Feeling not-so-Great:

the digital disillusion of American Exceptionalism

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Abstract

Over the last decade, a multitude of digital texts have challenged dominant narratives of eras and events in US history, ranging from citizen-made texts that reach only a handful of people to federal and industry-produced media objects that have national, regional, or global reach. These texts not only diverge from the popular narratives of American exceptionalism, they also frequently promote suppressed stories of the proverbial "skeletons in America's closet" (or the very real skeletons buried in American soil), or they complicate accepted understandings of historical US policy and military action. Moreover, many of these texts work to connect their historical narratives to the present moment, or in some cases a future moment—making the past always present and working to constitute their characters, and thus their viewers/audience/users, as historical subjects. In this dissertation, I posit that this challenging of narratives of US popular memory by a multitudinous number of digital texts is contributing to a growing sense among Americans that the US is, in fact, "not-so-Great" after all. Using multimodal critical discourse analysis, I interrogate a selection of these media objects and their surrounding discourses across four domains of encounter (US education, public history, comedy, and speculative fiction), examining multiple mediums and levels of production within each domain. I offer these analyses as evidence of "feeling not-so-Great," an emergent structure of feeling about the way Americans understand and identify with their nation and its historical self-conception, and I discuss the nuanced and varied ways that this affective orientation is circulated, accumulated, and experienced.

Introduction

From as early as I can remember having such opinions, Independence Day was always my favorite holiday. I am sure it had something to do with the fact that my birthday was only a few days earlier and it was easy to imagine that the entire country was celebrating me (of course, when I found out that Canada Day was on the actual day of my birth, I promptly asked my parents to emigrate - I had some grandiose notions as a child, what can I say). The lure of fireworks, both the professional ones that lit up the sky and the amateur ones that were often not technically allowed in the dry, fire-prone Colorado summers, certainly contributed to the appeal as well. My hometown and the small town my grandparents lived in each had a big parade to celebrate the occasion, so in addition to fireworks and narcissism there was also candy, music, and floats working to produce a heady sensory experience. On top of all that, there were the many triumphant and nostalgic depictions of the holiday that permeated some of my family's favorite films: *The Sandlot* (1993) and the titular *Independence Day* (1996) to name a few. But more than the activities, the entertainment, and the evocative media narratives, for me the Fourth of July was a day of social connection rooted in a nationally shared understanding that we were part of the greatest nation in the world. Despite some dubious personal connections which made the day feel like "mine," it was only because of a collective "we" with a shared national affinity that the day had any meaning at all. Whether at home, at my grandparents', or on one of our many cross-country family road trips, there were always fireworks shows, parades, or community cookouts where the atmosphere of national pride and unity was palpable - and it felt pretty damn Great.

Independence Day is no longer my favorite holiday for a variety of reasons, but none as important as my since-acquired understanding of American "Greatness" as a social construct supported by carefully curated infrastructures, narratives, and rituals that entice an affective

identification with the nation.[1] The sense of pride and belonging I experienced on those days, and that I could experience them in seemingly any social space, was the intended outcome of my affective indoctrination into American Exceptionalism, made easier by my privileged position as a straight, cis, White American for whom scripts by which to model myself were abundant. "Feeling Great"[2] was the result of cultural and institutional narratives of shared histories and my indoctrination into the hegemonic values and desires of "good" Americans they communicated. Hour long fireworks shows carefully built to a roaring crescendo that lit up the sky in reds, whites, and blues were easy rituals of community that required little interaction between citizens but created palpable affect through their sensorial stimulation. Movies, television shows, and news stories depicting Fourth of July and other national triumph narratives modeled how citizens should feel on the day while also creating popular references that facilitated local, regional, and national belonging. The activities, entertainment, and media that seemed secondary to my feelings were in fact crucial to amplifying and circulating the affective state that produced them.

My current comprehension of American "Greatness" as socially constructed, affective indoctrination is largely informed by my critical media studies training and social constructivist positioning, an orientation to the world that is by no means universal. Yet, anecdotal evidence (online user comments, political rhetoric, and personal interactions) from strangers, friends, and

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[1] Here I pull from Lauren Berlant's concept of the National Symbolic as a "tangled cluster" of political, juridical, territorial, genetic, linguistic, and experiential spaces that always-already binds citizens together through its production of a "national fantasy" which "harness[es] affect to political life" by localizing national culture through the circulation of images, narratives, monuments, and sites through personal and collective consciousness. Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 4-5.

[2] I borrow this conceptual framework from Hollis Griffin, who describes "feeling normal" as "a nebulous term for an affective state" that presents "a feeling of freedom and belonging…an experience of body and mind that you share with others." Akin to "feeling normal", I propose "feeling Great" as the affective state that works to keep subjects within Lauren Berlant's "space of infantile citizenship." Hollis Griffin, *Feeling Normal: Sexuality and Media Criticism in the Digital Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 1; Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 26.

family who are not enmeshed in the theories and literatures of cultural studies suggest that "feeling Great" about the U.S. is on a sharp decline among Americans in general. The daily political, economic, and cultural realities of Americans, which have vacillated between states of decline, tension, and crisis since the 1990s (income inequality, recession, racial strife, domestic terrorism, unaffordable health care, the U.S.'s decreasing influence abroad, etc.), certainly contribute to the waning of this affective identification. However, similar conditions existed in the 1990s and 2000s when "feeling Great" remained the dominant mode of affective identification with the nation, peaking in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.[3] It follows, then, that it is more than the shattered illusion of the "American dream of guaranteed prosperity" that has minimized the accumulation and circulation of Exceptional sentiment.[4]

Marita Sturken defines American Exceptionalism as "an argument about the uniqueness and virtue of the United States, its capacity to be an ideal nation," which "has enabled a narrative of American innocence that has the effect of absolving the U.S. from responsibility for the outcomes of its actions."[5] Yet, the last decade has seen the proliferation of increasingly popular and seemingly endless retellings of America's past deeds—deeds that have been purposely left out of the narratives or that were once admired for having been done in the name of God, justice, and freedom—as *mis*deeds by highlighting their Machiavellian nature and resulting negative impacts. A more humorous and lighthearted example of this phenomenon, the @subparparks Instagram account

[3] Lauren Berlant demonstrates how "silly objects" that proliferated in the 1990s and a feeling of "cruel optimism" in the aftermath of the US / Iraq war and the 2009 recession contributed to the National fantasy and its role in maintaining American exceptionalism, while Marita Sturken highlights how the emphasizing of American innocence and virtuousness was key in US interpretation of and response to the attacks of 9/11. Berlant, *The Queen of America*; Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Marita Sturken, *Terrorism in American Memory: Memorials, Museums, and Architecture in the Post-9/11 Era* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2022).
[4] Marita Sturken, "Feeling the Nation, Mining the Archive: Reflections on Lauren Berlant's Queen of America," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9, no. 4 (2012): 358, https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1080/14791420.2012.741099.
[5] Sturken, *Terrorism in American Memory* (2022), 8.

posts digital artwork of the U.S. National Parks with hand drawn quotes from real one and two-star reviews of the parks, demonstrating in silly, surreal, and aesthetically pleasing ways how the nation's "best idea" was maybe not-so-Great after all. Like the @subparparks account, these retellings of American misdeeds frequently come in the form of non-historically focused media; the popular MTV series *Teen Wolf,* for example, tells the story of present-day U.S. teenagers dealing with supernatural problems. However, season three's major villain comes, geographically and temporally, from a World War II Japanese internment camp, offering an evocative narrative of the wrongs committed against Japanese Americans by the U.S. as well as their repercussions for current and future generations. Some of the stories I focus on are more directly set in historical times. Rockstar Game's *Red Dead Redemption II*, for example, offers players a game narrative set at the turn of the twentieth century and Fox's *Making History* flirts with temporality through its time travel premise. While the temporal settings range from the start of the American Revolution to the near future, all of the objects in my archive evoke historical narratives in ways that poke at the affective state of "feeling Great."

Because there are a multitude of digital narratives that do this "revisionist" work, the ones that serve as objects for this project in no way represent an exhaustive list. George Takei's digital comic *They Called Us Enemy* (2019), a memoir of his imprisonment in a U.S. internment camp, and HBO's representation of the 1921 Tulsa race massacre in its *Watchmen* (2020) series are digital objects that illuminate previously obscured narratives of American misdeeds, but I do not include them in my archive. Interrogating every text that falls within this category is beyond the scope of this project; however, the objects that are included in my archive were not randomly selected from the larger pool. I have been intentional with my selections based on three major criteria: ubiquity/accessibility, genre/domain, and narrative connection to land.[6] The stories featured in the

[6] These criteria are made clearer in the methods section.

media that make up my archive come from professional, institutional, and amateur narrators, covering a range of topics from scientific to militaristic to artistic and from time periods as far back as the establishment of the nation all the way up to the imminent future. While they range wildly in form, genre, and topic, these retellings all work to complicate the narrative of U.S. innocence and virtuousness that are foundational to American Exceptionalism.

They do so in part by revealing the memory politics inherent in narratives of Exceptionalism: when a previously redacted misdeed is revealed, it becomes clear who were, and who were *not*, considered worthy of being remembered. Who gets remembered and how can tell us much about the negotiation of national identity.[7] Those whose stories do not serve Exceptionalism are seen as outside of what Judith Butler has described as the "grievable life."[8] However, as the digital narratives at the center of this project demonstrate, they are also never fully erased–they linger. Sturken refers to the lingering of non-grievable lives as a haunting of the national story. I like the language of "haunting" because it is evocative, and in its evocation it works to connect memory to shame. While a haunting can cause fear, it is more often deployed—as a narrative device as well as in its vernacular usage—to amplify or reveal shame. We are not haunted by our previous faux pas because we are afraid of them, but because we are ashamed of them. I also like the language of "haunting" because it conjures thoughts of spirits. A spirit in the sense most signified through "haunting" is generally understood to be a manifestation of the non-physical part of a person that represents their true self, but spirit can also be understood as the "qualities regarded as forming the definitive or typical elements in the character of a person, nation, or group or in the thought and attitudes of a particular

[7] Sturken, *Terrorism in American Memory*, 4.
[8] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London; New York: Verso, 2004), 32.

period."[9] Thus, "haunting" connects memory to shame but it also connects memory and shame to identity, at both the national and individual levels, and to a specific historical context.

While there is much to like about the language of "haunting" and all it evokes, the multitude of texts that bring these haunting spirits into popular memory narratives complicate their role as such - do they still simply haunt, or has their embodiment through digital representations given them a different kind of influence over the national story? In this project, I contend that these digital representations have, ironically, materialized the influence of the haunting spirits. The manifestation of these spirits in popular digital media has allowed them to step out from behind the curtain of the national story, revealing it for what it is: a fantasy, an illusion.[10] Unlike the narratives of American Exceptionalism that worked to circulate and amplify my childhood experiences of "feeling Great," these digital objects contribute significantly to a decrease in Exceptional sentiment. More than that, I contend that they represent an emergent structure of "feeling not-so-Great" in which sentiments of American Exceptionalism and American unExceptionalism across historical contexts are in tension. As such, these texts embody an ideological inflection point wherein the Exceptional identity of the U.S., past and present, is under negotiation.

Literature Review

This dissertation is an interdisciplinary project that brings together the fields of media studies, American studies, and public history to examine the role of digital media in contributing to an emergent structure of feeling. Drawing on literature from affect studies, memory studies, and digital studies, I demonstrate how key scholars have approached questions of national identity,

[9] *Oxford English Dictionary* (2022), s.v. "Spirit"
[10] Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* (1991); Alfred Margulies, "Illusionment and Disillusionment: Foundational Illusions and the Loss of a World," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 66, no. 2 (2018): 289 -303, https://doi.org/10.1177/0003065118770332.

national memory, and national sentiment and synthesize their findings regarding the ways that dominant national narratives are reinforced, challenged, and negotiated in various mediums and modes of digital media. Rather than focusing on breadth, I instead offer a review of resonant work from scholars who I see as key interlocutors in the scholarly conversations with which this project engages.

We Take These Truths to Be Self Evident (Constituting the Nation)

Nation & Nationalism

In his seminal work on nation and nationalism, Benedict Anderson demonstrates how the nation-state is an inherently mediated construct, based on narratives of shared histories made possible through the rise of mediated vernacular language which allowed people to imagine parallel and plural realities that constitute an "imagined community" of geographically dispersed but temporally simultaneous members.[11] While geographical borders are important to imagined communities, the discursive creation of shared pasts, presents, and futures form the major bonds between individuals in the nation-state. Anderson further theorized that nationalism de-emphasizes the socio-economic disparities among its population to reinforce a "deep, horizontal comradeship"[12] in which all members share a set of sacred features that bind them together. This became possible following the Enlightenment period, during which the legitimacy of the divinely ordained dynastic ruling model was deconstructed, and self-determination was embraced.

In the case of the United States, the Declaration of Independence serves as the symbolic media text that worked to constitute the thirteen colonies as an imagined community – "We the people" not only delineated the colonists from those who served the British crown, it turned them

[11] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 2006).
[12] Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (2006), 7.

into an affective community ready to wage war in the name of fraternal comradeship by constructing a shared history of British oppression. Of course, in practice it was much more complicated than this—it was not as if the Declaration was signed and then everyone in the thirteen colonies were immediately on board with the revolution. But the Declaration did serve as a powerful discursive object that worked to circulate sentiments of fraternity across colonies that had been relatively disconnected up to that point.

Anderson's conceptualization of the "imagined community" has had a lasting impact on a wide range of fields, but one of its major contributions was in demonstrating how the reconstitution of language through print-capitalism generalized a new grasp of temporality through novels and newspapers (and later through radio, television, and magazines), affectively transforming an abstracted comprehension of the nation into an experience of lived immediacy.[13] Time and affect, then, are key concerns for Anderson as foundational components of national identity and sentiment, making Anderson's work useful for this project.

However, as other scholars have pointed out, Anderson's original theory has its shortfalls. One major limitation of Anderson's theorization is its masculinist assumption of uniformity, concealing the institutionalization of gender (and racial) difference.[14] While Anderson sees a positive implication in the creativity inherent in the imagined community, McClintock points out that the invocation of a glorious past, a history of shared struggles, and a collective destiny erase feminist histories in favor of masculine narratives—a dangerous undertaking we can see playing out in the violent consequences of toxic masculinity.[15] Furthermore, Anderson approaches imagined

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[13] Manu Goswami, "Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983)" *Public Culture* 32, no. 2 (2020): 441-448, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-8090180.
[14] Anne McClintock, "Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family," *Feminist Review*, no. 44 (1993): 61–80, https://doi.org/10.2307/1395196 and Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2004).
[15] McClintock, "Family Feuds," 63.

communities as a product of the European enlightenment, enforcing a colonized view of the development of the modern nation-state that assumes all nations are modeled after the democratic nations of Western Europe and North America.[16] Since Anderson's initial study of nation-states and nationalisms, scholars have demonstrated how imagined communities have traversed national borders in a globalizing world (cosmopolitanism and virtual communities)[17] and how other political categories like sexuality and gender can motivate the forming of imagined communities (digital LGBTQ+ communities).[18] These same scholars, among others, have examined how digital affordances and cultures contribute to these alternative communities that often operate across vernacular languages.

While scholars have applied Anderson's theory to new types of imagined communities and new forms of media, few have interrogated the ways in which the communicative transformations afforded by digital technology may complicate one of the main processes in Anderson's original theory. Whereas media (specifically print-capitalism) allowed for the imagining of parallel and plural realities that constituted the nation, the horizontal networks of digital technologies combined with their ubiquity in our everyday lives means that we no longer *imagine* our fellow citizens because we see, hear, and read them on our screens on a daily basis. Does it matter that a news article implores me to support my fellow Americans when I just saw a video of one such American cussing out the president and spreading prejudice? Or when another posts "I only support the true, God-fearing

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[16] Partha Chatterjee, "Whose Imagined Community?," *Millennium* 20, no. 3 (1991): 521-525, https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298910200030601.

[17] Ulrich Beck, "Cosmopolitanism as Imagined Communities of Global Risk," *American Behavioral Scientist* 55, no. 10 (2011): 1346–1361, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764211409739; and Camelia Grădinaru, "The Technological Expansion of Sociability: Virtual Communities as Imagined Communities," *Academicus: International Scientific Journal* 14 (2016): 181-190, https://dx.doi.org/10.7336/academicus.2016.14.13.

[18] Christine M. Klapeer and Pia Laskar, "Transnational Ways of Belonging and Queer Ways of Being: Exploring Transnationalism Through the Trajectories of the Rainbow Flag," *Global Studies in Culture and Power* 25, no. 5 (2018): 524-541, https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2018.1507958; and Charlotte Ross, "Imagined Communities: Initiatives around LGBTQ Ageing in Italy," *Modern Italy* 17, no. 4 (2012): 449–464, https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2012.706997

Americans!" as a comment on that news article? The nation-state, especially one as geographically dispersed as the U.S., is a mediated construct but can that construct survive in a media landscape that removes the possibility of imagining similarity and replaces it with visceral differentiation as an everyday occurrence? By interrogating how an established imagined community adapts and responds to advancing media technologies, this project will add valuable knowledge to the existing literature on the role of the media in constituting (or dissolving) national identity and national unity.

Give Them Something to Remember (Memory in the Digital Age)

Social Memory

In the early twentieth century, Maurice Halbwachs developed one of the most influential theories of social memory to date. Though memory had been understood as partially collective in the nineteenth century, Halbwachs theory of collective memory posited that *all* of an individual's memories are acquired in society, and thus memory is wholly dependent on "the frameworks of social memory" most prominent within any given cultural context at any given moment.[19] For Halbwachs, this is true at multiple levels of society—national, regional, local, familial—and for both autobiographical and historical memory. While Halbwachs is often credited as the father of collective memory despite not coining the term, his original theorizations have been advanced and critiqued by many scholars over the years and no memory studies literature review section would be worth its salt without mention of his work.

Almost a century after Halbwachs shook up the memory studies world, Andrew Hoskins introduced the memory of the multitude, his conceptualization of the way social memory operates in the digital era. Hoskins posits that the archival and horizontal logics that rule digital media have

[19] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory,* trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 38-39.

disrupted canonical understandings of collective memory to the extent that the canon needs to be thrown out. While this is perhaps an extreme notion, he makes a compelling argument about the ways the digitally fostered value of openness "have driven a culture of unbridled commentary that reveals that there is no 'mainstream'… the multitude has vacated the centre ground, with all the most ugly and irrational in human thought aroused through rage and dismay thriving in the polarizing virality of social networking."[20] This argument is predicated on the notion that the hyperconnected, unlimited archive created in and through digital media has been removed from the hands of those traditionally responsible for its compilation, diminishing the authority of the former gatekeepers of memory and allowing history to become whatever one "chooses to accept as true."[21] In Hoskins words, "The memory of the multitude *softens history*, changing the parameters of the who, what, when and why of remembering."[22] While Hoskins devotes the majority of his energies to discussing the effects of the multitude on autobiographical memory and ruminating on the potential negative consequences of a limitless, infinite multitude, I find his work extremely useful as theoretical lens through which I can examine the digital production, circulation, and amplification of American misdeed narratives that contribute to the affective tensions within the structure of feeling-not-so-Great.

Remembering the Nation

Beyond the key frameworks of collective memory discussed above, scholars have looked specifically at the role of memory in shaping and maintaining national identity and cohesion. Within the field of cultural studies, one of the most prominent theories of cultural (national) memory comes

[20] Andrew Hoskins, "Memory of the Multitude: the end of collective memory," in *Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition*, ed. Andrew Hoskins (New York: Routledge, 2017): 88.
[21] David Lowenthal, "The Past Made Present," *Historically Speaking* 13, no. 4 (2012): 3. https://doi.org/10.1353/hsp.2012.0040.
[22] Hoskins, "Memory of the Multitude," 88; emphasis in original text.

from Jan Assmann. In *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* (2011), Assmann draws on the work of Halbwachs to define three elements that work together to constitute a nation's identity and historical self-conception: a space-time referent, group specificity, and reconstructivity. Similar to Anderson's focus on shared histories and spatial boundaries, Assmann's space-time referent highlights the importance of communal spaces—a village, the family home, a specific landscape—which serve as semiotic referents for community-strengthening experiences and memories. These signs then work to connect community association to the past when one moves away from those spaces and over time, begins to associate home with the now-distant space and time from which they came. Assmann's second element of group specificity emphasizes the non-universal aspect of group identification taken up by the process of national identity building. Here, each nation builds a narrative that is associated with certain emotive and value-laden events and features which serve to distinguish the group from the "other." Lastly, Assman's third element of reconstructivity points to the negotiable and dynamic nature of national narratives, in-so-far as they are not fact-based stories of past times but rather the result of constant negotiations and reconstructions of cultural memories which are subject to the values and patterns of interpretation within the present socio-historical context. Together, these three elements produce a national identity narrative that works to stabilize society in times of upheaval and uncertainty. While time is only partially relevant to Assman's theorization of national identity, affect serves as a main facilitator of community formation. Because of this, Assmann's work will help to guide my analyses through this project.

In a slightly different vein of study, Marita Sturken's work on U.S. memorialization since 9/11 focuses on memorials, museums, and buildings as the main sites of national memorialization, specifically analyzing architecture and design as the major frameworks through which national

memory has been shaped. According to Edy[23], however, national memory is most widely shaped through the mass media (especially news media), even more so than it shaped by education because the mass media reach pockets of the population that education often does not. Sturken gives a nod to the power of media objects in shaping national memory by beginning *Terrorism in American Memory* (2022) with an account of the Black Lives Matter content that dominated social media feeds (and were frequently commented on and shared by the news media) in the summer of 2020 and discussing their role in motivating a nation-wide movement to re-evaluate monuments, memorials, and museum spaces. Sturken also gives a fair bit of space to her analyses and discussion of several audio recordings—voice messages left by loved ones in anticipation of their deaths, among other poignant content—featured in an exhibit at the 9/11 museum, focusing on the affective power of these digital, aural media. However, media other than that which is used in museum exhibitions remains largely absent from her analyses and arguments. Thus, this project expands upon Sturken's argument by demonstrating how digital media platforms and objects, beyond but also within spaces of public history, serve as sites where national memorialization occurs and U.S. memory-politics are negotiated.

Shifting to the realm of media studies, in her work on the American historical imaginary, "a culturally shared popular understanding of the past created by discourses of entertainment, politics, and education," whose "narratives are highly resistant to challenges from traditional methods of history,"[24] Caroline Guthrie asks: how does American exceptionalism remain salient in the face of heaps of evidence refuting its virtuousness? In attempting to answer this question, she turns to mass culture in the forms of television, film, and the Magic Kingdom at Walt Disneyworld to demonstrate

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[23] Jill A. Edy, "Journalistic Uses of Collective Memory," *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 2 (1999): 71-85, WILEY.

[24] Caroline Guthrie, "Narratives of rupture: Tarantino's counterfactual histories and the American historical imaginary" *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 23, no. 3 (2019): 339, https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1080/13642529.2019.1615200

how historical narratives of American Greatness that valorize white masculinity and ignore oppression and resistance are fortified at and through these sites and texts, often presenting American exceptionalism as a foregone conclusion.[25] However, Guthrie finds hope in the alternative history films of Quentin Tarantino, demonstrating how they reveal history as neither inert nor inevitable but as the result of multitudinous choices, made by powerful individuals but also individuals caught up in larger systems of power, which could have been made differently. By changing the historical narrative, Guthrie argues that these films make space for viewers "to feel rage not only at those who perpetuated history's atrocities, but also those who failed to act against them."[26] Complicating Landsberg's insistence that historical consciousness only solidifies when a viewer's temporal distance from the media narrative is emphasized,[27] Guthrie suggests that identification with characters in Tarantino's films, particularly identification with the antagonists, is what fosters critical historical consciousness and gets viewers to consider their own culpability in the present moment.[28]

Guthrie demonstrates how media complicate, challenge, and reaffirm contemporary ideas of national identity that are tied to particular versions of history that valorize white masculinity and ignore oppression and resistance. Guthrie's contribution of the "historical imaginary" offers a useful conceptual arena through which I approach the major objects of analysis for my project. However, I expand on Guthrie's work by focusing on digital culture rather than mass culture. To this end, I include social media, video games, digitally distributed educational materials, and digital exhibitions as media objects that contribute to negotiations over America's past and present notions of national

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[25] Caroline Guthrie, *The American Historical Imaginary: Contested Narratives of the Past* (Chicago, IL: Rutgers University Press, 2022)
[26] Guthrie, "Narratives of rupture," 359.
[27] Alison Landsberg, *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 33.
[28] Guthrie, "Narratives of rupture," 350.

identity, and I examine these various digital mediums and the narratives of American Exceptionalism they convey both within and across the domains of popular culture, public history, and education. I also move beyond analysis of the texts themselves and include an interrogation of their surrounding discourse to offer a richer picture of their influence on the American historical imaginary. Lastly, I engage with Guthrie's preference for a Gramscian understanding of the American historical imaginary as a set of dominant narratives that are open to challenges from subaltern understandings rather than "multiple, competing historical imaginaries"[29] similar to the multiple, competing Souths Tara McPherson interrogates in *Reconstructing Dixie*.[30] Because of the way digital mechanics and logics have shifted how we interact with and interpret knowledge and following Hoskins' memory of the multitude supposition, I use my archive to help illuminate whether memory in the digital era operates via hegemonic circulations of power or if the multitude has dispersed a singular dominant imaginary across multiple imaginaries, complicating the very essence of "commonsense" understandings of the past.

A More Perfect Union (Superlative Orientations)

Feeling the Nation

In her National Symbolic quartet, Lauren Berlant interrogates the role of affect in constituting and maintaining particular forms of citizenship within the United States through a localization of what she calls the National Fantasy—a fantasy about how the nation is. This localization occurs through "the images, narratives, monuments, and sites that circulate through

[29] Guthrie, "Narratives of rupture," 341.
[30] McPherson saw competing imaginaries of the American South operating through lenticular logics in which "histories or images that are actually copresent get presented (structurally, ideologically) so that only one of the images can be seen at a time," but I propose that in the digital era we cannot encounter one historical imaginary without also encountering the others and, as Hoskins and Lowenthal have asserted, it becomes an individual choice to focus on or believe in one over all others. Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 7; Hoskins, "The Memory of the Multitude," 88; Lowenthal, "The Past Made Present," 3.

personal collective consciousness"[31] Across the four books in the series, along with some articles, Berlant demonstrates how intimacy, affect, and sexuality serve as central analytical lenses through which we can better understand the nation and public culture. Using a range of mediated genres and forms from high, low, and popular culture, Berlant lays the path for an understanding of nation, citizenship, and national identity based in the intimate, everyday feelings and practices of the average citizen. Some of her largest contributions to cultural studies have been her insistence on low culture or "silly" objects of analysis as well as what Marita Sturken has pointed out as theoretical shift in the British-American tradition of cultural studies which "signals the nascent beginnings of the field of affect studies as a new paradigm within the study of culture. This means that the power of [*The Queen of America*] is its deep and ultimately devastating critique of how dominant, mass culture works at the most intimate level."[32] Berlant's deployment of affect *as political* and integrated with various forms of mediation is where her work becomes most relevant for this project. Following her theorization of citizenship and the National Symbolic as intimately connected to mediated affect, I attempt to pick up where *Cruel Optimism* left off and engage with mediated objects that complicate one's affective identification with the nation.

Affective Economies, Affective States, Affective Governance

Affect is neither "in" nor "outside of" the individual or the social but relates to the circulation of emotion between different sites, objects, or bodies.[33] Sara Ahmed refers to the circulation of affect as affective economies in which affect circulates between subject and objects to assign affective value. Borrowing from Marxism, Ahmed describes this process as akin to the way monetary value becomes attached to commodities in capitalist economies. In affective economies,

[31] Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy,* 5.
[32] Sturken, "Feeling the Nation", 354.
[33] Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

however, feelings and emotions become "stuck" to certain subjects, objects, or spaces over time. This circulation and "sticking" of emotion "serve[s] to situate subjects in relation to their world, orientating them towards its objects with degrees of proximity and urgency, sympathy and concern, aversion or hostility."[34] However, these emotional orientations are never static, undergoing frequent negotiation and contestation as we encounter and engage with rhetorical argumentation.[35]

Other useful theorizations within affect studies for this project include Griffin's work on "feeling normal" as an affective state which interpellates LGBTQ+ citizens into the national body politic through a mediated appeal to queer desires for belonging and Alison Page's study of the U.S.'s affective governance of slavery through media from the 1960's to today. Griffin's use of an affective state which works to keep citizens connected to national politics, even when those politics have been exclusionary or harmful, offers a conceptual tool through which I have proposed the affective state of "feeling Great" as the result of a highly successful affective economy of Exceptional sentiment. Page's work, on the other hand, is less helpful theoretically but offers insights into one of the major topics at hand in my work (U.S. chattel slavery) through the same theoretical lens (affect). Page also delves into the domain of U.S. public education and the media forms of film, social media, and video games, offering helpful analytical blueprints as I work through several objects in my archive.

III. Contribution

Research Questions

This project began with the identification of a phenomenon that I saw repeated across digital forms, genres, domains, platforms, and producers: discourse that questioned, challenged, or outright demolished narratives of American Exceptionalism. Though frequently followed by or responded to

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[34] James Martin, *Politics and Rhetoric: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2014), 120.
[35] Martin, *Politics and Rhetoric*, 120.

with Exceptionalism-affirming discourse, these counter-Exceptionalism narratives appear in and around popular culture to an astonishing extent. Thus, this dissertation seeks to answer two main questions:

1) How do contemporary digital media re-imagine ideas about American Exceptionalism for the current moment, in which racial strife, income inequality, domestic terrorism, and the U.S.'s waning influence abroad challenge core tenets of U.S. national identity as it circulated in prior eras?
2) How have the values and affordances of digital media technologies and platforms contributed to the production, circulation, and discourse of unExceptional sentiment?

An Emergent Structure of "feeling not-so-Great"

Predicated on the work of cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams, this dissertation proposes "feeling not-so-Great" as an emergent structure of feeling. Williams defines a structure of feeling as a set of characteristic affective elements of practical consciousness with specific internal relations that are both interconnected and in tension with one another. Social experiences that are still in process, structures of feeling are often not recognized as social; instead, they are experienced as private and, in some instances, isolating impulses. It is only through analysis that the sets of characteristics and specific hierarchies of the structure are revealed.[36] This project posits "feeling not-so-Great" as the state of affective tension borne out of a process of disillusionment with American Exceptionalism.

[36] Raymond Williams, "Structures of Feeling," in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128-135.

Moving beyond its traditional understanding as "feeling[s] of disappointment resulting from the discovery that something is not as good as one believed it to be,"[37] Margulies describes "disillusionment" as a process in which a set of powerful illusions that cohere into an understanding of world and being begin to crack until they eventually shatter, making one's previous conception of world and self now seem broken or fantastical.[38] The shattering propels us into a new reflexive state, where we begin to question every understanding, memory, and learned historical fact related in any way to the illusions we have finally recognized as illusions. By default, this process and the state of practical consciousness it creates are historically oriented—we did not know the illusions were there until after they had been revealed as false and it is only in the looking back that we see them for what they are. In our new state of disillusion, we are then inclined to look back on everything anew so that we may reconstitute our understanding of the world and our place within it.

While there is much to like about Sturken's language of "haunting," this project centers Americans' identification with the national story more than it does those who haunt that story. Consequently, I have chosen to use the language of "illusion/disillusion" offered by Margulies to refer to what I have observed as a major affective response to digital circulations of unExceptional narratives. To this end, I connect disillusionment to Eve Sedgewick's engagement with Silvan Tomkin's work on affect, particularly the way she situates shame as an affect of distinction and strangeness. As Margulies describes it, disillusionment is a process of one's world becoming strange, but also of one becoming strange to their world. Thus, one's disillusionment is connected to their attunement to shame, or the strength of their shame theory defined by "the size and topology of the domain it organizes and its methods of determining that domain."[39] In other words, the extent to

[37] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), s.v. "Disillusionment."
[38] Margulies, "Illusionment and Disillusionment," 293-294.
[39] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 2 (1995): 519, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343932.

which one allows themselves to be disillusioned depends on the preventative strategies they choose to enact in response to shame and the strength of their shame theory. Thus, disillusionment as a historically oriented, affective state of practical consciousness serves as a preventative strategy in which one becomes strange from the Exceptionalist story of the nation to distance themselves from its shameful deception. On the other hand, if one's shame theory is weak then each narrative of national sin serves as a singular outlier and remains disconnected from an intact Exceptional narrative; if any such story does trigger shame, that affect is redistributed from its original historical narrative to the present U.S. society which has become "not-Great" because of its obsession with finding fault in the past. In this way, considering the strength of an individual's shame theory helps us to understand, to some extent, the different ways "feeling not-so-Great" has been taken up as varying attunements of cognitive antennae and preventative strategies across domains of affective terrain.

IV. Method

The Analysis

Affect orients us to our world but *how* it does this and *in what ways* is decided in and through discourse. In the sense Foucault described, discourses serve as models of the world and contribute to the (re)production of social life.[40] Following this paradigm, Halliday and Fairclough posit that language creates dispositions within us, constituting us as subjects.[41] So, then, discourse constitutes us as subjects and affect situates us within those subject-positions, emotionally orienting us to the various objects and other subjects that make up our world. Because affect is circulated through discourse and following scholarly calls to "not forsake affect as uncanny, visceral and inaccessible,

[40] David Machin and Andrea Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2012), 20.
[41] Manchin and Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis*, 26.

and instead pursue its relationship with semiosis,"[42] this project employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) as its primary methodology. "Discourse" is commonly understood as "language in real contexts of use," but I use the term to encompass many forms of semiosis that serve independently and concomitantly to communicate, and therefore to construct, power relations.[43] To this end, I use both textual and visual analysis techniques to draw out the underlying ideas, values, and beliefs communicated in and through the objects that make up my archive, paying special attention to semiotic choices that are connected to the circulation of particular affects (notably: shame, anger, and disgust). Specifically, I focus on the ways in which the texts in my archive work to reinforce and/or reframe Americans' affective orientations to their subject-positions as U.S. citizens within the broader frameworks of historical and present-day American identity.

While the discourse circulated in and through the objects in my archive is the focus of my analyses, it is also the case that this discourse is presented and encountered in formal technological environments (i.e., platforms). In critical platform studies literature, the interface is understood as "a cultural text that aspires to power and that frames specific forms of interaction" making it a "non-neutral entity."[44] Consequently, it is also imperative that my analyses engage with the interaction between a platform's mechanics, logics, and interface and the discourse it produces and/or hosts. While a thorough analysis of the underlying mechanics of the various social media, institutional/organizational, streaming, and gaming platforms encountered in my archive is beyond the scope of this project, I do my best to give attention to the instances in which platform mechanics, logics, and interfaces interact with the circulation of affects via discourse.

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[42] Ewa Glapka, "Critical Affect Studies: On Applying Discourse Analysis in Research on Affect, Body and Power," *Discourse & Society* 30, no. 6 (2019): 617, https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926519870039.
[43] Machin and Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis*, 10-20.
[44] Korinna Patelis, "Political Economy and Monopoly Abstractions: What Social Media Demand," in *Unlike Us Reader: Social Media Monopolies and Their Alternatives*, ed. Geert Lovink and Miriam Rasch (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2013), 120.

The Archive

The narrative objects that form the foundation of my archive were all produced and distributed between 2013 and 2022/the present, but they engage with chronicles that traverse time from the founding of the United States to the present day. Across social media, video games, television, digital exhibitions, and web-accessed curriculum, I demonstrate how foundational narratives of American identity have been reaffirmed, revised, and reconciled in and across the domains of education, public history, comedy, and speculative fiction. I examine media that reimagine historical narratives foundational to American identity and that bring stories of U.S. history that have been conspicuously absent into the American historical consciousness. Including both "silly" and serious texts, I approach the various digital media that make up my archive as "objects of cultural weight and consequence" adopting the position that "it is the everydayness, the ephemerality, and the very popularity of such texts that makes them worth reading."[45]

The UnExceptional Multitude (Narrative Objects)

In building this project, I have frequently questioned the breadth of my archive because it has seemed overwhelmingly large and impossible, and because it means I will not be able to give as much time and attention to each individual narrative object as I would if I focused on fewer. However, every time I follow this argument to its inevitable end, I come to the same conclusion: the breadth is *necessary* because it is the overwhelming multitude of these narratives that has provoked and continues to stoke the structure of feeling not-so-Great. Individual narratives of American

[45] Sturken, "Feeling the Nation, Mining the Archive," 361.

misdeeds can be explained away, but story after story after story of American not-so-Greatness demonstrate a pattern that cannot be so easily overlooked. Arguments of "it was a different time" have been able to uphold the American progress narrative for decades, but in the face of misdeed narratives that traverse time periods separated by two hundred-plus years those arguments reveal themselves as the cardboard cutouts they are and fall flat.

The word "multitude" is apropos for this project for two reasons: first, it is the word Hoskins uses in his work on memory in the digital age as something entirely different from collective memory as it had been understood through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries; and second, the historic and present-day philosophical uses of the word connect it to the ideas of distance from and/or resistance to sovereign political bodies and global systems of power.[46] While the word has typically been used to refer to large numbers of people acting as a group, I use it here to refer to a large body of texts connected by their messages of resistance and distance from the traditional narratives of American Exceptionalism – what I refer to as the "unExceptional multitude." Early philosophical work attributed great power to multitudes, and it was fear of their power that served as the limit of sovereign power.[47] Because the unExceptional multitude consists of ideas rather than people, its power is different than that theorized by early philosophers. However, I contend that the strength of its power is no less great; in fact, it is the supposition of this project that the power of the unExceptional multitude has upended a century-long national sentimentality of Exceptionalism.

As I mentioned in the introduction, a comprehensive study of the unExceptional multitude is beyond the scope of this project. There are simply too many digital texts that offer such a

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[46] Benedictus de Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise; and, a Political Treatise*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
[47] Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise.*

narrative. While colleagues, mentors, and friends have offered excellent and compelling examples of texts that fall well within the parameters, I have done my best to create balance within the archive between texts that are incredibly popular and lesser-known, between texts that offer narratives central to American history as their main narratives and texts that only touch briefly on American history, and between texts that are understood as serious and those that are understood as silly. Despite the narrowing down of the multitude and the balancing out of three continuums of criteria, my archive remains quite large as a reflection of the multitudinousness. The list that follows is quite long, but I remind the reader (and myself) that that is, exactly, the point.

Table 1

Foundational Narrative Objects & Accompanying Discourse

Title	Year(s)	Format	Domain	Associated Discourse
Gameloft's *The Oregon Trail*	2021	Video Game	Education	*The Oregon Trail* (1985) & *The Oregon Trail II* (1995); scholarly articles on previous game versions; press coverage; game reviews; user comments (where available)
When Rivers Were Trails	2019	Video Game	Education	Press coverage; scholarly articles; accompanying lesson plan & online resources; possibly interviews with MSU game lab scholars who helped create the game
Every Kid Outdoors Curriculum	2019	PDF & Linked Webpages	Education	Information about the program from various state & federal entities, as well as non-profits and commercial enterprises that support and help to celebrate the initiative
NPS Network to Freedom Junior Ranger Booklets		PDFs	Education	information shared by Network to Freedom staff; potentially interview data with NPS personnel responsible for creating the booklets and anonymized completed booklets
Not Your Momma's History	2014 –	Website/Social Media	Public History	Press coverage; info gleaned via Patreon access; comments on social media videos & posts

U.S. National Park Service (main) Facebook & Instagram	FB: 2103 – IG: 2015 –	Social Media	Public History	User comments; National Park Service (Fan Page) Facebook group page; U.S. NPS social media how to guides & policies; NPS digital media training materials; possibly interview with NPS (main) social media creator
Google Arts & Culture x NPS "The Hidden Worlds of the National Parks"	2016	360° VR Films	Public History	YouTube promo videos & comments; press coverage; review posts
Sally Hemmings Digital Exhibit at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello	2018	Webpage(s); Digital Exhibit	Public History	Press coverage; TripAdvisor reviews of Monticello; possibly documents/interviews with Monticello personnel
@subparparks	2020 –	Social Media & E-Book	Humor	Press coverage; book reviews; comments on Instagram posts
Making History (various episodes)	2017	TV Series	Humor	User reviews on Rotten Tomatoes &. IMDB; press coverage
Drunk History (various episodes)	2013 – 2019	TV Series	Humor	User reviews on Rotten Tomatoes & IMDB; press coverage
Red Dead Redemption II	2018	Video Game	Speculative Fiction	Google Audience reviews & YouTube review videos; press coverage
*Teen Wolf (*various episodes from season 3b)	2014	TV Series	Speculative Fiction	User reviews on Rotten Tomatoes, IMDB, and other websites; press coverage
Falcon and The Winter Soldier (mini-series)	2021	TV Series	Speculative Fiction	User reviews on Google Audience; press coverage
Spirit Rangers	Slated for 2022 release	TV Series	Speculative Fiction	Press coverage; social media posts from show creatives

Timeframe (2013 – present)

A Decade of Disillusion

The year of 2013 marks a significant period in American cultural history that has had lasting repercussions, while also foreshadowing coming challenges. Following the re-election of President

Obama at the end of 2012, 2013 offered a range of terrors, disappointments, injustices, and revelations for Americans. In December of 2012, a twenty-year-old white man shot and killed twenty first graders and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary, triggering another national debate over gun control that culminated in April 2013 when the Senate failed to pass a bill that would have expanded background check requirements and banned assault rifles and high-capacity magazines. For every mass shooting that followed (of which there were many), those who supported gun control legislation seemed resigned to the fact that nothing would change—the frequent refrain became "If Sandy Hook didn't convince them, nothing will." Less than ten years later in May 2022, an eighteen-year-old man stormed Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, killing nineteen students and two adults and severely wounding seventeen others along with his grandmother who attempted to prevent him from leaving their house. In response to this and another mass shooting, Congress passed their first gun control bill in thirty years; it was signed into law by President Joe Biden in July 2022. 2012 also saw the murder of Trayvon Martin by neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman, who was acquitted of all charges in July of 2013. This ruling brought existing issues about race and the justice system into the national consciousness and sparked the Black Lives Matter movement, which continues to campaign against violence and systemic racism towards Black people in 2022.

Other important happenings from 2013 include: the bungled roll out of Obamacare, a policy that many hoped would be the solution to increasingly unaffordable and inaccessible health care but in practice only made a small dent in the larger issue and was at the heart of a sixteen-day federal government shutdown caused by a dysfunctional Congress; the city of Detroit's declaration of bankruptcy, a delayed result of the 2008-2009 recession; Edward Snowden's leaking of classified intelligence from the NSA which sparked an international discussion on the boundaries of surveillance in the digital age; the Boston Marathon bombing which killed three people, injured over

260 others, and shut down a major American city while police hunted the perpetrators with the help (or hindrance) of social media footage from the day; and the landmark Supreme Court decision that struck down the Defense of Marriage Act, clearing the way for gay marriage across the U.S. – a decision that the court framed as a matter of basic equality. Beyond the US, other big events from 2013 include Malala Yousafzai's UN speech on youth education and a landmark UN report declaring climate change "unequivocal" and warning of unprecedented high temperatures by 2047 as well as 1.5 billion people soon facing water scarcity. It was quite the year for the U.S., but it was also quite the year for the planet.

A Digital Decade

2013 also hosted several notable events within the tech and media spheres, solidifying the dominance of digital distribution and continuing the ideological shift from product to service across industries. The shift to digital distribution was exemplified in the homes of everyday citizens, as 2013 marked a significant year for cable providers in their expansion of video-on-demand offerings. Internet TV became the norm and "cord cutting" discourse grew – of course, by then cable providers had assured their survival by becoming internet providers and shoring up their digital infrastructures.[48] In 2013, Twitter went public with some success, the SEC turned social media into legitimate news sources when they ruled to allow organizations to make announcements via social media platforms, advertising on social media finally proved to be profitable, and the Pope signed onto Twitter for the first time ever. Snapchat became a hit, increasing their user base by almost 3500% from the end of 2012 to the end of 2013 and turning down acquisition offers from Facebook and Google. Netflix released their first self-produced television series, *House of Cards*, and became

[48] Amanda Lotz, *Media Disrupted: Surviving Pirates, Cannibals, and Streaming Wars* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press) 2021, 95.

legitimate players in the production game when it won three Emmy's. Spotify release a free mobile version of their streaming service and introduced company-curated playlists built around activities and moods in addition to genres.[49] Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines" dominated speakers and stirred up discussions of rape culture. The word "selfie" was added to the dictionary. The tech and media industries, and the cultural practices that support them, were changing and those changes were palpable for users and audiences in 2013. Today, the major players have both changed and stayed the same in different industries, but selfies, streaming, and social media as predominantly news and advertising platforms are well-established.

This Land was Made for You and Me

Because American identity has been so closely tied to land—the acquisition and "taming" of land in the era of Manifest Destiny; the cultivating of land on ranches, farms, and plantations; the bounding of land through national, state, and territorial borders; the preservation of land in parks and forests; and the anthropomorphizing of land as the fertile feminine body in need of protecting—narratives and institutions of U.S. land feature prominently in my archive. In particular, the U.S. National Parks and other natural sites under the stewardship of the National Parks Service (NPS) are given special attention in this project because they serve as monuments of American exceptionalism, a reading that has been attached to both the sheer scale and wildness of the landscape and the conquering of that landscape (and its Indigenous populations) by White, Anglo-European settlers, and because they are deeply entrenched in American culture. Beyond the lands under the stewardship of the NPS, however, I also look to land narratives in the form of southern

[49] "Spotify's $30 billion playlist for global domination," Robert Safian, accessed August 16, 2022, https://www.fastcompany.com/90205519/spotifys-playlist-for-global-domination.

plantations, state and national border crossings, the American frontier or "Wild West", WWII Japanese internment camps, and Native American reservations and land allotments.

Areas delineated specifically for their outstanding beauty or awe-inspiring scale, the National Parks operate as representatives of the American landscape. However, they also symbolize a U.S. identity informed by the ideology of imperialism in the guise of Manifest Destiny—a God-given right to claim and "civilize" the land through Westward progress—and largely hidden from citizens through the shaping of U.S. history education.[50] The preserved nature of the parks has also served as an escape from and reproach of modernity, beginning in the early 1900s when industrialization shifted the daily duties and operations of those living in urban areas and continuing to the present when logging, fracking, and other industrial pursuits continue to erode the already limited wilderness spaces left around the world and their ability to maintain the conditions most conducive to the various forms of life on the planet. These symbolic services combine to make the parks both an escape from the modern world to the wilderness and the playgrounds on which the imperial fantasy of conquering that wilderness is played out. In this way, the landscapes of the National Parks have as much temporal significance within US National culture and identity as they do spatial and geological significance.

As century-long custodians of natural and historic spaces, the NPS has evolved their curation criteria and their public persona; while existing parks and archives have largely remained the same (that is the goal of preservation, after all), the boundaries of acceptability for new parks, monuments, and programs and NPS interpretation and communication of park and archive narratives have expanded. The parks have also been positioned as important spaces in the fight for

[50] Cindy Spurlock, "America's Best Idea: Environmental Public Memory and the Rhetoric of Conservation Ethics," in *Observation Points: The Visual Poetics of National Parks*, ed. Thomas Patin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 247 and Daniel Immerwahl, *How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States* (New York: Random House, 2019), 338.

environmental sustainability and the combating (or the simple acknowledgment) of human-driven climate change, even recruiting Bill Nye "the Science Guy" as an ambassador and public-facing champion of the NPS. Despite (and in some instances because of) these organizational culture and communicative changes, the parks' enduring history as symbols of American exceptionalism resonates in both traditional and contemporary ways. At a time when nostalgia for American "greatness" has had a major resurgence for some, others are becoming more aware of past crimes and condemning those actions and the ideologies that perpetuate them. Despite an often-cited increasing polarization of the nation's citizens, the U.S. National Parks still have general appeal making them particularly ripe spaces for analysis of American sentiment and national identity.

V. Chapters

My chapters are organized into four "domains of encounter"[51] where citizens are introduced to and interact with digital media narratives of American exceptionalism: education, public history, comedy, and speculative fiction. This delineation demonstrates how the structure of "feeling not-so-Great" is emerging across cultural contexts, while also demonstrating the nuances and tensions of the structure between and within the generic norms of each domain.

Ch 1: (Un)Teaching Exceptionalism:

Chapter 1, "(Un)Teaching Exceptionalism," adopts the belief that educational spaces serve as dominant socializing contexts for children and adolescents, hailing them as citizens through ritual recitation of the pledge of allegiance and introducing them to major narratives of national identity

[51] I use the term "domains of encounter" here for two reasons: one, as a nod towards Eve Sedgwick's engagement with the "domain" of shame theory; and two, to delineate the contexts in which any given narrative might be encountered. Sometimes, these contexts are less specific (i.e., education) while other times they are quite specific (i.e., speculative fiction).

and memory in the forms of lessons, holiday celebrations, and cultural enrichment activities. In other words, school is a structuring sphere where young Americans learn to "Feel Great". Or at least, that is the sentiment that schools in the U.S. have traditionally imparted. Though work on the impacts and role of media in schools is relatively small within the field of media studies, media (and digital media in particular) has played and continues to play a major role in the educational domain of encounter. Taking this as a jumping-off point, this chapter interrogates digital infiltrations into U.S. education that complicate the role of traditional curriculum in teaching American Exceptionalism.

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the production, scholarship, and lasting discourse of *The Oregon Trail* (1985) and *The Oregon Trail II* (1995) video games which dominated student interactions with computers in schools across the U.S. from the mid-1980s to the early-2000s. Extending existing arguments about these games, I will argue that their story and mechanics in combination with their typical role as a "reward" within the computing/technology curriculum of public schools, worked to structure a generation of U.S. public students' relationship to technology within the affective framework of "feeling Great".

I then shift my focus to the legacy of *The Oregon Trail* (1985 & 1995) game narrative by examining two recent responses to it: one, the Indian Land Tenure Foundation's (ILTF) and Michigan State University's Games for Entertainment and Learning Lab's *When Rivers Were Trails* (2019); and two, Gameloft's *The Oregon Trail* (2021), a remake designed for the Apple Arcade gaming subscription service. *When Rivers Were Trails* is an educational 2D adventure game that mirrors the format of *The Oregon Trail* & *The Oregon Trail II* (1985/1995) but positions the player as an Anishinaabe person displaced from their ancestral lands in Minnesota and heading West to California because of impacts of the 1887 Dawes Act (also called the General Allotment Act).

Accessible via online download, the game[52] is accompanied by a brief lesson plan and learning goal to help teachers shape the introduction to and discussion of the game, as well as links to additional resources about land allotment policies, land tenure issues and history, and Indigenous peoples' connection to land.[53] The lesson plan/learning goal, linked additional resources, news articles, and scholarly texts will all be included in my analysis, along with the game itself.

In a more direct response to the legacy of the 1980s and 1990s game narrative, Apple Arcade's *The Oregon Trail* (2021) remake was produced with input from three Indigenous historians to more accurately represent Native peoples and the interactions that they would have had with pioneers crossing the American West in the mid-1800s. The introduction to this new version includes a note that reads: "For Indigenous Peoples, westward expansion was not an adventure but an invasion."[54] While not created explicitly for educational purposes, the new version was borne out of the legacy of the early games and their role within the education system and is specifically targeted to "the now-40-year-old original fans and their kids. And more Native American players."[55] Thus, I position the game as a tool of continuing-education and a direct challenge to the narratives of exceptionalism imparted by earlier game versions. In addition to the game, I include news articles and Apple Arcade game reviews in my analysis. I argue that *When Rivers Were Trails* and *The Oregon Trail* (2021) contribute to the unlearning of American exceptionalism within the educational domain, ultimately working to circulate the affective state of "feeling not-so-Great".

I transition to the second part of the chapter with an interrogation of various digital curricula media created by or with major input from National Parks Service personnel. These include four

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[52] "When Rivers Were Trails," Indian Land Tenure Foundation, accessed May 24, 2022, https://indianlandtenure.itch.io/when-rivers-were-trails
[53] Elizabeth LaPensée and Nichlas Emmons, "When Rivers Were Trails," *Films for the Feminist Classroom* 9, no. 1 (2019), http://ffc.twu.edu/issue_9-1/lesson_LaPensee-and-Emmons_9-1.html.
[54] Gameloft, *The Oregon Trail* (Gameloft: PC/Mac, 2021).
[55] "A New Spin on A Classic Video Game Gives Native Americans Better Representation", Anna King, NPR, accessed June 4, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2021/05/12/996007048/no-bows-and-arrows-and-no-broken-english-on-the-updated-oregon-trail

lesson plans from the Every Kid Outdoors program, and two Junior Ranger Booklets focused on the histories of freedom seekers escaping enslavement. Through the Every Kid Outdoors program (formerly Every Kid in a Park), which the U.S. Bureau of Land Management describes as "a federal public lands program created to spark a lifelong passion for America's great outdoors,"[56] U.S. fourth graders are granted a pass that allows them and their families free entry at all US National Parks, as well as Lands and Waters under the stewardship of the U.S. federal government. Passes are accessed online via the Every Kid Outdoors website, where educators can also find activity guides that offer lesson plans for teaching students about these spaces. The four guides currently on the website are: "Exploring Federal Lands and Waters" which teaches students why our country protects lands and waters; "Environmental Stewardship" which shows students how to take care of lands and waters; "Our Nation's Native Peoples" which teaches students about the Indigenous people who lived on these lands before they were called the United States; and "Citizen Science" which helps kids learn about the difference between weather and climate.[57] Each guide is offered as a downloadable PDF (portable document format) complete with learning objectives, common core skills associated with each guide, required materials, and lesson time estimates, as well as active hyperlinks to other government websites that host additional information and resources the students are asked to engage with throughout each lesson. Junior Ranger Booklets are curriculum designed by NPS personnel for specific NPS sites and programs, which children (and adults) are invited to complete to earn a Junior Ranger Badge. Each booklet includes multiple activities; children older than ten years of age are typically asked to complete more activities to earn their badge. The two booklets I include in this chapter are centered on the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom

[56] "Every Kid Outdoors," Bureau of Land Management, accessed May 13, 2022, https://www.blm.gov/everykidoutdoors.
[57] "Every Kid Outdoors - Educators," U.S. Government, accessed February 22, 2022, https://everykidoutdoors.gov/educators.htm.

Program, an NPS program focused on sharing the stories of freedom seekers who resisted slavery and oppression through escape and flight. Because the Network to Freedom Program does not have an official physical site, these booklets are (currently) only available online and badges are sent to Junior Rangers digitally or, if requested, through the mail. During a ten-week internship with the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program, I was exposed to discussions surrounding the Junior Ranger Booklets, including the program Director's desire to revamp the booklets. I also have verbal agreement from one of the Network to Freedom staff members for an interview about the booklets, and a good possibility of getting interviews with the staff members who created the existing booklets. Furthermore, the staff person responsible for going through the completed booklets and sending out Junior Ranger Badges has offered to insert a checkbox on the booklets that parents can check if they agree to have the completed, anonymized booklets be used in research. They have offered to send me any completed booklets with these permissions. Through a discursive analysis of the Every Kid Outdoors curriculum and the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Junior Ranger Booklets, I will explore the ways in which NPS-created digital educational texts about U.S. land and history both contribute to and complicate narratives of American exceptionalism.

Taken together, the analyses in this chapter will demonstrate how educational digital media contribute to the structuring of U.S. children's and adolescents' orientation to national sentiment. The dynamic nature of student experience of and responses to these digital texts further complicate the ways that students (as pre-public citizens who will become public citizens) affectively identify with the nation, demonstrating the importance of discursive data in the analyses of the narrative objects addressed here.[58] While it is my hope to include student responses through completed Junior

[58] During my undergraduate study at the University of Tulsa in Oklahoma, one of my favorite professors shared a story about her daughter's elementary school celebration of Sooner Day, which was the day when the US government allowed settlers to claim land allotments throughout the Oklahoma territory. The

Ranger Booklets and online game reviews, I will not offer those analyses as representative of a complete picture of how educational digital media contribute to feeling not-so-Great.

Ch 2: Exhibiting Exceptionalism('s Sins)

Extending the work of Marita Sturken in demonstrating how memorialization in/at buildings, museums, and monuments contributes to shifting understandings of national identity, I turn to the domain of public history for my second chapter. This chapter examines digital incursions at sites of public history and from public history organizations as they serve to mediate and circulate ideas about American Greatness. I engage with three narrative objects in this chapter: the US National Parks via the National Park Service's main social media accounts (Facebook and Instagram) and Google Arts & Culture's "The Hidden World of the National Parks" 360-degree virtual reality films, the Sally Hemmings digital exhibit at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, and the social media and Patreon accounts of Cheyney McKnight's historic interpretation company, "Not Your Momma's History."

While parks are not traditionally understood as spaces of memorialization or exhibition, the U.S. National Parks have served both purposes for the American public since the designation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872. Additionally, the NPS serve as a central narrator in the story of American national memory and identity as the National Parks are some of the most visited tourist

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celebration of Sooner Day is a popular practice in Oklahoma public schools, particularly when learning about the state's history. My professor's daughter's school celebrated by having the students dress up as pioneers and race out across the playing fields at the school to "claim" their plot of land. My professor and her husband both identify as Indigenous and their daughter does as well, so rather than dress up as a pioneer she wore her traditional native dress and, accompanied by her father, stood on the land across from the line of her classmates waiting for the signal to race out and claim it as their own. This story has stuck with me as an evocative example of how schools indoctrinate students into the myth of American exceptionalism by glossing over the messier parts of those narratives, but also how student reception and responses to these lessons can complicate those narratives. I don't know the affective impacts that my professor's daughter might have had on participating students, parents, and teachers by representing a missing part of the narrative of Sooner Day but hearing the retelling of it went a long way towards propelling me into "feeling not-so-Great".

destinations in the U.S. They are also "America's Storytellers,"[59] a self-proclaimed title that is present in their digital communications, and as such they are committed to "Telling All Americans' Stories."[60] While digital media are becoming increasingly present within the parks themselves, brought in by visitors via mobile devices and established in park-created exhibits and navigational resources, my analyses will focus on web-accessed park-produced digital media as objects that work to mediate and circulate ideas about American identity, history, and Exceptionalism. The two major digital objects I will focus on are the NPS (main) social media accounts on Facebook (this account page was created in 2009, but I will only look at posts and comments posted on/after January 1, 2013) and Instagram (this account was created in 2015) and the Google Arts & Culture x NPS "The Hidden Worlds of the National Parks" 360° virtual reality (VR) films (2016). In addition to these objects, I will interrogate their surrounding discourse by looking at press coverage, review posts, and YouTube promo comments for the VR films, as well as user comments on the NPS Facebook and Instagram posts and an additional Facebook group page for fans of the US National Parks. Furthermore, through a recent internship experience I gained access to the NPS's digital training documents, which include guidelines and best practices for social media, and I have been put in touch with the NPS employee responsible for running the main NPS social media accounts, so the possibility of an interview is high. These additional materials will allow for a media organization approach to my analyses.

Unlike parks, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello is a classically understood site of memorialization and exhibition that holds a uniquely prominent place in American memory. As one of the founding fathers and the country's third president, Jefferson is renowned for his role in

[59] "LGBTQ Heritage," National Park Service, accessed March 12, 2022, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/tellingallamericansstories/lgbtqheritage.htm.
[60] "Telling All Americans' Stories," National Park Service, accessed December 7, 2022, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/tellingallamericansstories/index.htm.

American history but is also solidified in American cultural memory as his name and visage appear across the country via statues, monuments, schools, streets, parks, and, since 1938, the U.S. nickel. This last object also features a pressing of the mansion at Jefferson's Monticello plantation where he lived with his family… and the many people he enslaved. The most well-known enslaved person from Monticello is Sally Hemmings, who negotiated for her freedom and the freedom of all children she may have when she was in France with Jefferson and his family. Sally returned to the U.S. with Jefferson and had several children, all of whom are believed to have been fathered by Jefferson. In 2018, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello introduced several new exhibits and programs to their site. The most prominent of these was "The Life of Sally Hemmings" exhibit which, despite being entirely digital, dedicated physical space within the Monticello grounds to Hemmings' story, allowing the US slavery narrative to take up space literally and figuratively within a popular narrative of American history. Because the exhibit is digital, it exists at Monticello as well as on the Monticello webpages. The exhibit also traveled to galleries across the country shortly after its introduction. While the digital exhibit will serve as the main narrative object for my analyses, I will also look at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello visitor reviews on TripAdvisor and press coverage of the exhibit to get at the ideas and sentiments it produces.

The last narrative object I consider within the public history domain are the webpages and social media accounts of "Not Your Momma's History," a public history company ran by historic interpreter, Abolitionist, and activist Cheney McKnight that focuses on "developing specialized programming about slavery and the African experience in eighteenth and nineteenth century America."[61] While the company has its hands in many aspects of public history, including consulting with and aiding museums, historic sites, historical societies, and private businesses and creating and

[61] "About Us," Not Your Momma's History, accessed June 24, 2022, http://www.notyourmommashistory.com/about-us-1.html.

performing programs for schools and events, it is most well-know for its YouTube vlogs and other social media content. In addition to examining YouTube videos, TikTok's, and Instagram posts from the company's accounts, I also plan to become a Patreon supporter of Not Your Momma's History, which at a certain tier comes with the benefit of attending live Zoom hangouts with Cheney every three months "where you can ask all the questions you like about [her] experiences, research and life."[62] I will also evaluate press coverage of Cheney and her company as well as user comments on their YouTube videos and other social media content to better understand how the digital media that Not Your Momma's History produces is taken up within a larger discourse.

Traditionally understood as material sites that demonstrate American greatness, "Exhibiting Exceptionalism('s Sins)" focuses on the digital exhibitions of/at U.S. National Parks, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, and "Not Your Momma's History" arguing that the ideas and sentiments they mediate and the circulation of those ideas through other forms of digital communication complicate their contributions to the myth of American exceptionalism. At the same time, they also contribute to a different kind of "feeling not-so-Great" which remains faithful to the myth of American exceptionalism by condemning the narratives and practices that complicate it as part of a progressive culture that has made present day America less "Great" than it used to be.

Ch 3: Laughing About Exceptionalism

The basic assumption underlying my third chapter is that humor serves as a central domain through which we encounter and interpret social and cultural values and processes. As Limor Shifman notes, "Humor has accompanied human society from its very beginnings, changing form,

[62] "Not Your Momma's History," Patreon, accessed July 3, 2022, https://www.patreon.com/NotYourMommasHistory

content and style in response to social, cultural and technological trends."[63] In the digital age, humor seems to have become increasingly predominant as employing humor in any of its various and varied forms is one of the surest ways to "go viral," an outcome not entirely disconnected from the proliferation of "vibes"—many of which have humorous aspects or even center around a specific comedic type, form, or topic—as an increasingly dominant way of affectively identifying and engaging with content. At the same time, digital tools and platforms and the increasing power of the consumer have greatly impacted the production, distribution, and consumption of comedy media.[64] Humor has also proliferated as a historical remediation technique creating "New forms of history [that] foster understanding, relatability, and identity as they shape and reshape collective historical experience."[65] Thus, it is unsurprising that a significant number of digital texts focused on sites and narratives of American exceptionalism, all of which were intentionally developed as (or quickly grew into) commercial enterprises, employ humor as their defining characteristic. Television episodes from FOX's *Making History* and Funny or Die/Comedy Central's *Drunk History*, as well as the @subparparks Instagram account page and its resulting book, *Subpar Parks: America's Most Extraordinary National Parks and Their Least Impressed Visitors* make up the major narrative objects of this chapter. "Laughing About Exceptionalism" engages with these digital comedic portrayals, demonstrating how humor works in complex and multifaceted ways to affectively reinforce and undermine their narratives of exceptionalism.

In 2017, among a slew of other time travel-related programming, FOX Broadcasting distributed a half-hour comedy series about time travel called *Making History* in which a facilities

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[63] Limor Shifman, "Humor in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Continuity and Change in Internet-Based Comic Texts," *International Journal of Communication* 1, no. 1 (2007): 187, https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/11.
[64] Peter C. Kunze, "Laughter in the Digital Age," *Comedy Studies* 6, no. 2 (2015): https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1080/2040610X.2015.1094945
[65] Melissa Sartore, "Drunk and Diverse: Reframing the Founding Fathers," *The Popular Culture Studies Journal* 6, no. 1 (2018): 45.

manager at a local college named Dan inherits an unlikely time machine, travels back to the 1770s, reinvents himself among America's founding fathers, and begins a romantic relationship with Paul Revere's daughter. In the two-episode pilot of the series, Dan discovers that his time traveling escapades have prevented the start of the American revolution and he must employ the help of Chris, a Black history professor at the college, and his girlfriend Deborah to convince the colonists to revolt against the British. In the big punchline of the pilot, it is the idea that the British might take their guns away that finally gets the colonists to start a revolution. Premiering to over two million viewers in the U.S., numbers dropped 25% after the first two weeks and the show was cancelled after only nine episodes; despite the promising premise of the show when time travel media was having a moment, *Making History* was a big flop.[66] However, this comic remediation of America's origin story fits into the larger pattern that serves as the impetus for this project and its major research questions: why are there suddenly so many digital media that deal with the traumatic, messy, and buried stories of American history or that reimagine popular stories of American history with alternative or unsung heroes and heroines, and what impacts are these media having on Americans' understandings of U.S. national memory and identity? *Making History* not only deals with historical national trauma and alternative heroines, but its narrative use of time-travel works to connect those stories to the present historical moment. At the same time, situating itself as a comedy series should make those altered historical narratives more palatable to viewers, yet the show was decidedly a failure by industry standards. All these qualities, in a show that was distributed on one of the major U.S. broadcast networks, make *Making History* rife for analysis. My analysis will include all episodes that reference or feature the American Revolution and its prominent characters (five episodes), news

[66] "Making History: Season One Ratings," TV Series Finale, published May 22, 2017, https://tvseriesfinale.com/tv-show/making-history-season-one-ratings/.

and trade press about the show, and user comments from Reddit (r/makinghistory), IMDB, and Rotten Tomatoes.

In contrast to *Making History*, Funny or Die/Comedy Central's *Drunk History* series consistently achieved high levels of viewership, making the series a commercial success for the humor-centered distributor. Originally produced as an amateur web series that ran from 2007 to 2010, *Drunk History* gained popularity online before getting picked up by Comedy Central. Its first season with the comedy channel aired in 2013 and its sixth and final season finished in 2019. Each episode consists of three to four sketches in which a celebrity, comedian, or historian gets drunk and then relates a "true" story of history. As the narrator talks, the visual fades into a re-enactment of the story in which famous actors and actresses take on the roles of the historical figures and lip-synch to the audio of the narrator. Most of the stories focus on American history, but some episodes cover topics such as "medieval" or "ancient" history. Many episodes are centered around large American cities, but episodes also have themes like "First Ladies" and "The Wild West." Existing scholarship on *Drunk History* is not extensive, but the studies that have been published suggest that certain episodes reinforce the ideals of "Manifest-Masculinity" inherent to American exceptionalism[67] while other episodes have been argued to complicate popular, "glossy" understandings of the founding fathers by focusing on narratives of the people they enslaved and their immature political squabbles.[68] Similar to *Making History* in its less-than-grand portrayal of America's "great men of history," *Drunk History* also differs from the FOX series in its format (sketch comedy), genre (non-fiction), and popularity. Interrogating the specific ways that humor

[67] Chandra Maldonado, "Recovering Teddy, Recovering Trump: The Rhetoric of Manifest-Masculinity in a Drunk and Rap Battle Generation," in *Gender, Race, and Social Identity in American Politics: The Past and Future of Political Access*, ed. Lori L. Montalbano (New York: Lexington Books, 2019): 237-254.
[68] Sartore, "Drunk and Diverse."

operates in these two series will offer insight into how they may or may not contribute to "Feeling Not-So-Great."

My last two objects of analysis in this chapter are the @subparparks account page that first appeared on Instagram in December of 2019 and its resulting eBook. The account's bio reads: "Real bad reviews of parks: apparently America's best idea wasn't that great."[69] As of April 2022, the account has 385,000 followers and 150 posts that are mostly digital artworks of U.S. National Parks, Monuments, and Forests, with hand-drawn lettering depicting quotes from real one-star reviews of the sites pictured. Published by PLUME (an imprint of Penguin Random House) in July of 2021 because of the account's popularity, *Subpar Parks* the book is available to buy in both hardback and eBook formats on multiple digital bookseller platforms. In addition to the posts and eBook content, I will also look at user comments, book reviews from Goodreads.com, and press articles about the account and eBook. As a form of surreal comedy that juxtaposes visual representations of extraordinary scenic landscapes (America's "best" landscapes) with the words of their harshest critics, the art and discourse of @subparparks expands the potential of this chapter in three important ways: first, it adds two mediums in which humorous narratives of American exceptionalism are circulating, making my potential arguments multimodal; second, it demonstrates how the comedy industry has shifted as the result of digital technologies and platforms, expanding the scholarly conversations in which I can make contributions; and third, as an object centered on the U.S. National Parks it allows me to make arguments about how narratives of American exceptionalism specific to National Park sites and the National Park Service are being engaged across domains of encounter in interconnected, multifaceted ways. Lastly, because the Instagram account and the eBook feature the same general content, I will be able to do a direct comparison of the ways this particular brand of humor is read and circulated in two different mediums.

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[69] @subparparks [Instagram account], https://www.instagram.com/subparparks/.

Ch 4: Speculating UnExceptionalism

> "Because tyrants have a need to be seen as the only legitimate source of truth, stories—which are often cloaked deep in metaphor—sometimes become the only tools with which citizens can counter state propaganda."[70]

Engaging with episodes from MTV's *Teen Wolf*, Disney's *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier,* and Netflix's [upcoming] *Spirit Rangers* along with Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption II*, "Speculating UnExceptionalism" explores digital speculative fiction as a domain of encounter in which U.S. national memory and identity is negotiated. While the fictional nature of these stories might draw critique as data for an investigation of U.S. national memory, it is precisely because of the freedom allowed by fictional storytelling and the "silliness"[71] of popular, fictional narratives that make these texts key to understanding how digital media contribute to "feeling not-so-Great". Following Lauren Berlant and Caroline Guthrie, I turn to speculative fiction narratives not to offer them as counter-hegemonic American historical narratives, "but to see that in the affective scenarios of these works and discourses we can discern claims about the situation of contemporary life" and the historical vantage point it provides.[72] Though modern definitions of the word highlight a lack of firm evidence and reliance on conjecture, "speculate" comes from the Latin root "speculat-" meaning "to observe from a vantage point."[73] This idea of the vantage point is central to understandings and interpretations of speculative fiction as it is precisely this removal from proximity, often through allegory, symbolism, or metaphor, that allows for critical reflection and examination of hegemonic social structures and subject-positions as well as one's own complicity in perpetuating their

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[70] Cynthia Boaz, "How Speculative Fiction Can Teach About Gender and Power in International Relations: A Pedagogical Overview" *International Studies Perspectives* 21, no. 3 (2020): 241.
[71] Lauren Berlant, *Queen of America.*
[72] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 9.
[73] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), s.v. "Speculate."

dominance.[74] Exemplified in the work of critical race theory scholars who have shown how various forms of speculative fiction have proliferated in Black storytelling traditions, especially Black feminist/womanist storytelling, because they allow the author "to place the realistic world into a fantastic tale" and "to create counterstories that can make visible the stories of minoritized people," the distance afforded by the genre of speculative fiction allows for the possibility of dismantling dominant narratives.[75] Through textual, visual, and platform analysis of specific episodes, chapters, and interactions as well as popular and trade press coverage, user/audience reviews, and social media discourse, I approach *Teen Wolf*, *Spirit Rangers*, *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, and *Red Dead Redemption II* as digital narratives that fall within the domain of speculative fiction, demonstrating how they popularize allegorical counterstories which work to challenge hegemonic, Exceptionalism-serving narratives of the U.S. historical imaginary by destabilizing beliefs in American benevolence and the popular narrative of historical U.S. race relations. While they are decidedly *not* historical narratives, the allegorical historical elements and their embodied presence in the present-day scenarios of these speculative fictions raise questions about the way we were taught to understand U.S. history and its implications for U.S. identity, an affective dissonance that leaves us feeling not-so-Great.

[74] Boaz, "How Speculative Fiction Can Teach," 250-252.
[75] S. R. Toliver, "Can I Get a Witness? Speculative Fiction as Testimony and Counterstory," *Journal of Literacy Research* 52, no. 4 (2020): 512, https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1177/1086296X20966362.

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