative effects (Bailey; Meyer-Frazier). While this project is to draw from these influential studies mapping the field of Civil War music, it is to further expand upon these scholars' insights. This project aims to make a substantial contribution to this field by examining how civilians' employment of musical practices deliberately framed their responses to the encroaching disruptions caused by four years of Civil War.

Similarly, within Civil War historiography, scholars have continued to explore the conflict's impact on Southern white women, including its disruptions to cultural and social tenets central to their lives, such as the meaning of labor, enslavement, and the

home (Faust; Glymph). Moreover, especially young elite women's engagement with the conflict has become of increasing interest to scholars, who have outlined an amplified form of support in the advancement of the Confederate Cause among young women compared to their elders (Ott; Jabour). These scholars' work is to provide the principal backdrop for this project's chosen group of diarists through whose lens reactions to the conflict will be analyzed in the way they were framed musically. Yet, these studies have largely neglected non-textual forms of media and personal expression (with the exception of fashion) in structuring these women's agency in the war and their perception of its impact. Music, however, is a primary connective through which to explore these responses. Particularly within the context of the Civil War, often referred to as "a war with a musical soundtrack" (McWhirter 1), the performance and consumption of popular music functioned as a dominant "cultural tool" among civilians due to its ubiquitous application (84). This influence was even more pronounced in the lives of many Confederate women, as musical accomplishment embodied a central element of the contemporary ideal of femininity, particularly for those of the upper class (Abel 140). Thus, although a common argument among scholars of Confederate women relies on their particular ideological support for the cause, further research on the aural and performative means employed to engage with the war effort will enrich scholarly understanding of this projected female patriotism.

In order to expand this connective property of music regarding the disruptions of war and individuals' engagement therewith, scholarship on the impact of music on structuring human experience will work to solidify this link. Scholars of musicology and sociomusicology have at length explicated the role of music in organizing individuals' understanding and interpretation of their position in society (DeNora; Kun), and in creating a sustained sense of community among listeners and performers, not least on a national level (Shelemay; Mattern). These studies work primarily on a theoretical and contemporary level and, as such, will provide substantial conceptual impulses for the project's focus on music a crucial object of study. As such, this scholarship can be enriched by the proposed project's historical angle. By exploring musically framed engagement with the disruptions of war, these studies' key theoretical tenets on the

general properties of music will be broadened by a thorough consideration of the wide range of its practical application.

### **3 Research Design and Methodology**

The theoretical and analytical strands of this project are to be woven together by means of a textual analysis of Confederate women's narratives of the Civil War, i.e., predominantly diaries written by white Southern women between 1861-1865. The project thus traces this group's engagement with the interrelated cultural concepts of race, class, gender, and nationalism as they are put forth along a musical trajectory in these women's writing. In so doing, it delineates the manners in which music as "an art of organized sounds" (Ferris 1) was both understood and implemented by these women as a reaction to the war's transformative effects on their personal lives, as well as those by which these concepts of race, class, gender, and nationalism were being (re)negotiated and perpetuated through the narratives' musical framing. In addition to the project's primary focus on a textual analysis of diaries, its scope will expand to include para-textual references of contemporary sheet music. As no commercial sound recordings existed during the period, sheet music was the primary way in which popular songs could be marketed and distributed for domestic use. Therefore, sheet music and its (visual) embellishments will be considered in the context of the diarists' access to contemporary music. Thus, a multimodal approach is to enrich the project's analysis of white Southern women's acoustic responses to the war's disruptions. Despite this absence of sound recordings, such an approach allows us to situate diarists' references to contemporary musical practice and performance in a context beyond mere narrative production but within the contemporary culture of popular music.

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## Zany Aesthetics: Theorizing Literary Style in the American Postwar Novel

### 1. Project Summary

The years following the Second World War have long been considered a crucial social and cultural threshold for the United States. The aftermath of the war not only saw the United States' emergence as a new global superpower but also marked the beginnings of a fundamental change in its social structure and culture, a critical development still unfolding to this day. Until recently, scholars have primarily perceived the American postwar years as a monolithic moment, often described as a Cold War culture characterized by narratives of containment and threats of nuclear warfare, allegedly heavily reflected in the period's literature and culture (see, for example, Nadel or Grausam). However, the last ten to fifteen years have seen a growing number of studies attempting to reevaluate this perspective on postwar American culture. While continuing to be anchored in a larger Cold War framework, recent research has, by and large, moved away from narratives of postwar culture as a unified whole and focused on the workings of the Cold War on a more granular level (see, for example, Belletto or Hong).

Conspicuously, research interested in the period's literary aesthetics, in contrast, has largely moved in a different direction by either focusing on literature produced after the late 1960s or approaching it as part of a longer trajectory (see, for example, Heise or Michaels). To date, however, none of the attempts to reevaluate the postwar have thoroughly examined the changing aesthetics of novel writing in the early decades in a granular manner, as has been done regarding the period's wider cultural field.<sup>1</sup> As a result, scholarship tends to substitute one totalizing narrative for another, which leaves the literature of the first decades after World War II undertheorized in terms of its aesthetics. Without an adequate analysis of the microlevel of aesthetics of postwar American literature, however, we undervalue the aesthetic innovations, concerns, and diversity of these literary texts, ultimately leading to an overly simplified conceptualization of the period as such.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkens comes closest to this when examining what he calls the "odd interregnum between the first half of the twentieth century [...] and the pervasive transformations of the late sixties" (1). His study of three major novels from the 1950s and 60s, however, immediately gives way to the larger concern of "how the kinds of break in historical consciousness that they represent take place" (1), thus using changing conventions of novel writing to study larger psychosocial changes instead of studying the changing literary field on its own terms. This tendency is also observable in the many studies of postwar literature framed as examining the origins of later phenomena (see, for example, Jonnes or Medovoi).

My dissertation project, “Zany Aesthetics: Theorizing Literary Style in the Postwar Novel,” sets out to address this gap by identifying and analyzing a larger narrative trend in American novels published during the two first decades after WWII. Bringing together works by Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, Vladimir Nabokov, Mary McCarthy, and William Melvin Kelley, my project examines these novels’ shared aesthetic of excess, that is, a surplus of activity, description, and other conventional elements of realist novel writing, resulting in what could be described as ‘overactive prose.’<sup>2</sup> Drawing on recent work at the intersections of aesthetic theory, affect theory, and the sociology of literature, my project will examine this narrative trend by proposing to theorize this aesthetic as a specific instance of the zany, a literary style I argue to be uniquely able to grasp the conundrum of the novelistic during this time. Understanding these novels as zany, I suggest, allows us to analyze more adequately both the unique ambivalent affective mix of identification and repulsion underwriting these narratives as well as the narratives’ continuing strict adherence to realism, that is, their creation of a comic, larger-than-life effect without, in fact, ever breaching the boundaries of verisimilitude. Earlier attempts of categorizing these novels under adjacent yet distinct concepts, such as absurd literature, encyclopedic narratives, or the picaresque, in contrast, have respectively obscured varying elements of these texts, thus standing in the way of seeing these texts’ shared concerns with questions of performance, identity, and failure at a time when the literary field was discussing the intersections of these concepts with regard to novel writing and its role and function in an unprecedented change in the self-fashioning of American national identity as such.

## 2. Central Concept and Research Questions

On its most basic level, my project identifies and examines a narrative trend in novels written during the first decades after the Second World War that I identify as their zaniness. I use ‘zany’ to refer to a set of characteristics that include seemingly excessive detailed descriptions and cataloging, heavy use of parataxis, large amounts of minor characters and subplots, frantic activity, and an ambivalent mixing of genres, registers, and affect, while never breaching the boundaries of verisimilitude. While ‘zany’ is also a term used in everyday language and even by

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<sup>2</sup> I’m borrowing this description from Nina Baym’s characterization of Bellow’s writing in her introduction to the writer in the sixth edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (2004).

some of the writers I am interested in regarding their own writing, a central objective of the proposed project is to expand our understanding of ‘the zany’ as a specific literary style.

Etymologically, ‘zany’ comes from the Italian *zani* or *zanni*, potentially a Venetian form of the name Giovanni. The *zanni* was a stock character in the *commedia dell'arte*, where he was a comic servant character, often a porter, and is linked to precarity: “Zanni is that regrettably eternal unfortunate, the dispossessed immigrant worker” (Rudlin 67). On the stage, the *zanni* is characterized by exaggerated movement; “[h]e appears nervous, talks a lot, his head moves constantly” and “[s]ometimes his body becomes completely alien to him and different parts of it take on their own animation in order to act out an imaginary situation” (70). He usually functions in plays to create confusion in scenes, especially in scenes interacting with his master. This stock character’s influence is visible until today in characters and personae such as Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, or Lucille Ricardo in the T.V. sitcom *I Love Lucy*. From there, the term ‘zany’ entered the English lexicon around the end of the sixteenth century. Moving from the theatrical realm to a more general use of the term, ‘zany’ was first used as a noun and as an adjective only a few years later. Next to its continued use as a synonym for buffoon or fool, we see some of the *zanni*’s characteristics live on in the word’s English usage. First, the exaggerated manner of behaving and speaking informs the primary use of the adjective. Second, the fact that the *zanni* is usually comically failing at his assigned tasks as a servant shows up in the use of the term as referring to “a poor, bad, feeble, or ludicrous imitator” (“zany”).

Outside of discussions of the character type in theater, zaniness has been introduced as an aesthetic category by Sianne Ngai in her 2012 *Our Aesthetic Categories*, in which she identifies the zany as one of three main aesthetic categories of postmodern culture. As Ngai’s overarching goal in the book is to connect these three aesthetic categories to aspects of post-Fordist capitalism, she mainly narrows in on the previously mentioned link between the *zanni* and precarious employment. She therefore theorizes the zany as a performative aesthetic that indexes the continuing blurring of work and leisure as well as “the increasing emotionalization of work in general” (10) in postmodern practices of production in post-Fordist times. Zaniness, for Ngai, then, is generally “a style of desperate playfulness” (235). Yet while the other two main categories of Ngai—the cute and the interesting—have received further scholarly attention since then, the zany has not seen a similar—or almost any—engagement.

In contrast to Ngai's account of the zany as an aesthetic of precarious employment starting in the late-1970s, I suggest that we can observe another prominent clustering of the zany in novels of the immediate postwar decades, where it becomes especially visible in texts concerned with failures of imitations and/or the performance of these failures. In other words, while Ngai foregrounds the zany as an aesthetic of (post-Fordist) economic precariousness, the central hypothesis of the proposed project is that, during the immediate postwar years, the zany can be more adequately described by drawing on the second definition of the term as referring to “a poor, bad, feeble, or ludicrous imitator” (“zany”). In addition, my project traces possible links between these negotiations of performance and failure in relation to ongoing debates in the literary field of the time, especially a perceived crisis of (realist) novel writing and the institutionalization and changing role of American literature in the transatlantic world.

Attempting to make a step towards providing a better understanding of this phenomenon, the project will address a set of interrelated research questions:

- How is zaniness created in these texts on both the level of form and affect?
- How does it relate to or differ from similar styles, modes, and genres, such as the picaresque, the encyclopedic, or the absurd? What does it highlight in these texts in contrast to these previous descriptions?
- What are possible explanations for the traction this style gains during the postwar years? What are its functions, politics, and affordances at that particular moment?
- How is the zany situated in and interacts with larger debates in the postwar literary field, such as the ‘death of the novel’ debate, the renewed search for the ‘Great American novel,’ or the institutionalization of American literature?

### **3. Presentation at the Regional Colloquium**

My presentation at the regional colloquium will focus on an exemplary reading of one of my core primary texts – Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*. While *Pnin*, in contrast to other novels of my corpus such as Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, may not necessarily strike the reader immediately as zany in its overall style, it features as its central character the Russian-born professor Timofey Pnin, a character that, as I will show, is quintessentially zany. I will use the text to, first, argue for understanding ‘the zany,’ *pace* Ngai, as concerned with failed imitation

and, second, tease out some of the connections between the zany and American institutions of literary studies, on the one hand, and other traditions of performance, on the other.

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# **Identity Politics and the Literary Imagination in Contemporary U.S. Literature**

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## Introduction

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the focus of Western politics has shifted significantly. While the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by the competition between two distinct political systems, the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have seen the rise of identity politics as a main political factor in the U.S. and beyond. Centered around the notion of political action and cultural belonging as being determined by the “shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups” rather than “around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliations,” identity politics has repeatedly been attacked as divisive, corrosive, and stifling by its critics while its proponents portray it as the only way to “assert or reclaim ways of understanding their [social group’s] distinctiveness that challenge dominant characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination.”<sup>1</sup>

This conflict has also found its way into the literary discourse. A recent example of this is the controversy surrounding the translation of Amanda Gorman’s poem “The Hill We Climb”. Gorman, a 22-year-old African American poet, had recited her poem at the inauguration of Joe Biden as the 46<sup>th</sup> president of the United States of America, which saw her catapulted to fame overnight. When publishers in some European countries commissioned white individuals to translate the poem, the public outrage following this decision soon compelled those publishers to backtrack and the assignments were recommissioned to translators of color.

On the other side of the debate, one of the most remarkable - albeit bizarre - examples of a repudiation of identity politics’ influence on literature occurred in June 2016 at the Brisbane Writers Festival. Here, U.S. author Lionel Shriver mounted the stage in a sombrero and proceeded to give a scathing speech on the topic of identity politics in literature, vehemently abandoning the concept as an outright attack on the independence of the literary imagination and artistic agency.

The ripple effect of both the controversy around Gorman’s translators and Shriver’s attack on identity politics was felt all around the literary world, sparking discussions about creative freedom, representation, and authenticity that have been making the rounds since. However, while the reactions to both events usually mirrored the larger social divide in our current political climate, another strand of this discussion on the question of *who gets to tell whose story* displayed a more nuanced assessment of the underlying issues. Poet and essayist Claudia Rankine argued that the problem with the influence of identity politics on literary writing did not lie in its ubiquitous and absolute claim on the literary imagination but, contrarily, in its problematic absence from a rather significant portion of literature, namely that produced by white authors like Shriver, as if race was a category that did not affect this particular identity group whatsoever.<sup>2</sup>

In the case of Gorman’s translators the reactions were mixed. Some defended choosing a translator based on the criterion of identity by arguing that a shared lived experience

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<sup>1</sup> Cressida Heyes, “Identity Politics”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/identity-politics/> Accessed 14 Sep 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda. “On Whiteness and the Racial Imaginary.” URL: <https://lithub.com/on-whiteness-and-the-racial-imaginary/> Accessed Sep 14 2021.



facilitates a more profound insight into literary works. But the question of how to assess the considerable power that identity politics wields in the literary field also brought forth criticism of this influence from within minority communities. Some minority authors lamented the ways in which the demands of identity politics on their creative process coerced them to tell their stories not just through the prism of race/gender/sexuality but also to present them in a predetermined fashion rooted in a tradition of representation that has historically been catering to and is implicitly sanctioned by the white majority. Additionally, some drew attention to the fact that minority writing is also hemmed in by a constant awareness of a perceived responsibility to be considerate of the sensitivities and political objectives of their own respective identity groups.

In the course of this debate, the initial question of *who gets to tell whose story?* first morphed into *who gets to ignore whose story?* and ended up as *how does who get to tell whose story?* At the center of these questions lies the issue of how the presence of identity politics within both the broad public literary discourse as well as the intimate realm of individual creative agency and artistic self-actualization is involved with granting and withholding narrative privilege and, ultimately, how this presence is to be assessed in literary terms.

### **Research Aims and Questions**

In addressing these questions, my project will have to identify and confront the paradox that lies at the heart of the notion of enacting identity politics *through* literature. If, as the definition above suggests, identity politics is concerned with reclaiming interpretative sovereignty and challenging the dominant characterizations of minorities, then, rather ironically, the implementation of identity politics into the literary discourse often seems to have the exact opposite effect on the artistic freedom of minority writers. On the one hand, this impediment results from the incessant confrontation with the demand to engage with the issues surrounding a group's respective history of discrimination, persecution, subjugation, and marginalization. On the other hand, minority authors also must grapple with the artistic constraints associated with proselytizing to, engaging with, and generally addressing the (white, male, cis-gendered) reading audience.

Consequently, some of the central questions I will try to answer in my project are: How do minority authors navigate the triangular space between artistic freedom, collective (in-group) responsibility and their representational function towards the majority (out-group)? How is it possible to fend off these claims in literature in service of an actualization of individual artistic agency? And might there even be a way to poetically (re)claim both individual artistic agency and promote collective political goals at the same time? And if so, by what literary means might such a reconciliation of seemingly disparate phenomena be achieved? Are there certain literary genres that are especially equipped to facilitate this?

In answering these questions, I also want to argue that uncompromisingly dismissing identity politics as a prohibiting force hijacking the literary imagination of minority

authors is short-sighted and one-dimensional. In contrast to this notion, I propose a more nuanced and complex assessment of the interplay between literary writing and identity politics. In his monograph *Writing through Repression*, Michael G. Levine identifies a peculiar dynamic between outer-literary restrictions and literary innovation, arguing that the presence of “an obstacle that cannot and yet must be overcome” can serve as a catalyst for a “more equivocal and double-edged style of writing.”<sup>3</sup>

Investigating along these lines, I also want to address the following questions: How might the *explicit* and *direct* engagement with identity politics and its influence over the literary imagination be repurposed as a means of engendering literary innovation in terms of theme as well as form? And how does Levine’s idea of a more equivocal and double-edged style of writing come into play here? How might this notion of literature as a realm of nuance, contradiction, and (moral) uncertainty be used in service of a recuperation of narrative agency and artistic progression?

Any discussion of the interplay between identity politics and literary writing in contemporary US literature would be incomplete without also assessing the relationship between identity politics and white American literature. While I assume that – in the case of minority literature – this interplay is characterized by *opposing* the in-group/out-group claims on the literary imagination to a certain extent, I want to argue that white writers relate to identity politics in a different way. My aim is to show that white writers might uncover unexplored innovative literary potential through *giving in* to the demands of identity politics on their literary imagination by assessing their point of view through the lens of their group identity. Since white writers are not exposed to the same restrictive phenomena that minority writers need to face, one might assume that such an approach is the result of intrinsic and deliberate artistic motivation. This circumstance makes it interesting to explore the possibilities this kind of deliberate choice offers poetically.

I will try to explore the relationship between identity politics and literature by focusing on four contemporary American works of literature published between 2016 and 2020: Ayad Akhtar’s *Homeland Elegies*, Paul Beatty’s *The Sellout*, Carmen Maria Machado’s *In The Dream House* and Ben Lerner’s *The Topeka School*. I picked these texts because of their direct and explicit engagement with identity politics within their respective narratives and - since I want to assess identity politics through the lens of particular genres - also because of their generic diversity.

## State of Research

Thus far, the discourse on identity politics in the U.S. has been hugely relegated to political and social sciences<sup>4</sup>, predominantly in the contexts of the Obama<sup>5</sup> and Trump<sup>6</sup> administrations. In literary studies, most research on the issue of identity is concerned with the literature of one specific identity group and its respective history of challenging

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<sup>3</sup>Michael G. Levine: *Writing Through Repression*, London 1994, p.2.

<sup>4</sup>Francis Fukuyama: *Identity. Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*, London 2019; Mark Lilla: *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, New York 2018; Todd McGowan: *Universality and Identity Politics*, New York 2020.

<sup>5</sup>Amílcar Antonio Barreto, Richard L. O’Byrant: *American Identity in the Age of Obama*, New York 2015

<sup>6</sup>Asad Haider: *Mistaken Identity. Race and Class in the Age of Trump*, London 2018.

literary limitations resulting from political pressure from without and within their group<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, most research that is concerned with this issue is not explicitly addressing it in terms of identity politics.<sup>8</sup> The reason for this might have to do with the simple fact that “identity politics” as a concept of significance for literary studies is a rather new phenomenon.

The ontological turn that I mentioned earlier being still under way, the process of academically assessing the interplay between literature and identity politics is only just beginning. Hence, there is a considerable lack in studies that focus on a comprehensive comparative evaluation of the different approaches of writers from diverse identity groups in American literature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and their respective methods of (re)claiming authenticity, representation, and artistic agency through explicitly engaging in the discourse on identity politics in literary writing.

In the course of my research so far, I have been made aware of the fact that the discussion of the question of how (and if) identity politics shapes (or should shape) the literary imagination has been mostly relegated to the feuilleton of newspapers and (online) magazines as well as internet forums and social media platforms (especially Twitter).<sup>9</sup> While I believe that the debate on identity politics and the literary imagination should be held in a broad, inclusive, and accessible manner (an undertaking for which online discourse is uniquely equipped), it is also essential that, moving forward, there exists an academic endeavor to understand how both phenomena interrelate. With my project, I am hoping to contribute to this academic endeavor.

## Methodology

Despite this considerable lack in research, there are various theories that conceptualize the interplay between identity and literature in a fashion that lays the methodological groundwork for a comparative academic evaluation of identity politics’ influence on the literary imagination. Below, I will sort these different approaches according to my previous delineation of the fields of study in my project:

### *1./2. Autofiction and Memoir*

A useful methodological approach for my discussion of *Homeland Elegies* and *In the Dream House* is afro-fabulation. In liberating the literary imagination from “the demand that a representation be either true or false, either history or fiction”, afro-fabulation might

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<sup>7</sup>Tyler Bradway: *Queer Experimental Literature. The Affective Politics of Queer Reading*, Berlin 2017; E. Lâle Demirtürk: *African American Novels in the Black Lives Matter Era : Transgressive Performativity of Black Vulnerability as Praxis in Everyday Life*, Maryland 2019; Derek C. Maus; James J. Donahue: *Post-Soul Satire. Black Identity after Civil Rights*, Mississippi 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Two (somewhat dated) exceptions being: Bruce Bawer “Violated by Ideas: Reflections on Literature in an Age of Identity Politics.” In: *The Hudson Review* 48.1 (1995); Kenneth Mostern: *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics. Racialization in Twentieth-Century America*, Cambridge 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Some notable examples being Anis Shivani. “Notes on the Ascendancy of Identity Politics in Literary Writing.” URL: <http://subtropics.english.ufl.edu/index.php/2017/06/12/notes-ascendancy-identity-politics-literarywriting/> Accessed Sep 14 2021; James Walker. “Authenticity and Experience: The Problem of Identity Politics in Literature.” URL: <https://quillette.com/2016/05/04/authenticity-and-experience-the-problem-of-identity-politics-in-literature/> Accessed 26 Sep 2021; Tajja Isen. “How can we expand the way we write about our Identities?” URL: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tajjaisen/personal-essay-identity-race-trauma-writing/> Accessed: 26 Sep 2021.

serve as a literary “means of unburdening representation”<sup>10</sup> through opening a narrative space for the creation of a “speculative work of self-fashioning”<sup>11</sup> in the interest of reclaiming narrative autonomy. Since Akhtar’s autofictional novel as well as Machado’s memoir are both invested in exploring literary means of challenging politically motivated encroachments on the literary imagination, this approach should provide a theoretical framework with the help of which I might be able to assess how both texts carry this enterprise out.

### 3. *Satire*

In the context of my project, the field of African American studies yields especially insightful methodological approaches, ranging from theories that identify the advent of an era of post-blackness to oppositional stances such as afro-pessimism. Serving as the endpoints on a spectrum of theories on black identity, these approaches will be of significance in my discussion of *The Sellout* as a satirical negotiation of the diverse approaches to enacting black identity politics.

In the same context, I will also be discussing Post-Soul Aesthetics. Based on the idea that “no one – no white establishment, no black identity police, and [...] no peer pressure – can limit the imagination of the black artist” (612), this literary movement approaches the question of black identity from a non-essentialist angle, aiming at an “exploration of the boundaries of blackness”<sup>12</sup> in part by looking at the deployment of genre (in my case satire) as a literary means to diversify the boundaries of blackness and representation.

### 4. *Whiteness and Realism*

One approach towards assessing the (lack of) representation of whiteness in contemporary white American literature is through acknowledging how the close connection between whiteness and literary realism has historically served to obscure its presence narratively. In order to “disrupt the ‘traditional’ link between realism and whiteness” Kee-Yoo Nahm proposes to narratively “highlight issues of race not by satirizing or parodying whiteness, but by rigorously embodying it.”<sup>13</sup> In a similar vein, Jess Row proposes that white writers should use realism not as a “static, passive technique [...]” but as a literary mode that ruptures a narrative space[of whiteness] instead of enclosing it.<sup>14</sup> This programmatic notion of reframing literary realism as a means of explicitly engaging with white identity should prove useful for my analysis of *The Topeka School* and the book’s modernization of the social novel in service of a critical reflection on white identity.

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<sup>10</sup> Tavia Nyong’o “Unburdening Representation.” *The Black Scholar* 44.2 (2014). p.77.

<sup>11</sup> Tavia Nyong’o “Unburdening Representation.” *The Black Scholar* 44.2 (2014). p.77-78.

<sup>12</sup> Bertram Ashe “Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetics: An Introduction.” *African American Review* 41.4 (2007). p.611-612.

<sup>13</sup> Kee-Yoo Nahm. “Visibly White: Realism and Race in Appropriate and Straight White Men.” URL: <https://jadtjournal.org/2015/04/24/visibly-white-realism-and-race-in-appropriate-and-straight-white-men/> Accessed 14 Sep 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Jess Row: *White Flights. Race, Fiction, and the American Imagination*, Minneapolis 2020, p.147.