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"When you look at a calf, what do you see?"

Land(ed) Business, Necrotic Entrepreneurialism, and Competing Capitalisms in the Contemporary West of *Yellowstone*

Stefan Rabitsch

Abstract

For a popular, mass media text, Paramount's hit television show *Yellowstone* (2018–) packs quite a punch. It renders visible in a mass-mediated, synecdochial format the latent and ongoing effects that settler colonialism and its entanglements with the necrotic logic of capitalism have on lifeworlds in the contemporary West. By making a traditionally privileged place—a multigenerational cattle ranch—the principal target of intrusive, increasingly powerful agents of big non-agricultural capital, who are portrayed as a threat to the local and regional polity and the social fabric of the rural West, *Yellowstone* says something tangible and pertinent about the fastest growing region in the United States, and the massive changes in land use and land development that have registered there in the past two and a half decades.

This article pursues a goal that is twofold. Firstly, it will map the Trans-Mississippi West as an entrepreneurial habitat where the agents of settler colonialism initiated patterns that continue to undergird land ownership, land development, and land use policies in the contemporary West. Secondly, I will read and explicate how *Yellowstone* remediates New/Post-West scholarship—the work of social historians and cultural geographers in particular—with a seemingly didactic zeal. Ultimately, this yields a rather sober(ing) view of entrepreneurism in that its frequently quoted Schumpeterian definition—creative destruction—amounts to an ideological position that can only ever produce formations of violence, be they physical, psychological, epistemic, symbolic, and/or ecological.

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“When you look at a calf, what do you see?”

Land(ed) Business, Necrotic Entrepreneurialism, and Competing Capitalisms in the Contemporary West of *Yellowstone*

Stefan Rabitsch

It is all about the land. Conceived and run by actor-turned-director/writer Taylor Sheridan, Paramount’s hit television show *Yellowstone* (2018–) has become the central node in a rapidly growing television franchise ecology with two spin-offs to date and two more in the production pipeline. Set in the eponymous fictional valley in Montana, the show follows the travails of sixth-generation rancher John Dutton (Kevin Costner), who owns the largest contiguous spread in the state. A widower of more than two decades and supported by his children, he works to maintain the family’s livestock operation and its attendant socio-political powerbase in both the community and the state as an onslaught of increasingly powerful, non-agricultural monied interests bring socio-economic upheaval and a fair share of violence to the valley. More importantly at present, however, *Yellowstone* is a show that speaks volumes to the entrepreneurial workings of capitalism in the West—past and present—and their attendant land-based complexities. Unlike classic genre westerns, there is little that is unambiguous about the world we enter in *Yellowstone*. A brief example shall serve as an entrypoint.

In the pilot episode, John Dutton asks his eldest son, Lee (Dave Annabel), who is in charge of day-to-day operations on the ranch, “When you look at that calf, what do you see?” after they helped a cow that had difficulties calving in one of the ranch’s many pastures. Clearly relieved by their good deed and extolling the virtues of good husbandry, Lee says, “I see a life I got to feed and defend until it grows up and feeds me.” While appreciative of his son’s cowboy ethic, John strikes a more entrepreneurial tone, responding, “That’s what a cowboy should see. But a cattleman sees a $293

investment worth $1,100 in seven months whether it feeds anyone or not."[1]

Their brief exchange performs a fair amount of conceptual labor. First, usually obscured by decades' worth of hyper-romanticization across media, John lays bare the classist hierarchies of power that have always undergirded the realities of livestock raising and horsemanship economies in the West: while cowpunchers, wranglers, etc.—that is cow*boys*—are but (poorly) waged laborers, control over and ownership of the means of production and their attendant capital rests with cattle*men*. As John makes clear earlier in the scene, there is a difference between "running" and "working" a cattle outfit. Second, since ranching as an economic and cultural practice is no stranger to being maligned in performative culture wars, John unapologetically articulates what feminist rancher-writer Teresa Jordan has identified as "the essential irony of our work"—that "no one forgets that a live calf is money in the bank. And yet a reverence remains."[2] Similarly, Karen Merrill has located a "never resolved," perhaps unresolvable "tension between guardianship and the market" in ranching.[3] What is particularly striking is that John speaks to capitalism's necrotic logic, which has undergirded the global meat industry—it is of little importance whether or not harvested meat is consumed (Illustration 1). Third, what is left unsaid, however, can be inferred from what the audience sees in the scene: a sprawling, albeit fenced, pasture surrounded by mixed coniferous forests on sloping hillsides with higher mountains visible in the distance. The livestock-raising economy the Dutton family partakes in is contingent on having access to, control over, and ownership of land. As rancher-scholar Nancy Cook has opined, to be "in the ranching business" means to be "always in the land business."[4] Not only does the pilot episode open with one of John's three sons in front of a state government committee making the case against condemning a parcel of the ranch for a development project of a nearby town, time and again the show makes clear that it is all about the land. For example, later in the season, John confronts and sees off a group of Chinese tourists who have trespassed on his property, proclaiming that "this is America. We don't share land here."[5] This is land that is contested and haunted by what is both a corrupted and corruptive zero-sum logic that renders *Yellowstone* a postwestern entrepreneurial drama. Lastly, Lee is soon killed after their conversation in an altercation where the ownership of cattle is in dispute. A spectral presence, violence haunts both the West as a region and the show in its own right, a condition I will return to in this article's conclusion.

From the comfort of their living rooms, the audience can see "how ideological and economic changes in the West become manifest on the land."[6] After all, what John Dutton sees from the fence line of his ranch is "a peopled, cultured, playful, ugly West,"[7] which draws equally from the paradigm-shifting *Atlas of the New West* (1997) and the scholarly labor of New Western historians in general as well as their postwestern scions who have successfully enmeshed the region in the carcinomatous forces of

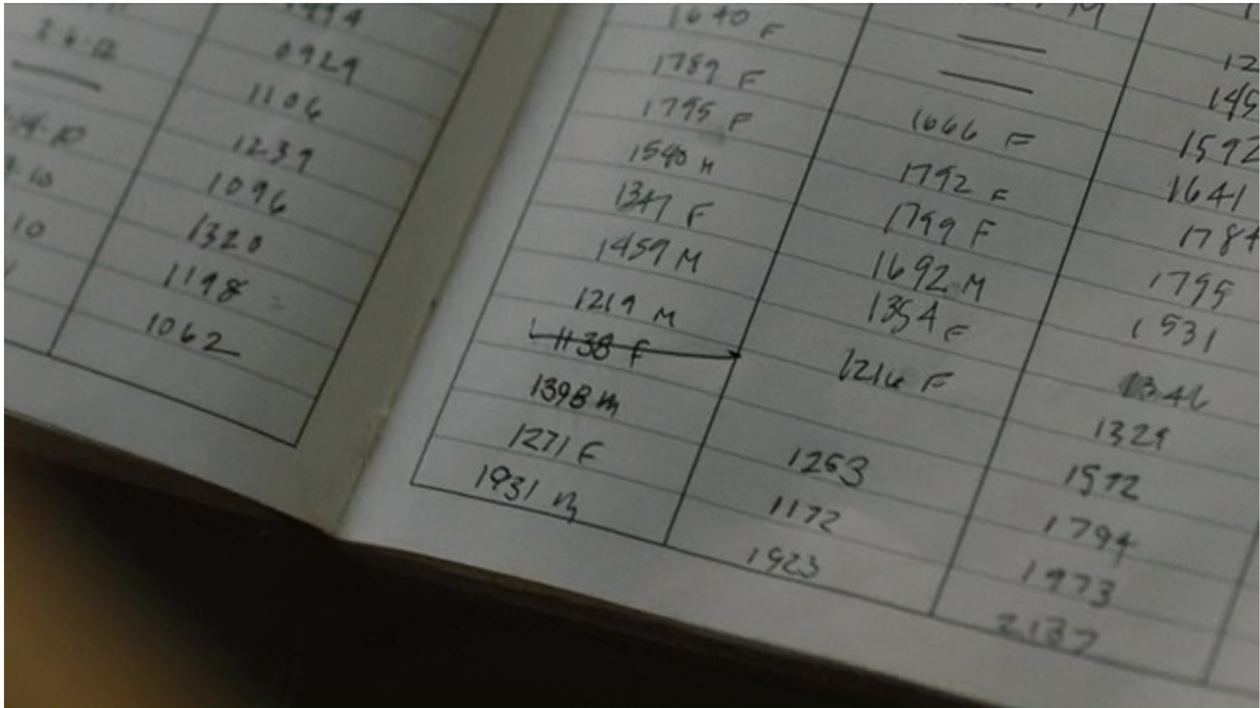

Illustration 1: The business of cattle.

Frame capture from *Yellowstone*, "Daybreak" (Season 1, Episode 1). *Yellowstone* © Paramount Pictures, 2018. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

late-stage capitalism. Consequently, *Yellowstone* renders visible in a mass-mediated, synecdochical format the latent and ongoing effects that settler colonialism and its entanglements with the necrotic logic of capitalism have on lifeworlds in the contemporary West. Made visible and thus accessible to critique, the show posits that the region, especially the Intermountain West, has been a habitat for entrepreneurial ventures that are contingent on the ownership of, and/or control over, the land and its attendant uses ever since the incursion of Europeans. Indeed, it only makes sense that *Yellowstone* centers on a multi-generational ranch; a family-owned agricultural unit is an ur-American, spatially manifest enterprise. Invoking claims of and to "authenticity,"[8] which, by definition, are dubious and suspect in mass media entertainment, Taylor Sheridan sees the show as a vehicle to extricate and rehabilitate the labor and lifeworlds of people in the livestock-raising and horsemanship economies from an excessive amount of romanticization. Despite what are arguably high levels of cowboy(ing) verisimilitude, the show, as a postwestern text, cannot but fail this lofty goal. While *Yellowstone* is invested in "a process of disengagement from the system it is in tension with (the Westerns of the past)," Neil Campbell has conceded "full knowledge that it is probably inescapable from that system as well," thus making the postwestern "a mutational and dialogical form."[9] The show's pervasive elegiac nostalgia is a case in point. However, by making a traditionally privileged place—a multigenerational cattle ranch—the principal target of intrusive, increasingly powerful agents of big non-agricultural capital, who are portrayed as a threat to the local and

regional polity and the social fabric of the rural West, *Yellowstone* says something tangible and pertinent about the fastest-growing region in the United States, and the massive changes in land use and land development that have registered there in the past two and a half decades.[10]

For a popular, mass media text, *Yellowstone* packs quite a punch. Consequently, this article pursues a goal that is twofold. Firstly, it will map the Trans-Mississippi West as an entrepreneurial habitat where the agents of settler colonialism initiated patterns that continue to undergird land ownership, land development, and land use policies. These patterns of conspicuous consumption speak to how forces of big capital are spectral constants in the region which have ravaged the land as well as human and non-human bodies alike for multiple generations. Secondly, I will explicate how *Yellowstone* remediates New/Post-West scholarship—the work of social historians and cultural geographers in particular—with a seemingly didactic zeal. Ultimately, this yields a rather sober(ing) view of entrepreneurialism in that its frequently quoted Schumpeterian definition—"creative destruction"[11]—amounts to an ideological position that can only ever produce formations of violence, be they physical, psychological, epistemic, symbolic, and/or ecological.

The American West as Entrepreneurial Habitat

For the contemporary non-Westerner—and even for Westerners—it might be challenging to see the long history of entrepreneurialism in the region, let alone how its pervasive patterns continue to shape lifeworlds today. For quite some time now, the hotshots of the information industry have been the default exemplars of entrepreneurial prowess and success. It is all but certain that when people think of the American West and entrepreneurship, Silicon Valley's elite, the likes of Larry Page, Sergey Brin, Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, and hundreds like them—not to mention the thousands of aspirants to their type of success—is what comes to mind. Partially the product of government-enabled development after World War II, a relatively small speck of the West, Santa Clara county in California, has since become synonymous with high-tech entrepreneurialism. A resource that comes from the land, silicates, which are a key element in transistors, integrated circuit chips, and a host of other electrical components, have enabled the rise of Silicon Valley. However, the exceptional(ist) position ascribed to these entrepreneurial heroes of our second Gilded Age is hardly warranted.[12] The "dean of western literature,"[13] Wallace Stegner, has observed that their "entrepreneurial attributes are not greatly different from those of an old-time cattle baron."[14] His observation merely gestures at the extent to which Western spaces have been thought of in economic terms which can be efficiently excavated and mapped when "thinking [in] postwestern [terms]."[15]

Contrary to the epistemic and moral certainties of the mythic West, and the ideological confidence propagated by the Turnerian school of western history, there is one appellation that has become axiomatic in the scholarship about the region over the past three decades: the West is complex, always has been. In both historical and contemporary terms, the region amounts to a palimpsest of complexity where intersections between entrepreneurialism and the land register on many, if not most, layers of the region's geomorphic surfaces and historical substrates. While "the Old West had more or less one kind of story to tell," Nina Baym has argued, "the New West has many different kinds of story, and the Postwest worries about the ontological status of any story a western historian or writer or literary academic might want to narrate."[16] Accessing the region from this vantage point means, according to Neil Campbell, "to see it as several spaces simultaneously, overlapping, in contact and exchange . . . always relational, dialogic . . . and, therefore, contradictory, irreducible, and hybrid."[17] Invoking Renée L. Bergland,[18] Campbell has since expanded on this idea, appraising the West as "a spectral landscape[,] . . . a layered, scarred region, both geographical and psychical," which has accumulated "an inheritance buried deep in the American national psyche."[19] Practicing a multiscopic way of seeing, the spectral presences on (and also below) the land bear the imprint of the transformational, albeit often violent, labor performed by capital, and "the ownership of land [has been] a primary part of that narrative."[20]

Rooted in settler-colonist practices and increasingly codified since the land policies of the Early Republic and the mid-nineteenth century (e.g., the Land Act of 1797, the establishment of the General Land Office in 1812, the Homestead Act of 1862), expansionist modes of land-based entrepreneurialism have always defined the West. Regardless of whether they are forms of individual or corporate enterprise, they have repeatedly transformed "the West into a commodified landscape," but "not simply a landscape filled with natural resources to be mined and harvested, it was also a symbolic landscape available for consumption."[21] The process by which these transformations have taken place is predicated on "a fundamental assumption," which is that "land would be property."[22] Since the "ownership and occupation of western land was both desired and then contested by many peoples,"[23] this fundamental assumption begot, and then worked in conjunction with, legal fictions designed to "rid the frontier of all impediments to economic enterprise."[24] From an Anglo-European point of view, this, of course, meant that the indigenous stewards of the land as well as competing colonial/imperial ethnicities (e.g., in the Spanish, later Mexican Southwest) would be made cultural and economic subalterns. While the federal polity has enshrined the existence of, and access to, a public commons as a fundamental public good in its laws, William Robbins has contended that "for more than a century the nation's land policy was singularly obsessed with transferring ownership to private hands."[25] The

fault lines between public access and use, and private development and use continue to be part of everyday life in the West. Ideologically and economically, the transfer of public land into private ownership only makes sense given both the meaning and value ascribed to land over the course of American history. Painting in broad strokes, James Oliver Robertson has observed that "land meant agriculture, crops, surpluses, rents, food in the belly, and riches; it meant place and position, status and power, security and continuity."[26] Needless to say, for the dispossessed and those unable to acquire land holdings, it more often than not translated into the opposites.

The labor that capital performs on the land within a settler-colonial frame of reference is, however, not an abstract process. Often state-enabled, sometimes state-sponsored, it is directed and enacted by monied agents and/or entities. American westward expansion and consolidation produced a number of land business ventures that have since achieved hallmark status. For example, the magnates who directed the transcontinental railroads across the Great Plains, the Rockies, the Great Basin, and the desert Southwest—people like Leland Stanford, Thomas "Doc" Durant, Jay Cook, and James J. Hill—are frequently listed as the immediate forebears of Gilded Age industrialists.[27] Perhaps lesser known outside the West, but no less impactful on land ownership and land use in the region were large cattle outfits such as the XIT, the JA, and the 6666 ranches, which were usually financed by East Coast and/or European, especially Scottish, capital.[28] More specific models of land-based and/or land-dependent entrepreneurialism showcase not only how pervasive entrepreneurialism has been in the West, but also how they established patterns of capital, ownership, and power whose latent influence still registers.

Writing about coastal California in 1835, Richard Henry Dana exuberantly asserted, "In the hands of an enterprising people, what a country this might be."[29] Swiss émigré John Sutter fit Dana's aspirational profile of what Howard R. Lamar has termed the "wilderness entrepreneur."[30] In 1839, Sutter obtained a land grant in the Central Valley from the Mexican governor to establish a trading post, where he then "traded with Indians, participated in the fur trade, tried to raise food, and successfully built up herds of horses and cattle."[31] Sutter was not an aberration but rather paradigmatic of Jacksonian Common Man entrepreneurialism; and the wilderness trading post was a typical entrepreneurial model in the West, which, even if individual posts failed, often served as the basis for local townships or agricultural ventures. Staying in the Golden State, William Robbins has mapped how "the state's finest agricultural lands, including properties deeded by Mexico to a few hundred owners," correspond with "California's large agribusiness ownership patterns of today," and "therefore, mirror the past."[32]

Another paradigmatic model is what Carl Abbott has aptly called "early versions

of smokestack chasing."[33] On the eastern fringes of the West in the latter third of the nineteenth century, towns and communities answered "declines in their agricultural base" by way of "economic development planning" that translated into "land assembly, public infrastructure investment, place marketing, and tax incentives."[34] Fast-forward to the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, and we see "worn-out resources towns convert to tourism as city people search out scenery," vis-à-vis "rural economic development districts and small town elites . . . recruit[ing] tenants for new industrial parks."[35] These are the real-world dynamics of "various land-control regimes" that undergird the postwestern entrepreneurial drama of *Yellowstone*.[36]

What conceptualizing, mapping, and reading the Trans-Mississippi West as entrepreneurial habitat then allows us to do is to track and parse the state- and capital-enabled process of "put[ting] sovereign territory on the market" in real and imagined geographies.[37] In the vein of the popular culture labor performed by *Yellowstone*, such an approach aligns with the tenets of "critical regionalism" with a view to "mobiliz[ing] a more varied vision of the West in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries."[38] The region's settler-colonial legacy—"a form of agricultural work premised on . . . the colonial mastery over indigenous peoples, animals and landscapes"[39]—has carried forward two principal ethics: i) the homestead ethic and ii) the entrepreneurial ethic. A "grassroots doctrine," the former is rooted in three assumed rights, "the right to have and to hold a family-size farm, the homestead; the right to enjoy a homestead unencumbered by a ruinous economic burden such as an onerous mortgage or oppressive taxes; and the right peacefully to occupy the homestead without fear of violence (such as that by Indians or outlaws) to person or property."[40] The latter expresses the belief in "individual enterprise in a market economy."[41] It is all but obvious that when enterprising agents of capital covet the same land for different uses, the shear forces which emanate from their zones of contact are likely to yield tension, indeed conflict.

"This ain't checkers, son": Ranching is Preferable to Aspenization; Or, a New "Old" West(ern) Story

In her paradigm-shifting work *Legacy of Conquest* (1987), New Western historian Patricia Limerick went on record, stating that "if Hollywood wanted to capture the emotional center of Western history, its movies would be about real estate."[42] Though likely unintentional and coming in the form of a television show rather than a feature film, Taylor Sheridan has arguably riposted Limerick's quip with *Yellowstone*.[43] The series is all about land—who has access to it, who owns it, who would like to acquire it, who has been deprived of it—and the incompatible goals of how to best use and/or

develop it. Its timbre is thus in tune with what Wallace Stegner has identified as a key characteristic of Westerners (new and old)—that is, an unadulterated "love of the land."[44] However, this love—though covetousness might be a better term—accommodates contradictory, sometimes entirely antithetical values and ideas, ranging from "a fatal carelessness and destructiveness," sustaining conspicuous consumption to "an impassioned protectiveness," which encompasses the sacrality of private property as well as public conservation concerns.[45] Consequently, the landed complexities that inform the central drama and conflict of the show derive from what Peter Walker has diagnosed as the "tensions between competing capitalisms that commodify nature in incompatible ways."[46] More specifically, "the key process," William Travis contends, is located in "the appropriation of rural land with capital not associated with, or earned from, traditional rural land uses such as farming, ranching, logging, and mining."[47]

For those less accustomed to contemporary Western lifeworlds and their entanglements with land development and land use, *Yellowstone* offers simplified albeit symbolically potent motifs that are convenient avenues for getting into the weeds of the West's landed complexities. Throughout the series, these complexities are explicated in abridged form by way of addressing how their attendant socio-economic changes register in seemingly mundane practices of consumption.[48] For example, in the pilot episode, John Dutton's prodigal son, Kayce (Luke Grimes), takes his bi-racial son, Tate (Brecken Merrill), to an ice cream parlor in downtown Bozeman. He asks his father whether this was where he had ice cream with his dad when he was young; Kayce promptly replies, "This wasn't here when I was a boy. None of this was. I will say this though. These transplants sure can make some ice cream." Visibly puzzled, Tate wants to know what or who a transplant is, which leads Kayce to explain that they use the term to refer to "a person who moves to a place, and then they try to make that place just like the place they left."[49] The response leaves Tate even more befuddled. Coffee serves a similar purpose; considerable attention is given to Jamie (Wes Bentley), the third of three Dutton sons,[50] grabbing a cup of "pour-over" coffee at a local hipster coffee shop for his out-of-state campaign manager-turned-lover who extolls that "the best measure of progress in a town is decent coffee."[51] While Harvard-educated, Jamie's Westernness is made explicit by him not caring about the diverse selection of coffee he has to choose from, nor the latest brewing techniques. Meanwhile, we see John Dutton have regular drip coffee at a local greasy spoon.

These relatively simple motifs illustrate the transregional demographic shifts and their attendant socio-economic changes in that the significant increase of "new rural settlers [who] bring their jobs and incomes with them," and then "demand services not typical to rural economies."[52] Bozeman makes an ideal example, since it is one of many regional cities that have been reclassified as "micropolitan areas."[53] They are

the urban-ish nuclei that have driven the transformation of "Cowboy Counties" into "Cappuccino Counties" in the past two decades.[54] To be sure, while "westerners have been trying to simplify the West into monochromatic societies . . . for a very long time," Joseph Taylor has confirmed that "rural patterns have been displaced by the demands of a broad, transnational class of amenity-seeking, franchise-patronizing consumers."[55] What has changed in the past two to three decades, however, are the pace, the extent, and the excess of how these "economic changes . . . transformed the region's land use patterns and have altered its long-standing land use battles."[56] Consequently, *Yellowstone*'s fictional locale exhibits considerable synecdochical value, since it explicates the economic and demographic pressures that have registered all over the region; and nowhere is the "unbridled development" entrepreneurialism more visible than on rangeland.[57]

Following John Dutton's patriarchally charged position as narrative focalizer, *Yellowstone* not only remediates the symptoms and effects of the changes in rural land development, but also addresses the seismic shifts in the systemic substrate that had ossified land use regimes over decades; and, the series does that without being ignorant of indigenous concerns. Succinctly summarizing the visible effects on the land, William Travis has mapped how "spreading residential and commercial land uses are transforming the West's emblematic landscapes: its mountain fronts, its great swaths of rangeland, and its desert canyons."[58] Variously labeled "exurban sprawl,"[59] "the gentrified range,"[60] "wilderburbs,"[61] or "weekendlands,"[62] these land development ventures represent the transformation of largely agriculturally productive spaces, presided over by legacy landowners, into a non-agricultural amenity landscape and "positional good" by "city makers."[63] These real estate investors and developers cater to a rapidly growing market of residency seekers, often "equity refugees,"[64] who look for (and can afford) "great views of mountains (and maybe distant city lights), elk outside your window, neighboring public lands on which you can roam, and all within, say, an hour's drive to city, airport, and ski slope."[65]

In the series, this is what Dan Jenkins (Danny Houston) is selling: having accumulated wealth in the California gaming industry, he is a newly arrived transplant who seeks to develop land directly adjacent to the Dutton ranch into a planned community of subdivisions and possibly condos. When the audience first sees him, he already owns and operates a sporting club-con-resort and golf course, which, as can be seen in the first meeting between John and Dan, presses up right against the ranch's fence. The symbolism could not be more obvious with the rich greens of the irrigated and landscaped lawn, representing his development goals and what he calls "progress,"[66] vis-à-vis the yellows and ochre of the much drier rangeland lorded over by Dutton on top of his horse (Illustration 2). Visually, it seems as if John is afforded the moral high ground. What follows in season one and parts of season two is Jenkins engaging in a

Illustration 2: The business of land.
Frame capture from *Yellowstone*, "Daybreak" (Season 1, Episode 1). *Yellowstone* © Paramount Pictures, 2018. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

series of entrepreneurial maneuvers and counter-maneuvers with a view to shaking loose the Dutton family's grip on parts of their holdings and their power base in the community and the state government. Apart from the societal and ecological changes (e.g., rising rents, food and gas prices, increased traffic, and environmental degradation due to increased recreational use) that land development projects like Jenkins's entail, they have a significant impact on land prices, which, in conjunction with changing demographics, also alter the tax base. While increased tax revenues are usually presented as a boon to local and state governments, they can quickly become a liability for legacy landowners like the Duttons and other ranchers we see in the series. Long-time landowners could maintain their holdings thanks to a relatively low tax burden. William Travis has identified "the point of inheritance to be especially vulnerable,"[67] for these landowners, which Jenkins, under duress, reveals as his strategic linchpin when threatened with a good-old western hanging in the unraveling finale of the first season: "We'll inflate the land prices. Run up the property tax. And price people out." Portentously, Jenkins adds, "You think I'm gonna be the last person who's gonna wanna take it?"[68] However, before he can make good on his scheme, he is dispatched by other landed powerbrokers in a different economic sector who made it clear to him that "thriving in Montana is all about staying in your lane."[69]

Jenkins's estate is subsequently swallowed by the purveyors of a particularly pernicious and regionally derided form of land development: Aspenization. A form

of "corporate-controlled colonization," this type of land development sees "small ranching and mining towns discovered and transformed into resorts, their residents overwhelmed," by "extravagant new commercial and residential investment."[70] Two seemingly innocuous acts of trespassing signal the arrival of mega-corp Market Equities. First, a group of suits wander onto one of the ranch's pastures while assessing the defunct Jenkins estate and are bluntly seen off. Then, a fly fisherman is caught wading in a section of a river that belongs to the Dutton family. He is soon revealed to be Roarke Morris, a hedge fund manager and frontman for Market Equities. He delineates to Beth (Kelly Reilly), John's daughter, that even though "Dan Jenkins was a smart guy . . .[,] his dreams just weren't big enough. Why dream about building golf courses when you can build cities?"[71] Having already secured a Forest Service lease and pre-approval by the Federal Aviation Administration, Market Equities seeks to either buy out ranchers in the valley or make the case to the state government to condemn private property under eminent domain. Beth ascertains their goals: "They are building an airport and a ski resort . . . And then they're gonna build a city around it."[72] With monied interests in excess of multiple billions stepping onto the scene, it falls to Governor Perry (Wendy Moniz), whose ear John Dutton also has, to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of such a large infusion of cash into the state economy, knowing fully well that Market Equities wield the kind of capital and power that can sway elections. In a series of conversations between the different stakeholders, the mega-corp's growth-or-die boosterism,[73] which is undergirded by a zero-sum logic, is both explicated and critiqued. For example, Jamie counters their default arguments—increased tax revenues and job growth—with their well-documented side effects: "Thousands of low paying service jobs. Skilled labor, I'm sure, will come from out of state. Which will drive the home prices even higher, if that's possible. You're pricing people out of the valley."[74] The crux is that a large segment of the labor force is pushed into bedroom communities, or worse,[75] "reminiscent of nineteenth-century logging camps[,] or commute long distances to service wealthy tourists."[76] *Yellowstone* explicitly nods to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, the subject of Justin Farrell's book-length study *Billionaire Wilderness* (2020). The town is the county seat of "the richest county in the United States and the county with the nation's highest level of income inequality."[77] Ultimately, in the explosive finale of season three, the fate of the valley seems sealed as the governor makes clear that, "There is no choice anymore, John. There are only options."[78] These options then become somewhat more convoluted as John Dutton makes a bid for, and then secures, the governor's office in season four and the first half of the as-yet-unfinished fifth and final season.

Over the course of its first three seasons in particular, different voices tease out the capitalist logic that informs the entrepreneurial ventures big money is bringing to the region and repeatedly impress upon the ranch patriarch that he is facing

competitors who are not obliged to operate within established, regionally-anchored frameworks; nor do they care or have to. John's daughter sums it up succinctly: "What this place is facing… it isn't an enemy. It's a perspective. It's a shift in values. The world doesn't value your way of life anymore, Dad."[79] Similarly, when the governor visits John at the summer cow camp in the mountains, where he tries to sway her by way of the state's heritage as cattle country con western sunset, she tells him outright, "I can see why this is the dream they want to sell." John retorts, "Yep… but you can't sell this. You gotta earn it. You gotta live it. And that's what they'll never understand." Like his daughter, the governor hits the proverbial nail on the head: "But they only want to sell it. And they could care less about the dream coming true. That's what you've got to understand."[80] While "originally sites of commodity production," ranches like the Duttons' have become "a commodity in their own right, purchased for recreation and for the 'ranch' ideal."[81] Crucially, they are developed and purchased to consume this ideal without adding, let alone replenishing value. As Nancy Cook has observed, "When the rich folks get bored and leave, they sell out to other rich people."[82] Consequently, all last stand bravado and latent pastoral romanticism (of which there is a lot in the series) aside, the Dutton family is confronted with the carcinomatous realities of late-stage capitalism. Adhering to a necrotic logic, these commodification schemes translate into a mode of consumption where that which they are contingent on is consumed until it ceases to exist.

Even more interestingly perhaps, the entrepreneurial and ideological wranglings over land in *Yellowstone* say something about the systemic changes in the political substrate of the West that have enabled, or at the very least accelerated, changes in land development and land use. To be sure, John Dutton, his family, and other "Lords of Yesterday," to borrow from Charles Wilkinson,[83] are neither powerless, nor are they innocent victims, far from it. John wields considerable, some might say feudal, power in "his" valley. For example, when Dan Jenkins smugly proclaims that "progress doesn't need your permission," John retorts, "Yeah, in this valley it does."[84] Much to Jenkins' consternation, John's powerbase encompasses—but is not limited to—being the State Livestock Commissioner and thus controlling an agency with executive powers; a daughter who works for an investment firm and who is called upon to stage defensive maneuvers; a lawyer son who serves in the State Attorney General's Office and who later becomes the AG. Additionally, he is friendly with local law enforcement, has the backing of stockgrowers associations, has the governor's ear, and so and so forth. While some might rightfully call this a nepotistic cabal of local/regional interests, these structures actually conform to "subgovernment theory," which is "a simple descriptive device for identifying causal relationships between actors and the strategies they employ to dominate the policy setting."[85] Historically, ranchers and other agricultural landowners established solid organizational ties in the absence of

a strong federal presence in the West prior to the Great Depression.[86] These formed the systemic basis for "so-called iron triangles," i.e., "relationships between interest groups, agency bureaus, and congressional subcommittees,"[87] which William Kelso has described as "mutually supportive and harmonious" until the turn of the twenty-first century.[88] As can also be inferred from *Yellowstone*, "resource users often manipulated the system for private advantage."[89] Since the presidency of George W. Bush, however, these ironclad structures have increasingly softened up as "an unintended consequence of the expansion of domestic energy production," effectively "displac[ing] the ranching industry's historical domination of . . . land-use policy subgovernment."[90] In other words, iron triangles are gradually giving way to "open systems,"[91] in which "previously closed policy domains are now described as porous and susceptible to the influence of competing players."[92] In the series, the onus for these seismic shifts is not only on the Jenkinses and Roarkes who seek to Aspenize the valley, but it is also crafted into a narrative space for indigenous voices and their agendas.

While the show might appear to give the moral and ideological high ground to John Dutton, *Yellowstone* is fairly explicit in assigning settler-colonial blame and responsibility to his family. More than once, John all but declares that their holdings were essentially stolen from the original stewards of the land. For example, late in the second season, Jenkins visits the ranch and explains his rationale for coming to the valley: "So beautiful. Every direction. It's just like a painting. All I wanted was give people the opportunity to see it, you know. . . . I have just as much right to be here as you." John could not disagree more, saying that "no one has a right. You have to take the right. Or stop it from being taken from you."[93] This is but one example of how *Yellowstone* gestures to "the continued vitality of issues widely believed to be dead."[94] With Market Equities stepping onto the scene, and deployed with a hefty dose of irony, John's Native American daughter-in-law, Monika (Kelsey Asbille),[95] confronts him with the following observation: "Kayce used to tell me what a war it was for you, keeping this place. When this land belonged to my people a hundred and fifty years ago, children were stolen and men were killed. Families herded away like cattle. And nothing's changed. Except you're the Indian now."[96]

Not only does she make clear in so many words that the ranch is built on stolen land, but as the subaltern in this conversation, she also (re)assigns subalternity to John; it is a sign of things to come since it is he and his family who are made subalterns of big(ger) capital. With the contemporary West having rapidly grown into "a neo-colonial area,"[97] *Yellowstone* concludes its third season with Market Equities moving on the Duttons like they would be doing, according to their CEO Willa Hayes (Karen Pittman), "an oil deal in Yemen."[98]

"I want our land back": The Decolonizing Plans of a Native American Entrepreneur

If *Yellowstone* did not have the makings of a postwestern text, it would likely "fail to recognize that from the Native American perspective, the region's history is little more than a chronicle of white 'settlers' coveting Indian land and their subsequent effort to exterminate, dispossess, and remove the native population."[99] However, any such charge would not hold up to scrutiny since the series's entrepreneurial drama over land features indigenous presences over absences with a view to not only thematizing those absences in the past along with their systemic causes, but also to adding a seemingly postcolonial counterweight to the capitalist slugfest between the descendants of settler colonists (old and new). Taylor Sheridan has worked hard to deliver respectful, relevant, and poignant representation of Native American characters, communities, and concerns which, instead of rehashing problematic stereotypes of neutered victimhood, defeatism, and expiration, speaks to, and embodies, agency, resilience, and survivance.[100] One of John Dutton's adversaries is the newly appointed chairman of the Broken Rock Indian Reservation, Thomas Rainwater (Gil Birmingham). Drawing on formidable entrepreneurial acumen, courtesy of Harvard, the American Petroleum Institute, and Merrill Lynch, he is intent on leveraging the power of capital by way of a casino and resort operation as a means for the dispossessed subaltern to actualize "Land Back" activism. In the process, he and other indigenous characters become sounding boards for the necrotic effects of participating in the wrangling of big capital over land. What the show also points to is the irreversible damage—ecological, social, and psychological—that capitalist settler colonialism has already wrought upon ancestral lands.

Native American characters such as Rainwater serve a twofold purpose. First, they repeatedly level postcolonial charges about accountability at the heirs, benefactors, and perpetrators of white settler colonialism. For example, early in the first season, Dan Jenkins barking inevitable progress at John Dutton is juxtaposed with Rainwater telling Dutton something else with the same air of inevitability in a symbolically potent space—a prison courtyard (Illustration 3): "I'm the opposite of progress, John. I am the past… catching up with you."[101] Secondly, Native American characters are molded in the vein of "middle ground" scholarship,[102] which posits that "alien cultures and peoples inventively attempted to find a common cultural, linguistic, and symbolic ground upon which to interact."[103] Thus, *Yellowstone* contributes to understanding indigenous peoples as being not mere passive victims of settler colonialism but rather active, albeit unequal, participants who never surrendered their agency. In the same scene, Rainwater tells Dutton, "After I interned at Emerson, I worked for Merrill Lynch in mergers and acquisitions. I figured it'll take about 14 billion to buy it all… The valley. And I'm gonna buy your ranch first… And then I'm gonna pull down every fence

Illustration 3: The (compromised) business of "Land Back."
Frame capture from *Yellowstone*, "No Good Horses" (Season 1, Episode 3). *Yellowstone* © Paramount Pictures, 2018. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

and any evidence that your family ever existed will be removed from the property. It'll look like it used to… when it was ours."[104] Chairman Rainwater is yet another entrepreneurial and monied player in the landed complexities of *Yellowstone*'s West.

By way of a tribally owned and operated casino, the fictional Confederated Tribe at Broken Rock Indian Reservation becomes the narrative focus for showcasing this nation's stake in the wranglings over landownership in the valley as well as highlighting its chairman's entrepreneurial agency and acumen in shifting entanglements with the other players involved. Though fictional, the Broken Rock nation is a vehicle for discussing how "Native nations are exploring the multiple ways that the incorporation of casino gaming redefines tribalism and sovereignty."[105] Rainwater is introduced in both postcolonial and entrepreneurial terms vis-à-vis his proposed casino venture. Just prior to his swearing-in as the new chairman, he tells a U.S. senator who is in attendance, "The gambler's money is like a river, flowing one way… our way. Senator, you've never driven a road or walked a trail or skied a mountain in Montana that didn't belong to my people first. This nation doesn't want to give it back? So be it. We'll buy it back… with their money."[106] After serious gains in civil rights had merged with President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty—especially the Community Action Program "promot[ing] gaming as a means of growing tribal economies because of its relatively low start-up costs and low overhead"[107]—and following landmark court cases protecting tribal gaming,[108] Native nations across the region and

beyond have found in casinos "a means to support Native self-sufficiency."[109] However, as Lisa Emmerich contends, it was the "circumstances that had plummeted Native communities into poverty" in the first place—"isolation, land holdings that had been carved away by federal policies, few or no usable resources, and no connection to American industrialization"—which ironically "brought them to consider gaming as a means of escape."[110] A subaltern accustomed to speaking (and acting) back, Rainwater addresses these ironies and their attendant inequities of trying to participate in the free market system. During a temporary truce, he tells John Dutton, "I don't really want another casino either. It's an insulting and wickedly ironic revenue stream for an Indian Nation. It is a means to an end"[111]—that end being the repatriation of his nation's ancestral homeland. How he envisions undoing the effects of decades of capitalist exploitation remains unspecified, though. If the goal of the Jenkinses and Roarkes is to build new homes and John Dutton's goal is to hold on to and pass on his home, then for Rainwater it is all about restoring his people's home. More than once, we hear him say that he and whoever is his opposite "want the same thing for very different reasons."[112]

The presence of, and agency emanating from, tribal lands in postwestern texts, according to Krista Comer, remind audiences of "Indian sovereignty and national autonomy" while "reservations are represented as . . . the sites of new forms of toxicity."[113] Rainwater's entrepreneurial maneuvers and counter-maneuvers repeatedly give rise to moments where both the ironies and the very real systemic inequities and injustices that continue to plague indigenous lifeworlds on and off the rez are explored. Whilst allied with Dan Jenkins, Rainwater impresses upon him the power and value of Indian sovereignty: "When you sold me the land, Dan, I gave you freedom from [state] oversight."[114] Rainwater wields his nation's sovereignty not only to gain economic leverage, but also in line with his goal to decolonize the valley, i.e., a means to reproach and then redress the legacy of U.S.-Native judicial relations. He is intent on rectifying rulings such as John Marshall's 1831 majority opinion in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, in which he held that Native tribes were "domestic dependent nations" occupying "territory to which we assert a title independent of their will."[115] It was rulings such as these that "validated" the legal fictions of the protectionist (broken-) treaty system and assimilationist policies that followed. Eschewing two-dimensional saviorism, indigenous lifeworlds are represented with inflections of intricacies. For instance, Rainwater's casino venture is met with opposition by some of his own council members, which is in line with ongoing debates in Indian country that range from "the degradation of traditional values to eligibility for tribal membership to the (mis)management of revenues."[116] Similarly, Taylor Sheridan has used Rainwater's character portfolio to weave an issue that is dear to him (see his 2017 feature *Wind River*) into *Yellowstone*: the abduction and killing of Native American women.

Leveraging his statutory power as chairman and the monetary brawn of the casino operation, Rainwater is "forming a council to focus on violence against women on the reservation. It will take our stories to the universities. To Congress. To anyone who will listen."[117] He places John Dutton's Native daughter-in-law Monica in charge. While promising at first, this storyline was all but dropped as the show made major inroads in the mass media mainstream during its hiatus between seasons three and four.[118]

Monica's role as a liminal character who is caught between, and tries to reconcile, her husband's white settler heritage with her tribal identity and role as teacher at a reservation school makes her a vehicle for expressing the most ardent critique of the forces that inform and perpetuate the landed complexities in the West along with what appears to be their inevitable outcome: violence and the irreversible damage that it has already caused. Thanks to John Dutton leveraging some of his sub-government capital with the president of Montana State University, Monica receives a job as an instructor teaching a class in American history—"Columbus's arrival to the Declaration of Independence"[119]—and an opportunity to complete her PhD at the beginning of the second season. In her inaugural lecture, she is promptly confronted with toxic masculinity and racist stereotyping found among the student body, which she uses as an occasion to deliver a poignant critique of the carcinomatous realities of late-stage capitalism as the result of settler colonialism. Confronting those who verbally accosted her with a simple question concerning the definition of power, she maps the latent influence of Eurocentric epistemologies and their corruptive as well as destructive effects on contemporary lifeworlds, "Ever feel like making someone do you want, whether they want to or not? It's a very European mentality, stemming from the oppressive political and religious structures of the Renaissance … That was the mentality of the men who discovered America. And it is the mentality our society struggles with today. What you know of history is a dominant culture's justification for its actions. And I don't teach that. I'll teach you what happened. To my people. And to yours. Because we are all the descendants of the subjugated. Every one of us."[120] This leaves but one question to be answered: what or who has turned the denizens of the contemporary West—whether they are newly arrived, or have called the region their home since time immemorial—into descendants of the subjugated? Monica's lecture seems to suggest that it can only be the necrotic labor performed and extracted by capitalism. She wants both her students and the audience to hold accountable the dual paradigms of European settler colonialism and capitalism in an argument that is as simple as it is powerful. Consequently, we can draw but violent conclusions from her indictment.

Illustration 4: The "descendants of the subjugated" and their business.

John Potter cartoon #28 Potter, John. "Bozeman, Montana: Capital Of The New Unwild West?" *Mountain Journal*, September 11, 2021. https://mountainjournal.org/is-bozeman-montana-is-selling-its-soul-to-the-purveyors-of-greed. Used by permission from *Mountain Journal*.

"Meaner than Evil": Violent Conclusions

Despite the presence of elegiac, horse-mounted livestock laborers set against breathtaking pastoral scenes, the West the audience enters through *Yellowstone* is not one of romance or myth. A postwestern text in aspiration, structure, and execution, the region in its contemporary state and Taylor Sheridan's imagining is messy and ugly despite, or according to most players in its landed complexities because of its purportedly pristine environs—a resource coveted by seemingly everyone though for different reasons. The show's fictional valley is a synecdochical space that registers and reflects the significant changes in demographics and their attendant shifts in land development and land use that have been occurring throughout the region at an increasing pace since the turn of the twenty-first century. Consequently, *Yellowstone* places a magnifying glass on what are but the most recent layers of the

West as a palimpsest of complexity, where intersections between entrepreneurialism and the land tend to point to "a persistent assault on nature that left a legacy of destruction, depletion and death."[121] Since the earliest incursions of Europeans in the region, the West has been rendered a habitat for entrepreneurial ventures that are contingent on the ownership of, and/or control over, the land and its attendant uses, as they are conducive to, and coveted by, Eurocentric modes of production and consumption. Following the settler-colonialist logic, then, what are those entrepreneurial ventures if not an amalgamation of violent acts.

Let us not forget, entrepreneurialism in its Schumpeterian definition—creative destruction—is an inherently violent process, the significance of which only comes into view when taking into account the pathogenic metaphors Joseph Schumpeter used to describe its qualities and the Darwinist conclusions he drew from them. Writing about "an organic process" and a "process of industrial mutation," he identified the "process of Creative Destruction" as "the essential fact about capitalism," which he understood to be "an evolutionary process . . . whose every element takes considerable time in revealing its true features and ultimate effects."[122] As a geo-cultural space, the American West is no stranger to violence. In its ideologically privileged and incessantly mythologized permutation, the region has offered violence as a regenerative, or at the very least a redemptive, means.[123] In entrepreneurial terms, the region has then given life to "great" entrepreneurial drama, or, more precisely perhaps, drama of great entrepreneurial violence. However, violence is neither an innovative nor regenerative process, since understanding it as such belies its necrotic logic. It may indeed bring ephemeral transformation and/or progress (in a Eurocentric meaning of the word) but ultimately it consumes those resources—material and immaterial—which it needs as fuel and/or sustenance until it collapses in on itself, ceasing to exist. In the case of the contemporary West as it is represented in *Yellowstone*, the true features and ultimate effects of entrepreneurially motivated land(ed) business are unambiguously clear: they are as violent as they are necrotic.

For all the stand-your-ground defiance of the ranching patriarchs of yesteryear and their cowboy(ing) vassals as well as the actors of postcolonial survivance and resistance in *Yellowstone*, the trail the contemporary West is on is likely leading to a bleak outcome. As William Travis has diagnosed, "Antigrowth, slow-growth, and even 'smart growth' forces are weak, their campaigns outmaneuvered by local and regional growth machines," since "government in the West mostly promotes further development with pro-growth programs of all sorts, from tax breaks to water projects."[124] In the end, it might very well be that both the series and the region find their terminus in John Dutton's lament: "It's all for nothing."[125]

Acknowledgments

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99 Robbins, "In Search of Western Lands," 6.

100 Gerald Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance," in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1–24.

101 "No Good Horses," writ. and dir. Taylor Sheridan, *Yellowstone*, season 1, episode 3 (Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 2018).

102 See, for example, Peter Iverson, *When Indians Became Cowboys* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994)

103 Bradley J. Birzer, "Expanding Creative Destruction: Entrepreneurship in the American Wests," *Western Historical Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (1999): 51, DOI: 10.2307/971158.

104 Birzer, "Expanding Creative Destruction."

105 Lisa E. Emmerich, "Indian Casinos," in *Icons of the American West: From Cowgirls to Silicon Valley*, ed. Gordon Morris Bakken (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 444.

106 "Daybreak."

107 Emmerich, "Indian Casinos," 455.

108 For example, *Seminole Tribe of Florida v. Butterworth* (1981) and *Cabazon Band of Mission Indians v. California* (1987).

109 Emmerich, "Indian Casinos," 454.

110 Emmerich, "Indian Casinos," 449.

111 "Cowboys and Dreamers," writ. Taylor Sheridan, dir. Christina Voros, *Yellowstone*, season 3, episode 5 (Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 2020).

112 "Cowboys and Dreamers"; "A Monster is Among Us."

113 Comer, "New West," 253.

114 "Only Devils Left," writ. Taylor Sheridan and Brett Conrad, dir. Stephen Kay, *Yellowstone*,

season 2, episode 4 (Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 2019).

115 *The Cherokee Nation v. The State of Georgia*, 30 U.S. 1, https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/30/1.

116 Emmerich, "Indian Casinos," 453.

117 "All for Nothing."

118 A thematically related storyline—the forced removal of Native American children and their exposure to assimilationist policies in boarding schools—is anchored in Rainwater's grandmother, Teonna (Aminah Nieves), in the spin-off series *1923* (Paramount+, 2022–).

119 "A Thundering Is Coming."

120 "New Beginnings," writ. Taylor Sheridan, dir. Ed Bianchi, *Yellowstone*, season 2, episode 2 (Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 2019).

121 Walsh, *American West*, 32.

122 Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 82–83.

123 Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 5.

124 Travis, *New Geographies*, 6.

125 "All for Nothing."

About the Author

Stefan Rabitsch has recently accepted a position as Associate Professor in American Studies with the Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages at the University of Oslo, Norway, where he will start in the fall of 2022. His main areas of research and teaching straddle American cultural history and popular culture studies. He is the author of *Star Trek and the British Age of Sail* (McFarland, 2019) and co-editor of *Set Phasers to Teach! Star Trek in Research and Teaching* (Springer, 2018), *The Routledge Handbook of Star Trek* (Routledge, 2022), and *Fantastic Cities: American Urban Spaces in Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror* (University Press of Mississippi, 2022). His current book project is a cultural history of cowboy hats, which received the 2019 Fulbright Austria Visiting Scholar Grant in American Studies.

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