

Netherlands American Studies Review

2026, no. 2



Welcome

to the thirteenth edition of the *Netherlands American Studies Review* (NASR), the bi-annual student journal of the Netherlands American Studies Association (NASA).

This issue features seven articles which showcase the diversity and originality of the work being done by students across the Netherlands. Two of the pieces, by Joost Graafland and Elize Verburg, draw on historical methods to examine America's long history of oppression of racial and sexual minorities. Two of the pieces, by Hanna Rodriguez Sundqvist and Kim Ville, highlight the role of literature in critiquing the interrelated crisis of capitalism and climate collapse. The piece by Maarten van Geffen, on the other hand, uses film as a way to explore the tensions and anxieties around race and democracy in the early Cold War. Focusing on the same period, but with the very different perspective provided by International Relations, Melanie Penning explores the nature of the Anglo-American 'special relationship.' From another discipline again, Lisette van Haersma Buma brings a perspective informed by art history and drawing on work done at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in order to examine changing Dutch attitudes to the export of art to the United States. Finally, we are thrilled to have a short interview with a former NASR editor, Kirsten Soer, who is now a PhD student at The Ohio State University and has kindly shared her insights on undertaking graduate studies in the United States.

The diversity of methodological approaches and disciplinary backgrounds on show in this issue highlights the rich range of scholarship being produced in the Netherlands on North American topics. Thanks to all the authors for submitting to NASR and for their hard work in editing their papers for publication. I also want to take the opportunity to thank the members of the NASR editorial board, whose careful attention and enthusiasm are essential to the success of the journal. Finally, thanks to the NASA board, and in particular to our academic coordinator Dr Spencer Morrison, for their continued support.

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ISSN: 2772-4492

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Paper

Reassessing Cold War Hollywood: Race, Justice, and Democracy in Late-1950s Westerns

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This paper was written for the course 'Arsenal of Democracy?: The United States and the World since 1945' for the MA North American Studies

On a hot afternoon in an Arizona courtroom in 1881, Sergeant Braxton Rutledge, a Black cavalryman who is accused of raping and murdering a white woman, rises to testify. The tension breaks when Rutledge's voice echoes through the chamber: "The Ninth Cavalry was my home, my real freedom, and my self-respect. And the way I was desertin' it, I wasn't nuthin' worse than a swamp-runnin' ni[---]r. And I ain't that; I'm a man!"¹ This scene from John Ford's *Sergeant Rutledge*, released in 1960, is the apex of a film asking whether a Black man can receive justice in a society founded on his exclusion.

Just under two months later, John F. Kennedy stood before the Democratic National Convention and announced a bold political vision: "We stand today on the edge of a New Frontier—the frontier of the 1960s; the frontier of unknown opportunities and perils; the frontier of unfulfilled hopes and unfilled threats. Beyond that frontier are the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice."² With the phrase "New Frontier," JFK invoked the very mythology that had defined American identity for over a century: the idea of the frontier as a symbol of fighting for freedom and democracy.³ But in *Sergeant Rutledge* and in several other Westerns released between 1956 and 1960, the frontier was being reimagined, not as the site of heroic conquest, but as a cinematic magnifying glass aimed at racial conflict and the contradictions of American democracy.

In this article, I argue that late-1950s Westerns, of which *The Searchers* (1956), *Gunman's Walk* (1958), and *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960) are exemplary, each used the Western to show how race shapes access to justice, belonging, and authority in the United States. At a time when the civil rights movement and Cold War propaganda were beginning to push America to live up to its democratic creed, these films explored what racial order and justice meant in the land of the free. The Western was not just a standard film format that gave people escapism and nostalgia; it was, as historian Richard Slotkin observes in his 1992 book *Gunfighter Nation*, the

Notes

¹ *Sergeant Rutledge*, directed by John Ford (Warner Bros., 1960).

² John F. Kennedy, "Acceptance of Democratic Nomination for President," speech, July 15, 1960, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/acceptance-of-democratic-nomination-for-president>.

³ Heike Paul, "Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West," in *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies* (Transcript Verlag, 2014), 344.

“clearest expression” of America’s national myth, and in the late 1950s that myth was revised to accommodate a changing racial and political landscape.⁴ I therefore make three key arguments in relation to these films. First, I argue that *The Searchers* stages a racial and moral crisis in its portrayal of frontier justice, with a narrative of purification and conquest that mirrors Cold War anxieties about ideological contamination. Second, I contend that *Gunman’s Walk* uses the breakdown of white patriarchal authority to critique settler entitlement and highlight the cracks in American legal and racial hierarchies. Finally, I suggest that *Sergeant Rutledge* turns the courtroom into a symbolic test of whether US institutions can deliver justice to racial outsiders.

A number of scholars have explored Cold War allegories and racial tropes in Westerns, but few focus exclusively on this period, and *Gunman’s Walk* and *Sergeant Rutledge* have been particularly underexamined in the scholarly literature in relation to the genre of Revisionist Westerns.⁵ These three films have been selected because they offer distinct but complementary engagements with race within a tightly defined transitional moment in the Western genre. Rather than choosing later, more overtly progressive films, I focus on these works precisely because they operate within the classical Western framework while subtly reworking it from within. Because they retain familiar conventions of heroic violence, their racial critiques show how Cold War-era anxieties about democracy and justice could enter mainstream genre cinema without fully disrupting its traditional appeal. In discussing these films, I follow an integrated approach, looking both at the content of the films as primary sources themselves and examining the historical context and how these films were received in the period they came out, in order to avoid making a modern-day judgment that a contemporary audience would not have made.

Building on the argument, made by historian Scott Laderman in his 2018 book *Imperial Benevolence*, that popular culture often naturalizes US political ideology and promotes American Exceptionalism, this study treats these 1950s Westerns as political texts that reflect and reinforce early Cold War-era beliefs.⁶ In this framework, films are not merely entertainment but sites where national myths – in this case, American exceptionalism and racial hierarchy – are constructed, reinforced, and contested. Inspired by *Imperial Benevolence*, I follow a triangulated methodology for this paper, namely a close analysis of each film’s narrative and symbolism, careful attention to the historical context in which it was produced, and examination of contemporary reception. The goal is to illuminate the politics embedded in these cultural texts as part of Cold War ideology rather than to critique them by today’s standards.

There is significant existing scholarship on Westerns and their political messages. Richard Slotkin, a historian and American Studies scholar best known for his work on the myth of the frontier in US culture, provides a framework in his groundbreaking work *Gunfighter*

⁴ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Atheneum, 1992), 10.

⁵ See, for example, Stanley Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors: The Western and U.S. History* (Temple University Press, 2004), 9–10; J. Hoberman, *An Army of Phantoms: American Movies and the Making of the Cold War* (The New Press, 2011), 140–144.

⁶ Scott Laderman, “Introduction: Camouflaging Empire,” in *Imperial Benevolence: U.S. Foreign Policy and American Popular Culture since 9/11*, ed. Scott Laderman and Tim Gruenewald (University of California Press, 2018), 17.

Nation for seeing Westerns as enactments of the frontier myth, founded on a “savage war” against racialized enemies.⁷ He analyzes the biggest Westerns both in terms of content and context they were produced in, and deals with many of the tropes and characters that are also present in the three case studies analyzed in this article.⁸ While Slotkin has also written about the Western in the Cold War, he has focused specifically on the Revisionist Western as it became prominent during and after the Civil Rights Movement, rather than the period before that, which is the focus of this article.

Building on Slotkin’s work, historian Stanley Corkin examines Westerns as products of Cold War consensus and conflict; in his 2004 book *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*, he argues that the genre was co-opted to project American democratic virtues and resolve historical contradictions, at a time when the US was keen to contrast its freedom with Soviet tyranny.⁹ Corkin’s analysis helps frame how Westerns simultaneously entertain and reassure domestic audiences of American moral superiority. He analyzes *The Searchers* in-depth, but his particular focus is on drawing parallels with the Korean War as opposed to race relations. Also relevant to this article is cultural historian James Hoberman’s *The Dream Life: Movies, Media and the Mythology of the Sixties*, which opens by discussing the Westerns that came out in 1960 (though he mentions *Sergeant Rutledge* only in passing). Hoberman’s study of Cold War cinema, *An Army of Phantoms: American Movies and the Making of the Cold War*, highlights the fears of infiltration and obsession present at the time, which he applies to his examination of John Ford’s *The Searchers*.¹⁰ As Corkin and Hoberman argued, the Western’s us-versus-them narrative easily lent itself to Cold War allegory.¹¹ But when ‘them’ included Black cavalry members and characters with mixed Indigenous identities, the genre had to reconcile its mythic violence with the rising call for racial justice. The case studies I present in this article show how each film performed this reconciliation, and what that tells us about American self-perception at a critical historical juncture.

The mid-to-late 1950s presented a tense backdrop linking race and Cold War politics. On the world stage, the Cold War pitted the United States against the Soviet Union in an ideological battle of democracy versus communism. Yet, at the same time, the United States was undergoing a domestic reckoning, with the fight against fascism leading many to realize that the Jim Crow laws in the American South were not much different from the Nazi ideology they had been fighting abroad. The Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (1954) declared segregated schooling unconstitutional, the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–56) signaled mass

⁷ Richard Slotkin, “Faculty Profile,” Wesleyan University, accessed May 20, 2025, <https://www.wesleyan.edu/about/directory/profile.html?id=rslokin>; Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 11.

⁸ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*.

⁹ Stanley Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors: The Western and U.S. History* (Temple University Press, 2004), 3–5.

¹⁰ James Hoberman, *The Dream Life: Movies, Media, and the Mythology of the Sixties* (The New Press, 2003), 283.

¹¹ Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*, 3–5; Hoberman, *The Dream Life*, 283.

Black protest against Jim Crow, and events such as the integration of Little Rock Central High (1957) brought racial conflict to the forefront of national consciousness.

US racial practices became a Cold War liability, as the Soviet Union repeatedly used American segregation and lynchings as propaganda to discredit the US abroad.¹² In response, American politicians and cultural producers faced pressure to demonstrate racial progress as proof of the nation's moral leadership. Historian Mary Dudziak famously termed this linkage "Cold War civil rights," describing how Cold War imperatives hastened certain civil rights reforms.¹³ Hollywood in the 1950s was a part of this broader ideological environment, and its continued growth was built in part off the back of the popularity of the Western genre. As historian Richard White claims in his 1993 book *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, the Western comprised "about 11 percent of all works of fiction published in the United States, and Hollywood turned out a Western movie every week."¹⁴ Slotkin notes that there were fourteen full-length Western movies that were released in 1947, but this rose to thirty-six in 1954, and forty-six in 1956.¹⁵

The Western's stories of cowboys and lawmen taming the frontier resonated with audiences because they dramatized Cold War values of security and sacrifice on the home soil. The language of freedom versus tyranny echoed the old tropes of Cowboys versus Indians. In some Westerns of this era, the Indigenous or non-white characters even became stand-ins for allies or enemies in the Cold War context. For example, the mixed-ethnic group of mercenaries in *Vera Cruz* (1954) includes a Black character fighting alongside whites, while the Mexican setting hinted at Third World struggles that paralleled the global Cold War.¹⁶ At the same time, these films grappled with the limits of American justice: could American ideals hold when facing internal doubt? Thus, by 1956–60, the stage was set for Westerns that explicitly asked what American democracy and justice mean in the face of racial violence.

On the surface, John Ford's *The Searchers* delivers a standard Western adventure, but, at its core, the film is a test of how far the logic of frontier racism can be taken before it destroys the values it claims to defend. The film is set in post-Civil War Texas and follows former Confederate soldier Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) on a quest to find his niece Debbie, who was abducted as a child by Comanche warriors. As Slotkin notes, *The Searchers* "explores and exposes [the] informing structures" of the frontier myth, especially "the complex of thought and feeling that constitutes racist hatreds," showing how those hatreds operate in individual psyches and communities.¹⁷ In Ethan, the film personifies the darkest side of the American

¹² Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 12.

¹³ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 12–15.

¹⁴ Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 626.

¹⁵ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 349.

¹⁶ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 434–439.

¹⁷ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 462–463.

frontier ethos – what Slotkin identifies as the “Indian-hater” archetype.¹⁸ Ethan is a paradox: the frontiersman whose identity is defined by fighting “savages,” but who in the process adopts a savage brutality himself. Ford uses Ethan’s extremes to critique the very myth the film resides in: the idea that violence and bigotry can be justified by ‘civilization’s cause.’

Nowhere is this more evident than in the film’s central conflict over Ethan’s niece Debbie. When the protagonists locate Debbie after five years, she has been integrated into the Comanche tribe and made the wife of the chief Scar. To Ethan, this is a fate worse than death: “Livin’ with Comanches ain’t bein’ alive.”¹⁹ He would rather kill Debbie than see her live as a “comanch.” In my reading, Ethan’s motto is essentially ‘better dead than red,’ with ‘red’ carrying a dual meaning; the red skin of a Native American, and, by allegorical extension, the ‘Reds’ of communist infamy. In the Cold War 1950s, the phrase “Better Dead Than Red” was a popular anti-communist slogan.²⁰ *The Searchers* examines this sentiment via the Western frontier, where Ethan’s fanatical insistence on killing his possibly Comanche niece rather than allowing her to live among the enemy uncannily mirrors the era’s paranoia about ideological contamination.

To avoid imposing modern interpretations, it must be emphasized that, in its moment, *The Searchers* spoke in a coded language that 1950s audiences only partially decoded. At the time of *The Searchers*’ release in 1956, few reviewers explicitly commented on the film’s racial and political undercurrents. For instance, Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* praised Ford’s direction and the Technicolor vistas, calling it “a rip-roaring Western,” but failed to mention what is now perceived as the core theme of the film, namely the racial hatred.²¹ Likewise, trade papers admired the production values and John Wayne’s performance without drawing attention to the potential in Ethan for a critique of racism.²² Ford biographer Joseph McBride has suggested that this omission was a result of the fact that, in mid-50s America, “racism was so endemic in our culture that people didn’t even notice it. They treated Wayne as a conventional western hero.”²³ A 1956 viewer was more likely to have seen Ethan as just another tough Westerner – perhaps a bit extreme, but ultimately heroic for rescuing Debbie – than as a potential indictment of the brutality underpinning America’s ‘civilizing’ mantra.

It was only in later decades that *The Searchers* was widely reinterpreted as a critique of American racism and imperial violence. As Slotkin puts it, the film “interrogates...the ideological structures” of the frontier myth, showing how the racism of those structures produces unreasonable and damaging “cycles of violence.”²⁴ In my reading, Ford’s film suggests that America’s westward expansion rested on a violent and racist foundation. Ethan’s hatred becomes

¹⁸ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 462.

¹⁹ *The Searchers*, directed by John Ford (Warner Bros., 1956).

²⁰ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 462.

²¹ Bosley Crowther, “Screen: ‘The Searchers’ Find Action,” *New York Times*, May 31, 1956.

²² J. Hoberman, “American Obsession,” *New York Times*, February 22, 2013, accessed May 20, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/24/books/review/the-searchers-by-glenn-frankel.html>.

²³ Joseph McBride, interview by Glenn Frankel, in *The Searchers: The Making of an American Legend* (Bloomsbury, 2013), 330.

²⁴ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 462.

an extreme expression of a frontier logic built on eliminating those deemed racially alien. Yet although Ethan is morally isolated, he remains essential to the plot's resolution, and Debbie's return means she is 'saved' from the 'scalping' Native Americans, reaffirming settler domestic order. Thus, while the film critiques frontier racism, it does so within familiar Western conventions, allowing audiences to absorb that critique without fully abandoning the genre's underlying myth.

Two years later, Columbia Pictures' *Gunman's Walk*, directed by Phil Karlson, offers a lesser known but illuminating 1950s Western confronting race and violence within the frontier myth. Set in the late-19th-century West, *Gunman's Walk* is about a family led by rancher Lee Hackett, a respected old-guard frontiersman, and his two sons: Ed, the hot-headed elder, and Davy, the more measured younger brother. The drama unfolds around generational conflict and racial intolerance. Unlike *The Searchers*, where conflict is between whites and Native Americans externally, *Gunman's Walk* turns its gaze inward to a white family being torn apart by racism. Ed Hackett harbors a virulent hatred and arrogance toward Native Americans and anyone he perceives as 'inferior,' an attitude enabled by his father, until it spirals out of control. The plot explicitly involves interracial tension: Davy becomes fond of Cecily "Clee" Chouard, a beautiful half-French, half-Sioux woman in town, while Ed's racism leads him to harass Clee and violently compete with her Sioux brother Paul during a horse roundup. In a key incident, Ed deliberately drives Paul's horse toward a cliff edge, causing Paul to fall to his death. Ed is arrested and put on trial, but the court releases him when a white witness perjures himself to declare it an accident, even though two actual eyewitnesses of Sioux descent had seen the crime happen. This miscarriage of justice highlights how the legal system in the frontier town is skewed by racial bias and cronyism. The episode also recalls the Jim Crow South, where white perpetrators of racist violence would avoid conviction through discriminatory courts and all-white juries, as in the case of Emmett Till.²⁵ As Ed's sense of impunity grows, he commits further violence, and ultimately his father Lee is forced to shoot Ed dead to prevent further bloodshed. It is a reversal of the typical Western showdown: instead of the hero killing a villain to save the community, here a father kills his son, who was the true threat to the community.

Cold War ideology operates more subtly in *Gunman's Walk* than in *The Searchers*, but it is present in the film's emphasis on law and order, a concept that in the 1950s functioned as a key marker of American democratic legitimacy in contrast to the perceived disorder and coercion of communist systems.²⁶ The fact that Lee must personally enforce justice on his wayward son because the court failed to do so is a bleak commentary on the state of American justice. The message of the film is seemingly that formal institutions are not yet strong enough or fair enough to contain the violence of racism, and that it takes a personal intervention to

²⁵ Thomas Ward Frampton, "The Jim Crow Jury," *Vanderbilt Law Review* 71, no. 5 (2018): 1602-3; Hugh Stephen Whitaker, "A Case Study in Southern Justice: The Murder and Trial of Emmett Till," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (2005): 210, 215-17.

²⁶ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 27, 132-33.

restore balance. In context, one might see an analogy: the US federal government in the late 1950s sometimes had to confront recalcitrant local authorities to enforce civil rights (e.g. Eisenhower sending troops to Little Rock to uphold school integration in 1957). In *Gunman's Walk*, Lee's action mirrors that kind of intervention against one's 'own side' to uphold a greater principle. The generational conflict between Lee/Ed and Davy mirrors a broader social divide in which younger Americans were increasingly receptive to civil rights, while older generations remained more attached to segregationist attitudes.²⁷ The film's scenario – in which a bigoted man commits violence against a minority, escapes legal judgment, but is ultimately condemned by moral judgment – resonates with events like the Emmett Till case (1955) or the acquittal of white perpetrators of violent crimes against African Americans, which slowly but surely started drawing national outcry.

Gunman's Walk participates in what Richard White describes as the sexual coding of frontier narratives: "Only nonwhite women remain uniformly natural and thus sexually potent and dangerous."²⁸ This trope appears in many Westerns. In *Duel in the Sun* (1946), for example, the mixed-race woman is framed as a sexualized figure, whereas the white woman is associated with civilization and desexualized in contrast to racialized ideas of "nature."²⁹ Clee is framed as both desirable and 'dangerous,' occupying the liminal space of racial otherness. The romantic tension between her and Davy represents a progressive challenge to these norms, but it is notable that Clee's indigeneity is diluted (she is only half Sioux, and played by a white actress), reflecting the limits of what was representable in 1958.

The contemporaneous reception of *Gunman's Walk* recognized its powerful drama, though its status as a B-movie, as opposed to one led and directed by the famous John Wayne and John Ford, meant that the film received far less critical and scholarly attention, and reviews for it in newspaper archives are very scarce. The *Los Angeles Times* reviewer Philip K. Scheuer lauded it in 1958 as "moviemaking at its best," ranking this Western "with [the] best" of the genre.³⁰ While Scheuer's review, tellingly titled "Heflin and Hunter Winners in *Walk*... Are Films Pampering Nazis?", only briefly references the theme. Instead, the title frames *Gunman's Walk* as a hard-hitting morality play, perhaps even drawing a parallel between Ed's violent racism and the evils of fascism that America had fought a decade earlier.³¹ By equating frontier bigotry with the ultimate evil, the review and the film together underscore how significant the race question had become to American self-definition in the Cold War era. The film's explicit dealing with anti-Native American prejudice was somewhat unusual, but not without precedent, as earlier Westerns such as *Broken Arrow* (1950) and *Devil's Doorway* (1950) had also

²⁷ Paul B. Sheatsley, "White Attitudes toward the Negro," *Daedalus* 95, no. 1 (Winter 1966): 222–23.

²⁸ White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 628.

²⁹ This interpretation is based on my own reading of *Duel in the Sun*. For discussion of comparable representational patterns in Westerns, see Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 627–629.

³⁰ Philip K. Scheuer, "Heflin and Hunter Winners in 'Walk': New Western Ranks With Best," *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 1958, A5.

³¹ Scheuer, "Heflin and Hunter Winners in 'Walk,'" A5.

sympathetically portrayed Native Americans.³² What *Gunman's Walk* did differently, however, was tie that prejudice to a critique of the frontier's lawlessness and to a father-son tragedy, making it integral rather than peripheral.

In retrospect, *Gunman's Walk* stands as an artifact of Hollywood's tentative engagement with civil rights-era themes. It anticipates the 'progressive' or revisionist Westerns that would become more common in the 1960s. For example, films like *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964) directly addressed mistreatment of Native Americans and *Little Big Man* (1970) flipped the perspective entirely with an eye on satirizing the Vietnam War.³³ But, unlike those later films, *Gunman's Walk* operates within a classical framework: it still has shootouts, cattle drives, and the familiar landscapes of the West, ensuring it did not alienate traditional audiences. Its subversiveness is packaged in convention, which may be why it flew under the radar. It used the microcosm of one family's tragedy to endorse a vision of frontier justice that was strikingly aligned with democratic ideals: equality under the law, respect across racial lines, and the taming of violence by moral accountability. These were ideals the US wanted to project abroad during the Cold War, and here they were affirmed on the silver screen, quietly but firmly.

In 1960, as the civil rights movement was accelerating, John Ford, who was by then an elder statesman of Hollywood, released *Sergeant Rutledge*, a Western explicitly focused on a Black hero and the racial injustices of the American frontier. Ford, who had earlier directed *The Searchers*, here shifts from examining a white man's racist obsessions to celebrating a Black man's courage and loyalty. I therefore read *Sergeant Rutledge* as Ford's attempt to revise the image of minorities in the West that his own earlier films (and Hollywood at large) often distorted. Stating Ford's intent is, however, difficult, as Ford was reluctant to talk about the 'meaning' of his films, saying in an interview with director Peter Bogdanovich: "to be quite blunt, I make pictures for money, to pay the rent. There are some great artists in the business. I am not one of them."³⁴ The actor who portrayed Sergeant Rutledge, Woody Strode, has, however, talked at length about his collaborations with Ford and the things they talked about in private, such as in one of several interviews with film scholar Frank Manchel. He stated that Ford explicitly said that he wanted to "show what the Black man did in American history that most of us don't know anything about" and how they "helped build the American West."³⁵ According to Strode, Ford thought he would do something graceful, tackling the importance of African-Americans in US history. Strode says that "before anybody started to march or decided to do anything, [Ford] just did it on his own."³⁶

³² Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 366-368.

³³ Slotkin, 629-630.

³⁴ John Ford, interview by Peter Bogdanovich, in *Directed by John Ford*, directed by Peter Bogdanovich (American Film Institute, 1971).

³⁵ Frank Manchel, *Every Step a Struggle: Interviews with Seven Who Shaped the African-American Image in Movies* (New Academia Publishing, 2007), 363.

³⁶ Manchel, *Every Step a Struggle*, 363.

The character of Rutledge in the film is shown by Ford as a paragon of military virtue: loyal, brave, and principled. He even saves white soldiers in a battle against Apache warriors, reinforcing his heroism in the mold of classic Western protagonists. Strode's performance, especially during his courtroom testimony, was quietly revolutionary. Ford had him repeat the climactic speech until Strode broke down in real tears; a rawness that communicates Rutledge's emotional burden as both a soldier and a racial outsider.³⁷

Despite – or perhaps because of – its groundbreaking content, *Sergeant Rutledge* underperformed at the box office.³⁸ Its critical reception was also mixed: *The New York Times* praised Ford's direction but noted tonal inconsistencies; *Variety* commended Strode's performance but found the courtroom format overly talky.³⁹ The film's bold racial message may have been too forward for mainstream 1960 audiences, particularly in the segregated South. However, the Black press offered an enthusiastic response. The *Pittsburgh Courier* celebrated the film's portrayal of "Negro heroics," calling it both gripping and believable.⁴⁰ In later decades, critics revisited the film more favorably, such as Armond White, who wrote for *Film Critical* that he was initially skeptical, but then came to praise *Sergeant Rutledge* for its "authentic complexity about race and history and American social temperament."⁴¹ This reassessment reflects the film's lasting importance: while conservative in structure, it offers a radical intervention in the genre by placing a Black soldier at the moral center of the American frontier.

In Cold War terms, *Sergeant Rutledge* performed important ideological work. As Mary Dudziak argued in *Cold War Civil Rights*, American racial violence was a diplomatic liability.⁴² Ford's film functioned as cultural diplomacy: showing a Black man honored by the Army suggested that the US was correcting its moral record. The film's ideological function is thus clear: it presents a racially inclusive vision of American justice that directly counters Soviet propaganda about US racism. As Mary Dudziak has argued, American civil rights progress was not only a domestic concern but also a diplomatic tool.⁴³ By showing a Black man upheld by the military system, *Sergeant Rutledge* serves as cinematic soft power; a rebuttal to critiques of American hypocrisy. However, *Sergeant Rutledge* is not a perfect progressive film or a revisionist Western of the kind that would emerge later in the 1960s. While elevating a Black hero, it perpetuates older stereotypes, most notably through its depiction of Native Americans as nameless, violent antagonists. The Apaches function primarily as a unifying threat against which white and Black characters bond. This Cold War allegory comes at the cost of repeating colonial tropes. Richard Pryor later commented wryly on the irony of Black Americans "bragging about having helped whites kill off the Native Americans," highlighting a legacy the film does not

³⁷ Manchel, 364.

³⁸ Scott Eyman, *Print the Legend: The Life and Times of John Ford* (Simon and Schuster, 2015), 453.

³⁹ Howard Thompson, "Screen: Cavalry Yarn with a Twist," *New York Times*, May 26, 1960.

⁴⁰ George E. Pitts, "Sergeant Rutledge Highlights Negro Heroics," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 1960.

⁴¹ Armond White, "John Ford's Radical Compassion," *Film Comment*, March/April 2009.

⁴² Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 12-15.

⁴³ Dudziak, 12-15.

address.⁴⁴ Ford, making a film primarily about Black-white relations, was content to lean on the old Native-American-as-villain trope; one progressive step at a time.

In conclusion, I have shown that late-1950s Hollywood Westerns like *The Searchers*, *Gunman's Walk*, and *Sergeant Rutledge* engaged deeply with race, justice, and American identity. The three films, released within a crucial four-year period in the Civil Rights struggle, all dealt with similar and overlapping themes: racial exclusion, frontier violence, legal failure, and the unstable relationship between democratic ideals and racial hierarchy. As the Cold War demanded US moral leadership, these Westerns exposed the fractures in the American democratic project, illustrating how the old myth of the frontier was being reworked.

Race emerged as a crucial fault line within the Western genre in this period. Through distinct narrative approaches, directors used the genre as a cultural battleground where competing visions of America were contested. Racial conflict and legal ambiguity were dramatized through frontier narratives in a society struggling to maintain its image as the global champion of freedom and equality. The three films I examine in this article do not issue direct political manifestos, but they also participate in what Slotkin calls a “reciprocal influence” between cinema and national discourse.⁴⁵ The Western genre offered an ideal space to dramatize tensions between America's self-image and its racial reality, and it could accommodate both Ethan Edwards and Braxton Rutledge, heroes on opposite ends of the racial and ideological spectrum. In doing so, it forced audiences to confront the implications of both.

Future research could build on the findings of this article by exploring how television Westerns of the era addressed race, or how Black and Native American audiences interpreted these films differently from white viewers. Because scholarship has paid limited attention to how contemporary audiences understood racial themes in late-1950s Westerns, further archival research would help recover reviews and other responses that reveal the extent to which viewers recognized the messages these filmmakers were trying to convey. Ultimately, this paper contends that the late-1950s Western was more than popular entertainment; it was a barometer of political and cultural change, mapping the nation's reckoning with the racial and moral limits of its own mythos.

⁴⁴ Richard Pryor, quoted in Clarence Spigner, “Buffalo Soldiers and American Myth,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 27, no. 4 (1999): 36.

⁴⁵ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 296.

Paper

From Stone Mountain to the Statehouse: The Second Klan's Rise in Georgia, 1915-1925

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This Paper was written for the course 'Democracy in Action: Radical Cultures and Protest Movements in Modern America' for the BA History

On Thanksgiving night in 1915, Georgia played a central role in the Second Ku Klux Klan movement. That night, the Klan was reestablished and Georgia would continue to serve as the Klan's national headquarters, earning it the nickname of the "Invisible Empire State," coined by W.E.B. Du Bois to designate the state as the primary command center and birthplace of the movement at its source.¹ The founding ceremony in 1915 took place on Stone Mountain, a prominent granite outcrop just outside Atlanta, in a highly choreographed event involving fire, ritual oaths, and religious symbolism.² Atlanta then became home to the Klan's national office, known as the "Imperial Palace," and, at its height, the Atlanta chapter alone boasted over 15,000 members.³ By the mid-1920s, the Klan had established chapters throughout the state, from major cities to rural hamlets, working together to expand influence and coordinate membership drives.⁴ This article examines the social and religious factors that enabled the Second Ku Klux Klan to achieve mainstream acceptance in Georgia between 1915 and 1925. In particular, I argue that the Klan's mainstream success rested not only on racist ideology or intimidation, but on its calculated alignment with dominant religious values, moral reform agendas, and political structures. As I will trace below, Georgia's cultural and institutional landscape was particularly amenable to the Klan's presentation of itself as a defender of Protestant virtue, civic order, and American identity.

The period from 1915 to 1925 marks the organization's peak in Georgia, from its Stone Mountain revival to its political and cultural ascendancy across the country, before internal scandals and national backlash triggered a decline in the late 1920s and early 1930s.⁵ In order to track this rise, I draw on local newspapers, Klan publications, pamphlets, oral histories, and government documents to analyze the narrative strategies and institutional collaborations that underpinned the Klan's rise. The first section examines how post-Reconstruction resentment, Lost Cause mythology, and racism created a climate of white anxiety in Georgia. The second section explores the overlap between Klan ideology and Protestant moralism, particularly within Southern Baptist traditions, and how religious symbols, biblical references, and ministerial cooperation helped the Klan enter mainstream

Notes

¹ Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), introduction XIV.

² MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 5.

³ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 9.

⁴ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 14.

⁵ Thomas R. Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 183.

church life. The final section traces the Klan's shift from fringe movement to political influencer, focusing on the campaign of Clifford Walker for Governor and case studies, including the lynching of John Glover in 1922 and the subsequent testimony of Sheriff Jim Hicks on Klan influence in law enforcement. Together, these sections show how the Klan harnessed Georgia's religious and political institutions to gain cultural legitimacy and structural power. A central concept running through this article is what Thomas R. Pegram describes as "Protestant nationalism," a worldview that equated American identity with those who were native-born, white, and Protestant, casting Catholicism, Judaism, immigration, and pluralism as threats to the nation's moral order. This framework is used to underpin my argument about how the Klan embedded itself in Georgia's religious culture and justified its political ambitions through its supposed defense of "American values."⁶

Despite the abundance of scholarship on the Second Ku Klux Klan, Georgia's centrality to the movement has often been overshadowed by studies focusing on the Midwest or on national trends. Seminal works by Nancy MacLean, Thomas Pegram, and Kelly Baker explore the Klan's reach and religious framing, but few focus on Georgia as the ideological and administrative heart of the Second Klan.⁷ In this article I reposition Georgia as the ideological and administrative heart of the Second Klan, highlight the role of religious rhetoric and church structures in its appeal, and demonstrate how the Klan shaped local politics not only through violence but through legal, electoral, and legislative pathways that redefined citizenship and morality in public life.

Contemporary press coverage captured the mystique of the reemergence of the Klan. As reported in *The Americus Daily Times*:

A weird story has come to Atlanta from Stone Mountain about the revival of the mystic rites of the Ku Klux Klan. A night or two ago a mysterious yellow flame was seen to burn brightly on the top of Stone Mountain, and in the early dawn a number of mysterious figures were seen to come down the mountain side and disappear into the woods.⁸

This almost mythical portrayal of the Klan's reemergence was no coincidence; it was part of a deliberately orchestrated event rooted in deeper anxieties and aspirations within Georgia society. The flames on Stone Mountain did not ignite in a vacuum; they were the culmination of long-simmering tensions, cultural currents, and regional dynamics that shaped the state's identity in the early twentieth century.⁹ To understand why this moment occurred in Georgia

⁶ Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*, 158.

⁷ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*; Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*; Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011)

⁸ "Ku Klux Klan With Old Rites and the Weird Brought Out," *The Americus Daily Times-Recorder*, November 29, 1915."

⁹ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 3-5.

and why it resonated so strongly, it is necessary to examine the social, religious, and political environment of the time.

William J. Simmons, the Klan's founder and so-called Imperial Wizard, the title given to the organization's national leader, selected the symbolic setting of Stone Mountain as part of his shaping of the ideological character of the revived Klan. Simmons later declared, "It was MY creation, MY CHILD, if you please, MY first born."¹⁰ The choice of Stone Mountain tapped directly into Lost Cause mythology, recasting the Confederacy as a noble, divinely sanctioned struggle; the mountain had already served as a prominent site for Confederate reunions and memorial gatherings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, giving Simmons a ready-made landscape of Southern memory on which to stage the Klan's rebirth. The ceremony's flaming crosses and ritual oaths infused the Klan's rebirth with Christian imagery, presenting it as a spiritual crusade to "restore" an imagined racial and religious order.¹¹ Georgia was not only the site of Stone Mountain, but also a hotbed of white anxieties surrounding race, immigration, and urbanization, issues upon which the Ku Klux Klan would build its ideological foundation. Leo Frank was lynched in Marietta after his death sentence for the murder of 13-year-old Mary Phagan was commuted. Georgia's governor, Nat E. Harris, condemned the killing as "the most atrocious lynching ever committed in any Southern State," underscoring the volatile climate into which Simmons launched his revived order.¹²

Nativist sentiment in Georgia during the 1910s and 1920s existed along a broad spectrum, and the Second Ku Klux Klan exploited this uneven landscape of anxieties. Anti-immigration attitudes were present, although generally less pronounced than the state's pervasive racial tensions, and nativism was not uniformly embraced across politics or the press.¹³ Even conservative newspapers such as *The Atlanta Georgian* occasionally adopted more moderate positions, criticizing restrictive immigration measures as "stupid laws to regulate immigration" and extending a conditional welcome to "healthy, intelligent, honest white immigrants of all kinds."¹⁴ Such views reflected a belief that certain white immigrants, primarily those from northern and western Europe, could still integrate into American society if deemed morally fit. By contrast, southern and eastern Europeans, especially Italians and Irish Catholics, were often viewed with suspicion and were not always considered fully "white" within the hierarchy of Anglo-Saxon Protestant identity.¹⁵ Other publications, however, advanced even more extreme positions. In 1916 Tom Watson's *The Jeffersonian* warned that immigrant communities formed "separate Kingdoms" loyal to a "foreign Potentate," echoing anti-Catholic fears central to Klan ideology.¹⁶ Simmons repeatedly framed immigrants, especially Catholics and Jews, as agents of moral and social decay. In one of his manifestos, he argued that the Klan stood against "alien doctrines" and those whose first

¹⁰ William J. Simmons, *America's Menace or The Enemy Within* (Atlanta, 1926), 66.

¹¹ Simmons, *America's Menace or The Enemy Within*, 233.

¹² MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 12.; Georgia's Shame', *The Jeffersonian* (August 26 1915).

¹³ Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan*, 6.

¹⁴ 'Stupid Laws to Regulate Immigration', *Atlanta Georgian* (February 15 1914).

¹⁵ Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*, 51.

¹⁶ 'Trying to establish a Political Despotism for Catholic Priests, Northern Corporation, Whiskey Interests and Rotten Politicians', *The Jeffersonian* (October 26, 1916).

allegiance was not to the United States but to foreign religious or political authorities.¹⁷ By positioning itself as the defender of white, Protestant Americanism, the Klan effectively harnessed both the moderate unease and the more radical nativist fears circulating within Georgia, transforming them into a powerful tool for recruitment and ideological consolidation.

This climate was further shaped by enduring post-Reconstruction resentment, the white Southern anger over federal intervention and the brief period of Black political participation after the Civil War. That resentment had, by the early twentieth century, solidified into a belief in white supremacy as both natural and desirable.¹⁸ The 1910s and 1920s marked a period when white supremacist thought was not only widespread but seemingly validated by contemporary science, social theory, and popular culture.¹⁹ The Second Klan's call for a "white, patriotic, and Protestant community" resonated deeply within this context. In Georgia, collective memory of Reconstruction and the consolidation of Jim Crow policies fueled fears of racial equality and loss of white control. Prominent white leaders who advocated even limited cooperation with Black communities, such as Governor Hugh Dorsey and members of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC), faced backlash, accused of betraying Southern racial solidarity.²⁰ The vehemence of this response showed that the Klan's ideology was not a radical aberration but an intensification of long-standing white anxieties embedded in Georgia's political and cultural life.

D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) played a pivotal role in reinvigorating the Ku Klux Klan, particularly in Georgia. The film was a major box office success, even before it hit Southern theatres, and was scheduled to premiere in Georgia theatres just before Thanksgiving.²¹ While the film was widely acclaimed at the time, it did face minimal opposition in Georgia's larger cities, such as Atlanta and Augusta. A small delegation of ministers, led by Presbyterian clergyman Dr. C.B. Wilmer, petitioned for the film to be banned, although their specific objections were not fully detailed in contemporary reports.²² Despite this resistance, the film proved immensely popular across the state. By romanticizing the Ku Klux Klan and portraying Klansmen as heroic defenders of the South against so-called "beastly Negroes," the film provided a powerful and deeply racist narrative that contributed significantly to the Klan's revival.²³ This volatile mix not only made the Klan's return possible, it prepared the ground for a movement that would cloak its racial and political agenda in the language of Protestant morality.

The revival of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia in 1915 was not only racially and politically motivated; it was also steeped in religious symbolism and moral rhetoric. William J. Simmons' writings, including *America's Menace or the Enemy Within* (1923) and articles in

¹⁷ William J. Simmons, *The Klan Unmasked* (Atlanta, 1923), 50.

¹⁸ Illinois Legislative Investigating Commission, *Ku Klux Klan: A Report to the Illinois General Assembly*, Chicago, Illinois Legislative Investigating Commission, 1976, 2.

¹⁹ John M. Matthews, "Studies in Race Relations in Georgia, 1890-1930" (PhD diss., Duke University, 1970).

²⁰ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 130.

²¹ Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*, 7-8.

²² 'Birth of a Nation', *The Americus Daily Times-Recorder* (October 10, 1915) .

²³ Maclean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 13-14.

The Imperial Night-Hawk, consistently framed the Klan as a Protestant moral force.²⁴ The Klan did not merely present itself as the defender of white supremacy, it styled itself as a righteous force upholding Christian civilization by divine order.

One of the key reasons the Ku Klux Klan had a particularly strong resonance in Georgia was its deliberate alignment with Protestant moralism, a worldview rooted in Southern Baptist traditions that emphasized personal discipline, sexual purity, temperance, and the defense of “Christian civilization.”²⁵ William J. Simmons made this connection explicit during his testimony before the House Committee on Rules, where he described the Klan’s creed as “the highest form of Southern Protestantism.” By presenting the organization in these terms, Simmons positioned the Klan within a familiar moral framework that many white Protestants already embraced.²⁶ Klan literature and public speeches reinforced this link by invoking themes of moral decline and denouncing alcohol, gambling, sexual promiscuity, and perceived “urban corruption.” Drawing on this religious vocabulary, the Klan framed its political agenda as a moral crusade through concepts such as “law and order,” “purity,” and “Americanism,” each tying civic belonging to Protestant values and racial boundaries.²⁷ Supporters such as Alma B. White, the first female bishop in the United States and an outspoken advocate for the Klan, captured this sentiment, for example in her claim that “no person has any right to citizenship in the United States who cannot uphold the principles for which this great organization stands,” referring specifically to the Protestant ideals championed by the Atlanta chapter.²⁸ By embedding its nationalism and racism within the language of Protestant moral reform, the Klan was able to legitimize its cause as a religious duty, positioning itself as the defender of Christian civilization rather than a fringe extremist movement.²⁹ Religious symbolism was also central to the Ku Klux Klan’s identity during its 1915 revival in Georgia. Simmons introduced the burning cross, drawn from romanticized accounts of the first Klan and popularized by *The Birth of a Nation*, as a ritual emblem that blended Anglo-Saxon heritage with spiritual authority. In Klan literature and speeches, the fiery cross was described as representing “the light of Christ” and “the flaming sword of Protestantism,” reinforcing the organization’s claim to defend white Protestant civilization.³⁰

The Klan further strengthened this religious framing by structuring its ceremonies to mirror church hierarchies. During Konklaves, the Kludd, the Klan unit’s chaplain responsible for prayers and religious instruction, presided like a pastor, and Klansmen formed a square, standing three feet apart, around a central altar on which a Bible was placed and opened specifically to Romans chapter twelve.³¹ This passage was chosen because it emphasizes spiritual sacrifice, moral discipline, fraternal unity, and hierarchical obedience values the Klan

²⁴ Simmons, *America’s Menace or The Enemy Within*, 25. ; ‘Klansman, To Church!’, *The Imperial Knight-Hawk* (May 23, 1923).

²⁵ Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*, 7.

²⁶ United States, The Ku-Klux Klan. Hearings before the Committee on Rules, House of Representative, Sixty-seventh Congress, First Session (Washington D.C., 1921), 127.

²⁷ Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan*, 9.

²⁸ A. B. White, *Klansmen: Guardians of Liberty* (New Jersey 1926) 123.

²⁹ Interview with Lawrence Brooks Hays by A. Ronald Tonks, May 1972, *Oral History Program*, Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

³⁰ Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan*, 74. ; Simmons, *America’s Menace or The Enemy Within*, 233.

³¹ William. J. Simmons, *Kloran: Knights of the Klu Klux Klan* (Atlanta 1916) 12-13.

selectively interpreted as divine sanction for its beliefs.³² By adopting church-like offices, altar-centered worship structures, and scriptural framing, the Klan positioned itself as a religious community in its own right, effectively co-opting Protestant forms to present its racial and political agenda as a sacred duty.³³ Following the placement of the Bible, the ceremony continued with the singing of a hymn and a prayer led by the Kludd. It opened with an appeal for God's guidance, asking that each Klansman be led by Christian virtues.³⁴ The prayer called for "clanish fidelity" and unity among members, describing loyalty to the Klan as a sacred duty. It emphasized that a Klansman's highest honor was to serve and preserve the mission of the Order. The prayer also invoked divine blessing for absent members, the nation, and the leadership of the Invisible Empire, including the Emperor, asking that they be granted wisdom and grace. It concluded with a collective vow to serve both God and the Klan, ending with the line: "For my country, the Klan, my fellow Klansmen and my home."³⁵ This prayer combined Christian language with white supremacist ideology and nationalist loyalty.

The Ku Klux Klan's influence in Georgia extended far beyond its secretive Konklaves and became deeply intertwined with Protestant (especially Southern Baptist) church life. The Klan actively used Protestantism and Southern Baptist values, such as temperance, sexual purity, strict Sabbath observance, and the policing of personal morality to promote its ideology to Georgia's white churchgoing population.³⁶ Klansmen organized religious revivals, and sympathetic ministers allowed members to attend services in full regalia. After joining the Klan, many members became deeply involved in congregational life, often joining churches and serving as deacons.³⁷ According to Lawrence B. Hays, a traveling lawyer active in Georgia's Southern Baptist community during the mid-1920s, this visible Klan presence deterred some people from attending services.³⁸ Yet, in many Methodist and Baptist churches, Klan influence became dominant and contributed to increased membership. Klan-dominated congregations across the state cooperated in pursuing shared goals, most notably gaining mainstream acceptance and boosting local chapter recruitment. This network of religious alliances helped make Georgia the second-highest Klan state in the South in terms of membership.³⁹ The Klan's reign in Georgia church life was not, however, entirely unopposed. Some churches demanded the expulsion of Klan-affiliated ministers. For example, Central Baptist Church only readmitted former Imperial Kludd Dr. C. Ridley after he claimed to have severed ties with the Atlanta Klan chapter, though several ministers continued to contest his return.⁴⁰ According to the Atlanta-based Committee on Interracial Cooperation (CIC), ministers who opposed the Klan's methods far outnumbered those who supported them, though direct confrontation remained rare.⁴¹

³² Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan*, 54-56.

³³ Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan*, 6 and 24.

³⁴ Simmons, *Kloran*, 6.

³⁵ Simmons, *Kloran*, 13-15.

³⁶ Simmons, *Kloran*, 36.

³⁷ Illinois Legislative Investigating Commission, *Ku Klux Klan*, 34.

³⁸ Interview Hays, May 1972.

³⁹ Maclean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 15.

⁴⁰ 'Dr. Caleb Ridley Reinstated by Baptist Pastors', *Atlanta Tri-Weekly Journal* (January 29, 1924).

⁴¹ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 15.

Religion, particularly Southern Baptist values and broader Protestant moralism, therefore played a foundational role in shaping the message and appeal of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia during its 1915 revival. The Klan skillfully cloaked its white supremacist and nativist ideology in the language of Christian morality, portraying itself as a divinely sanctioned guardian of American civilization.⁴² By aligning itself with traditional Protestant anxieties about urban vice, immigration, and moral decay, the Klan effectively embedded its message within the moral and cultural framework of Georgia's white protestant communities. This religious integration not only expanded the Klan's reach but also lent moral weight to its message, allowing the organization to present itself not merely as a political force but as a righteous instrument of divine and national renewal.⁴³

By the mid-1920s, the Second Ku Klux Klan had emerged from the shadows and begun asserting itself as a powerful force within Georgia's public institutions. Actively pursuing political influence, the Klan embedded itself in local government structures, law enforcement, and even parts of the judicial system. It endorsed political candidates, manipulated voter turnout through intimidation tactics, and framed its policy goals as moral imperatives grounded in Protestant nationalism. This form of American Protestantism linked civic legitimacy to white, native-born Protestant identity and cast pluralism and social change as threats to the nation's moral order. By aligning itself with this vision, the Klan was able to present its political agenda as the defense of "American values," granting it disproportionate sway over public life, particularly in a state already shaped by one-party dominance, disenfranchisement, and racially biased law enforcement.⁴⁴

According to Klan doctrine, democracy could only function if its participants were articulate, educated, and morally disciplined. William J. Simmons made this racialized logic explicit when he declared that "the African Negro cannot realize democracy today because he is psychically, and hence morally, unfitted for its responsibilities."⁴⁵ In the Klan's view, only white, native-born Protestant men of Anglo-Saxon descent were fit to exercise political agency, including the right to vote.⁴⁶ Although the organization initially claimed to have no political ambitions, its rhetoric and activities quickly revealed otherwise.⁴⁷ By the early 1920s, the Klan was not marginal to Georgia's political landscape but deeply embedded within it.⁴⁸ Contemporary observers noted that "no other state, however, presented a better study of intrenchment by the Klan into local politics than the State of Georgia," where the organization helped elect sympathetic officials, including Governor Clifford Walker, and cultivated allies in the judiciary, legislature, and even Congress.⁴⁹

⁴² United States, *The Ku-Klux Klan*, 127.

⁴³ Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*, 14.

⁴⁴ Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*, 188-190.

⁴⁵ Simmons, *The Klan Unmasked*, 141

⁴⁶ Simmons, *The Klan Unmasked*, 142-143.

⁴⁷ Simmons, *America's Menace or The Enemy Within*, 124.

⁴⁸ Clement C. Mosele, "The Political Influence of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia, 1915-1925", *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 57:2 (1973) 235-255, 253.

⁴⁹ Mosele, "The Political Influence of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia, 1915-1925," 236.

The exception was Columbus, a city marked by unusually fierce resistance from anti-Klan figures such as Julian Harris, editor of *The Columbus Enquirer-Sun*. There, a candidate for city commissioner was forced to relocate after being exposed as a Klansman and losing the election, illustrating the intensity of local opposition.⁵⁰ In such local contexts, running for office as a known Klansman could still carry significant personal and electoral risk, especially while state and federal authorities were making early, though largely ineffective, attempts to curtail the organization.⁵¹ But these isolated setbacks did not reflect the broader political landscape. Across most of Georgia, the Klan rapidly became an entrenched force, holding the balance of power in numerous communities, maintaining a paid lobbyist in Atlanta, and exerting considerable influence over public officials. The contrast between Columbus and the rest of the state underscores how exceptional local resistance was during a period when the Klan's political reach in Georgia was otherwise expanding dramatically.⁵²

The case of Governor Clifford M. Walker offers a telling example. He ran for Governor of Georgia in 1922–1923, less than a year after the city commissioner candidate in Columbus was forced to leave town following revelations of his Klan affiliation.⁵³ While Walker's personal membership in the Ku Klux Klan remained unconfirmed during the campaign, his bid for office was heavily, and visibly, influenced by the Klan's political machine.⁵⁴ He received a quiet endorsement and benefited from the organization's extensive network, which was supported by sympathetic Baptist and Methodist churches. His platform of moral reform and anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant rhetoric resonated with rural white Protestant voters.⁵⁵ This so-called "quiet" endorsement didn't go unnoticed when the *Atlanta Tri-Weekly Journal* interviewed Imperial Wizard Edward Y. Clarke. In this interview, the Imperial Wizard insisted the Klan was "distinctly a non-political organization," and claimed it had abandoned the violence of its Reconstruction-era predecessor.⁵⁶ Both claims proved false, as the Klan resorted to intimidation and coercion in support of Walker's election campaign.⁵⁷ The Klan deployed members to polling stations and neighborhoods to discourage Black voters, as well as Catholic and immigrant sympathizers, from casting their ballots, using threats, coercion, and outright acts of intimidation.⁵⁸ The *Atlanta Tri-Weekly Journal* condemned the organization as a "cheap political machine" that used character assassination, intimidation, and physical violence to deprive citizens of their rights.⁵⁹ Violence against Catholics, immigrants, and Black people often went underreported, and local authorities, many sympathetic or unwilling to intervene, failed to investigate or prosecute these abuses.⁶⁰

⁵⁰ 'Look out Politicians', *The Cordele dispatch and daily Sentinel* (December 12, 1922).

⁵¹ 'Government is able to erase Ku Klux Klan', *The Americus Times-Recorder* (September 30, 1921).

⁵² Mosele, "The Political Influence of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia, 1915–1925," 235–236.

⁵³ 'Look out Politicians', *The Cordele dispatch and daily Sentinel* (December 12, 1922).

⁵⁴ Mosele, "The Political Influence of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia, 1915–1925," 246.

⁵⁵ Mosele, "The Political Influence of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia, 1915–1925," 237 ; MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 9–10.

⁵⁶ Clarke Reveals Plan to Broaden Scope of Ku Klux', *Atlanta Tri-Weekly Journal* (December 30, 1922).

⁵⁷ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 17.

⁵⁸ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 163–164.

⁵⁹ 'Factions Ruining Klan, E.Y. Clarke Writes President', *Atlanta Tri-Weekly journal* (December 29, 1923).

⁶⁰ Matthews, *Studies in Race Relations in Georgia*, 164.

Mainstream Protestant newspapers often minimized or ignored acts of racial or religious violence altogether. It was instead Black press outlets and organizations such as The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People that documented these violations, painting a fuller picture of how the Klan's intimidation tactics undermined the democratic process during the 1922–1923 elections.⁶¹ This silence in official records allowed the Klan to continue operating with impunity, masking the scale and severity of its campaign of terror during one of Georgia's most politically volatile moments. Walker's Klan-endorsed campaign eventually led him to victory. By the time his Klan-affiliation became official, it was already largely accepted by many of the majority of Georgia's white population.⁶²

While the Ku Klux Klan publicly professed political neutrality, its founder, William J. Simmons, was explicit in asserting that law enforcement, and both civil and criminal justice, should serve as tools to uphold what he described as “white man's law.”⁶³ Simmons declared in a brochure that the Klan's objectives were:

To aid and assist in the execution of all constitutional laws, and to preserve the honor and dignity of the State by opposing tyranny, in any and every degree attempted from any and every source whatsoever, by a fearless and faithful administration of justice; to promptly and properly meet every behest of Duty without fear and without reproach.⁶⁴

This rhetoric granted Klansmen a self-styled mandate to enforce what Simmons called “white man's law” by any means deemed necessary.⁶⁵ In Georgia, this ideology translated into deliberate efforts to place Klan members within local law enforcement across towns with active chapters.⁶⁶

Once embedded, these officials frequently ignored Klan violence or directly participated in it. In some cases, this complicity extended to lynching. The 1922 killing of John Glover in Macon illustrates this dynamic: deputies stood by as a mob pursued, shot, and burned Glover after he allegedly killed a deputy sheriff.⁶⁷ A year later, Macon County sheriff Jim Hicks admitted that most local law enforcement officers were Klan members and actively obstructed him from enforcing the law, with several deputies and county commissioners openly acknowledging their affiliation.⁶⁸ These revelations underscore how the Klan's penetration of Georgia's law-enforcement structures allowed it to operate above the law, transforming public institutions into instruments of racial terror and political enforcement.

⁶¹ Matthews, *Studies in Race Relations in Georgia*, 135.

⁶² ‘Chief Executive Attended Meet of Hooded Order’, *The Americus Times-Recorder* (October 14, 1924).

⁶³ Simmons, *The Klan Unmasked*, 158

⁶⁴ William J. Simmons, *ABC of the Invisible Empire* (Atlanta, 1917).

⁶⁵ Simmons, *Kloran*, 13–15.

⁶⁶ United States, *The Ku-Klux Klan*, 75

⁶⁷ ‘Bibb County Authorities Take no Action Following Execution by Mob’, *The Cordele dispatch and daily Sentinel* (August 3, 1922).

⁶⁸ ‘Backing up Hicks’, *The Cordele dispatch and daily Sentinel* (October 4, 1923).

By 1925, the Second Ku Klux Klan had become a powerful presence in Georgia's religious, civic, and political life. The Klan did not gain influence simply through intimidation or racial violence; it succeeded because it embedded its message within the everyday moral language, institutional structures, and political expectations of white Protestant Georgia. The Klan's appeal rested on its ability to present white supremacy and nativism as expressions of Christian duty and civic responsibility. By adopting the rituals, rhetoric, and authority of Southern Protestantism, especially Southern Baptist moralism, the Klan framed its cause as a sacred defense of community and nation. This religious veneer allowed the organization to move beyond the margins and into the center of church life, where ministers, congregations, and lay leaders often provided tacit or explicit support. At the same time, the Klan capitalized on widespread social anxieties about racial change, immigration, and moral decline. It offered white Georgians a narrative of order and renewal at a moment when many feared the erosion of traditional hierarchies. Politically, the Klan leveraged these cultural currents to infiltrate law enforcement, influence elections, and shape legislation, blurring the boundaries between religious conviction, civic authority, and racial ideology. These factors reveal that the Klan's rise in Georgia was not an aberration imposed from outside, but a movement that grew from within the state's own institutions and belief systems. Its power lay in its ability to appear ordinary, rooted in familiar values, reinforced by trusted institutions, and justified through the language of faith and patriotism.

That seeming ordinariness, rather than its extremism, explains how the Klan became woven into the fabric of Georgia's public life during the 1915-1925 period. This research points towards a potentially generative path for future scholarly investigations, which should examine Georgia in a comparative way against the experience of other Southern states and trace the decline of Klan influence after the 1920s, building a more locally specific picture of the rise and fall of the Klan across the United States. Further attention might also be given to the role of women's auxiliaries, as well the responses of Black and immigrant communities at the grassroots level. What this study ultimately reveals is that the Klan's power in Georgia was not just in its robes or rhetoric, but in its ability to become ordinary, to speak the language of churches, courtrooms, and campaigns. That remains its most enduring and dangerous lesson for future movements based on racial and political extremism.

Paper

Mixed Feelings: The Dutch Response to the Export of Dutch Seventeenth-Century Paintings to the United States

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This paper was written as part of the Eugene V. Thaw Fellowship at the Department of European Paintings, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The final hundred thousand was announced in a breathless silence, and when at last the auctioneer's voice called out 'one million' with solemn emphasis, whilst pointing his gavel in the direction from which the bid had come, all voices fell silent..."

On 9 June 1913, *The Toilet of Bathsheba* (1643) by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669) became the first painting ever to sell for one million francs at a public auction. The sale attracted considerable attention, drawing a large crowd and generating widespread coverage in Dutch newspapers and periodicals, including in *Het Vaderland*, from which the above quote is drawn. It also fueled a developing debate about the growing export of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings to the United States. This debate emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the context of the increasing domination of American wealth over the international art market. European works of art, long embedded in national histories and elite collecting traditions, increasingly crossed the Atlantic as American collectors invested in cultural authority alongside economic power. Among the most sought-after objects were Dutch seventeenth-century paintings.

Art historians have addressed this transatlantic circulation of Dutch art and its reception in the United States. In *Holland Mania: The Unknown Dutch Period in American Art and Culture* (1998), art historian Annette Stott examines the American fascination with Dutch culture in the United States between 1880 and 1920. Stott defines “Holland Mania” as a cultural phenomenon in which Americans developed a widespread fascination with the Netherlands as part of a larger effort to define American identity. According to Stott, Americans admired and idealized the Dutch Republic, with their passion reflected in the collecting of Dutch paintings.² The 2014 volume *Holland's Golden Age in America: Collecting the Art of Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Hals* provides another important overview of this period of American collecting of Dutch Old Master paintings. In the book, art historian Peter Hecht discusses the rivalry between American collectors and Dutch museum collections. He argues that the reaction of the Dutch towards the growing US collections

Notes

¹ “Kunst- en Letternieuws: Verkoop van de Collectie-Steengracht,” *Het Vaderland*, June 10, 1913, 8, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB23:001510178:mpeg21:p00008>. All translations are by the author unless stated otherwise.

² Annette Stott, *Holland Mania: The Unknown Dutch Period in American Art and Culture, 1880–1920* (The Overlook Press, 1998).

showcases not only their increasing concern but their growing ability to compete with American collectors and keep art within the Netherlands.³

What sets this research apart from existing studies, however, is the focus on one single work. This article argues that the response to the sale of Rembrandt's *The Toilet of Bathsheba* reflects the shifting Dutch sentiments towards the American art collecting of seventeenth century paintings. In particular, this article shows how attitudes to US collecting of paintings evolved from indifference to growing concern. Opinions were spread through numerous publications, ranging from short news reports to more in-depth articles. Published opinion pieces following the sale of *Bathsheba* reflect broader sentiments in a time when Dutch sensitivity about their cultural heritage was gaining prominence.

Furthermore, the article's contribution extends beyond art history. The article not only complements studies such as those by Stott and Hecht, but also contextualizes the conversation by discussing art market developments through the intersection of art, economics, and national identity. Published in the *Netherlands American Studies Review*, the article reaches readers beyond the field of art history and contributes to ongoing interdisciplinary discussions about the cultural consequences of transatlantic collecting.

The article first situates the export of Dutch seventeenth-century paintings within the broader transformation of the international art market during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, shaped by the rise of American wealth and Gilded Age collecting. Then, it engages with key scholarship on the transatlantic circulation of Dutch art to position the study within existing historiography. Building on this context, it analyses how Dutch reporters and art critics framed the increasing export of Old Master paintings to the United States, focusing on shifting attitudes towards cultural heritage and national identity. Finally, the 1913 sale of Rembrandt's *The Toilet of Bathsheba* from the Steengracht collection serves as a case study to explore how, alongside feelings of indifference and concern, expressions of national pride increasingly emerged.

In the late nineteenth century, the United States experienced a remarkable surge in industrial development and economic growth. The Industrial Revolution, which began in Britain in the late eighteenth century, gradually spread across Europe and into the United States in the nineteenth century. As mechanized production replaced manual labor, largely rural societies transformed into increasingly urban ones. The US built its industrialization on lessons learned from European examples. Supported by abundant natural resources, a growing railway network, and expanding telecommunications, the US industrialized faster and on a larger scale than any preceding country.⁴

During this time, a new elite class of wealthy industrialists and financiers emerged. The industries most critical to American industrial expansion were driven by a small group

³ Peter Hecht, "Unexpected Rivals for the Dutch: Competing with the Americans for Holland's National Heritage in Great Britain and Elsewhere," in *Holland's Golden Age in America: Collecting the Art of Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Hals*, ed. Esmée Quodbach (Pennsylvania State University Press, The Frick Collection, 2014), 154–167.

⁴ Gerald Michael Greenfield and John D. Buenker, *Those United States: International Perspectives on American History* (Wadsworth Publishing, 1999), 1–7.

of businessmen, such as John D. Rockefeller (oil), Andrew Carnegie (steel), Cornelius Vanderbilt (railroads), and John P. Morgan (investment banking). While their businesses thrived, both American and migrant workers suffered from low wages and poor working conditions. It is the contrast of widespread poverty, covered with a golden veneer, that is reflected in the title often given to the period: the Gilded Age.⁵

New York City was the stage on which much of Gilded Age high society life played out. In *Mrs. Astors's New York: Money and Social Power in a Gilded Age* (2004), Eric Homberger discusses the efforts of socialite Caroline Schermerhorn Astor to create a social upper class in New York City. Following the example of British aristocracy, the New York elite built houses inspired by British architectural styles and mimicked their societal rules, adhering to strict social codes and etiquette. The new upper class wanted to display their wealth and to be part of this high society, helping them strengthen their position in this influential social network. One of the ways they sought to elevate their social status was to invest heavily in art collections.⁶

The tradition of building art collections followed the example of those European aristocratic families that had built collections over centuries. These impressive art collections were symbols of their wealth, social status, and centuries-old lineage. However, by the late nineteenth century, many of these noble fortunes were in decline, with growing economic challenges taking their toll. According to art historian Esmée Quoadbach, a specialist in the history of collecting, railroad financier Henry G. Marquand had a significant impact on the collection of Dutch paintings at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met), which was founded in 1870 by private collectors who wanted to create a museum inspired by European examples. In 1883, Marquand bought The Met's first Rembrandt in a sale from the well-respected British Lansdowne collection. The Marquess of Lansdowne had to sell part of his collection due to declining revenues from landownership and the high costs of maintaining his aristocratic estates.⁷

In the United Kingdom, the introduction of inheritance taxes further pressured aristocratic families to sell their historic artifacts.⁸ The resulting rise in artworks on the market created prime opportunities for wealthy US collectors to acquire high-quality European paintings. The appeal only grew in 1909, when the US government eliminated import duties on art, making these acquisitions even more attractive.⁹ An opinion piece written by a US author and published in a Dutch newspaper in 1889 showcases the sentiments of the time:

⁵ The term "Gilded Age" was popularized by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in their 1873 novel *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, highlighting the contrast between surface prosperity and underlying corruption. See Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (American Publishing Company, 1873).

⁶ Eric Homberger, *Mrs. Astor's New York: Money and Social Power in a Gilded Age* (Yale University Press, 2004), 1-9.

⁷ Esmée Quoadbach, *The Age of Rembrandt: Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (Metropolitan Museum of Art & Yale University Press, 2007), 10-11.

⁸ Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., "The Dutch Painting Collection at the National Gallery of Art," in *Holland's Golden Age in America: Collecting the Art of Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Hals*, ed. Esmée Quoadbach (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 128.

⁹ Wheelock, "The Dutch Painting Collection at the National Gallery of Art," 128.

As we Americans become more distinguished, and as we begin to have our native aristocracy, the need gradually arises to have, like old Europe, our collections too, not only of modern Corots and Millets, but in addition of old, posed Rembrandts, Van Dycks, and Ter Borchs.¹⁰

According to this author, European collections were not defined by paintings from modern artists such as French painters Camille Corot (1796-1875) and Jean-François Millet (1814-1875). Instead, old European collections contained seventeenth-century Dutch paintings that had been held there for generations, reflecting their long-established lineage. Collecting paintings by Rembrandt and his contemporaries would therefore be better suited for the rising American aristocracy than acquiring more recent paintings.

While Gilded Age collectors viewed the collecting of European art as a mark of cultural sophistication and refined taste, Dutch reporters often looked at the acquisitions with a sense of skepticism. Critical reflections on US collectors were expressed in numerous books and periodicals. In 1892, during the height of the Gilded Age, art critic W. van Tricht argued that the “Yankee’s” love for art was like a naive first love.¹¹ In his opinion, The Metropolitan Museum of Art was filled with a random selection of art. He felt that The Met’s collection was brought together motivated by money rather than taste, with no clear ordering:

Oh Yankee! believe me, you're still too young to be in love! With the stately figure of your sweetheart, European art, your beardless office face doesn't suit her as a lover! (...) Generally speaking, the Yankee is too much of an admirer to truly be capable of love. Art isn't his passion, it's just a pastime to him.¹²

Van Tricht, an art critic who covered his identity with a pseudonym, noted how collectors in the US invested in art to show off, as it was the most expensive thing they could buy. He mockingly expressed his critical opinion of this practice.

Not all reviews, however, were negative. Another lengthy opinion piece from the time reflects the layered response in the Netherlands to The Met. In 1903, art critic Henriëtte Hendrix expressed how she felt there were more sincere sentiments driving the collection of The Met:¹³

Yes, that is what I believe of the Americans, whom we in our supposedly idealistic old world condemn as being so extraordinarily materialistic; I believe that they have a great and beautiful ideal, that they want to make their people

¹⁰ “Vereenigde Staten van Noord-Amerika, Philadelphia, 28 December,” *Dagblad van Zuidholland en 's Gravenhage*, January 8, 1889, 1, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB19:003599011:mpeg21:p00001>.

¹¹ W. van Tricht is described as an art critic who hides behind his pseudonym in the newspaper *Arnhemse Courant* of August 17, 1892, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB08:000091461:mpeg21:p002>.

¹² W. van Tricht, “De kunst in Amerika. Het Metropolitan Art Museum in New-York,” *De portefeuille, kunst- en letterbode*, May 21, 1892, 1, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMUBA17:247646008:00001>.

¹³ Henriëtte Hendrix was one of the first female journalists. She started her career for Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf* and later moved to New York, working for the *New York Times* as well as staying a correspondent for Dutch newspapers. “Henriette Holst-Hendrix,” *Algemeen Handelsblad*, August 23, 1933. <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010663490:mpeg21:p002>.

good and happy, that they want to help humanity progress! And how could they do that better than with art?¹⁴

Hendrix was a Dutch reporter who lived in New York state and had a far more nuanced view than Van Tricht, deriving from her personal experience. While she shared the popular opinion that many investments in art were made to create a good impression and to bring the benefactor fame, she did not believe the collecting was solely motivated by self-interest. Hendrix felt that critics of the “idealistic old world” were shortsighted to call the American collectors materialistic. She concluded that they must have been driven by nobler motives and ideals, wanting to do good for their nation and help humanity move forward.¹⁵

Dutch seventeenth-century painting was one of the primary collecting interests among Gilded Age collectors.¹⁶ Besides wanting to follow the example of European collections, there were other reasons this era of painting stood out as a consistent favorite. First, seventeenth-century Dutch paintings were highly praised by art historians and critics for the exceptional quality of the works.¹⁷ Moreover, collecting Dutch art was an effective way to identify with Dutch history. During the Gilded age, New York City’s elite looked to the seventeenth-century Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam for an ancestral history that predated British colonial rule.

Stott explains how, between 1880 and 1920, Gilded Age industrialists drew parallels between their own rise to wealth and that of the prosperous Dutch Republic. Some collectors identified with the seventeenth-century Dutch middle class, whose economic success, civic independence, and moral values felt strikingly familiar. They reflected their affinity through the acquisition of portraits of Dutch merchants and governors, who had fought for self-government and religious liberty in their time. Furthermore, Dutch paintings frequently depicted scenes of trade and domestic prosperity, themes that resonated with the Gilded Age entrepreneurs who valued hard work and commercial success.¹⁸

Throughout the Gilded Age, increasing numbers of Dutch paintings appeared on the international art market. Most of these paintings made their way to the United States. Perhaps surprisingly, there was almost no pushback from within the Netherlands. After all, Dutch seventeenth-century painters were considered among the most important historical heroes. Historian Niek van Sas illustrates this by stating that after the Netherlands became a

¹⁴ Henriëtte Hendrix, “Het Metropolitan Museum te New-York,” *Kunst en Leven: Tijdschrift voor Kunst en Belletrïe*, 1903, 38, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=KBDBVL02:004837001:00007>.

¹⁵ Hendrix, “Het Metropolitan Museum te New-York,” 35-39.

¹⁶ Lloyd DeWitt, “‘They leave us as they find us, they never elevate’: John G. Johnson and the Dutch Masters,” in *Holland’s Golden Age in America: Collecting the Art of Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Hals*, ed. Esmée Quodbach (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 82-86.

¹⁷ Due to the open market in the Dutch Republic, civilians could commission artists, instead of just church, state or nobility. This resulted in expanding production and experimentation with new painting styles and subjects. Seventeenth-century Dutch painters developed innovative techniques, resulting in detailed brushwork and optical realism.

¹⁸ Stott, *Holland Mania*, 19-28.

parliamentary democracy in 1848, the first statue that was erected was that of Rembrandt, who became a central figure in Dutch nationalism around the turn of the century.¹⁹

But despite this increasing recognition of the central role of art to Dutch history, not much money was being spent on the Netherlands' existing heritage. The Dutch state appeared to be more involved with honoring these artists through statues, than taking care of their existing works of art. A cartoon made in 1895 by Marius Bauer (1867-1932) visualizes this attitude very clearly. In the cartoon, a statue of Frans Hals has been erected in a row with statues of Rembrandt, Jan Steen, and other seventeenth-century artists. In the foreground, paintings are being shipped abroad on boats with the names of Germany, France, England and the US.²⁰ At the bottom of the print, a four-line verse says: "There go our finest paintings, shipped overseas. While here they raise up ugly statues in their place. A good Dutchman grumbles — who could blame him: 'Well, damn it!'" The print accompanied an article by artist Jan Veth (1864-1925), who bemoaned that Frans Hals's paintings from the Haarlem Hofje van Beresteyn were sold, and who criticized plans for a monument to Hals as a hollow imitation of genuine tribute.²¹

Victor de Stuers, then a lawyer, was one of the first advocates for Dutch culture and helped transform the government's attitude toward cultural heritage. In a 1873 opinion piece, De Stuers criticized the government and the Dutch people for their negligence towards their material culture. He addressed the neglect of historical sites, the poorly maintained museums, and criticized short-sighted policies in which the government viewed art and heritage as unprofitable. In the article, he remarked, "when we consider the state of our Museums, do not the ghosts of Rembrandt, of Hals, of the entire glorious Dutch school scream in our ears that we are not worthy to count such geniuses among our ancestors?"²² The article gained much attention and even had a transformative impact on the Dutch government. Four months after the essay was published, a Royal Decree established an advisory board to the government for the monuments of history and art, under the authority of de Stuers.²³

Although the government, under the influence of de Stuers, took important steps toward a national policy for monuments and art, their resources were limited. The state was not fast enough in their response to artworks that came up for sale. As a result, many works were still at risk of leaving the country. In an effort to form a more reliable alliance a group of art patrons founded the Vereniging Rembrandt (Rembrandt Association) in 1883, with support from de Stuers. The association could act more quickly than the state by using private funds, after which purchases were often formalized in cooperation with the government.²⁴

¹⁹ N. C. F. van Sas, *De metamorfose van Nederland: van oude orde naar moderniteit, 1750-1900* (Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 561-565.

²⁰ Marius Bauer, *A Statue for Frans Hals*, 1895, lithograph, 18.6 × 12.4 in., inv. no. RP-P-OB-100.148, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/object/Een-Standbeeld-voor-Frans-Hals-ad2a1f2843b5969a.43757cdbf277cba4?tab=data>.

²¹ Henk Slechte, "Een zachtmoedig satiricus. De spotprenten van Marius Bauer in De Kroniek," *De Boekenwereld* 19 (2002-2003): 138.

²² Victor de Stuers, "Holland op z'n smalst," *De Gids* 37 (1873): 60-67, https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_gid001187301_01/_gid001187301_01_0060.php.

²³ Hecht, "Unexpected Rivals for the Dutch," 157.

²⁴ Hecht, "Unexpected Rivals for the Dutch," 156-158.

With their shared efforts, the Rembrandt Association's art patrons and the government had the potential to challenge America's Gilded Age fortunes.²⁵

It was amid these changing circumstances that the renowned private collection of the Steengracht family was set to be auctioned. The Steengracht collection was a remarkable art collection in The Hague that contained well-known paintings by Rembrandt, Gerard Dou (1613-1675), and Jan Steen (1626-1679). The collection was brought together over four generations and through several inheritances. In 1912, following the death of Hendricus Adolpus Steengracht van Duivenvoorde, the then owner of the majority of the collection, rumors circulated about what would happen to the Steengracht collection. On December 16, the newspaper *De Nieuwe Courant* published the following statement: "From reliable sources, we have learned that the Steengracht collection has been sold in its entirety to a private individual. We have not been able to obtain further details at this time."²⁶ Numerous newspapers repeated this rumor until further notice appeared.

An interview with Hendrik Teding van Berkhout, the Rembrandt Association's secretary, reveals the growing disagreement about such rumored sales. In *Algemeen Handelsblad*, van Berkhout voiced his discontent on how the collection was never offered to the state.²⁷ Meanwhile, newspapers were speculating about where the collection would end up. For instance, *De Grondwet* published a rumor that the collection was sold as a whole to an English collector for a large sum of money, surpassing even "the land of dollar millionaires."²⁸ Similar statements were expressed in newspapers from all over the country, such as *Delftse Courant* and *Zutphense Courant*.²⁹ Ultimately, on January 25, 1913, the truth was uncovered and *De Nieuwe Courant* rectified their earlier statements. As stated in his will, Hendricus had decided to sell off the collection. The collection would be sold by Frederik Muller & Co. at Georges Petit in Paris.³⁰

Emotional responses were expressed in newspapers and periodicals in following months. Mere days before the sale, the public debate intensified and feelings of despair were expressed in the Dutch press, such as *Algemeen Handelsblad*:

It is a sad thought that arises as we leaf through the catalogue, that we will likely never see these paintings again, Brouwer's *Smokers*, Metsu's *The Sick Child*,

²⁵ Annette de Vries and Quentin Buvelot, *Passie voor schilderijen: De verzameling Steengracht van Duivenvoorde* (Stichting Duivenvoorde / Primavera Pers, 2012), 13.

²⁶ "Kunst," *De nieuwe courant*, December 16, 1912, 9, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB15:000776193:mpeg21:p00009>.

²⁷ "Kunst. Schilderijen naar het buitenland," *Algemeen Handelsblad*, January 3, 1913, 6, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010650873:mpeg21:p0006>.

²⁸ "Nederlandsch Nieuws.," *De Grondwet*, January 21, 1913, 11, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:110621418:mpeg21:p011>.

²⁹ "Kunst," *Delftse courant*, January 6, 1913, 1, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB08:000112938:mpeg21:p0001>; "Kunsten en Wetenschappen," *Zutphense courant*, January 6, 1913, 3, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMRAZ02:000384004:mpeg21:p00003>.

³⁰ Vries, *Passie voor schilderijen*, 13; "Kunst- en letternieuws," *Het Vaderland*, January 25, 1913, 5, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB23:001494064:mpeg21:p00005>.

the magnificent Jan Steens, etc., which we have so often admired through the hospitality of the Steengracht gentlemen in The Hague.³¹

The attention in the media appears to show a personal attachment to these paintings. Media attention particularly surrounded one of the collection's most prized works: Rembrandt's *The Toilet of Bathsheba* (1643), now part of the collection of The Met. On the viewing days, the *Bathsheba* painting had to be guarded by two policemen to prevent any damage from the immense crowd.³² It was the only Rembrandt painting in the collection and therefore gained the attention of Rembrandt connoisseurs. In the painting, Rembrandt portrayed the biblical figure Bathsheba during a private moment of bathing, unaware that she is being observed by King David from the distant tower in the background.

Besides the excitement surrounding the painting, there were also many complaints expressed about the viewing days. First, *Het Nieuws van de Dag* did not speak highly of the crowds attending the sales:

Interest? No, it is curiosity that drives that crowd of snobs and useless individuals into a large hall, where a few dozen people argue over the possession (...) of more or less famous works of art.³³

This is clearly not a neutral observation, but a value judgment. It suggests that attending the auction presentation was not just motivated by the interest in the paintings, but also by an interest in the event itself as a social spectacle.

Moreover, journalist and art critic Jacques Mesnil specifically detested the display of the paintings, remembering how beautifully the paintings had hung in the serenity of the Steengracht townhouse in The Hague. Mesnil places the intimate setting of the townhouse in stark contrast to the auction presentation. According to him, the paintings were placed in a rather banal, skylit room. He also expressed his discontent with the visitors, who acted accordingly: "The ladies uttered admiring cries while also showing off their outfits; a shower of flattering clichés followed."³⁴ The atmosphere resembled a society event more than a setting for focused art appreciation.

According to a catalogue by sculptor and writer Lord Ronald Sutherland Gower (1845-1916), published in 1875, *The Toilet of Bathsheba* used to be situated among the greatest masters in the Steengracht townhouse. The Steengracht collection was displayed on the ground floor, divided over three light and spacious rooms. The *Bathsheba* was placed in the second room, just above a painting of the same theme by Adriaen van der Werff (1659-1722). On either side of these paintings were portraits of apostles Peter and Paul by Peter

³¹ "Kunst. Veilingen," *Algemeen Handelsblad*, May 16, 1913, 6, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010651093:mpeg21:p006>.

³² "Kunst- en letternieuws. De veiling der collectie Steengracht," *De Avondpost*, June 10, 1913, 10, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB27:017864156:mpeg21:p00010>.

³³ "Brieven uit Parijs," *Het Nieuws van den dag: kleine courant*, 14 juni 1913, 9, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010109872:mpeg21:p0009>.

³⁴ Mesnil, "Veiling der verzameling Steengracht," 66.

Paul Rubens (1577-1640).³⁵ Lord Ronald Gower felt the surrounding paintings clashed with the Rembrandt. Though critical of the display, he concluded that the Steengracht gallery was worth a visit.³⁶

The critique of the event reveals similar accusations to those previously leveled at American collectors. The audience's behavior was not seen as 'proper' and they appeared to be there for the spectacle rather than to seriously consider the paintings. Still, the critical notes about American collectors persisted. There was a personal perspective shared in an article written the day before the sale in the newspaper *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*. The anonymous author opened with the expectation that the "dollars" would win again in the sale, finding it heart-wrenching "that a wildly rich American would carry off these pieces of joy and delight, which belong to all humankind, across the ocean, only to imprison them on yet another 'Avenue.'"³⁷ The author believed that the paintings should be in a public collection in the Netherlands. The concern was that the paintings would be placed in a private collection in New York City.

However, the concern expressed by the author seemed to be less about whether the collection was publicly accessible, and more about the principle of cultural heritage departing from the Netherlands. Though the article indicated a personal affection towards these paintings, the author confessed that the auction viewing was in fact the first time they had seen these paintings. They admired art and were raised in The Hague, but had never learned about the collection, and for this they blamed their education.³⁸

Furthermore, the outrage becomes more nuanced when considering how seldom the collection was visited prior to its sale. According to art historian Annette de Vries, the collection could be visited by appointment only, making it accessible for some but not for all.³⁹ Research into the guestbook shows that the collection remained open until a month before the sale. The news that the collection would be sold caused a peak in visitor numbers, with around twenty-five visitors on the busiest days.⁴⁰ Even though the newspaper articles suggest a vast public interest in the collection, these numbers reveal a discrepancy between the emotional reaction to the sale and the actual level of public interest.

Despite the commotion, the event proceeded as planned. The long-awaited Steengracht collection auction took place in Paris on June 9 and 10, with the paintings divided over the days into old and modern paintings. Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* was sold for an unrivaled sum of one million francs to art agent Joseph Duveen for New York collector Benjamin Altman, and the painting was set to be transported to the US.⁴¹ To illustrate the

³⁵ Lord Ronald Sutherland Gower, *A Pocket Guide to the Public and Private Galleries of Holland and Belgium* (Sampson Low, Marston, Low, and Searle, 1875), 56-64.

³⁶ Gower, *A Pocket Guide to the Public and Private Galleries of Holland and Belgium*, 56-64.

³⁷ "Het einde van de Steengracht-verzameling," *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, June 9, 1913, 9, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010032851:mpeg21:p009>.

³⁸ "Het einde van de Steengracht-verzameling," 9.

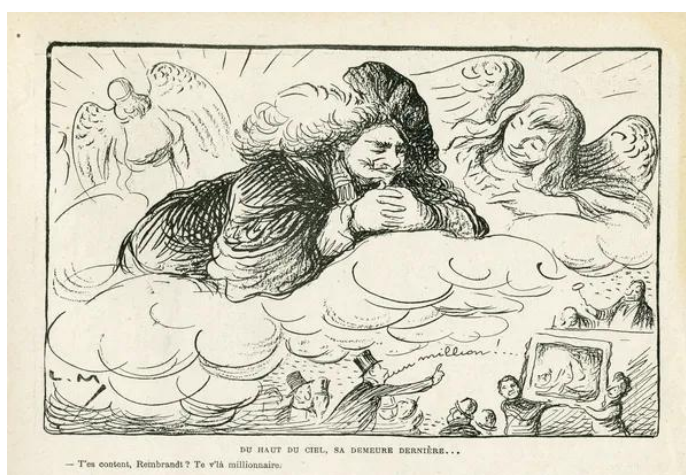
³⁹ Vries, *Passie voor schilderijen*, 27.

⁴⁰ Vries, 28.

⁴¹ Hecht, "Unexpected Rivals for the Dutch," 162.

scale of this sum, and to emphasize the economic inequality, it is worth noting that a worker's annual income in France was around 2000 Francs at the time.⁴²

While prior to the sale, discourse was dominated by concerns over the loss of the collection, afterwards attention quickly turned to the successful sale. Before the sale, much attention was paid to the painting as one of the most important works from the collection. After the sale, however, it was discussed in extensive detail how a million francs were spent. In this way, the Dutch reaction mirrors earlier critiques of American collectors, where financial value appears to overshadow artistic appreciation. The emphasis on monetary value is reflected in almost all of the Dutch newspapers following the auction.⁴³ There was even a cartoon, published in French and Dutch newspapers, that reflects on the event. Illustrator Lucien Metivet (1863-1932) depicted Rembrandt in heaven, his hands folded, peeking over the clouds to see how his painting was sold in Paris. The text reads: "From the heights of heaven, his final home... Satisfied, Rembrandt? You're a millionaire now."⁴⁴ Hereby the cartoonist mockingly celebrated the new millionaire status of Rembrandt paintings.



The fascination with the sale value marked a shift in the public debate. The press did not express much grief over the loss of the Rembrandt. Rather than despair, there was a sense of pride that the Rembrandt painting found its way elsewhere. A few days after the sale, a reporter concluded, "as for the loss of the Rembrandt, we must come to terms with it. We have enough paintings by that master of the highest order, and the Bathsheba will henceforth

⁴² Jérôme Bourdieu, Lionel Kesztenbaum, and Gilles Postel-Vinay. "Thrifty Pensioners: Pensions and Savings in France at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," *The Journal of Economic History* 71, no. 2 (2011): 383–412, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050711001574>.

⁴³ *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* confirmed the painting was sold for the highest price ever at a public auction. "Letteren en Kunst: De veiling Steengracht," *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, June 10, 1913, 1, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010032853:mpeg21:p009>.

⁴⁴ *Le Rire: journal humoristique*, June 21, 1913, 3, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6246473x/f3.item.r=rembrandt>.

proclaim the glory of our old art abroad.”⁴⁵ Newspaper *Het Vaderland* concluded, “it was one of the greatest events that will be talked about for years.”⁴⁶

The debate was shifting as the Dutch moved from seeing themselves as victims to positioning themselves as key players. Aside from the sale of *Bathsheba*, press coverage focused primarily on the successes of the Rembrandt Association. Five of the works the Association had hoped to acquire were successfully secured for the Netherlands. Many Dutch art patrons were therefore relieved by the results of the auction. These significant works would remain in the country and become part of the public collection by returning them to The Hague, now in the Mauritshuis museum.⁴⁷ *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* would even remark that it was now up to other countries to envy the partnership of the Association for the Dutch national collection.⁴⁸

More than a century has passed since the much-discussed sale of the Steengracht Collection. Since then, the Dutch government has become much more aware of the value of their national heritage. However, sometimes controversy rises again. In 2019, the auction at Sotheby’s in New York of thirteen valuable Rubens drawings by the late Princess Christina of the Netherlands, caused public outcry. Under Dutch legislation, the sale could not be prevented, and the collection was bought by an anonymous buyer for almost 10 million dollars.

It led to the establishment of a special commission on the Dutch Collection. In 2022, this commission proposed to strengthen the protection of important cultural heritage. This includes, among other things, a licensing system for trade within the EU, expanding the Museum Acquisition Fund, and introducing a ‘passport’ for cultural goods to reduce administrative burdens.⁴⁹ It remains a balancing act to choose between caring for national cultural heritage on the one hand, and upholding a free market for art on the other.

There were many events that shifted the way the Dutch public perceived the value and ownership of their artistic heritage. What had once been met with relative indifference gradually evolved into a growing sense of cultural loss, stirred by the rising influence of Gilded Age collectors and the extraordinary sums they were willing to spend. The growing concern among Dutch art patrons culminated in the establishment of an advisory board to the government and the Rembrandt Association.

The response to the sale of *The Toilet of Bathsheba* ultimately reflects a deeper sentiment: a collective awareness that Dutch heritage held global resonance. The Dutch state, as well as the New York Gilded Age collectors, used the paintings as gateways to Dutch

⁴⁵ “Kunsten en wetenschappen,” *De Courant*, June 13, 1913, 6, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB19:003533136:mpeg21:p00006>.

⁴⁶ “Kunst- en letternieuws: Veiling Steengracht,” *Het Vaderland*, June 6, 1913, 6, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB23:001510178:mpeg21:p00006>.

⁴⁷ “Kunst. Aankopen uit de collectie Steengracht,” *Algemeen Handelsblad*, June 10, 1913, 6, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010651135:mpeg21:p0006>.

⁴⁸ “Een miljoen voor een schilderij,” *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, June 10, 1913, 1, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010667283:mpeg21:p001>.

⁴⁹ “Plan: nieuwe regels export kunst, meer geld voor behoud hier,” *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.rdn.nl/artikel/966145-plan-nieuwe-regels-export-kunst-meer-geld-voor-behoud-hier>.

seventeenth-century culture and history. Indirectly, the interest of the Gilded Age collectors fueled Dutch cultural pride. There was a sense of triumph in seeing the legacy of Rembrandt celebrated internationally, paired with a new determination to protect and preserve what remained in the country.

Thesis

Reconstructing the Anglo-American Special Relationship: Early Cold War Interactions from the Suez Crisis to the Cuban Missile Crisis (1955-1962)

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This article is drawn from part of the thesis for the MA Global History and International Relations

Neither the sure prevention of war, nor the continuous rise of world organization will be gained without what I have called the fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples. This means a special relationship between the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States.¹

With these words from 1946, part of his famous ‘Iron Curtain speech,’ Winston Churchill first characterized Anglo-American relations as defined by the two countries’ so-called “Special Relationship.”² This notion of a ‘Special Relationship’ has played a crucial rhetorical role in shaping Anglo-American relations ever since, from Churchill’s 1946 speech to the present, with the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) continuing to deploy it – most recently, for example, in the Technology Prosperity Deal of September 2025.³ The UK-US relationship is particularly important to the history of the Cold War, which Churchill’s speech helped inaugurate, a conflict which was in part shaped by the shift from British imperial hegemony to the so-called ‘American Century.’ Analyzing the interactions influencing the relationship is therefore essential to understanding both countries’ intertwined histories and the broader international context within which they operated as key players.⁴

Notes

¹ Winston Churchill, “The Sinews of Peace, 1946 - Iron Curtain” Speech,” Transcript and Recording Sinews of Peace, Winston Churchill’s Iron Curtain Speech, 5 March 1946, <https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/sinews-of-peace-iron-curtain-speech.html>; Wyn Rees and Ruikun Xu, “Shared Adversaries in the Anglo-American Special Relationship: From the Cold War to Contemporary Threats,” *China International Strategy Review* 6, no. 1 (June 2024): 156-57.

² Churchill, “The Sinews of Peace,” 156-57.

³ Kristin Haugevik et al., “Becoming Allies: Finland and Norway after Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” *Nordic Review of International Studies*, no. 3 (2024): 8-9, 18, <https://nris.journal.fi/article/view/144955>; “President Trump Signs Technology Prosperity Deal with United Kingdom,” Government, News, Releases, The White House, 18 September 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/releases/2025/09/president-trump-signs-technology-prosperity-deal-with-united-kingdom/>; Department for Business & Trade, “General Terms for the United States of America and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland Economic Prosperity Deal (Web Accessible Version),” Business and industry, Trade and investment, Free trade, GOV.UK, 20 June 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/us-uk-economic-prosperity-deal-epd/general-terms-for-the-united-states-of-america-and-the-united-kingdom-of-great-britain-and-northern-ireland-economic-prosperity-deal-web-accessible-v>.

⁴ David Reynolds, “The Origins of the Cold War: The European Dimension, 1944-1951,” *The Historical Journal* 28, no. 2 (June 1985): 500-3, 505; Nigel J. Ashton, “Anglo-American Relations from World War to Cold War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 1 (2004): 118, 120-21; Andrew Gamble, “Britain and America” in *The*

This article examines a crucial period in this relationship, the period between 1955 and 1962, when Cold War tensions between the US and the Soviet Union (USSR) were at their height.⁵ Drawing on the work of constructivist International Relations (IR) scholars, it argues that both ideational factors and structural context shaped interactions between American and British leaders, leading to the repeated reconstruction of the Anglo-American Special Relationship during this period.⁶ The Anglo-American Special Relationship functioned as a relational identity construction: a relationship constructed by domestic representations and international interactions – in this case, specifically those between US Presidents and British Prime Ministers (and their foremost representatives) – with varying degrees of closeness in the relationship across the research period.⁷ This article begins by outlining this theoretical approach before discussing the primary sources used, the methodological approach to these approaches, and the place of the argument in the wider historiography. This introduction is followed by close examination of two case studies which illustrate the central argument. The first case study focuses on the Anglo-American interactions concerning the developments surrounding Gamal Abdel Nasser's 1955 request for a loan to finance the Aswan High Dam, as well as the subsequent Suez Crisis and its resolution in 1957.⁸ The second case study examines Anglo-American interactions regarding Cold War nuclear tensions, spanning from the Anglo-American Atomic Bilateral Agreement of 1958 to the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.⁹

International relationships are built on both material and immaterial factors, with Churchill's original description of the Anglo-American Special Relationship consisting of

Oxford Handbook of British Politics, 1st edn, ed. Matthew Flinders et al. (Oxford University Press, 2010), 575–76; Patrick K. O'Brien and Geoffrey Allen Pigman, "Free Trade, British Hegemony and the International Economic Order in the Nineteenth Century," *Review of International Studies* 18, no. 2 (April 1992): 89; Henry Robinson Luce, *The American Century* (Ferris Printing Company, 1941), 32–36, 38–39; Nicholas Guyatt, "The End of the Cold War" in *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War*, 1st edn, ed., Richard H. Immerman and Petra Goedde (Oxford University Press, 2013), 606–7; Michael F. Hopkins, Michael D. Kandiah, and Gillian Staerck, eds, *Cold War Britain* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2003), 1.

⁵ Reynolds, "The Origins of the Cold War," 500, 502–4, 513–15; Rees and Xu, "Shared Adversaries in the Anglo-American Special Relationship" 158–62; McKay et al., *A History of Western Society* Twelfth edition (Bedford/St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2017), 942, 944–45, 950.

⁶ Ashton, "Anglo-American Relations from World War to Cold War," 119–120; Anthony Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon: Full Circle*, 1st edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), 468–470, 629–631, 633–637, 640, 649–653; Charlotte Peevers, *The Politics of Justifying Force: The Suez Crisis, the Iraq War, and International Law* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 77; Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956–1961*, 2 vols (Doubleday & Company Inc., 1965), 14, 31–39, 72–73, 98–99; Klaus Larres, "Britain and the Cold War, 1945–1990" in *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War*, 1st edn, ed. Richard H. Immerman and Petra Goedde (Oxford University Press, 2013), 147; ⁶ Kristin Haugevik, "Introduction" and "What It Means to Be Special" in *Special Relationships in World Politics. Inter-State Friendship and Diplomacy after the Second World War* (Routledge, 2018), 3–20.

⁷ Haugevik, *Special Relationships*, 3, 5–7, 10, 13, 20.

⁸ Barry Turner, *Suez 1956* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2006), 150–51; Ralph Dietl, "Suez 1956: A European Intervention?," *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 2 (April 2008): 259, 266, 276; Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953–1956* (Doubleday & Company Inc., 1963), 150.

⁹ Richard Moore, *Nuclear Illusion, Nuclear Reality: Britain, the United States and Nuclear Weapons, 1958–64* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2010), 1, 23; Oscar M. Ruebhausen and Robert B. Von Mehren, "The Atomic Energy Act and the Private Production of Atomic Power," *Harvard Law Review* 66, no. 8 (June 1953): 1450, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1336868>; Peter Catterall, "At the End of the Day: Macmillan's Account of the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Relations* 26, no. 3 (September 2012): 268; Reynolds, "The Origins of the Cold War," 500, 502–4.

immaterial, ideational factors: a shared language, regular friendly contact, mutual understanding, and military cooperation.¹⁰ A constructivist approach allows for an assessment of how these factors shaped the interpretation of Anglo-American interactions and interests and the evolution of the Special Relationship over time.¹¹ The constructivist framework treats state interests not as solely material or fixed but as produced through a socially constructed framework that shapes actors' perceptions and identities through interaction. Ideational factors – the values, beliefs, norms, and shared ideas that influence human behavior and decision-making – are therefore analytically important because they structure how political material interests are interpreted.¹² Furthermore, if human interaction shapes social reality, then interaction is part of the context in which relationships form, meaning that social phenomena in international relations—including states, institutions, and geopolitical relationships—are constructed and sustained through repeated interaction within specific historical and cultural contexts.¹³ Actors' ideational factors, identities, and context are therefore important for understanding the Anglo-American Special Relationship.¹⁴ Accordingly, this article examines the Special Relationship in its specific context, considering both ideational factors and structural context – material, systemic, and domestic factors such as economic power, international alliances, unequal power relations, and shared elite cultures. All of these factors are hereafter collectively referred to as 'contextual factors.'¹⁵

Within this framework, the analysis considers Anglo-American leaders' identities and perceptions of the Special Relationship and one another, examining how these shape diplomatic practice and political decision-making.¹⁶ Without accounting for ideational factors, shifts in Anglo-American relations would appear driven solely by material interests. As Harnisch and Haugevik argue, however, similar material conditions produce different

¹⁰ Churchill, "America's National Churchill Museum - Winston Churchill's Iron Curtain Speech"; Sebastian Harnisch, "Special Relationships in Foreign Policy" in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* ed., Erin Hannah (Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.

¹¹ Harnisch, "Special Relationships in Foreign Policy," 2.

¹² David M. McCourt, *The New Constructivism in International Relations Theory* (Bristol University Press, 2023), 4, 21, 26, 30, 32-33, 36; Charlotte Epstein, "Who Speaks? Discourse, the subject and the study of identity in international politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 2 (June 2011): 329.

¹³ McCourt, *The New Constructivism*, 3-4, 21-36; Epstein, "Who Speaks?," 329; Karin Fierke, "Constructivism" in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, eds. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, Steve Smith (Oxford University Press, 2016), 163-168; Arya Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research: Key Attributes and Navigating the Conundrums in Its Application," *Sociological Bulletin* 70, no. 1 (January 2021): 105-6.

¹⁴ McCourt, *The New Constructivism*, 21-36; Fierke, "Constructivism," 163, 165-66; Epstein, "Who Speaks?," 329; Haugevik et al., "Becoming Allies," 8; Haugevik, *Special Relationships*, 3-20; Harnisch, "Special Relationships in Foreign Policy," 8.

¹⁵ J. Samuel Barkin, ed., *The Social Construction of State Power: Applying Realist Constructivism* (Bristol University Press, 2020), 1; McCourt, *The New Constructivism*, 4, 26-48; Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research," 105-6; Harnisch, "Special Relationships in Foreign Policy" 2-4; Haugevik et al., "Becoming Allies," 8.

¹⁶ McCourt, *The New Constructivism in International Relations Theory*, 3-4, 21, 26, 30, 32-33, 36; Fierke, "Chapter 9: Constructivism," 163, 165-66; Epstein, "Who Speaks?," 329; Sutanuka Ghosh, "Expressing the Self in Bengali Women's Autobiographies in the Twentieth Century," *South Asia Research* 30, no. 2 (July 2010): 106; Haugevik, "Chapter 1: Introduction and Chapter 2: What It Means to Be Special," 2-7, 9-10, 13, 20; Haugevik et al., "Becoming Allies," 8.

outcomes as a result of ideational factors, such as a shared understanding of identity.¹⁷ Ideational factors influence how Anglo-American actors assess intentions, define appropriate behavior, and construct shared understandings in diplomatic practice rather than simply responding to their context.¹⁸ This understanding is reflected in and builds upon IR scholar Kristin Haugevik's Special Relationship theory, which characterizes the concept as an identity construct renewed through repeated domestic representations and recurring discursive and diplomatic interactions at the international level.¹⁹

The primary sources used in this study are the autobiographies of US President Eisenhower and UK Prime Ministers Eden and Macmillan, as well as accounts regarding President Kennedy's thoughts and actions since no autobiography of his time in office exists.²⁰ These figures were selected because, as heads of government and foreign policy decision-makers, they played key roles in shaping the Anglo-American Special Relationship.²¹ As the sources were written by the leaders themselves or close associates, they were shaped by personal or political motivations and are therefore treated throughout as subjective interpretations of historical and diplomatic contexts.²² Nevertheless, autobiographies are useful because they show the perceptions, motivations, and interpersonal dynamics shaping how these leaders interacted, offering a sense of these leaders self-reflective understanding of their decisions and relationships in ways that are not available through a focus on official records, diplomatic correspondence, and public

¹⁷ Harnisch, "Special Relationships in Foreign Policy," 4; Fierke, "Chapter 9: Constructivism," 164–67; McCourt, *The New Constructivism in International Relations Theory*, 3–5, 15–16, 26, 28, 36; Onuf, "Constructivism at the Crossroads," 115, 122–23, 125; Guzzini, "The Concept of Power," 498; Haugevik, "Chapter 1: Introduction and Chapter 2: What It Means to Be Special," 2–7, 9–10, 13, 20; Haugevik et al., "Becoming Allies," 8; James Paul Gee and Michael Handford, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 4–5, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203809068>.

¹⁸ Stefano Guzzini, "The Concept of Power: A Constructivist Analysis," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (June 2005): 498, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298050330031301>; Nicholas Onuf, "Constructivism at the Crossroads; or, the Problem of Moderate-Sized Dry Goods," *International Political Sociology* 10, no. 2 (June 2016): 122–23; McCourt, *The New Constructivism in International Relations Theory*, 3, 15–16, 26, 28, 30, 36; K. M. Fierke, "Chapter 9: Constructivism," in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 4th edn, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (Oxford University Press, 2016), 162–64, https://archive.org/details/internationalrel0000unse_t5f6/.

¹⁹ Harnisch, "Special Relationships in Foreign Policy," 7; Haugevik, *Special Relationships*, 2–20.

²⁰ Harold MacMillan, *Riding the Storm, 1956–1959*, MacMillan Memoirs 4 (Harper & Row, 1971); Harold MacMillan, *Pointing the Way, 1959–1961*, MacMillan Memoirs 5 (Harper & Row, 1972); Harold MacMillan, *At The End of The Day, 1961–1963*, MacMillan Memoirs 6 (Harper & Row, 1973); "John F. Kennedy: The 35th President of the United States," About The White House, Presidents, The Biden White House Archive, accessed 8 January 2025, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/john-f-kennedy/>; John F. Kennedy, *"Let the Word Go Forth": The Speeches, Statements, and Writings of John F. Kennedy*, ed. Theodore C. Sorensen (Delacorte Press, 1988); Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, with Robert S. McNamara and Harold MacMillan (: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969).

²¹ Stephen Buckley, *The Prime Minister and Cabinet* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 94–104; Duncan Watts, *The American Presidency* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 97–98, 128; Haugevik, *Special Relationships*, 3–20.

²² A. V. S. Jayaannapurna, "A Study of Autobiographical Approach and Understanding," *Scholedge International Journal of Multidisciplinary & Allied Studies* 4, no. 4 (2017), 28–30; Jaume Aurell and Rocio G. Davis, "History and Autobiography: The Logics of a Convergence," *Life Writing* 16, no. 4 (October 2019): 504–8; Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 5th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 546–48; The Biden White House Archive, "John F. Kennedy: The 35th President of the United States"; "Theodore C. Sorensen," About, Awards, National Humanities Medals, National Endowment for the Humanities, accessed 8 January 2025, <https://www.neh.gov/about/awards/national-humanities-medals/theodore-c-sorensen>.

statements.²³ This article applies discourse analysis to examine the language in the American and British sources, while using secondary literature to recognize and contextualize the bias in these sources, building up a deeper understanding of how these leadership interactions shaped the Special Relationship.²⁴

This approach is further enabled by the use of a hermeneutic methodological approach, which enables discourse analysis to place the textual evidence in primary sources within its ideational and structural context through secondary sources.²⁵ This interpretative research methodology aligns with constructivism's emphasis on context.²⁶ Furthermore, this interpretative approach supports the selection of sites that help explain the phenomenon, rather than choosing randomly.²⁷ This makes it possible to perform case study research, so that this article examines several cases of Anglo-American interactions within their context and through the perspective of multiple actors, resulting in a more nuanced, contextualized interpretation of the Anglo-American relations.²⁸ This enables analysis of participants' experiences of these interactions within their context, as it supports both descriptive analysis of social units — such as individuals, families, communities, or organizations — and an explanatory analysis of social phenomena.²⁹

The cases of Anglo-American interactions discussed below were selected because they occur within the Cold War context of tensions between two alliance blocs and represent key moments in which the Special Relationship was tested and reconstructed through high-level interactions between US Presidents and British Prime Ministers and their key representatives.³⁰ The first case, the Suez Crisis interactions (1955-1957), illustrates a breakdown in the relationship during a wider power shift between the US and the UK and highlights the influence of ideational factors on international decision-making.³¹ The second case, the Cuban Missile Crisis interactions (1958-1962), demonstrates Anglo-American cooperation within the tense structural context of a nuclear threat.³²

²³ Jayaannapurna, "A Study of Autobiographical Approach and Understanding," 28-29; Jaume Aurell and Rocio G. Davis, "History and Autobiography," 504-8.

²⁴ McCourt, *The New Constructivism*, 4, 26, 30-36, 48; Haugevik, *Special Relationships*, 2-20; Gee and Handford, *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis* 1, 4-5.

²⁵ McCourt, *The New Constructivism*, 4, 26-36; Epstein, "Who Speaks?," 329; Fierke, "Constructivism," 163-8; Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research," 105-6; Anol Bhattacharjee, *Social Science Research: Principles, Methods, and Practices* (Open Textbook Library: Global Text Project, 2012), 103-117.

²⁶ Bhattacharjee, *Social Science Research*, 103; Arya Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research," 105-6.

²⁷ Bhattacharjee, *Social Science Research*, 104.

²⁸ Bhattacharjee, *Social Science Research*, 104.

²⁹ Bhattacharjee, *Social Science Research*, 93-4; Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research," 105-6; McCourt, *The New Constructivism*, 4, 26-36; Epstein, "Who Speaks?," 329; Fierke, "Constructivism," 163-8.

³⁰ Haugevik, *Special Relationships*, 3-20; Buckley, *The Prime Minister and Cabinet*, 94-96, 98-99, 104; Watts, *The American Presidency*, 97-98, 128; Ashton, "Anglo-American Relations from World War to Cold War," 118-20; McKay et al., *A History of Western Society*, 950, 964-65.

³¹ Ashton, "Anglo-American Relations from World War to Cold War," 119-20; Christopher Baxter, *The Great Power Struggle in East Asia, 1944-50: Britain, America and Post-War Rivalry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009), 1-2, 52; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon: Full Circle*, 468-70, 629-31, 633-37, 640, 649-53; Peevers, *The Politics of Justifying Force*, 77; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 14, 31-39, 72-73, 98-99; Larres, "Britain and the Cold War, 1945-1990," 147.

³² Moore, *Nuclear Illusion, Nuclear Reality*, 1; A. McKercher, "Steamed Up: Domestic Politics, Congress, and Cuba, 1959-1963," *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 3 (June 2014): 618; Catterall, "At the End of the Day: Macmillan's

This article contributes insights to several key historical debates. First, as David Reynolds has argued, much IR scholarship on the Cold War has maintained a narrow view of the conflict as taking place between the US and USSR, an approach influenced by the original scholarship on the conflict in the 1950s.³³ While revisionists challenged this in the 1960s by placing greater responsibility for initiating the Cold War with the US, they still focused on US-USSR relations as the driver of the conflict.³⁴ Even post-revisionist approaches in the 1970s, which moved beyond straightforward blame attribution, interpreted the Cold War as a pattern of action and reaction between the two main superpowers, reinforcing this binary analytical framework.³⁵ This approach has persisted into scholarship on the end of the Cold War, with many international relations scholars in the 1990s attributing the USSR's collapse, and thus the end of the Cold War, to either US-driven systemic change or reforms by the USSR's leader, Gorbachev.³⁶ From the 2000s onwards, however, scholars began to give systematic attention to other factors in the development of the Cold War, including: the roles played by other countries, structural developments, such as decolonization, democratization, and economic change, and motives beyond politics, economics, and reputation.³⁷ This article builds on this more recent scholarship, offering an examination of the Cold War during the 1950s and 1960s which foregrounds not US-USSR bilateral relations but the ideational factors that shaped US-UK relations in the broader Cold War context.

Within the historiography on Anglo-American relations during this period, the central debate concerns the scale and nature of Britain's role in the Cold War. This debate can be traced to Donald Watt's 1978 study of British influence on the origins and development of the conflict, which encouraged scholars in the 1980s to move beyond the dominant US-USSR framework.³⁸ Following this important intervention, scholars have split over Britain's level of influence on the development of the Cold War. Following Anne Deighton, some historians argue that Britain exercised meaningful influence, while others, such as Geoffrey Warner, emphasize structural asymmetry and Britain's limited autonomy.³⁹ In the 2000s, the focus shifted to the nature of the Anglo-American relationship itself. While Jonathan Colman argues that the two states remained closely aligned in the early 1950s, Christopher Baxter and Nigel Ashton contend that the United States increasingly

Account of the Cuban Missile Crisis," 280–81; MacMillan, *At the End of the Day*, 200–201, 205–208; MacMillan, *Pointing the Way*, 279, 282–84; Barkin, *The Social Construction of State Power*, 1; Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research," 105–6; Harnisch, "Special Relationships in Foreign Policy," 2, 4.

³³ Reynolds, "The Origins of the Cold War," 497–99.

³⁴ Reynolds, "The Origins of the Cold War," 497–98.

³⁵ Reynolds, "The Origins of the Cold War," 498.

³⁶ Guyatt, "The End of the Cold War," 606–7.

³⁷ Guyatt, "The End of the Cold War," 606–7.

³⁸ Hopkins, Kandiah, and Staerck, *Cold War Britain*, 1, 188; D. C. Watt, "Rethinking The Cold War: A Letter To A British Historian," *The Political Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (October 1978): 446; Reynolds, "The Origins of the Cold War," 500–3, 505.

³⁹ Hopkins, Kandiah, and Staerck, *Cold War Britain*, 1, 188.

took the lead.⁴⁰ Ashton's approach even implies that there was a decline in close contact between the countries when this power shift occurred.⁴¹

This article intervenes in this debate by challenging Nigel Ashton's argument that Anglo-American relations can be periodized into four distinct relationships based on threat perceptions and changing international roles, all of which, he argues, show a shifting power balance and a corresponding decline in closeness over time.⁴² By examining a broader set of factors shaping the relationship beyond threat perceptions and international roles, I argue for a continuous Special Relationship whose closeness fluctuated throughout the Cold War. This includes the late 1950s and early 1960s period which is this article's focus, a period which Ashton does not treat distinct, despite his acknowledgement of the close interactions between President Kennedy and Prime Minister Macmillan.⁴³

Finally, within Special Relationship historiography, differing interpretations of the 'Special Relationship' have produced distinct phases in scholarly approach, each defined by its own understanding of the relationship's nature. Early scholarship focused on structural and domestic factors, such as power relations and a shared elite culture, to explain its supposed 'specialness,' treating the Special Relationship as an outcome of foreign policy shaped by these factors.⁴⁴ In the next phase, however, International Relations scholar Lily Gardner Feldman reconceptualized the Special Relationship as an "international institution," highlighting its capacity for change and prompting further study of its evolution.⁴⁵ More recent historiography, following the mid-1990s constructivist turn in IR scholarship, has emphasized ideational factors—such as shared values, norms, interests, and language—in shaping perceptions of whether the relationship exists at all.⁴⁶ This article continues this work and extends its insights to two crucial moments of tension and transformation in the Anglo-American relationship.

The period in which the case study about the Suez Crisis (1955-1957) took place is, as historian Ralph Dietl argues, one with a "major impact on Britain's role in the world and on

⁴⁰ Jonathan Colman, "Portrait of an Institution: The US Embassy in London, 1945-53," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 4, no. 3 (2009): 343-44; Baxter, *The Great Power Struggle in East Asia*, 1-2; Ashton, "Anglo-American Relations from World War to Cold War," 118-21.

⁴¹ Ashton, "Anglo-American Relations from World War to Cold War," 118-20.

⁴² Ashton, "Anglo-American Relations from World War to Cold War," 119-20; McCourt, *The New Constructivism*, 3-4, 26, 30, 34, 36; Fierke, "Constructivism," 162-65; Onuf, "Constructivism at the Crossroads," 115, 122-23; Barkin, *The Social Construction of State Power*, 1; Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research," 105-6; Harnisch, "Special Relationships in Foreign Policy," 2, 4; Haugevik, *Special Relationships*, 3-20; Haugevik, "Becoming Allies," 8; Larres, "Britain and the Cold War," 147; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 21-23, 534-37, 543-50, 553, 585, 588; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon: The Reckoning*, 288-89, 475, 478, 566; Churchill, *Stemming the Tide*, 339-40; Dietl, "Suez 1956," 259, 263, 266, 268, 276; Turner, *Suez 1956*, 72, 150-51; McKercher, "Steamed Up," 618; Peter Catterall, "At the End of the Day: Macmillan's Account of the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Relations* 26, no. 3 (September 2012): 280-81; MacMillan, *At the End of the Day*, 200-201, 205-208; MacMillan, *Pointing the Way*, 279, 282-84; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 296-98, 311-12.

⁴³ Ashton, "Anglo-American Relations from World War to Cold War," 118-21; Churchill, "The Sinews of Peace, 1946"; Haugevik, *Special Relationships* 2-13.

⁴⁴ Harnisch, "Special Relationships in Foreign Policy," 4.

⁴⁵ Harnisch, "Special Relationships in Foreign Policy," 4.

⁴⁶ Harnisch, "Special Relationships in Foreign Policy," 4; David M. McCourt, *The New Constructivism*, 34; Fierke, "Constructivism," 163-65; Epstein, "Who Speaks?"; Guzzini, "The Concept of Power," 498-99.

the process of European integration.”⁴⁷ This case supports Ashton’s claim that Anglo-American relations differed before and during the Cold War, but challenges his periodization by showing that those shifts occurred throughout the Cold War and were driven by ideational factors and structural context beyond the influences he accounted for in his theory.⁴⁸

Anthony Eden, Britain’s Prime Minister (PM) and Conservative Party leader, was a central actor in Anglo-American interactions regarding the Suez Crisis.⁴⁹ Eden’s Conservative belief in imperial power and prestige shaped his interpretation of challenges to Britain’s international position as threats requiring firm responses.⁵⁰ Furthermore, his tenure as Foreign Secretary also influenced his approach to Egypt, which he viewed as marked by “rottenness and inefficiency,” which is particularly relevant as it held the Suez Canal, a vital route for Britain’s oil supplies and imperial communications.⁵¹ The other key actor in Anglo-American relations during the Suez Canal crisis was US President Dwight Eisenhower of the Republican Party.⁵² As a Republican, Eisenhower believed that communism should be contained through collective defense and methods consistent with American traditions of freedom and fairness.⁵³ Furthermore, his experience as a World War II general placed Western alliances like NATO at the center of this approach.⁵⁴ This influenced his view of international stability, leading him to prioritize the protection of open global commerce and the use of mechanisms like the United Nations (UN) to manage international disputes.⁵⁵ As a result, his response to the crisis was driven by his focus on international cooperation, the canal’s central role in global trade and concerns about Soviet overtures toward Egypt as part of the wider Cold War rivalry.⁵⁶

⁴⁷ Dietl, “Suez 1956,” 259.

⁴⁸ Ashton, “Anglo-American Relations from World War to Cold War,” 119–20; Churchill, “The Sinews of Peace”; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon: Full Circle*, 569–76, 640, 649–50; Churchill, *Stemming the Tide: Speeches 1951 and 1952*, 339–40; Dietl, “Suez 1956,” 268; Turner, *Suez 1956*, 72; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956–1961*, 14, 56–57, 76; Larres, “Britain and the Cold War, 1945–1990,” 147; Haugevik, *Special Relationships*, 3–13; Epstein, “Who speaks?” 329; Guzzini, “The Concept of Power,” 511.

⁴⁹ “Past Prime Ministers,” History of the UK government, GOV.UK, accessed 8 January 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/history/past-prime-ministers>; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 9, 299, 566.

⁵⁰ Churchill, *Stemming the Tide*, 48–49, 53–55, 339–40; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 9.

⁵¹ Geoffrey K. Fry, *The Politics of Decline: An Interpretation of British Politics from the 1940s to the 1970s* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2005), 136–37; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 9, 23, 27, 248–49, 252–53, 264, 478; Turner, *Suez 1956*, 72; Dietl, “Suez 1956,” 268; Jonathan Pearson, *Sir Anthony Eden and the Suez Crisis: Reluctant Gamble* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), 8–9.

⁵² “Dwight D. Eisenhower: The 34th President of the United States,” About The White House, Presidents, The Biden White House Archive, accessed 8 January 2025, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/dwight-d-eisenhower/>; Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953–1956*, 14, 27–28, 57, 507; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956–1961*, 14.

⁵³ Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953–1956*, 3, 12, 14, 57, 138, 507; Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs By Harry S. Truman - Volume Two: Years Of Trial And Hope*, 1st edn (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1956), 2:257–58.

⁵⁴ Truman, *Memoirs By Harry S. Truman*, 257–58; Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953–1956*, 3, 12, 138, 507.

⁵⁵ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956–1961*, 34–37, 39.

⁵⁶ Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953–1956*, 3, 57, 138, 507; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956–1961*, 21–23; Rees and Xu, “Shared Adversaries in the Anglo-American Special Relationship,” 160–62; John P. McKay et al., *A History of Western Society*, 942, 944–45, 950; Epstein, “Who Speaks?” 329; Fierke, “Constructivism,” 164–65.

Differences in Eden's and Eisenhower's perspectives emerged during Anglo-American interactions regarding Gamal Abdel Nasser's 1955 request for a loan to build the Aswan Dam.⁵⁷ The PM's prior experience immediately made Eden cautious of Nasser; he saw the USSR's offer to build the Aswan Dam as a "threat" and expressed concern about "Soviet influence expand[ing] in Africa."⁵⁸ Eisenhower, by contrast, interpreted Nasser's strategy as an attempt to "play off East against West by blackmailing both," rather than actual alignment with the communists.⁵⁹ Therefore, while they had both agreed to adopt a cautious, wait-and-see approach, Eden remained more skeptical of Nasser's intentions.⁶⁰ As negotiations over the Aswan Dam continued into 1956, differing priorities between Eisenhower and Eden increasingly strained Anglo-American cooperation and foreshadowed later disagreements during the Suez Crisis. Both leaders questioned Egypt's ability to finance the dam and large-scale arms purchases from the USSR, especially as it resisted the loan conditions.⁶¹ Yet, Eden was "informed but not consulted" when the US canceled their shared loan to Egypt, and he noted it should have been handled differently given its abrupt timing had been "wounding to his [Nasser's] pride."⁶² This experience contributed to Eden's growing perception of a decline in America's reliability and support for allies.⁶³

Following the Americans' unilateral cancellation, Nasser nationalized the Anglo-French Suez Canal Company. Eden, operating from a great-power perspective, interpreted it as an "act of defiance," given the Canal's importance for the UK's oil supplies and communication lines.⁶⁴ Furthermore, Nasser's successful defiance of Britain and France risked undermining a widely held European hope for Western Europe to emerge as an autonomous "Third Force" capable of acting independently of the superpowers, contributing to the British and French proposal for rapid intervention.⁶⁵ Eisenhower's account, by contrast, viewed it as an action taken within Egypt's right of eminent domain, which made the proposed military intervention "unjustified." Furthermore, he saw such actions as undermining the UN, reflecting his belief in international cooperation, and

⁵⁷ Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 374.

⁵⁸ Turner, *Suez 1956*, 1-2, 150-51; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 467-69; Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 30.

⁵⁹ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 31.

⁶⁰ Fierke, "Constructivism," 163, 165-66; Harnisch, "Special Relationships in Foreign Policy," 4-5; Ghosh, "Expressing the Self," 106; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 3-9, 248, 9, 252-53, 264, 374; Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953-1956*, 3, 12, 14, 27-28, 57, 138, 507; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 14, 21-23.

⁶¹ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 31-32; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 374-75, 468-69.

⁶² Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 468-70; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 31-32; Peevers, *The Politics of Justifying Force*, 77.

⁶³ Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 374-375, 470.

⁶⁴ Peevers, *The Politics of Justifying Force*, 72, 77; Dietl, "Suez 1956," 259-60, 268; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 288-89, 472, 475, 478, 521, 566; Churchill, *Stemming the Tide: Speeches 1951 and 1952*, 48-49, 53-55, 339-40; Turner, *Suez 1956*, 18, 20, 26, 73; Dietl, "Suez 1956," 260-61.

⁶⁵ Peevers, "Chapter 3: The Suez Crisis," 72, 77; Dietl, "Suez 1956," 259-61; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 288-89, 475, 478, 521, 530-31, 540, 566; Churchill, *Stemming the Tide: Speeches 1951 and 1952*, 48-49, 53-55, 339-40; Turner, *Suez 1956*, 18, 20, 26, 73.

avored a UN-based solution, thereby inadvertently substantiating Eden's expectation of no US support.⁶⁶

They continued to interpret the same material event through different ideational logics even after Eden's government, despite initial reservations, attempted to restore order and protect British interests peacefully by bringing the Suez Canal dispute to the UN on 28 August 1956.⁶⁷ Eden's account noted that the US had not approached this in "the spirit of an ally," as American representatives, influenced by anti-colonial concerns, prioritized avoiding the appearance of colonialism over supporting nations whose economies depended on free passage through the Suez Canal. This perception was reinforced by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who implied that Britain's appeal to the UN functioned as a "device" to justify future military action.⁶⁸ Eisenhower's autobiography, however, suggests that troop movements and evacuations from Egypt raised US concerns about British motives, prompting presidential letters urging Eden to prioritize peaceful solutions.⁶⁹ Though Eden noted that he supported Dulles's attempt to create such a solution, the slow progress forced him to consider that it was a tactic to delay decisive Anglo-French action.⁷⁰ In October, the UN finally reached an agreement outlining the canal's use, Egypt's sovereignty, tolls, revenue allocation, and dispute arbitration between the Suez Canal Company and the Egyptian government.⁷¹ However, the USSR's following veto of its enforcement mechanism led Eden to shift toward a more interventionist stance.⁷²

Eden's memoirs criticize the American stance as "remote from reality," given Eisenhower's strong support for the peaceful solution and its lack of effective means to secure meaningful change for the UK.⁷³ By now, Eden viewed the UN as "indifferent" to the situation.⁷⁴ However, he still sought to preserve the Anglo-American relationship, as shown in his message to Eisenhower regarding the Anglo-French proposals: "My first instinct would have been to ask you to associate yourself and your country with the declaration. But I know constitutional and other difficulties in which you are placed." Clearly, Eden attributed the lack of US support to Eisenhower's position within the American political system, rather than to his personal preferences.⁷⁵

By the end of October 1956, Eden's increasing urgency to resolve the crisis was clashing with Eisenhower's commitment to a legitimate non-violent resolution and rejection of military action, straining Anglo-American relations. This led Eden to see further

⁶⁶ Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953-1956*, 150-52; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 34-36, 39; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 374-375, 470, 478-79.

⁶⁷ Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 550, 552-53.

⁶⁸ Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 512-13; Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953-1956*, 401-5.

⁶⁹ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 48-49, 56-57.

⁷⁰ Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 534.

⁷¹ Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 562-63.

⁷² Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 563-69.

⁷³ Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 563-69.

⁷⁴ Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 564-65, 586-88.

⁷⁵ Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 586-88.

consultation and waiting for support as ineffective.⁷⁶ This disagreement became especially clear in their respective accounts about Israel's attack on Egypt on the night of 29 to 30 October. Eisenhower noted that the British response to his proposal for action against Israel was "completely unsympathetic," while Eden focused on the fact that Eisenhower was now attempting to align their views to act, which he had been attempting to do "all through this drawn out business."⁷⁷ Eden had received no support that would allow him to protect the interests that were essential to the economy and Britain's reputation as a great power, and Moscow's existing Middle Eastern outposts further increased the threat to them, leading him to conclude that the UN would not support Anglo-French objectives without action.⁷⁸ Consequently, on 6 November 1956, he ordered British forces to intervene in the Suez Canal Zone without any further consultation with the US.⁷⁹ The President reacted by severing all personal contact with Eden and the British Embassy, as the intervention undermined commitment to international cooperation and his peace-focused re-election campaign.⁸⁰

After the Suez Crisis, the Anglo-American Special Relationship was reconstructed on somewhat different terms, with regular friendly contact, mutual understanding, and military cooperation all deteriorating severely, leaving only a shared language as the remaining characteristic of the bond between the two states.⁸¹ After the ceasefire on 6 November, President Eisenhower resumed contact with Eden, but solely to urge him to end the conflict rather than to mend fences with the UK.⁸² Eden was resistant because he'd seen USSR bases in Egypt, something he thought Eisenhower would understand as he was also focusing on settling Egypt and valued regional stability, yet he thought the US government thought differently than its president, as "the President's attitude was not reflected in the actions of his Administration."⁸³ The US continued to pressure the UK until the Anglo-French forces withdrew, and no efforts to repair relations with the UK were made until Eden's resignation as PM in 1957.⁸⁴

⁷⁶ Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 472, 476-78, 512-13, 519, 569-76, 586-88, 599, 613; Churchill, *Stemming the Tide: Speeches 1951 and 1952*, 339-40; Fierke, "Constructivism," 162-5; Harnisch, "Special Relationships in Foreign Policy," 4-5; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 14, 35-36, 39, 48-49, 56-57, 72-73, 76; Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953-1956*, 141-2, 150-2, 154, 400.

⁷⁷ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 75-76; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 584, 586-87.

⁷⁸ Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 606, 608-9, 629-31, 633-37, 640.

⁷⁹ Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 72, 288-89, 476, 478, 566, 610-11, 619, 637, 640; Dietl, "Suez 1956," 268; Churchill, *Stemming the Tide: Speeches 1951 and 1952*, 339-40; Turner, *Suez 1956*, 72; Fierke, "Constructivism," 162-63, 165.

⁸⁰ Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953-1956*, 14, 150-52, 154, 507; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 14, 34-36, 39, 72-73; Fierke, "Chapter 9: Constructivism," 162-63, 165; Larres, "Britain and the Cold War, 1945-1990," 147.

⁸¹ Churchill, "The Sinews of Peace"; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon: Full Circle*, 288-289, 476, 637, 640-641; Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953-1956*, 14, 150-52, 154, 507; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 14, 34-36, 39, 56-57, 72-73; Larres, "Britain and the Cold War," 147.

⁸² Larres, "Britain and the Cold War," 147; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 628-29.

⁸³ Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 629, 633-37, 640.

⁸⁴ Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 629-31, 633-37, 640, 649-53; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 98-99; Ryo Ikeda, "The Aftermath of the Suez Crisis: The Reopening of the Canal and Anglo-American Relations," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 33, no. 4 (October 2022): 690, 694, 700.

Five years later, in 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis once again reshaped the Special Relationship in a new Cold War context marked by the risk of nuclear war, intensifying East-West rivalry, and mounting pressure on the Western alliance.⁸⁵ This episode contradicts Ashton's argument that power within the Anglo-American relationship was shifting toward the US and that the alliance therefore lacked meaningful closeness. It showcases Macmillan's role as supporter and advisor to the President, a role he was visibly performing prior to and throughout the Cuban Missile Crisis.⁸⁶ The situation, therefore, suggests that even when Anglo-American relations shifted in the light of new structural developments, there was still closeness and meaning to the relationship.⁸⁷

Growing tensions with the USSR redirected President Eisenhower's attention toward the communist threat, making renewed closeness in Anglo-American relations possible, as the Suez Crisis and its associated tensions with the UK might otherwise have continued to shape relations.⁸⁸ His belief that the influence of communism should be contained through Western cooperation framed Soviet power as a threat to the West and made the deterrence of Soviet nuclear power his main priority.⁸⁹ This tension with the USSR made it logical that the President's account of Harold Macmillan's appointment as Prime Minister was positive, describing him as a highly competent "old friend," as his appointment removed the added pressure of tense Anglo-American relations.⁹⁰ Eisenhower's favorable impression of Harold Macmillan was formed through the latter's prior advisory role to the US on several occasions before his appointment in 1957.⁹¹

PM Macmillan was notably more restrained than Eisenhower in re-establishing personal contact, as his approach to renewed Anglo-American interaction was shaped by contextual pressures as understood through Britain's identity as a major power.⁹² On the one hand, his experiences as an MP during the 1930s economic crises, and later as Foreign Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer, led him to see Britain's economic recovery as

⁸⁵ Rees and Xu, "Shared Adversaries in the Anglo-American Special Relationship," 160-62; Catterall, "At the End of the Day," 270-72, 284, 279; McKay et al., *A History of Western Society*, 942, 944-45, 950, 963.

⁸⁶ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 89, 120-124, 148, 175-176, 179, 315, 500; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 200, 314-16; MacMillan, *Pointing the Way*, 306-12; MacMillan, *At The End of The Day*, 154-55, 200-201, 205-8; Catterall, "At the End of the Day," 280-81.

⁸⁷ Ashton, 'Anglo-American Relations from World War to Cold War,' 119-20; MacMillan, *At The End of The Day*, 200-201, 205-8; Catterall, "At the End of the Day," 280-81; Kennedy, *Let the Word Go Forth*, 118-19, 216-17; Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 107; Winston Churchill, "The Sinews of Peace, 1946."

⁸⁸ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 14, 34-36, 39, 72-73, 98-99; Larres, "Britain and the Cold War," 147; Ikeda, "The Aftermath of the Suez Crisis," 690, 694, 700.

⁸⁹ Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953-1956*, 3, 12, 14, 57, 138, 507; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 14; Truman, *Memoirs By Harry S. Truman*, 2:257-58; Fierke, "Chapter 9: Constructivism," 163-65, 167; Epstein, "Who Speaks?," 329; Guzzini, "The Concept of Power," 511.; Aiden Warren and Joseph M. Siracusa, *US Presidents and Cold War Nuclear Diplomacy* (Springer International Publishing, 2021), 75-76; Gregory Brew, "'Our Most Dependable Allies': Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the Eisenhower Doctrine, 1956-1958," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (December 2015): 89.

⁹⁰ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 120-124; Larres, "Britain and the Cold War," 147.

⁹¹ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 120-124; GOV.UK, "Past Prime Ministers."

⁹² MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 194-95; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 121; Fierke, "Chapter 9: Constructivism," 165; Epstein, "Who Speaks?," 329; Fry, *The Politics of Decline: An Interpretation of British Politics from the 1940s to the 1970s*, 157, 159; GOV.UK, "Past Prime Ministers."

essential to maintaining this identity.⁹³ On the other hand, he agreed with the British public's support for Britain's approach to the Suez Crisis, and he even described them as "more realistic" than Eisenhower's criticism of Britain's use of force.⁹⁴ Macmillan recognized the need to restore Anglo-American relations after Suez in order to sustain Britain's post-crisis position, but his Conservative values regarding the UK's strong reputation also influenced his perceptions.⁹⁵ Consequently, Macmillan waited for Eisenhower to initiate contact and adopted a "suitable but not effusive" tone in response, signaling a willingness to rebuild relations while avoiding any appearance of urgency, post-Suez guilt, or vulnerability.⁹⁶

Macmillan deliberately managed interactions with Eisenhower to rebuild cooperation with the US in ways that strengthened Anglo-American relations, as well as British power and economic stability. He openly acknowledged areas of agreement, and when disagreeing with Eisenhower's openness to accommodation with Nasser after Suez, his tone was measured.⁹⁷ The Prime Minister's aim to restore the UK's international reputation as a power continued to shape Anglo-American interactions, as shown in his account of discussions about nuclear programs. His reasoning behind his push to repeal the McMahon Act, a key barrier to Anglo-American nuclear cooperation, showed he clearly favored this approach as a way to avoid a "grievous expenditure of money and effort" while keeping the reputation that came from nuclear power.⁹⁸

President Eisenhower supported this revision of US nuclear policy because it aligned with his belief in cooperation among trusted allies and his security concerns regarding the USSR, which aided in the reconstruction of the Anglo-American Special Relationship post-Suez crisis.⁹⁹ He saw it as an act to secure nuclear capabilities among trusted allies, rather than a concession to British pressure.¹⁰⁰ This is especially clear from his autobiography, where Eisenhower noted that "many of our former secrets were known to our enemies," so it made "no sense to keep them from our friends."¹⁰¹ The continued alignment of their priorities in subsequent Anglo-American interactions enabled the establishment of the

⁹³ "History of Harold Macmillan," History of the UK government, Past Prime Ministers, GOV.UK, accessed 1 May 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/history/past-prime-ministers/harold-macmillan>; Ikeda, "The Aftermath of the Suez Crisis," 682; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon: Full Circle*, 650–53; Fry, *The Politics of Decline*, 137, 157, 159; Catterall, "At the End of the Day," 268.; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 175, 180, 199, 210, 240–42, 245, 247, 259; Fry, *The Politics of Decline*, 158–59.

⁹⁴ MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 110, 175–79; Larres, "Britain and the Cold War, 1945–1990," 147; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956–1961*, 14, 34–36, 39, 72–73.

⁹⁵ "History of Harold Macmillan," History of the UK government, Past Prime Ministers, GOV.UK, accessed 1 May 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/history/past-prime-ministers/harold-macmillan>; "GOV.UK, "Past Prime Ministers"; Ikeda, "The Aftermath of the Suez Crisis," 682; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 650–53; Fry, *The Politics of Decline*, 137, 157, 159; Catterall, "At the End of the Day," 268; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 175, 180, 199, 210, 240–42, 245, 247, 259; Fry, *The Politics of Decline*, 158–59; Churchill, *Stemming the Tide: Speeches 1951 and 1952*, 339–40.

⁹⁶ Hopkins, Kandiah, and Staerck, *Cold War Britain*, 169; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 194–95.

⁹⁷ MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 194–95, 250–55; Churchill, *Stemming the Tide: Speeches 1951 and 1952*, 339–40.

⁹⁸ MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 200, 296–97, 305, 314–16; Fry, *The Politics of Decline*, 157–59.

⁹⁹ Larres, "Britain and the Cold War," 147; Moore, *Nuclear Illusion, Nuclear Reality*, 1, 23; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956–1961*, 89, 148, 175–176, 179, 315, 500

¹⁰⁰ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956–1961*, 219, 342–43.

¹⁰¹ Truman, *Memoirs By Harry S. Truman*, 2:257–58; Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953–1956*, 3, 12, 138, 507; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956–1961*, 219.

Atomic Bilateral Agreement of August 1958, thereby facilitating the reconstruction of the Special Relationship post-Suez Crisis. The regular friendly contact was renewed, military cooperation reappeared through their nuclear collaboration, and mutual understanding was developing, resulting in more closeness.¹⁰²

Although Anglo-American relations had been strengthened, the US and the UK still lacked a mutual understanding as evidenced by their different responses to the re-emerging Cold War tensions in Cuba and Berlin.¹⁰³ In Cuba, Fidel Castro led a rebellion that emerged in the late 1950s, but Eisenhower did not note him as a communist threat initially. Thus, Eisenhower seized weapons and arms deliveries headed for Castro and Cuba, but he maintained a non-interventionist policy. This stance changed when later intelligence suggested that “Communists and other extreme radicals” were influencing his movement as he consolidated power and became increasingly anti-American.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, tensions were rising in Berlin, as reflected in Eisenhower’s memoirs, where he recounts Macmillan specifically telling him, the American President, that he had warned Khrushchev that the UK had “every intention of upholding [its] rights in Berlin,” a city divided between Soviet and Western control.¹⁰⁵ However, Macmillan promoted détente with the USSR rather than escalation during Anglo-American interactions because of his concerns about the British public’s fear of a potential nuclear war and the perceived necessity of trade with the USSR for the health of the UK economy.¹⁰⁶ Eisenhower, however, was focused on preventing communist expansion, particularly in East Germany, consistent with his prioritization of national security.¹⁰⁷

These divergent Anglo-American priorities became particularly evident during the U-2 incident, when a US spy plane was shot down over the USSR, exposing American surveillance of Soviet territory and triggering a diplomatic crisis.¹⁰⁸ According to his memoir, Eisenhower felt he had Macmillan’s loyalty and support, although Macmillan’s memoir reveals a private dissatisfaction with the “separate and conflicting stories” the US told while handling the situation. Nonetheless, Macmillan consciously moderated his actions to preserve the Anglo-American alliance, which he viewed as too important to risk further strain after Suez.¹⁰⁹ Further misunderstandings developed between Eisenhower and Macmillan over Cuba, as Macmillan thought the President was maintaining his previous

¹⁰² Moore, *Nuclear Illusion, Nuclear Reality*, 1, 23; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 89, 148, 175–7, 179, 500–501; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 98–99; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 637; Churchill, “The Sinews of Peace”; Churchill, *Stemming the Tide: Speeches 1951 and 1952*, 339–40; Epstein, “Who speaks?” 329; Guzzini, “The Concept of Power,” 499, 511.

¹⁰³ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 332, 520–23; McKercher, “Steamed Up,” 601–2; Ghosh, “Expressing the Self,” 106; Barkin, *The Social Construction of State Power*, 1; McCourt, *The New Constructivism*, 4, 26–36, 48; Harnisch, “Special Relationships in Foreign Policy,” 2–4.

¹⁰⁴ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 520–23; McKercher, “Steamed Up,” 601–2.

¹⁰⁵ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 332.

¹⁰⁶ MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 296–98, 305, 311–12; McCourt, *The New Constructivism*, 3–5, 26, 36–37, 48; Epstein, “Who Speaks?,” 329; Fierke, “Constructivism,” 165.

¹⁰⁷ Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953-1956*, 3, 12, 138; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 342–43; Warren and Siracusa, *US Presidents and Cold War Nuclear Diplomacy*, 75–76.

¹⁰⁸ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 543–50, 553, 556.

¹⁰⁹ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 544–50, 553, 556; MacMillan, *Pointing the Way*, 196–97, 201, 208; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 175, 298, 305; Larres, “Britain and the Cold War, 1945–1990,” 147.

non-interventionist stance toward Castro, even following the confiscation of non-Cuban properties.¹¹⁰ However, Eisenhower had already begun countermeasures, including propaganda, sanctions, and expanded surveillance of Cuba amid fears of Soviet missile deployment following Khrushchev's escalating threats.¹¹¹ Even at the UN, the pattern of misperception continued as Eisenhower valued Macmillan's composure in response to Khrushchev, while Macmillan became critical of Eisenhower's perceived lack of flexibility and weakening leadership.¹¹² Ultimately, their interactions gradually restored the Anglo-American Special Relationship, although it still lacked the mutual understanding characteristic of the pre-Suez period, as both leaders misread each other while pursuing their differing priorities.¹¹³

The election of John F. Kennedy in November 1960 reconstructed the Anglo-American Special Relationship once again by introducing an actor whose ideational outlook on containing communism and openness to dialogue more closely aligned with Macmillan's approach, which the British Prime Minister quickly recognized.¹¹⁴ The failure of the U-2 Summit meeting had convinced Kennedy that America should have a stronger international presence to contain communism, though he remained open to peaceful solutions.¹¹⁵ Macmillan's memoirs noted that he quickly recognized the potential of this relationship and positioned himself as a useful advisor on the communist threat, thereby maintaining Britain's relevance with the new US administration.¹¹⁶

Macmillan and Kennedy's interactions during 1962 revealed tension and miscommunication within the Anglo-American relationship due to their differing contextual factors, with Macmillan initially prioritizing peaceful solutions to protect Britain's economic and security interests and Kennedy emphasizing deterrence and a stronger American response to Soviet activity in Cuba.¹¹⁷ The miscommunication is evident from Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Macmillan's accounts of the naval quarantine of Cuba. Robert Kennedy suggests that Macmillan immediately supported the President's quarantine.¹¹⁸ However, Macmillan's account indicates that he was actually hesitant. The PM was concerned that the trade embargo on Cuba threatened his economically significant

¹¹⁰ MacMillan, *Pointing the Way*, 180–81.

¹¹¹ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 534–37.

¹¹² Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 585, 588; MacMillan, *Pointing the Way*, 279, 282–84.

¹¹³ Churchill, "The Sinews of Peace, 1946"; GOV.UK, "History of Harold Macmillan"; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 296–98, 311–12; Moore, *Nuclear Illusion, Nuclear Reality*, 147; Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953-1956*, 14, 27–28, 57, 507; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 14, 332, 520–23, 534–37, 543–50, 553; Fierke, "Chapter 9: Constructivism," 163–65; Epstein, "Who speaks?" 329; Guzzini, "The Concept of Power," 511; Haugevik, *Special Relationships*, 3, 5, 7, 10, 13, 20.

¹¹⁴ The Biden White House Archive, "Dwight D. Eisenhower: The 34th President of the United States"; "John F. Kennedy: The 35th President of the United States," About The White House, Presidents, The Biden White House Archive, accessed 8 January 2025, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/john-f-kennedy/>; MacMillan, *Pointing the Way*, 350, 359; Kennedy, *Let the Word Go Forth*, 118–119.

¹¹⁵ Kennedy, *Let the Word Go Forth*, 118–119, 216; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 298, 305, 311–12; Fry, *The Politics of Decline*, 144–47; Dietl, "Suez 1956," 259–61; Ikeda, "The Aftermath of the Suez Crisis," 685.

¹¹⁶ MacMillan, *Pointing the Way*, 306–12; Churchill, *Stemming the Tide: Speeches 1951 and 1952*, 339–40.

¹¹⁷ MacMillan, *At The End of The Day*, 153–55, 163–65; GOV.UK, "History of Harold Macmillan"; Kennedy, *Let the Word Go Forth*, 118–19, 216–17; Warren and Siracusa, *US Presidents and Cold War Nuclear Diplomacy*, 111; Moore, *Nuclear Illusion, Nuclear Reality*, 147.

¹¹⁸ Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 8–9, 51, 121; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 200, 311–12.

trade relations with the USSR and would push Cuba closer to the USSR. His hesitance did not vanish until October of 1962, when he received photographic evidence confirming the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba.¹¹⁹ This heightened Macmillan's concern with preserving Britain's credibility as a major power, leading him to support the blockade to avoid appearing weak or unreliable to Western allies.¹²⁰

Still, the combination of regular friendly interactions, structural context, and ideational factors resulted in the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis, as well as the reconstruction of a closer Anglo-American Special Relationship between Kennedy and Macmillan.¹²¹ Their ongoing interactions were a process of increasing alignment, as Macmillan's memoirs noted Kennedy repeatedly consulting the Prime Minister on key decisions and using him as a sounding board during negotiations with Khrushchev, which showcases their growing military cooperation and mutual understanding.¹²² Interestingly, their initial priorities differed, yet both ultimately concluded that it was unwise to provoke the USSR in Cuba. This was because they would risk escalating tensions in Berlin otherwise, as well as individual considerations.¹²³ For Macmillan, a peaceful solution meant he avoided choosing between supporting the economy to protect their strength and maintaining credibility with allies, while for Kennedy, it was informed by the belief that Cold War stability required a long-term, possibly peaceful, strategy rather than the reactive policy-making of the U-2 summit.¹²⁴ As a result, both leaders accepted the peaceful resolution when Khrushchev proposed to dismantle the missiles on 28 October, and the closeness and the traits of the earlier, pre-Suez, Anglo-American Special Relationship were restored.¹²⁵

In conclusion, the Anglo-American Special Relationship from 1955 to 1962 was an identity repeatedly reconstructed with varying degrees of closeness, as a result of interactions between US Presidents and British Prime Ministers, and their foremost representatives,

¹¹⁹ MacMillan, *Pointing the Way*, 180–81, 197, 201; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 311–12; Moore, *Nuclear Illusion, Nuclear Reality*, 147; Catterall, “At the End of the Day,” 270–71; Tahsin Saadi-Sedik, *How Does Trade Openness Influence Budget Deficits in Developing Countries?*, with Jean-Louis Combes (Washington: International Monetary Fund, 2006), 15.

¹²⁰ MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 175, 180, 199, 210, 240–42, 245, 247, 259; Fry, *The Politics of Decline*, 158–59; MacMillan, *At The End of The Day*, 182–85, 187; Churchill, *Stemming the Tide: Speeches 1951 and 1952*, 339–40; Moore, *Nuclear Illusion, Nuclear Reality*, 147; Catterall, “At the End of the Day,” 271; Churchill “The Sinews of Peace, 1946 - “Iron Curtain” Speech.”

¹²¹ Churchill “The Sinews of Peace, 1946”; MacMillan, *At The End of The Day*, 200–201, 205–208; Catterall, “At the End of the Day,” 280–81.

¹²² MacMillan, *At The End of The Day*, 200–201, 205–8; Catterall, “At the End of the Day,” 280–81; Churchill, “The Sinews of Peace, 1946.”

¹²³ Kennedy, *Let the Word Go Forth*, 118–19, 216–17; Warren and Siracusa, *US Presidents and Cold War Nuclear Diplomacy*, 111; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 298, 305, 311–12; MacMillan, *At The End of The Day*, 200, 211–213.

¹²⁴ Kennedy, *Let the Word Go Forth*, 118–19, 216–17; Warren and Siracusa, *US Presidents and Cold War Nuclear Diplomacy*, 111; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 298, 305, 311–12; MacMillan, *At The End of The Day*, 200, 211–213; Saadi-Sedik, *How Does Trade Openness Influence Budget Deficits in Developing Countries?*, 15; Churchill, *Stemming the Tide*, 339–40.

¹²⁵ Kennedy, *Let the Word Go Forth*, 118–19, 216–17; Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 107; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 184–85, 187, 298, 305, 311–12; Churchill, *Stemming the Tide: Speeches 1951 and 1952*, 339–40; Fry, *The Politics of Decline*, 144–47; Moore, *Nuclear Illusion, Nuclear Reality*, 147; Fierke, “Constructivism,” 162–63; Harnisch, “Special Relationships in Foreign Policy,” 3–5; Churchill, “The Sinews of Peace, 1946.”

which were influenced by ideational and structural factors in turn.¹²⁶ These contextual factors shaped how actors understood and reconstructed their reality, including the Special Relationship itself.¹²⁷ This is visible in the cases examined of the Anglo-American interactions around the Suez Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis, with changing structural contexts and ideational factors altering how the key actors interpreted their context and each other, resulting in the reconstruction of the Special Relationship with a different level of closeness.¹²⁸

With this conclusion, this article challenges Ashton's theory that there were four distinct Anglo-American relationships of declining equality and closeness before, during, and after the Cold War, instead identifying a single Special Relationship whose degree of closeness fluctuated.¹²⁹ Furthermore, it suggests that the shifts in Anglo-American relations were caused by how interactions between actors reconstructed the relationship in the light of changing ideational factors and structural contexts rather than just shifts in threat perceptions or changes in international roles.¹³⁰ The analysis also reinforces the constructivist approach more broadly, showing that ideational factors were central in shaping how actors interpreted their context and conducted diplomacy.¹³¹ Finally, this analysis broadens Cold War historiography, highlighting ideational factors and Anglo-American interaction as key influences on decision-making during the Cold War.¹³²

¹²⁶ Haugevik, *Special Relationships*, 3-13; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 476, 569-76, 633-37, 640, 649-50; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 48-49, 56-57; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 89, 148, 175-79, 200, 296-98, 311-12, 500-501; MacMillan, *Pointing the Way*, 306-12, 350, 359; MacMillan, *At The End of The Day*, 145-46, 154-55, 182-87; Kennedy, *Let the Word Go Forth*, 118-19, 216-17; Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 107; Churchill, "The Sinews of Peace."

¹²⁷ Harnisch, "Special Relationships in Foreign Policy," 2, 4; McCourt, *The New Constructivism*, 34; Epstein, "Who Speaks?," 329; Fierke, "Constructivism," 163-65; Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research," 105-6; Guzzini, "The Concept of Power," 499; Haugevik, *Special Relationships*, 3-13; Ghosh, "Expressing the Self," 106.

¹²⁸ Churchill, "The Sinews of Peace"; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 476-78, 566, 569-76, 586-88, 633-37, 640, 649-50; Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953-1956*, 14, 27-28, 57, 141-42, 150-52, 154, 400, 507; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 14, 34-36, 39, 48-49, 56-57, 72-73, 76, 332, 520-23, 534-37, 543-50, 553; Larres, "Britain and the Cold War," 147; Macmillan, *Riding the Storm*, 296-98, 311-12; Haugevik, *Special Relationships*, 3-20; Haugevik et al., "Becoming Allies," 8.

¹²⁹ Ashton, "Anglo-American Relations from World War to Cold War," 118-20; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 569-76, 640, 649-50; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 14, 56-57, 76, 89, 120-24, 148, 175-76, 179, 315, 500; Larres, "Britain and the Cold War, 1945-1990," 147; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 200, 314-16; MacMillan, *Pointing the Way*, 306-12; MacMillan, *At the End of the Day*, 154-55, 200-201, 205-8; Catterall, "At the End of the Day," 280-81; Kennedy, *Let the Word Go Forth*, 118-19, 216-17; Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 107; Haugevik, *Special Relationships*, 3, 5, 7, 10, 13; Churchill, "The Sinews of Peace."

¹³⁰ Churchill, "The Sinews of Peace, 1946"; Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon: Full Circle*, 476, 569-76, 633-37, 640, 649-50; Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961*, 14, 48-49, 56-57, 332, 520-23, 534-37, 543-50, 553; Larres, "Chapter 9: Britain and the Cold War, 1945-1990," 147; Kennedy, *Let the Word Go Forth*, 118-19, 216-17; Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 107; MacMillan, *Riding the Storm*, 184-85, 187, 296-98, 305, 311-12; Haugevik, *Special Relationships*, 2-20; Fierke, "Constructivism," 162-66; Harnisch, "Special Relationships in Foreign Policy," 2, 4; McCourt, *The New Constructivism*, 3-4, 21, 26-36, 48; Epstein, "Who Speaks?," 329; Onuf, "Constructivism at the Crossroads," 115, 122-23; Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research," 105-6; Barkin, *The Social Construction of State Power*, 1.

¹³¹ Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon*, 9, 248-49, 252-53, 264, 478; MacMillan, *At The End of The Day*, 200, 211-213; McCourt, *The New Constructivism*, 3-4, 21, 26-36, 48; Epstein, "Who Speaks?," 329; Fierke, "Constructivism," 163; Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research," 105-6; Harnisch, "Special Relationships in Foreign Policy," 2, 4; Haugevik et al., "Becoming Allies," 8.

¹³² Guyatt, "Chapter 34: The End of the Cold War," 606-7; Reynolds, "The Origins of the Cold War," 497-99; Fierke, "Constructivism," 162-65; Haugevik, *Special Relationships*, 2-20.

Paper

Bread and Circuses: Olivar as an Exploitative Corporate Force in *Parable of the Sower*

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This paper was written for the course 'American Climate Fictions' for the MA North American Studies

Freedom is dangerous, Cory, but it's precious, too. You can't just throw it away or let it slip away. You can't sell it for bread and pottage.

– Reverend Olamina, *Parable of the Sower*

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) offers a striking depiction of how devastating environmental collapse can enable new regimes of corporate power. The fictional corporate-owned town of Olivar exposes how climate change and environmental deterioration are exploited as economic and political opportunities. In Butler's dystopian future, ecological collapse erodes social infrastructures to such an extent that previously public goods, such as water, security, and infrastructure, become increasingly commodified. The novel follows Lauren Olamina, a fifteen-year-old Black girl, and her family in the walled community of Robledo, twenty miles from Los Angeles. The area surrounding Robledo is devastated by poverty, crime, drug abuse, and disease. Amidst this insecurity and social breakdown, Olivar emerges as a beacon of hope: a prosperous, largely white, coastal city recently purchased by Kagimoto, Stamm, Frampton, and Company (KSF), which plans to expand a desalination plant and consolidate its domination of farming and "great water, power, and agricultural industries."¹ In contrast to the increasingly unsafe community of Robledo and the violence of the surrounding world, Olivar is consistently presented through secondhand accounts as a refuge of stability and order.

Set in the mid-2020s, *Parable of the Sower* narrates Lauren's efforts to survive amid such accelerating environmental degradation, political instability, and economic collapse. As conditions in Robledo deteriorate, the community is ultimately destroyed, forcing Lauren and a number of other survivors to flee north. Prior to Robledo's collapse, discussions within Lauren's family and neighbors centered on the possibility of relocating to Olivar. Promising security, employment, and access to resources, the town presents a stark contrast to the precarity experienced throughout the rest of the novel. Although Olivar ultimately occupies only a limited portion of the novel, it serves as a pivotal point of comparison throughout Lauren's reflections on governance, security, and survival, crystallizing the poignant social and political dynamics that shape Butler's dystopian future.

Notes

¹ Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (Headline Publishing Group, [1993] 2019), 112.

Scholars have frequently interpreted *Parable of the Sower* as a critique of neoliberal capitalism, environmental crisis, and the erosion of collective social protections. Gerry Canavan, for example, reads Butler's dystopian future as an exploration of the social consequences of late capitalism and institutional collapse.² Similarly, in "Crip Collectivity Beyond Neoliberalism in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*," Jess Whatcott argues that Butler depicts California as "torn apart by neoliberal divestment," exposing the disabling effects of privatization, deregulation, and precarity under late capitalism.³ Similarly, ecocritical studies have emphasized the novel's representation of climate catastrophe, unequal vulnerability, and resource scarcity, highlighting how environmental collapse intensifies racial and class inequalities. Other critics, including Laura J. Lacey in her article "Octavia E. Butler on Coping with Power in *Parable of the Sower*, *Parable of the Talents*, and *Fledgling*," have focused on Butler's treatment of power, governance, and community formation, particularly through Lauren's efforts to imagine, and ultimately create, alternative social structures.⁴

While this scholarship has established the centrality of neoliberalism, power, and environmental collapse in Butler's dystopian vision, comparatively little attention has been paid to *Olivar* as a distinct spatial manifestation of these processes. Reading *Olivar* as a corporate climate enclave reveals how Butler links ecological crisis to the emergence of privatized forms of governance and asymmetrical distributions of security. Climate change and environmental deterioration become the conditions that legitimize corporate sovereignty, resource monopolization, and hierarchies of vulnerability centered on historically entrenched racial and class divisions. By focusing on *Olivar*, this article extends existing scholarship on neoliberalism in *Parable of the Sower* by demonstrating how Butler represents climate crisis as the enabling condition for new forms of corporate domination.

In this article, I argue that *Olivar* functions in the novel as a corporate climate enclave that exposes how ecological crises are exploited to consolidate power and legitimize privatization, especially following the breakdown of traditional governance. While *Olivar* is offered as a solution to the chaos and insecurity experienced by communities like Robledo, Butler explores how this promise of security depends upon the deliberate concealment of profound dependencies and the reproduction of racial and class inequalities. From the moment of its introduction, *Olivar* mirrors recognizable dystopian conventions, particularly the privatization of security, the displacement of public governance by corporate power, and the creation of fortified enclaves for social elites. At the same time, it foregrounds the stratifications that determine who is granted access to safety in Butler's America. The novel shows how corporate control over essential resources, enabled by government complicity, creates multiple hierarchies of vulnerability, in which even white, middle-class, literate residents willingly surrender autonomy

² Gerry Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler* (University of Illinois, 2016).

³ Jess Whatcott, "Crip Collectivity Beyond Neoliberalism in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*," *Lateral* 10 (2021): 1.

⁴ Laura J. Lacey, "Octavia E. Butler on Coping with Power in *Parable of the Sower*, *Parable of the Talents*, and *Fledgling*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 49 (2008): 379-394.

in exchange for what is presented as stability. Butler reveals how corporate enclaves like Olivar rely on manufactured myths of security, equality, and freedom that mask systems of exploitation and deepen existing inequalities. As this article will explore, it is a critique developed through historical and racial references, Lauren's first-person narration, and contrasting imagery.

This article first examines futuristic depictions of company towns and debt slavery in science fiction, highlighting parallels between KSF's Olivar and dystopian systems of domination. It then situates Olivar within the historical realities of the United States, specifically racialized vulnerability and social precarity, arguing that Butler's focus on Black experiences in a futuristic, speculative world situates the *Parable of the Sower* within Afrofuturism. The analysis then explores how the novel's first-person narration shapes both characters' and readers' perceptions of Olivar and reflects corporate power over knowledge. Finally, this article assesses how Butler's descriptive language and spatial imagery constructs Olivar's seductive appeal, which works to establish control over vulnerable individuals searching for hope following profound devastation and personal loss.

As Whatcott argues, *Parable of the Sower* depicts a society fractured by neoliberal divestment and privatization, exposing how economic logics reshape social relations.⁵ Butler's depiction of Olivar, despite spanning only a couple of pages in the novel, exposes how corporate enclaves operate by structuring access and belonging around economic utility. Although Lauren has never seen beyond the walls of Olivar, she pieces together a description of the city through second-hand accounts and speculative reflections and conversations with friends and family in Robledo. In her journal entries, which form the basis for the novel, Olivar emerges as a privatized, gated community where residents have accepted "smaller salaries than their socio-economic group is used to in exchange for security, a guaranteed food supply, jobs, and help in their battle with the Pacific."⁶ As Wendy Brown observes in *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, under neoliberal reasoning and the specific domains governed by it, individuals are typically assessed according to their capacity to generate economic value, as "all conduct [becomes] economic conduct."⁷ The secrecy surrounding Olivar's internal government further reinforces the absence of public accountability, enabling KSF to define admission criteria around profitability and investment and admit only those with education, skills, or social capital deemed useful to the company. Lauren interrogates the construction of vulnerable people as investments, with large families deemed "bad investments,"⁸ while "single people, childless couples, or, at most, people with only one or two kids"⁹ are preferred because of their greater potential to generate profit for the company. She acknowledges that she herself would be of no use to Olivar: "They don't need me. They've got hundreds of me, at least – maybe thousands. Every surviving community is full of unemployed, half-educated kids or

⁵ Whatcott, "Crip Collectivity," 1.

⁶ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 112.

⁷ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 9.

⁸ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 26.

⁹ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 26.

unemployed, uneducated kids.”¹⁰ Considering KSF’s desire for an “eager, educated work force,”¹¹ any individual that does not fit the standard risks being rendered expendable, their access to security and community contingent upon their capacity to serve corporate expansion

Recognizing the strict conditions for entry to Olivar and the hierarchical dynamics they inevitably create, both Lauren and her father characterize it as reminiscent of science fiction, observing that “cities controlled by companies are old hat in science fiction.”¹² Indeed, the image of the corporate city has consistently served as a central dystopian trope. Fritz Lang’s 1927 film *Metropolis* provided one of the first on-screen depictions of a futuristic urban dystopia, envisioning a profoundly stratified future in which elite, wealthy industrialists govern Metropolis from their skyscrapers while workers live and work underground. Similarly, Robert A. Heinlein’s “Logic of Empire” (1941) critiques corporate exploitation and governance by portraying the mechanisms of debt slavery. The novella exposes how laborers are coerced into contracts of indentured servitude on Venus, only to be left unable to pay off their debts because of the unaffordable cost of a drug required for sleep. While not his most celebrated work, the novella’s largely positive reception contributed to Heinlein’s growing reputation and garnered acclaim precisely because of its unflinching critique of capitalist excess and the economic justifications of exploitation and slave labor. These aligned particularly with the turbulent environment of post-World War II and articulated fears about corporate domination, labor exploitation, and the emergence of new forms of economic coercion.

The works of Lang and Heinlein both ultimately provide especially poignant parallels to *Parable of the Sower*, and more specifically, the future as presented by Olivar. Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1992) also engages with some of the themes central to Butler’s novel by describing a twenty-first century United States largely in the hands of private entities. Stephenson’s world is divided into corporate enclaves called “Franchise-Organized Quasi-National Entities,” where communities reside within gated housing developments protected by private security guards. Butler departs from these familiar dystopian narratives, however, by representing Olivar as a system her characters are actively pursuing, instead of desperately attempting to escape.

Olivar’s contractual system showcases this voluntary movement toward corporate authority. Like many dystopian company cities in popular media, Olivar offers essential needs for survival, such as food, shelter, and safety, in exchange for contracted employment. Although on the surface this appears benevolent, the arrangement instantly establishes ideal conditions for exploitation and reflects the practice of debt slavery. Defined by social anthropologist Alain Testart as “a form of bondage resulting from a situation of debtor insolvency,” its existence exposes a society where “one can lose one’s freedom for financial reasons.”¹³ As Lauren observes:

¹⁰ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 113.

¹¹ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 112.

¹² Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 116.

¹³ Alain Testart, “The Extent and Significance of Debt Slavery,” *Revue Française de Sociologie* 43 (2002): 175, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3322762>.

In not very much time, I think the new hires would be in debt to the company. That's an old company-town trick – get people in debt, hang on to them, and work them harder. Debt slavery. That might work in Christopher Donner's America. Labor laws, state and federal, are not what they once were.¹⁴

Debt, therefore, can be easily weaponized by the KSF corporation, especially with the federal government's permission. Lauren writes about President Donner's persistent attempts to suspend what he calls "'overly restrictive' minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws," especially regarding those "employers willing to take on homeless employees and provide them with training and adequate room and board."¹⁵ Donner's intended changes would ultimately allow big corporations, and by extension the governmental agencies that enable their behavior, to dominate and exploit a population with "extremely limited means to challenge or escape the system."¹⁶ Corporations like KSF would gain access to cheap, effectively trapped labor, allowing them to expand their control over American industries while treating people like economic assets and investments.

Lauren pointedly questions Donner's addresses to the public and the inanity of Olivar's assurances of security: "And what about those suspended laws? Will it be legal to poison, mutilate, or infect people – as long as you provide them with food, water, and space to die?"¹⁷ The indeterminate promise of "adequate" care for residents of these corporate enclaves offers no guarantee of safety or dignity, leading Lauren to ask, "what's adequate, I wonder."¹⁸ Simultaneously, Lauren underscores the profound anxiety and demoralization that Robledo residents experience, pushing them to join Olivar; surrounded by rising violence, crime, and communal collapse, she states: "We are coming apart. The community, the families, individual family members... We're a rope, breaking, a single strand at a time."¹⁹ Olivar's current and potential residents become trapped within this Machiavellian dynamic as they are pushed to extreme desperation in their search for security and stability. As president, Donner perpetuates this deeply exploitative system for both political and corporate gain, thereby confirming the earlier appraisal by Reverend Olamina, Lauren's father and mentor, that "politicians and big corporations get the bread, and we get the circuses."²⁰

Overt force is often critical to imposing and maintaining systems of debt slavery and domination.²¹ In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren quickly recognizes this dynamic in KSF's practices. She notes that it is an "armored KSF truck" that comes to collect the Garfields, who

¹⁴ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 116.

¹⁵ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 26.

¹⁶ Julia Simon, "Coercion, Debt Peonage, and Convict Labor," in *Debt and Redemption in the Blues: The Call for Justice*, ed. Julia Simon (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2023), 41, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271096735>.

¹⁷ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 26.

¹⁸ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 26.

¹⁹ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 109.

²⁰ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 20.

²¹ Simon, "Coercion, Debt Peonage, and Convict Labor," 41.

have decided to move to Olivar, and that the “guys with their uniforms, pistols, whips, and clubs, looked more like cops than movers.”²² This militarized display reflects precisely how systems of labor ostensibly grounded in contract are rendered coercive through the visible threat of violence. Lauren explicitly connects this to the abuse of power, observing that “people who have a little bit of power tend to use it.”²³ Her growing suspicion of “all those guards KSF is bringing in” reflects an understanding of how Olivar’s security infrastructure will operate differently depending on one’s socio-economic status and race.²⁴ Lauren predicts that the guards “won’t be allowed to bother the rich people, at least at first,” but that “new, bare-bones, work-for-room-and-board employees will be fair game.”²⁵ Although Olivar is advertised as a refuge protected by “lethal security devices to keep thugs and the street poor out,” Butler raises the unsettling question of whom this violence ultimately serves.²⁶ The mechanisms designed to enforce order can easily be redirected inward under the justification of maintaining control. This would likely first occur against the most marginalized residents, especially the poor and Black or Hispanic workers, whose limited economic and social power makes them most vulnerable in a system where security measures are shaped by economic value and social hierarchy. African American communities in particular have historically faced constrained access to stable employment and wealth accumulation, while Hispanic workers have often been concentrated in low-wage, precarious labor sectors shaped by limited legal protections and heightened exposure to exploitation.²⁷ In light of this historical legacy, Lauren and her father’s anxieties are well founded, reflecting an understanding that Olivar’s promise of safety is structurally dependent on the containment and exploitation of these marginalized and vulnerable populations.

While Lauren is never able to confirm if the reality of Olivar aligns with her perception of it, the details about the city that are shared with her poignantly mirror not only science fiction depictions in popular media, but actual events in American history. Lauren’s first journal entry on Olivar begins with the ominous phrase “something new is beginning – or perhaps something old and nasty is reviving.”²⁸ Lauren ambiguously refers back to similar antecedents within the United States, such as “company towns” that exploited its inhabitants and “debt slavery,” prompting the reader to recall their resonance with American history.²⁹ Similarly, Harry Baiter, Lauren’s friend from Robledo, references “nineteenth and early twentieth century company towns,” concluding that no matter how promising Olivar looks, it will ultimately result in “debt and loss of freedom”.³⁰ These allusions evoke post-emancipation systems such as sharecropping,

²² Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 130.

²³ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 114.

²⁴ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 114.

²⁵ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 114.

²⁶ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 116.

²⁷ Thomas Shapiro, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality*, (Oxford University Press, 2003), 47-48.

²⁸ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 111.

²⁹ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 113.

³⁰ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 120.

in which African American workers were often bound to employers through scrip-based economies that substituted government-issued currency with tokens or other non-cash payments.³¹ The dark legacy of convict leasing has similarly trapped predominantly Black laborers in cycles of debt and forced dependency, a process described by historian Karin Lurvink as “re-enslavement.”³² Butler thus positions *Olivar* within a historical continuum in which dystopia emerges from the repetition and adaptation of entrenched systems of racialized labor exploration.

While these references situate *Olivar* within a broader history of exploitation, Butler sharpens the critique by revealing its racial stakes. Butler grounds her portrayal of *Olivar* in the racialized vulnerability and social precarity inherent to the community the KSF vows to create and support, instilling the reader with profound caution and mistrust of *Olivar* from the moment it is introduced. Reverend Olamina introduces a crucial racial perspective on *Olivar*, describing it as sounding “half antebellum revival and half science fiction.”³³ He emphasizes the insidious racial implications such a system would have, arguing that slavery is inherent to *Olivar*’s structure and explicitly warning Lauren’s stepmother Cory that “there is nothing safe” about those conditions once she expresses interest in applying.³⁴ The Reverend’s warning expresses an understanding of how corporate control intersects with historical and ongoing systems in the United States that have relied on the domination and exploitation of Black people, beginning with slavery and sharecropping and continuing through mass incarceration and racialized policing. Lauren observes that she’s “still learning how dogged people can be in denial” but that her father has “lived with it longer” and recognizes how essential it is to not sell one’s freedom for “bread and pottage.”³⁵ This potential loss of freedom is especially significant for marginalized individuals.

The details revealed about *Olivar*’s structure also recall the ostensibly “voluntary” system of indentured servitude imposed on many impoverished and vulnerable Americans, especially those from minority communities. Amongst them were European immigrants to the American colonies, particularly those unable to afford passage and “enticed by extravagant promises and exaggerated depictions of the prospects of a new life across the Atlantic.”³⁶ Many such migrants, hailing in large part from Italy and Ireland, occupied contested and unstable positions within nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific racial hierarchies, rather than being fully incorporated into what would later be understood as “white” identity.³⁷ Prior to being racially repositioned as “white” within American society, both Irish and Italian individuals were viewed as entirely

³¹ Karin Lurvink, “Strapped for Cash: Non-cash Payments on Louisiana Cotton Plantations, 1865-1908,” *Tijdschrift Voor Sociale En Economische Geschiedenis* 11 (2014): 124-125, <https://doi.org/10.18352/tseg.147>.

³² Lurvink, “Strapped for Cash,” 124.

³³ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 115.

³⁴ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 113.

³⁵ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 114-115.

³⁶ Simon, “Coercion, Debt Peonage, and Convict Labor,” 43.

³⁷ Jonathan Warren and France Twine, “White Americans, The New Minority? Non-Blacks and the Ever-Expanding Boundaries of Whiteness,” *Journal of Black Studies* 28 (1997): 202-203.

separate and inferior races compared to the “superior Anglo-Saxon.”³⁸ This instability underscores how regimes of labor exploitation have functioned as sites for the production and consolidation of racial difference, as initially fluid distinctions were progressively codified into rigid hierarchies.

Especially relevant to *Parable of the Sower’s* distinct focus on the dystopian conditions experienced by marginalized communities is the historical connection between such practices of indenture and racialized chattel slavery in the United States.³⁹ American systems of indenture were grounded in an “underlying conception of debt” that framed labor as a form of repayment, thereby “creating the possibility for unconscionable contracts that immobilize and exploit workers.”⁴⁰ This system was reflected in sharecropping that bloomed at the end of the American Civil War, mostly occurring at the expense of freed African Americans who “attained an economic status akin to peonage.”⁴¹ Sharecropping involved landowners renting plots of land under contractual agreements to sharecroppers, who pledged a percentage of their crops in exchange for supplies, food, and housing. These provisions were deducted from the sharecroppers’ portion of the harvest, often leaving them indebted to landowners.⁴² These sharecroppers, more often than not African Americans, were frequently prohibited from leaving the property until the debts were paid, a system that effectively reproduced conditions of slavery.⁴³ This logic was later repurposed under Jim Crow segregation, perpetuating racialized forms of servitude and reinforcing ideologies of perceived Black inferiority.⁴⁴ Considering this historical past, it is unsurprising that both Lauren and her father voice their concerns about Olivar’s resemblance to these violent, discriminatory practices and systems. This continuity suggests that Butler is presenting dystopia as an extension of existing historical systems, one deeply imbricated in unresolved histories of exploitation. Butler’s work ultimately emphasizes the persistence of racialized exploitation and its ability to adapt even beneath changing economic and institutional forms.

Due to Butler’s foregrounding of Black experiences in a futuristic, speculative world, *Parable of the Sower* can be understood as falling within the Afrofuturist canon of science fiction. Credited to writer and cultural critic Mark Dery, he introduces the term “Afrofuturism” in his book *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (1994) as:

³⁸ Warren and Twine, “White Americans, The New Minority?,” 202-203.

³⁹ Leon Higginbotham *In the Matter of Color: The Colonial Period* (Oxford University Press, 1980), 55-57; Simon, “Coercion, Debt Peonage, and Convict Labor,” 43.

⁴⁰ Simon, “Coercion, Debt Peonage, and Convict Labor,” 43-44.

⁴¹ Wesley Allen Riddle, “The Origins of Black Sharecropping,” *The Mississippi Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (1995): 53, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26475959>.

⁴² Donald Winters, “Postbellum Reorganization of Southern Agriculture: The Economics of Sharecropping in Tennessee,” *Agricultural History* 62, no. 4 (1988): 1-2, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3743372>.

⁴³ Winters, “Postbellum Reorganization of Southern Agriculture,” 1-2.

⁴⁴ Simon, “Coercion, Debt Peonage, and Convict Labor,” 44.

Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of 20th-century technoculture – and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future to explore how people of color negotiate life in a technology intensive world.⁴⁵

Lisa Yaszek, a scholar of science fiction studies, further argues that Afrofuturism's projections of Black futures are shaped by Afrodiasporic history, culture, and experiences, revealing why race continues to matter in speculative futures.⁴⁶ Ralph Ellison's famed *Invisible Man* (1952) uses science fictional motifs "to aggressively critique American institutions and practices that erase black people and their history from the future imaginary."⁴⁷ Ellison's work serves as a stellar example of Afrofuturism because it has readers think about how "rhetoric of the futures industry impacts people of color."⁴⁸ This is precisely what Butler interrogates through her example of Olivar and the Olamina family's internal discussions about its viability for other Black and Hispanic families in particular: "Even if I were trusting enough to put my family into KSF's hands, they wouldn't have us."⁴⁹

Through *Parable of the Sower*, Butler draws inspiration from African American history to explore themes of survival, exploitation, and racial precarity, situating the novel within the Afrofuturist tradition. Butler's exploration of Afrofuturism operates on the premise that the future remains defined by unsettled histories of racial exploitation and discrimination. Olivar recalls historical systems of control and exploitation that have disproportionately affected Black communities. Lauren and her father's skepticism toward Olivar echoes the historical consciousness found in George W. Schuyler's serialized stories "The Black Internationale" and "Black Empire." Schuyler's work explores how laws and power structures have functioned as instruments of racial domination "to enslave and degrade the darker peoples" and how the experience of slavery and racial discrimination has specifically "prepared Afrodiasporic people for world domination."⁵⁰ These claims demonstrate how knowledge of the past can affect Black engagement with the future, thereby reinforcing *Parable of the Sower* as a form of historically grounded, material Afrofuturism that emphasizes the persistence of racialized exploitation rather than imagining the future as a break from the past. Butler's work has become a pillar of Afrofuturism precisely because it insists that any vision of the future must remain accountable to the enduring structures of historical violence and racial capitalism. In contrast to more techno-utopian or speculative strands of Afrofuturism that foreground technological advancement,

⁴⁵ Mark Dery, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Duke University Press, 1994), 136.

⁴⁶ Lisa Yaszek, "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future," *Socialism and Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2006): 42, 55. www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08854300600950236.

⁴⁷ Lisa Yaszek, "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future," 43.

⁴⁸ Lisa Yaszek, "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future," 48.

⁴⁹ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 114.

⁵⁰ George Schuyler, "The Black Internationale," in *Black Empire* (Northeastern University Press, 1991), 14; Lisa Yaszek, "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future," 54.

alternative historical trajectories, or expansive, interstellar futures, as exemplified by Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* and Samuel R. Delaney's *Nova*, Butler locates futurity within conditions of labor, scarcity, and systemic inequality. By embedding futurity within the horrific lived realities of Black history, Butler ultimately establishes Afrofuturism as a critical lens through which to understand how the past continues to shape, and largely constrain, Black futures.

Lauren's first-person journal conveys the *Parable of the Sower's* historical consciousness, offering an intimate account of socio-ecological collapse in Butler's America from the perspective of a young, marginalized subject. Lauren writes her journal retrospectively; however, her narration remains within the confines of what she understood and felt at the time of each particular experience. This retrospective yet temporally constrained first-person narration strongly shapes the reader's perception of Olivar in *Parable of the Sower*. The novel is filtered entirely through Lauren's voice, thus presenting Olivar as it is subjectively interpreted by an educated Black teenage girl who is the eldest child in her family, a resident of Robledo, and the eventual founder of Earthseed. These intersecting identities define how the narrative shapes the reader experience, exemplifying literary theorist Frank Hakemulder's claim that "while reading we find ourselves in the shoes of a wide diversity of people," a process that Butler's novel intensifies by restricting all narrative access to Lauren's consciousness.⁵¹

Caspar van Lissa et al., scholars of narrative and reading practices, similarly argue that fiction "encourages readers to imagine particular aspects of characters' psychological life in a first-person way, allowing them to take on those aspects through empathetic responses."⁵² Lauren's journal voice is precise, observational, and acutely skeptical, frequently offering critical judgments, such as asserting that Joanne Garfield, her best friend, is "sensible and mature" in her appraisal of Olivar, yet also entirely "wrong."⁵³ Consequently, the ideology surrounding corporate communities like Olivar is filtered through Lauren's knowledge. As previously discussed, her narration offers readers insight into the history and socio-political conditions of Butler's United States and reveals the extent of her education and critical awareness. While many other residents of Robledo, among others the Garfield family and Lauren's stepmother Cory, perceive Olivar's living and labor arrangements as desirable, Lauren recognizes their exploitative nature and dismisses them as an "old company town trick."⁵⁴ She candidly accuses the original residents of Olivar of making a "public spectacle of selling themselves to KSF," emphasizing the disconcerting purchases of human life that KSF is directing.⁵⁵ Lauren therefore believes that new applicants to Olivar are surrendering their freedom, recounting Robin Baiter's fear that if

⁵¹ *The Moral Laboratory* (John Benjamins Publishing, 2000), 97.

⁵² "Difficult Empathy: The Effect of Narrative Perspective on Reader's Engagement with a First-Person Narrator," *DIEGESIS: Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research* 5, no. 1 (2016): 43, pure.rug.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/133156267/dej16050104.pdf.

⁵³ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 121.

⁵⁴ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 113.

⁵⁵ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 112.

“Joanne goes away to Olivar, she’ll never see her again” and ultimately admitting that she suspects Robin is right.⁵⁶

In *Parable of the Sower*, the Garfield family is accepted into Olivar, but they are never heard from again following their departure. Lauren and the rest of Robledo’s understanding of the town is formulated primarily through sources that cannot be independently verified, including a radio documentary, rumors, and secondhand reports. According to Lauren, “there are still people in Olivar who are uncomfortable with the change,” yet these individuals are placed at a significant narrative distance as a generalized “they,” with no indication of where this information originates.⁵⁷ Lauren frames Olivar through phrases such as “some of them said so on the radio documentary” or “other people are talking about,” emphasizing the accumulation of rumor, the ambivalence surrounding the town, and the underlying suspicion she harbors toward its system and promises.⁵⁸

The absence of direct sensory description is significant because Olivar is only spoken about, never seen. The radio documentary, one of the primary sources of information about the town and its residents, is limited to sound and language which can easily be manipulated. For instance, there is no visual verification of the accounts being given on the nature of Olivar and KSF. This reliance on secondhand information is heightened by Robledo’s continued isolation from access to news, television, or radio: “All we have left now are three small, ancient, murky little TV sets scattered around the neighborhood, a couple of computers used for work, and radios.”⁵⁹ By placing Olivar at a sustained narrative distance, Butler emphasizes the town’s seductive unreliability, as its promises of security, work, and stability are continuously advertised but never actually confirmed. This uncertainty forces a profound ethical tension, making Robledo’s residents and readers of the novel alike choose between idealistically accepting Olivar or viewing it with skepticism.

Butler’s use of first-person narration, rather than an omniscient perspective, formally reproduces this restriction. The use of limited, secondhand knowledge therefore functions as a narrative strategy. As philosopher and social scientist Liza Herzog argues, corporations possess a distinct form of epistemic power, or power over knowledge within society, that enables them to monopolize information and influence what can be known.⁶⁰ Corporations can strategically use this protected knowledge to their advantage, influencing public discourse by transforming it into an “input for the production of goods and services” and connecting their “economic role as epistemic agents to a potential political role.”⁶¹ In *Parable of the Sower*, this dynamic allows KSF

⁵⁶ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 115.

⁵⁷ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 112.

⁵⁸ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 112.

⁵⁹ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 19.

⁶⁰ “Corporate Knowledge and Corporate Power. Reining in the Power of Corporations as Epistemic Agents,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 27, no. 3 (2022): 367-368, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2022.2113227>.

⁶¹ Lisa Herzog, “Corporate Knowledge and Corporate Power. Reining in the Power of Corporations as Epistemic Agents,” 367-368.

to present Olivar as secure and benevolent without substantiating those claims, while surreptitiously profiting from their contracted residents and their control over key industries. Butler thus demonstrates how informational control functions as a mechanism through which privatizers exploit societal collapse, creating the conditions under which Olivar appears desirable precisely as Robledo becomes increasingly vulnerable. This dynamic is formally echoed in the novel's limited narration, which positions the reader within the same epistemic constraints as Lauren.

Throughout the *Parable of the Sower*, Olivar is deliberately juxtaposed with the tragic events occurring in Robledo at the time. Butler contrasts Olivar with two traumatic and highly significant events that expose the increasing penetrability of Robledo and its cascading societal collapse: the murder of Mrs. Quintanilla and the disappearance of Lauren's father. She directly contrasts the sanitized corporate language used for Olivar that implies a successful future and opportunities, such as "offer," "applying," "skilled professionals," "small college," and "jobs" with Lauren's descriptions of fires, drought, hunger, and the overall fragility of Robledo: "It's like an island surrounded by sharks – except the sharks don't bother you unless you go in the water. But our land sharks are on their way in. It's just a matter of how long it takes for them to get hungry enough."⁶² The appearance of Olivar forces people to compare their potential futures in a town being publicized as a safe haven versus a community like Robledo, already increasingly plagued by crime and instability. In one of their final conversations, Joanne explodes when Lauren tells her she can refuse Olivar and stay to marry Harry Baiter: "What kind of future is that? None! None at all!"⁶³ Joanne recognizes that there is no future for her if she stays, as does Cory when she argues with Reverend Olamina about joining Olivar for the sake of the children: "where can they go from here except outside?"⁶⁴ Although Olivar represents a drastic departure from the life these characters are accustomed to, its uncertainty generates a sense of hope that corporations can exploit, making vulnerable individuals more susceptible to its promises.

Building on this dynamic, Butler employs spatial imagery to foreground how Olivar's promise of enclosure and safety contrasts with the lived permeability and fragility of Robledo. Olivar's system relies on its presumed dedication to protecting its residents from "the encroaching sea, the crumbling earth, the crumbling economy, [and] the desperate refugees."⁶⁵ While at the beginning of the novel Robledo's residents maintain a stronger belief in the community's impermeability, events surrounding the introduction of Olivar increasingly expose its vulnerability to the outside world. Lauren notes that the murder of Mrs. Quintanilla was the "seventh incident since Keith was killed," underscoring that there has been a drastic rise in violence in the eleven-household community within only two months.⁶⁶ Her observation that "more and more people are coming over our wall to take what we have, or what they think we

⁶² Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 113-116 and 46.

⁶³ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 121.

⁶⁴ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 113.

⁶⁵ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 111.

⁶⁶ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 110.

have” further highlights the increasing failure of Robledo’s physical walls in ensuring safety.⁶⁷ Following the disappearance and likely death of her father, she shares how the community “huddled in [their] illusions of security,” revealing her keen awareness of Robledo’s exposure to the outside world.⁶⁸

The language and spatial imagery Butler uses to construct an image of Olivar functions rhetorically to trigger profound longing among its characters, many of whom are exhausted by the surrounding chaos and destruction. The seductive premise of Olivar allows corporations, like KSF, to gain control over people because it appeals to their primal fears and anxieties, many of which are becoming increasingly defined by lived experiences. When Lauren attempts to convince Joanne to stay by claiming that Olivar is just “another fortress,” Joanne responds by highlighting the heightened danger of living in Robledo: “It’s a better fortress. It won’t have people coming over the walls, killing old ladies.”⁶⁹ Olivar is being successfully sold as salvation to desperate people that have been made vulnerable by climate change and have become increasingly disillusioned by their government’s failure in managing the social and economic crises that ensued.

Through insightful characterization, primarily rendered in scenes of dialogic conflict, Butler divulges the profound human longing for security that corporations such as KSF exploit. In particular, the debate over Olivar within the Olamina family underscores the emotional consequences of profit-driven corporate endeavors. As discussed, Butler exposes how Olivar’s power is grounded in human desperation, especially among people like Cory who yearn for the possibility of hope for the future after enduring immense losses. Cory’s faith in Olivar is strongly rooted in her desire to protect her children, especially following the death of her son Keith. However, it is precisely this fear-driven need for security that makes her vulnerable to Olivar’s promises. Safety becomes an emotional concern for Cory, expressed primarily through tears, anger, and disgust against Lauren for her skepticism. After Keith’s violent death, his ashes are returned to the family, which Cory carefully cradles in her arms in a heartbreaking moment of profound vulnerability.⁷⁰ This scene is significant in highlighting how her grief and fear shape her willingness to believe, as his loss intensifies her need to believe in a safer future. She must believe, because if not, she is left with nothing but pain and loss.

Parable of the Sower presents Olivar as a corporate climate enclave whose legitimacy depends upon environmental collapse and social instability. Through KSF’s control of essential resources, Butler demonstrates how ecological crisis, and its multipronged effects, can enable the consolidation of corporate power. Although Olivar is framed as a refuge from the violence and precarity surrounding, as well as within, communities like Robledo, the novel reveals that this stability is dependent on the surrender of individual autonomy and likely involves coercive

⁶⁷ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 110.

⁶⁸ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 125.

⁶⁹ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 119-120.

⁷⁰ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 115.

practices. Lauren's reflections interrogate how corporate towns like Olivar reproduce historical forms of racialized and economic exploitation, posing particular dangers for marginalized communities, especially Black and Hispanic people. *Parable of the Sower* ultimately confronts both its characters and its readers with a profound ethical dilemma regarding how to interpret corporate power and governance, especially as Butler warns of a future shaped by "economic colonies," privatization, and the commodification of human lives for profit.⁷¹

⁷¹ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 121.

Paper

These Colors Don't Run: Queer Resistance against the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" Policy

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This paper was written for the course 'Arsenal of Democracy?' for the MA North American Studies

On December 22nd, 2010, President Barack Obama signed the act that repealed the US military's Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) policy, which, since its enactment in 1993, had exposed queer servicemembers to discrimination and abuse.¹ In theory, DADT aimed to make a distinction between "homosexuality" as an identity and "homosexual conduct" as an act done while in service, only the latter of which would be grounds for a discharge.² As such, it was originally proposed as a more moderate policy for queer soldiers, as compared to previous policies, which had been far more discriminatory. Previous policy stated that queer servicemembers were fundamentally unacceptable in the military, even if they hid their identity.³ From the start, however, DADT ended up introducing new forms of discrimination for queer servicemembers. National Guardsman Andrew Holmes, for example, was discharged in 1994 for being open about his queer identity, for which he unsuccessfully sued the military. His was one of many such cases that would follow in the wake of DADT's enactment.⁴ Similarly, US Air Force major Margaret Witt was forcibly outed in 2004 and subsequently let go by the Air Force – like Holmes, she sued the Air Force, claiming that her dismissal under DADT had violated her constitutional rights. She won her case and was granted her retirement benefits and reinstatement of rank, with the court agreeing that DADT had violated her rights.⁵

Though DADT had originally been envisaged as a compromise between military leaders, who saw queer soldiers as a threat to the combat readiness of the military, and the queer soldiers themselves, it nevertheless led to numerous discharges of talented personnel for the supposed crime of their sexuality and identity.⁶ After public protests, numerous court cases, and extensive lobbying efforts, Obama would finally proclaim "This is done!", as he signed the act to repeal DADT. His remark was a reference to a story he had told before the signing about a young servicewoman who had asked him to "Get 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'

Notes

¹ This article will use the term 'queer' as an umbrella term to refer to all LGBTQ+ identities. As Faderman notes in *The Gay Revolution*, the usage of queer to denote a variety of LGBTQ+ identities began in the 1990s, when younger LGBTQ+ people reclaimed it. Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (Simon & Schuster, 2015), xi-xix.

² "10 USC § 654 – Policy concerning homosexuality in the armed forces" U.S. Code Toolbox, Cornell University Law School, last visited 13 april, 2026, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120213234231/https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/654>.

³ Heather Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights Since World War II* (Praeger, 2019), 123-124, 132-134.

⁴ Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights*, 132-133.

⁵ Heather M. Stur, "Red, White, Lavender, and Blue," in *Service Denied: Marginalized Veterans in Modern American History*, ed. John M. Kinder and Jason A. Higgins (University of Massachusetts Press, 2022), 113.

⁶ Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (Simon & Schuster, 2015), 505-512.

done.”⁷ The repeal of DADT was a major stepping stone in the wider campaign for LGBTQ+ rights in the United States, creating precedent and momentum for later queer rights victories, particularly *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015, which established a constitutional right to same-sex marriage in the United States at the federal level.⁸ This victory was hard-won, as republicans, right wing outlets, and military leadership offered stiff opposition to repeal at every step of the process.

Despite this, many people in the audience privy to the signing had no illusions that this victory was the end of the struggle for queer rights in the military. Among the people in the crowd at DADT’s repeal was Alexander Nicholson, a veteran turned activist who had been one of the people on the forefront of fighting queer discrimination in the military. He shared little of the sense of victory that was felt by others in the room, recounting that “I did not feel the sense of elation or fruition I thought I would feel after all those years of work. (...) deep down I knew that the work was far from done.”⁹ Nicholson would be proven right. Following his reelection in 2024, President Donald Trump vowed to reinstate the transgender ban in the military, which he had introduced in his first term. Accordingly, Pete Hegseth, the Trump administration’s Secretary of Defense, quickly reimplemented the ban on transgender servicemembers.¹⁰ The Supreme Court backed the trans military ban in May 2025, despite the fact that various lower courts had found it violated the constitutional rights of transgender servicemembers.¹¹ At the time of writing, Trump’s and Hegseth’s ban on trans soldiers has harmed the careers of thousands of transgender military personnel, in a widespread campaign of discrimination akin to that practiced under DADT in the 1990s and 2000s.¹² It is against this backdrop of renewed anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination that this article examines the strategies employed by queer servicemembers to fight for DADT’s repeal.

I argue that queer resistance to DADT succeeded because it attacked DADT from various angles at the same time under a single uniting goal, creating cooperation among various fronts and groups. In particular, this interconnectedness can be seen in the way in which the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN) was active simultaneously in court rooms, public pressure campaigns, and political lobbying. The SLDN was founded in 1993 explicitly to combat DADT and bring about its repeal.¹³ The SLDN was therefore behind many public pressure campaigns. It also helped with court cases, such as that of Major Witt, and public outreach campaigns. The SLDN was central to the interconnected nature

⁷ Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 532.

⁸ *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 644 (2015) U.S. Supreme Court, last visited 20 April 2026, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/576/644/#top>.

⁹ Alexander Nicholson, *Fighting to Serve: Behind the Scenes in the War to Repeal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”* (Chicago Review Press, 2012), 1.

¹⁰ Maya Yang, “US Military will no longer accept trans troops, Pete Hegseth’s memo says,” *The Guardian*, February 10, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/10/military-trans-troops-hegseth-trump>.

¹¹ “Attorney General James Stands with Service Members in Constitutional Challenge to Transgender Military Ban,” Office of the New York State Attorney General, last visited 20 April 2026, <https://ag.ny.gov/press-release/2025/attorney-general-james-stands-service-members-constitutional-challenge>.

¹² Alex Horton & Casey Parks, “Hegseth initiates ban on transgender troops after the Supreme Court Ruling,” *The Washington Post*, May 8, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/05/08/transgender-troops-hegseth-trump-supreme-court/>.

¹³ “A Look At Our History,” Modern Military Association of America, last visited 20 April 2026, <https://modernmilitary.org/about>.

of the DADT repeal movement – this nature was a key reason, I argue, for its eventual success. Beyond SLDN, this article also analyzes the various other means through which queer servicemembers fought DADT, utilizing oral history collections, most notably the *Ask and Tell* (2007) oral history collection assembled by historian Steve Estes, as well as the autobiographies of those who were involved in the campaign. In particular, this article will examine the autobiographies *Fighting to Serve* (2012) by Alexander Nicholson and *Tell* (2017) by Major Margaret Witt. These have been chosen as providing insights into the activities of two key figures in the repeal movement.

The existing historiography on DADT is limited, generally approaching it either as part of a broader queer history, as in Lillian Faderman's 2015 *The Gay Revolution*, or as one chapter in the larger re-examination of the intersection of civil rights and the military being pioneered by new military historians, as in Heather Stur's book, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights since World War II* (2019). This article will draw on the existing work in both queer history and new military history in order to approach DADT from an intersectional military history perspective. It will argue that the campaign to repeal DADT is unique in both the larger stories of American queer history and the history of civil rights and the military. In doing so, it will focus specifically on the DADT repeal movement's uniquely united nature and why that was so instrumental for its success. For example, while Faderman's chapters on queer soldiers and DADT are expansive, they do not highlight the uniquely interconnected nature of the resistance against DADT. She does, however, make some note of the various strategies employed, examining the repeal of DADT in relation to the struggles of civilian queer civil rights movements. This forms a crucial foundation for my own research.¹⁴ The full history of DADT can only now be told, as oral and autobiographical sources become increasingly available to historians examining the history of the policy and of the movement arguing for its repeal.

The burgeoning field of new military history offers a particularly relevant lens for examining this history. As Stur contends in her 2019 work on the military and civil rights, the postwar history of integration in the military often clashed with broader American cultural beliefs of what a soldier 'should' look like, with African American and queer soldiers challenging these core beliefs.¹⁵ Her analysis builds upon that of historian Margot Canaday in *The Straight State* (2009), who argued that as the US federal state expanded in the early twentieth century, this expansion was accompanied by attempts to define American citizenship (and thus also military service) as heterosexual in nature. In Canaday's analysis, we see the operating rationale that belied many of the policies the military and federal government enacted to keep out queer servicemembers; heterosexuality was the only way to be a good American, and therefore deviation was not to be accepted in the federal machine.¹⁶ As historians David Kieran and Edwin A. Martini argue, "the history of the U.S. military and its activities must be approached in the context of the other histories with which they

¹⁴ Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, xvii.

¹⁵ Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights Since World War II*, xi-xiv.

¹⁶ Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 10-15.

intersect...”¹⁷ This article operates from this intersection, focusing on the strategies employed by queer soldiers and veterans and the interconnectedness of their efforts to pursue their rights to military service and an open queer identity.

The structure of the article is in three parts. I first briefly discuss the relevant broader history for understanding DADT, demonstrating its uniqueness compared to previous military policy regarding queer servicemembers. The second part of the paper will analyze the oral histories and autobiographies of the people who publicly challenged DADT and how they engaged broader public opinion. The third part will discuss the specific public outreach organizations and campaigns that underpinned this outreach. It is these latter two sections that will provide the detailed analysis to support my argument that the DADT repeal movement represented a uniquely interconnected example of civil rights struggle.

To understand the roots of the DADT policy, it is important to first look at how the military banned, criminalized, and discharged queer soldiers from its ranks before the 1990s. As Stur has argued, although the military had excluded queer soldiers before the 1940s, it only began developing a standardized policy regarding homosexuality during the Second World War.¹⁸ This eventually took the form of the “undesirable discharge,” which allowed military leadership to quickly remove servicemembers from duty without the process of a court martial and the associated requirements for evidence a dishonorable discharge would require. This was often used against soldiers suspected of being homosexual, whose discharge would also lead to the loss of the benefits associated with the GI Bill. The “undesirable discharge” laid the groundwork for the queer-exclusionary military policy that would follow after the Second World War.¹⁹

In the 1950s, at the height of McCarthyism and the Red and Lavender Scares, the military set out to find and subsequently dismiss queer soldiers over supposed national security concerns. This paranoia over queer people being a national security threat originated in the State Department, with fears of homosexual staff being either amicable to communism or being easily blackmailed by communist agents. This paranoia quickly spread to all levels of the federal government, including the military.²⁰ The military responded a policy harsher than the “undesirable discharge”; it argued that queer identity was fundamentally incompatible with military service. This remained the military’s policy on queer servicemembers until the enactment of DADT in 1993.²¹

On the presidential campaign trail in 1992, Bill Clinton promised to end the military’s discriminatory policies, likening himself to Truman, who had led the charge on racially integrating the military in the late 1940s.²² Once in office, however, Clinton found himself hamstrung by both Congress and the military leadership. He was unable to end the

¹⁷ David Kieran and Edwin A. Martin, “Introduction,” in *At War: The Military and American Culture in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, ed. David Kieran and Edwin A. Martin (Rutgers University Press, 2018), 5.

¹⁸ Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights Since World War II*, 123.

¹⁹ Canaday, *The Straight State*, 145-148; Stur, “Red, White, Lavender, and Blue,” 104-107.

²⁰ Naoko Shibusawa, “The Lavender Scare and Empire: Rethinking Cold War Antigay Politics: The Lavender Scare and Empire,” *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 4 (2012): 728-730.

²¹ Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights Since World War II*, 123, 130-131.

²² Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 505-507.

military's discrimination or to get the congressional support needed to enact comprehensive reform. It was in these circumstances that the idea of DADT was born. DADT had been imagined by Clinton, his cabinet, and several members of Congress, as a compromise between military leaders who saw queer soldiers as a threat to the combat readiness of the military, and the queer soldiers themselves, who desired some measure of freedom. Although the policy theoretically made a distinction between queer identity and queer conduct, it led to witch hunts and discharges, returning the situation to one similar to that of the undesirable discharges of the 1940s and 1950s. Around fourteen thousand queer personnel were discharged in the seventeen years that the DADT policy was active.²³ These DADT discharges were not uncontroversial, however, and many of the soldiers let go under DADT frequently sought out various options to challenge the policy.²⁴ It is these acts of resistance that I turn to in the second part of this article.

Resistance to DADT took various forms, including public pressure actions, legal actions, public outreach, and lobbying. Although these public pressure actions have received relatively little attention in the existing scholarship, they were a significant part of the resistance to DADT, most notably the public coming outs of queer high-ranking officers in the 2000s. In 2003, ten years after DADT was enacted by Clinton, three senior officers, Brigadier General Virgil Richard, Admiral Alan Steinman, and Brigadier General Keith Kerr, publicly came out as gay to challenge DADT in an interview in the *New York Times*, alongside similar interviews at other outlets. This was part of a larger public outreach campaign organized by the SLDN.²⁵ As Steve Estes notes, there was no precedent in the long history of the US military's discriminatory policies toward minorities for high-ranking officers doing something so publicly to challenge the military's policy.²⁶ As Steinman argued in the three senior officers' joint *New York Times* interview, "because gays and lesbians are required to serve in silence and in celibacy," DADT operated as "effectively a ban." Richard contended that DADT actively harmed military readiness, as it forced queer servicemembers to choose between service and who they are; "There are gays and lesbians who want to serve honorably and with integrity but have been forced to compromise [...] It is a matter of honor and integrity." Kerr notes that the Clinton and Bush administrations did not tackle homophobic harassment enough: "It needs to be tackled more forcefully. And the president could set the tone."²⁷ Kerr also noted in subsequent years that "I wanted to come out to make a statement that 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' after ten years is not working."²⁸ Their argument was clear: queer servicemembers had been part of the military for a long time and had never negatively impacted military readiness. Steinman, Kerr, and Richard also all noted in their interview that the sacrifices they had made – not being able to be with the people they loved

²³ Faderman, 505-512.

²⁴ Faderman, 505-512.

²⁵ John Files, "Gay Ex-Officers Say 'Don't Ask' Doesn't Work," *The New York Times*, December 10, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/10/us/gay-ex-officers-say-don-t-ask-doesn-t-work.html>.

²⁶ Steve Estes, *Ask & Tell: Gay and Lesbian Veterans Speak Out* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 210-211.

²⁷ Files, "Gay Ex-Officers Say 'Don't Ask' Doesn't Work."

²⁸ Estes, *Ask & Tell*, 210.

and living with a constant sense of paranoia – had pushed them to come out publicly as a protest against DADT.²⁹ All of these reasons, ranging from the harassment and firings faced by queer soldiers to their own experiences with paranoia or sacrifice over the military's discrimination, influenced them to speak out. Their protest interviews and associated public 'coming out' received widespread attention in national news outlets.³⁰ Their protest would therefore go on to influence other queer servicemembers.

One servicemember who felt compelled to come out following the example of Richard, Steinman and Kerr was Army Ranger Brian Hughes. He had dropped out of Yale in the late 1990s to join the Army despite being gay. The Military, however, did not know about his sexuality, and he remained in the closet for the duration of his service. After returning from a tour in Afghanistan and receiving an honorable discharge, he decided to publicly come out to put pressure on the military to end DADT, like the three senior officers had done before him.³¹ The unprecedented public coming out of these three senior officers also pushed other senior and decorated queer officers to publicly come out in protest against DADT, who hoped to make a similar impression. These pressure actions showing queer soldiers who had served professionally for years became a common tactic for the repeal campaign. They showed that queer people had not degraded military readiness, countering the military leadership's argument for keeping DADT. The 2003 interview was also significant because of its publication as part of the SLDN's campaign to mark the ten-year anniversary of DADT's enactment. This points towards how interconnected the repeal campaign was, as SLDN found and provided the senior officers for the public coming out. These coming out actions were important to the DADT repeal movement and were recorded as significant events by national media outlets, becoming a crucial front of the interconnected fight against DADT.

Another front in the repeal movement was legal battles. While many court cases happened as part of the fight against DADT, the case of Major Margaret Witt can be considered one of the most impactful, paralleling the impact of the public coming out of high-ranking officers in 2003. In 2004, Air Force Major Witt became one of the thousands of queer servicemembers discharged under DADT. Like countless of her peers, she had sacrificed in order to not 'tell' about her queerness. She had broken up with a previous partner when she wanted to adopt a child and had lived far away from her base in order to avoid any suspicion over her sexuality. In 2006, she was discharged because it was discovered she was lesbian. This motivated her to ensure it would not happen to any other queer servicemember.³² Jan Gemberling, one of Witt's friends and a lawyer, pushed her to do so. Gemberling had worked on previous cases that challenged DADT's discrimination and thus

²⁹ Estes, 219-225.

³⁰ Bill Hemmer, "Gay ex-military officers speak out," *CNN*, December 11, 2003, <https://edition.cnn.com/2003/US/Northeast/12/11/cnn.gays.military/index.html>.

³¹ Estes, *Ask & Tell*, 241-247.

³² Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 508-509; Margaret Witt and Tim Connor, *Tell: Love, Defiance, and the Military Trial at the Tipping Point for Gay Rights* (ForeEdge, 2017), 89-94.

knew the significance of someone like Witt, a career officer who had received accolades for her service, and was therefore the “ideal plaintiff,” suing the military over DADT.³³

As soon as the discharge letter came in, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) began to set the stage for the case that would become *Witt v. Department of the Air Force*.³⁴ The ACLU had become involved with Witt’s case, as they had also been attached to previous court cases over DADT.³⁵ The ACLU argued that DADT had violated Witt’s constitutional rights, specifically the right to due process, by not granting Witt a timely hearing on the accusations before moving to a discharge. Furthermore, the ACLU built upon the 2003 *Lawrence v. Texas* case, in which same-sex sexual activity was made legal throughout the United States, including the military.³⁶ When Witt’s case went to retrial in 2010, it rested on how DADT had violated Witt’s constitutional rights. Witt’s case was strengthened by the testimony of those who served alongside her, such as Captain Ed Hrivnak, who said that “I have served (...) in two wars, and I’m coming in to tell you that you’re wrong. You made a mistake by letting this officer go.”³⁷ This use of senior military officers to publicly disagree with the DADT policy strengthened Witt’s case. The SLDN also supported Witt’s legal team, linking the case to other aspects of the repeal movement. They led Witt’s legal team to other senior officers willing to take the stand on behalf of queer servicemembers, for example Major General Dennis Laich.³⁸

In late 2010, Judge Ronald Leighton issued his ruling, arguing that the Air Force’s application of DADT policy to Witt had violated her constitutional rights, and that she had to be reinstated immediately. The fact that Witt won by proving DADT’s unconstitutionality was important, representing a major PR victory for the repeal movement. Furthermore, Leighton stated that Witt had proved the government wrong about queer servicemembers negatively impacting military readiness.³⁹ The very public victory of Witt and the ACLU in this court case was of immense importance; not only did they successfully manage to challenge DADT’s constitutionality in the courts, but several high-profile military officers had also served as witnesses in support of Witt. As with the public coming outs of Kerr, Richard, and Steinman, this confrontation helped to highlight the failure of DADT to the American public. Once again, it also reflected the interconnected and well-coordinated nature of the resistance against DADT, as SLDN provided several senior officers willing to testify for queer servicemembers. Furthermore, when the military was publicly and legally forced to provide an adequate reason for discharging queer soldiers, it failed to do so.

Beside the challenges to DADT policy through these public coming outs and legal actions, the repeal movement also featured a significant public outreach and lobbying campaign. For

³³ Witt and Connor, *Tell*, 93-95.

³⁴ *Witt v. Department of the Air Force*, 527 F.3d 806 (9th Cir. 2008), Justia U.S. Law, last visited 21 April 2026, <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/ca9/06-35644/0635644o-2011-02-25.html>.

³⁵ Witt and Connor, *Tell*, 115-116; *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003), Justia U.S. Supreme Court, last visited 21 April 2026, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/539/558/>.

³⁶ Witt and Connor, *Tell*, 120-121, 123-124.

³⁷ Witt and Connor, 190-191.

³⁸ Witt and Connor, 204.

³⁹ Witt and Connor, 214-215.

this, we can turn to the experience of Alexander Nicholson and Servicemembers United (SU). Like the SLDN, SU was an organization dedicated to the repeal of DADT. What distinguishes SU from the SLDN is that the former was predominantly made up of younger veterans. In 2002, like many other queer servicemembers, Nicholson was discharged under DADT, despite not undertaking any homosexual conduct on base. Nicholson had written a letter to a former romantic partner, which one of his fellow soldiers happened to see him writing. The soldier then reported Nicholson over the letter, and within weeks he was discharged for “homosexual conduct.”⁴⁰ A year after his discharge, the *Lawrence v. Texas* case was decided. This inspired Nicholson to reach out to Marty Meehan, a congressman attempting to repeal DADT and who had highlighted stories of other soldiers discharged. He shared his story, as he was tired of suppressing his experience of being let go despite having done nothing wrong, even under the restrictive terms of DADT itself.⁴¹

Nicholson would end up spearheading the campaign to end DADT as the executive director of Servicemembers United. After setting up SU with other discharged queer service members, with funding from various donors, one of the first major events it would undertake with help from existing organizations like SLDN was the “Call to Duty Tour,” which started in 2006. This was a tour of speaking events at various venues such as universities in which veterans would call for the repeal of DADT.⁴² In the years that followed, Nicholson, the SU, and the SLDN launched other similar publicity events to raise awareness for DADT repeal, such as 2007’s “Legacy of Service” and 2009’s “Voices of Honor” tours. They also sought out senior officers willing to follow the example of Richard, Steinman, and Kerr, and go on the record opposing DADT.⁴³ These PR actions and speaking tours demonstrate once again the collaboration among the various organizations and individuals campaigning against DADT, with SU, SLDN, and other organizations, such as the Human Rights Campaign, proving vital for public pressure events and outreach campaigns. This coordination was vital, as it meant the groups could share resources and experiences, gain access to politicians, and build a significant and united anti-DADT movement. SU’s and SLDN’s public outreach campaigns succeeded in raising awareness of the injustice of DADT, and Nicholson was often interviewed by news outlets or documentaries for his perspective on DADT, such as in the 2009 documentary *Ask Not*.⁴⁴

Nicholson and the SU were frequently cited and asked for comments by mainstream outlets when covering protests against or news about DADT.⁴⁵ In their campaigns they also

⁴⁰ Nicholson, *Fighting to Serve*, 11-12.

⁴¹ Nicholson, 19-20.

⁴² Nicholson, *Fighting to Serve*, 21-25, 30-35, 38-4; “History,” Servicemembers United, archived November 29, 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20101129050552/http://servicemembersunited.org/?page_id=32.

⁴³ Nicholson, *Fighting to Serve*, 48-49, 53; “Human Rights Campaign, Servicemembers United Bring National Tour to Repeal Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” Human Rights Campaign, accessed 30 January 2026, <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/human-rights-campaign-servicemembers-united-bring-national-tour-to-repeal>.

⁴⁴ “Alex Nicholson: Talking about Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” *NPR’s Fresh Air*, June 16, 2009, <https://www.npr.org/2009/06/16/105443003/alex-nicholson-talking-about-dont-ask-dont-tell>.

⁴⁵ Ed Hornick, “Activists praise Obama’s ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ repeal pledge,” *CNN*, January 29, 2010, <https://edition.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/01/28/obama.dadt.react/index.html>; “‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ Protesters Chain Themselves to White House Fence,” *ABC News*, March 18, 2010, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/protestors-charged-chaining-front-white-house/story?id=10138564>.

employed a strategy of intentionally featuring the voices of younger veterans or anonymous active-duty soldiers who had openly served as queer soldiers in their campaigns. Nicholson also spent time directly speaking to Obama's staff and various politicians to push for DADT repeal.⁴⁶ The use of younger queer soldiers in these events strengthened the argument the SU, SLDN, Witt, and the three senior officers were making, namely that queer soldiers were actively serving and posed no actual danger for military readiness. Furthermore, as with every American civil rights movement, reaching out to and organizing with political leadership was also a crucial part of the push for civil rights advancements. The efforts of Nicholson and the SU were recognized by the Obama administration; they were seated directly in front of the president when DADT was finally repealed by President Obama on December 22nd, 2010.⁴⁷

Though DADT had only been active for a relatively short period of seventeen years, it ruined the careers of countless queer servicemembers. Some of these service members, such as Nicholson and Witt, would dedicate their energy to the DADT repeal movement as a result. The fight to end DADT was fought on a variety of battlefields, ranging from courthouses to major news outlets, from public speaking tours to political lobbying in Washington. While Witt's court case has received attention in the existing historiography, what made her case so significant in its broader context is largely overlooked – besides successfully challenging DADT on constitutional grounds, Witt, the ACLU, and the SLDN also helped to construct an interlinked network and campaign that allowed notable and senior military personnel to testify on behalf of Major Witt and join the broader struggle against DADT. Therefore, the case not only disproved the military leadership's insistence that DADT improved military readiness, it *publicly* showed the emptiness of the military's arguments. Their legal victory created significant pressure upon the military leadership and Obama administration to repeal DADT. Relatedly, senior officers coming out as queer showed that DADT was actually harming military readiness rather than solidifying it, as soldiers had to hide a pivotal part of themselves. At the same time, the public outreach campaign of Nicholson, the SU, and the SLDN raised awareness, combined with lobbying that took place behind the scenes, placed further pressure on the president and military leadership to finally repeal DADT. Without any one of these angles of attack, the fight to repeal DADT may have lasted longer or never resulted in a full repeal. Yet, only the court battles have been given extensive scholarly attention in the historiography. The focus that these legal cases have been given by scholars has overshadowed other important aspects of the repeal movement, both in the historiography and in the popular consciousness. By comparison, the public outreach, pressure, and lobbying campaigns led by the SLDN and SU have little-to-no presence in the historiography. But, as this article has demonstrated, they too were a vital front for the repeal movement and reported on as such by mainstream media outlets. Furthermore, the SLDN and SU were actively involved with the court cases in addition to their other activities. The interconnected nature of these various efforts is important for understanding the scale and the success of the DADT repeal movement, and yet it is largely absent in the current

⁴⁶ Nicholson, *Fighting to Serve*, 90-93, 97-98, 103-104, 108-114.

⁴⁷ Nicholson, 247-248.

historiography. Thus, these aspects need to be included in our analysis of why DADT repeal succeeded. By focusing solely on the dramatic court cases, we risk overlooking the other vital aspects which helped the repeal movement achieve its victory. As the second Trump administration seems poised to attack various queer rights victories, we should look at *all* the tools of the queer resistance against DADT as inspiration, not just those that took place in the legal arena.

Paper

Drought, the American Southwest, and Climate Fiction

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This paper was written for the course 'American Climate Fictions' for the MA North American Studies

Since 2000, the American Southwest has been experiencing one of its most severe megadroughts in at least 1200 years, exacerbated by human-caused climate change.¹ This drought has affected at least 64 million people in the region directly, with far more people indirectly impacted because of the effects on the farms, orchards, and ranches that provide food for the rest of the US.² The people who experience these adverse effects of climate change are, however, not all affected equally.³ As found by a 2017 report from the United Nation's Department of Economic & Social Affairs, inequality continues to shape the discussion on climate change.⁴ Those who are worst-off face an increased exposure to climate hazards, higher vulnerability to harm induced by climate hazards, and have a decreased ability to cope with and recover from the damage.⁵

Expressing these effects and outcomes quantitatively does not always adequately convey the everyday hardships faced by people in the American Southwest.⁶ Fiction therefore plays an important role in illuminating the lived experiences of those on the front line of the climate crisis. As environmental humanities scholar Robert Nixon argues, fiction is one of the most critical tools to make the effects of environmental crises, such as the ongoing megadrought, visible and tangible to the public.⁷ The environmental harms experienced in the megadrought are not experienced as a sudden disaster and lack the "spectacular" quality of other devastating crises – such as fires, wars, storms, or terrorists attacks – which makes them less visible to the public. Yet, such intangible environmental crises – or, as Nixon calls them, instances of 'slow violence' – are no less harmful for lacking these qualities.⁸ This article argues that literary depictions of drought help to reframe it as a social and political crisis rather than a socially neutral natural disaster. This argument builds on the examination of two novels: *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015) by Claire Vaye Watkins and *Dry* (2018) by Neal and Jarrod Shusterman. These two novels will be analyzed through an ecocritical lens based on two theories – Robert Nixon's theory of slow violence and Yanoula Athanassakis'

Notes

¹ "Research Spotlight: Climate-Driven Megadrought," Drought.gov, <https://www.drought.gov/research-spotlight-climate-driven-megadrought>.

² "Drought Persists in the American Southwest," NASA Science, October 24, 2025, <https://science.nasa.gov/earth/earth-observatory/drought-persists-in-the-american-southwest-84801/>.

³ Barry S. Levy and Jonathan A. Patz, "Climate Change, Human Rights, and Social Justice," *Annals of Global Health* 81, no. 3 (2015).

⁴ Nazrul Islam and John Winkel, "Climate Change and Social Inequality," Department of Economic & Social Affairs of the UN, 2017, https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2017/wp152_2017.pdf.

⁵ Islam and Winkel, "Climate Change," 24.

⁶ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 41.

⁷ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 46.

⁸ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2.

environmental justice framework – to help make clear who are made most vulnerable by the Southwestern drought.

Environmental justice emerged from struggles against unequal distribution of environmental harm, especially where race, class, and political power shape exposure to pollution, toxicity, and risk.⁹ Central to environmental justice activism are grassroot groups who seek to frame harm in terms of social justice, foregrounding concepts such as race, class, gender, and power. This reshapes understandings of environmental harm, creating a framework through which local communities that experienced perceived injustice were able to find a common understanding.¹⁰ In its most straightforward form, scholars within the environmental justice tradition demand that all people and communities are entitled to equal protection under environmental and public health laws, especially against the racially and economically disproportionately distributed hazards.¹¹ In this model, the environment is not understood to include only the natural environment, but also the everyday spaces of life, tying environmental protection to health, housing, labor, and civil rights. Two core requirements in environmental justice are fair treatment and meaningful involvement. Fair treatment means that no group should bear a disproportionate share of pollution or environmental health impacts, while meaningful involvement is defined as the necessary involvement of affected communities in shaping laws, regulations, and enforcement.¹²

A key theoretical approach to environmental justice that informs this article is Yanoula Athanassakis' *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives* (2017).¹³ According to Athanassakis, environmental justice is “about bodies that are interrupted and whose normal and natural trajectory is somehow short-circuited by unnatural and toxic forces.”¹⁴ She suggests that environmental harms are registered through bodies and everyday life instead of as a distant ‘nature’ problem. Athanassakis argues that narratives can make injury, toxicity, and disruption to “interrupted bodies” (disfigured, diseased, unruly) visible on both molecular and planetary scales.¹⁵ The ‘interrupted bodies’ do more than symbolize harm: they unsettle how readers understand normalcy and even the boundaries of the body itself.¹⁶ Athanassakis’s approach deviates from the idea that nature is ‘good’ and humans are ‘bad,’ instead focusing on how uncertainty, entanglement, and contamination structure lived experience.¹⁷ This approach is especially useful for this project because drought’s effects are most directly experienced through bodies – through thirst, exhaustion, illness, heat and physical vulnerabilities – in ways that can best be accessed via narrative forms. Athanassakis’s

⁹ Paul Mohai, David Pellow, and J. Timmons Roberts, “Environmental Justice,” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 34, no. 1 (2009): 406, 408, 425.

¹⁰ Stella M. Čapek, “The ‘Environmental Justice’ Frame: A Conceptual Discussion and an Application,” *Social Problems* 40, no. 1 (1993): 6-8

¹¹ Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts, “Environmental Justice,” 407.

¹² Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts, “Environmental Justice,” 407.

¹³ Yanoula Athanassakis, *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives* (Routledge, 2017).

¹⁴ Athanassakis, *Environmental Justice*, 1.

¹⁵ Athanassakis, *Environmental Justice*, 2.

¹⁶ Athanassakis, *Environmental Justice*, 2.

¹⁷ Athanassakis, *Environmental Justice*, 3, 6.

framework will, therefore, help connect the large-scale environmental crisis of the megadrought to the everyday human experiences of those impacted by it.

Given the centrality of literature to the argument of this article, ecocriticism is a key methodological approach. A key text within ecocriticism is Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). Nixon defines slow violence "as harm that unfolds gradually, is dispersed across time and space, and is therefore 'typically not viewed as violence at all.'" ¹⁸ Nixon states that people are drawn to the spectacular events, large scale sudden disruptions, not to gradual harm that happens over a long time. ¹⁹ Nixon's theory of *Slow Violence* will serve as the basis of the framework used to analyze the two novels. It also allows drought to be read as cumulative and politically overlooked rather than as a single natural disaster. Drawing on Nixon's approach, this study provides a qualitative thematic discourse analysis of its two central texts.

These two works are part of the developing genre of American Climate Fiction, defined by Penguin Random House – the world's largest publisher – as "a growing branch of literature that deals with the effects of climate change on human society." ²⁰ Climate fiction does more than imagine possible futures: as Adam Trexler argues, it helps construct meaning around climate change by turning abstract predictions into tangible experience of place, identity, and culture. ²¹ Rio Fernandes, a scholar of climate fiction, also highlights the ability of this genre to communicate complicated ideas to a broader public by stripping away scientific jargon and presenting the long-term damage of climate change. ²² Debra Rosenthal and Jason de Lara Molesky further argue that climate fiction also concerns itself with the class struggle and popular revolt that emerges in relation to climate crisis. ²³ They critique, however, the genre for its tendency to "conflate all people as equally complicit in the climate crisis," with many of the key works in the genre "implying that every person, culture, and socioeconomic system holds the same degree of relative responsibility for altering the biosphere." ²⁴ This article builds on that critique by asking whether *Gold Fame Citrus* and *Dry* reproduce or challenge this tendency. It argues that while both novels present drought as a shared crisis, they also show that vulnerability, responsibility, and survival are unevenly distributed. *Gold Fame Citrus* has been the subject of several other articles. The critic Bryan Yazell, for example, reads Wakin's novel as reflecting a broader tendency for climate fiction to imagine climate-induced migration through familiar historical typologies. Yazell argues that the novel exposes a wider "imaginative failure" in public understandings of climate migration. ²⁵ Other readings have put the focus more directly on environmental ethics,

¹⁸ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2

¹⁹ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 3, 4.

²⁰ "Climate Fiction to Start Reading," PenguinRandomhouse.com, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/the-read-down/climate-fiction/>.

²¹ Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions* (University of Virginia Press, 2015), 61-62, 71-72.

²² Rio Fernandes, "The Subfield That Is Changing the Landscape of Literary Studies," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2016, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-subfield-that-is-changing-the-landscape-of-literary-studies>.

²³ Debra J. Rosenthal and Jason De Lara Molesky, *Cli-fi and Class: Socioeconomic Justice in Contemporary American Climate Fiction* (University of Virginia Press, 2023), 11.

²⁴ Rosenthal and De Lara Molesky, *Cli-Fi and Class*, 11.

²⁵ Bryan Yazell, "A Sociology of Failure: Migration and Narrative Method in US Climate Fiction," *Configurations* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 155–56, 159.

interpreting the novel as a critique of anthropocentric attitudes towards water, nature, and human responsibility.²⁶ This paper will build on these accounts but shift the emphasis to the novel's representation of the uneven social distributions of drought's harms.

The two novels will be analyzed through a thematic discourse analysis, in which three major themes are identified and used as lenses through which the books can be analyzed. These three themes, drawn from Nixon and Athanassakis, provide the analytical frame for the article: attritional harm and visibility; embodiment and exposure; and power, disposability and contested responsibility. To explore the first theme, this analysis considers how environmental damage unfolds gradually and how it gets (politically) ignored because it lacks spectacle. The analysis explores how the novels make slow damage legible, and who is believed or dismissed when harm is not spectacular enough. The second theme, embodiment, and exposure, is focused on the idea – stemming primarily from Athanassakis – that environmental injustice is experienced through bodies. Effects include illness, exhaustion, hunger, heat, contamination, and disability. This theme will examine how bodies become evidence of environmental injustice. Finally, the third theme draws together the work of Nixon and Athanassakis. Both insist that harm is unevenly distributed and produced by systems which decide whose lives are protected and who are treated as replaceable. This theme examines the actors who cause harm and those who bear it. Below is a brief overview of these three themes.

²⁶ Rajesh K. and Rajasekaran V., "Anthropocentrism in the Select American Dystopic Fictions: *The Water Knife* by Paolo Bacigalupi and Claire Vaye Watkins' *Gold Fame Citrus*," *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice* 21, no. 16 (2021): 27–28, 30–31.

TABLE 1. Analytical Framework

Theme	Central claim	Textual evidence	Examples
Attritional harm and visibility	Harm is attritional, and often ignored because it is not spectacular enough	How the text makes slow damage legible, and who is believed or dismissed when harm is not dramatic and drastic enough.	Cumulative damage: failing water systems/infrastructure, gradual health decline, altered seasons, displacement, normalized crisis language
Embodiment and exposure	Environmental injustice is experienced through bodies	How bodies become evidence, and whether harm is framed as individual or collective/structurally produced exposure.	Rashes, coughing, sickness, exhaustion, food insecurity. Moments where characters are disbelieved, medicalized, shamed, or blamed.
Power, disposability, and contested responsibility	Harm is unevenly distributed by systems. These systems decide whose lives are protected and whose are treated as disposable	Who causes harm, who profits, and who bears the cost? How does the novel assign blame/agency?	Water rights, policing, zoning, border controls, aid, leaders vs. followers.

The analysis begins by assessing how *Gold Fame Citrus and Dry* engage with the suggestion that environmental damage is often ignored as it is not ‘spectacular’ enough. In *Gold Fame Citrus*, Watkins explores drought as a form of slow violence. Claire Vaye Watkins’ *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015) is a climate fiction novel set in a near-future California, which has been almost destroyed by permanent drought and is threatened by an expanding dune sea. It follows Luz Dunn, a former child celebrity and model, and Ray, a veteran and surfer, who survive in an abandoned mansion above Los Angeles after most of the population have been evacuated. Their lives change when they take in a neglected child, Ig, and eventually flee east toward the expanding Amargosa dune sea. As they travel through camps, compounds, and the expanding dune region, the novel explores how drought affects everyday life, social order, and people’s sense of place.

The novel makes the drought legible by turning decades of infrastructural overreach and political decision into a readable sequence. This showcases how slow damage can be narrativized even when it lacks one cinematic ‘event.’ Besides the expansion of the

aqueducts, *Gold Fame Citrus* also highlights how lawsuits drag on, and that the Colorado's "death" (besides many other rivers, lakes and aquifers), is a long process rather than just one single disaster moment.²⁷ Early on in the novel, the enduring deprivation is foregrounded: green life has been "denied... so long" that it becomes "more and more impossible to conceive" of any other baseline. The crisis has become normalized over time as it has crept up slowly.²⁸

The novel is also able to clearly present who counts as a credible witness of how this slow violence operates. In particular, it considers who is believed and heard, and who is not. This question is particularly visible during the press conference which is held after the town of Needles is buried by the advancing Amargose dune sea. A small group of former residents stays near their houses and are questioned by reporters. They are told the dune is no longer just loose sand but behaves more like a fast-moving glacier, and that the buildings beneath it have already been crushed into rock. This scene shows how governmental and scientific discourse is often far removed from personal experiences and can dismiss lived attachment to a place. Within this scientific discourse there is little regard for personal or emotional connections to the sites affected by natural disaster, which risks obscuring the harm people experience. At the Needles press conference, officials define "authentic" Mojavs and the Bureau of Land Management claims the affected population is effectively zero. This is the bureaucratic erasure that dismisses lived experiences and lived harm by reclassifying those who suffer out of existence.²⁹ At the press conference this erasure is visible when it is stated that "the last of the Mojavs" dispersed, even as "the term had already outgrown them."³⁰

Neal and Jarrod Shusterman's *Dry* (2018) is a climate fiction novel set in Southern California during a sudden water shutdown which they called the "Tap-Out." When taps run dry, everyday life quickly collapses into panic, scarcity, and violence. The story mainly follows Alyssa Morrow, her younger brother Garrett, and their neighbor Kelton as they try to survive and find safety. As the crisis evolves, the novel shows empty stores, failed institutions, moral conflict, and desperate struggles over water. They are later joined by Jacqui and Henry and together they try to survive in a world in which access to water determines safety, power, and morality. *Dry* presents drought not just as an environmental disaster, but also a social and political crisis. *Dry* has a different approach to making environmental harm legible. Although this novel has a compressed timeline, spanning days rather than decades, it does frame the water/drought catastrophe as cumulatively produced and long ignored due to the lack of a spectacular event. The protagonist, Alyssa, describes how her neighborhood has been reshaped by long drought: dusty windshields, lawns replaced by succulents, and even dead lawns painted green like cosmetic cover up.³¹ It shows how the area deteriorated long before the "tap-out" event in the novel. Another example of how slow violence has been ignored is the "red flags" that were noticed but not acted on. These red flags are especially foregrounded in relation to Henry, who joins Alyssa on her journey. Henry describes how, when the

²⁷ Claire Vaye Watkins, *Gold Fame Citrus*, (Riverhead Books, 2017), 21, 99-100

²⁸ Watkins, *Gold Fame Citrus*, 10-11

²⁹ Watkins, *Gold Fame Citrus*, 99-104.

³⁰ Watkins, *Gold Fame Citrus*, 99.

³¹ Neal Shusterman and Jarrod Shusterman, *Dry* (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2019), 28.

drought was still “a normal drought,” the Dove Canyon fountain drew mountain lions “like house cats to a water bowl,” and states that it “really should have been a red flag,” but was ignored at the time as just another occurrence.³² It sets up the later social collapse as the predictable result of all these warning signs that have been ignored, because they were not dramatic enough.

In comparison to *Gold Fame Citrus*, however, *Dry* does center on a spectacular event: the “tap-off.” One character who comments on this is Alyce. She is a helicopter pilot whose brief point-of-view chapters widen the novel’s perspective by showing how the water crisis is managed from above, especially through emergency airlifts to official evacuation centers. Alyce reflects that there were warnings for years about environmental damage – for instance through PSAs and conservation talks – but that this was fundamentally different from a “total stoppage,” and that “there was no warning at all that the water would simply. Turn. Off.”³³ That contrast in *Dry* turns long ignored neglect into an event-triggered rupture.

Together, the two novels make slow harm legible by showing how gradual changes and adjustments are ignored due to the lack of a spectacular factor. They are ignored long enough until something drastic happens, like the “tap-off.” This illustrates Nixon’s argument: no or limited action is taken when harm is gradual and easy to discount, until it becomes suddenly spectacular, finally making it undeniable.³⁴

Using the environmental justice framework it also becomes clear that novels explore how environmental harm is experienced through bodies. *Gold Fame Citrus* makes the connection between drought and bodily experience visible from the first page: dust coats skin and bedding, thirst and heat shape daily life, and the landscape enters the body as particulate exposure.³⁵ The novel repeatedly presents bodies as evidence of the drought. Children’s cracked lips, for instance, illustrate the constant need to manage water and fluids, and the desert’s advancement forces characters into survival behaviors.³⁶ The most vivid description of what the drought does to the body is offered when Luz is separated from Ray and Ig and forced to survive out in the Amargosa Dune Sea with almost no water and extreme heat:

Her skin was screaming. Her lips split, clefts puttied with scabs. The flesh around her nose was raw to cracking, like the plates along the bottom of a dry ancient sea, no moisture left to yield. The insides too, surely, for the simple, vital intake of air stung. Her fingers were swollen beyond bending, waxy and violet-tinged.³⁷

This passage does not only describe Luz as suffering from the effects of the drought, it makes her body resemble the dried landscape itself. Especially by comparing Luz’s skin to “the bottom of a dry ancient sea,” the passage makes the boundary between body and landscape

³² Shusterman and Shusterman, *Dry*, 138.

³³ Shusterman and Shusterman, *Dry*, 161.

³⁴ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2-4, 13-16.

³⁵ Watkins, *Gold Fame Citrus*, 10.

³⁶ Watkins, *Gold Fame Citrus*, 18-20, 105-106, 111-112, 241

³⁷ Watkins, *Gold Fame Citrus*, 105

overlap. The body remains central throughout the entire story: characters' senses are what makes the crisis undeniable. This fits Athanassakis's emphasis on the ways in which environmental injustice is lived through bodies and that separating "body" from "environment" is itself a misleading dualism.³⁸ The body and the environment are not separate but deeply entangled. Environmental harm is lived through bodies, as heat, illness, contamination, and exhaustion make the environment felt.

Dry similarly revolves around bodily exposure and its progression. The novel focuses on dehydration symptoms (headaches, dizziness, heat stress), reduced hygiene, toilets turning toxic, and the shift from inconvenience to medical emergency.³⁹ They also add in another dynamic, with public health advice on TV in the novel framing the body as the primary site of crisis management, with the narrative continually revealing that these individual solutions do not work under structural shortage.⁴⁰ Athanassakis also raises the question if harm should be considered individual or collective. *Dry* repeatedly shows shame and blame dynamics: families hide water, neighbors watch each other's bottles, and access becomes moralized in a first come, first serve way, turning bodily survival into social conflict rather than collective care.⁴¹ At the same time, snapshots – the novel's brief point-of-view chapters – widen the lens, for instance when it becomes clear that nursing homes are hardest hit because they lack resources and attention. Such snapshots illustrate that vulnerability is structurally patterned, not individually chosen.⁴²

Overall both novels make the body the clearest proof that environmental harm is real: thirst, skin, breath and illness communicate the crisis more clearly than abstract numbers and political rhetoric. Where *Gold Fame Citrus* emphasizes chronic exposure, *Dry* emphasizes a rapid cascade. In both, bodily harm is not evenly shared – some are more affected than others based on how precarious their situation was before the drought. Those who begin from positions of dependence, poverty, displacement, or weak institutional support are most exposed, which shows that drought vulnerability is shaped not only by climate, but by inequality.

Gold Fame Citrus is quite explicit about the cause of the drought and who bears responsibility for it. The novel lists the agencies, cities, and the specific infrastructures that drained the watersheds, rivers, aquifers.⁴³ The origins of the drought are not attributed to natural causes, but to human actors, which is in line with Nixon's claim that slow violence and harm is produced through systems that render some places and people disposable.⁴⁴ Uneven harm is produced and managed by systems that effectively decide whose lives matter. When the desert becomes inhabitable, the state's priority is not to "rescue," but to classify and withdraw. Agencies arrive to measure and explain, but governance recedes and jurisdiction is ceded, leaving abandonment as policy.⁴⁵ The Bureau of Land Management's

³⁸ Athanassakis, *Environmental Justice*, 14.

³⁹ Shusterman and Shusterman, *Dry*, 28, 35-37, 43, 251-252, 235, 269.

⁴⁰ Shusterman and Shusterman, *Dry*, 36-37.

⁴¹ Shusterman and Shusterman, *Dry*, 49, 43, 163

⁴² Shusterman and Shusterman, *Dry*, 160

⁴³ Watkins, *Gold Fame Citrus*, 11, 20-21, 97-101.

⁴⁴ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 4.

⁴⁵ Watkins, *Gold Fame Citrus*, 98-101.

official survey of the affected area reports a population of zero, literally erasing remaining people on paper and taking away any protection, making “a desert deserted.”⁴⁶

Dry takes a more economical approach to the concept of power and protection. Power is presented through emergency governance and market coercion. For example, martial law and the National Guard formalize who can move and who is detained.⁴⁷ The state determines who is worth saving and who is disposable.⁴⁸ An example of this is that scarce water is reserved for official evacuation centers, while people outside those sites may go without aid altogether.⁴⁹ The novel also makes profit and plundering visible: price gouging turns survival goods into leverage, and later scenes depict water as a tradable luxury item with status value.⁵⁰ The responsibility of the drought is argued over in real time, where some blame other states for hoarding river water and others blame the cumulative mistakes and symbolic policies that did nothing to prevent or help the situation.⁵¹

Both novels treat scarcity as a distribution problem shaped by institutions, not only by a natural shortage. *Gold Fame Citrus* depicts bureaucratic erasure and displacement, while *Dry* shows the responsibility of the states and the mistakes they made that impacted those affected by the drought. Both make the argument that dispersed harms let officials dodge blame and push people into moralizing conflicts.

Reading *Gold Fame Citrus* and *Dry* through an ecocritical lens demonstrates that both novels treat drought less as a neutral “natural disaster,” one that happens to everyone equally, and more as a crisis produced and managed through human systems, affecting some more than others. Climate fiction serves to make Southwestern drought legible by turning slow, hard-to-see damage into concrete scenes of everyday breakdown and unequal exposure. *Gold Fame Citrus* presents drought as slow violence built through decades of extraction and policy, visible on the bodies of those affected, and then managed through reports and abandonment that makes some people invisible and therefore unprotected. *Dry* shows how years of ignored warnings and symbolic fixes are disrupted by a sudden “tap-out” that exposes how vulnerability follows inequality. Access, class, and state priorities determine who gets water, safety, and care. What makes these novels valuable for environmental justice is that they dramatize how harm is distributed unevenly in a way that most forms of non-fiction media cannot. They illuminate how some people have enough resources, mobility, and state protection while others are left exposed, displaced, or erased. This harm is made legible by translating it into stories of bodily suffering, fear, scarcity, and the breakdown of everyday life. These two novels suggest that the Southwestern drought is not just an environmental event, but an environmental injustice that can be made visible through fiction, turning environmental damage into something tangible and all-too-human.

⁴⁶ Watkins, *Gold Fame Citrus*, 101.

⁴⁷ Shusterman and Shusterman, *Dry*, 119-120, 170.

⁴⁸ Shusterman and Shusterman, *Dry*, 58-59, 161-162.

⁴⁹ Shusterman and Shusterman, *Dry*, 161-162.

⁵⁰ Shusterman and Shusterman, *Dry*, 75-76, 135-138, 165.

⁵¹ Shusterman and Shusterman, *Dry*, 6, 8, 28, 42, 138,

Interview

Studying for a PhD in the United States

Kirsten Soer | The Ohio State University

This interview was conducted in spring 2026 with current first-year PhD student Kirsten Soer, a former editor for the Netherlands American Studies Review who is now based at The Ohio State University

Question 1: Can you tell us a bit about yourself. What is the focus of your PhD research? What was your academic journey prior to starting the PhD?

Yes, absolutely. I specialize in the history of US foreign relations, also known as diplomatic history. I am particularly interested in the role of non-state actors – such as activists, consumers, and diplomatic spouses – in interpreting and shaping events on the global stage. One of the perks of pursuing a PhD in the US rather than in Europe, however, is that you do not have to settle on a topic right away. The first two to three years are taken up by course work and end in your candidacy exams. I will take my exams next year and start writing my dissertation after, so for now I am keeping my options open on my final research topic. That said, I will most likely focus my dissertation on progressive women's activism and informal diplomacy during the mid- to late Cold War, which is something I already started thinking about while still studying in the Netherlands

Before applying to graduate school, I spent a lot of time at Leiden University. I graduated with a BA in Classics and a minor in Chinese Studies in 2020, in the midst of COVID. I wasn't a huge fan of online classes, so I took a gap year in hopes of being able to do my master's degree in person. I got really interested in the history of US-East Asian relations during that year, and the immediate postwar US occupation of Japan particularly started to fascinate me. It was such a unique moment in which the US had just emerged from World War II with this huge power to reshape war-torn countries in its image, but in which it was not yet completely bogged down by Cold War concerns. It was with this interest in mind that I decided to pursue an MA in Asian Studies as well as one in North American Studies (including the premaster I needed to qualify). I loved both of these degrees and was very hesitant to graduate and have to leave! Once I ran out of side quests – e.g., serving on the board of study association LUNAS, editing here at the *Netherlands American Studies Review*, and interning at the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies – it was a fairly easy decision to pursue a PhD, even if this meant leaving behind the academic community and programs I had grown so comfortable with.

Question 2: Why did you decide to apply to the US for your PhD? Any advice for those considering applying to PhDs at US universities?

That's a good question. I guess I sort of "rolled into it," as they say. The first time anyone told me that I should consider pursuing a PhD, I looked at them as if they didn't know what they were talking about. It took me a while to build the confidence to apply for anything, but over the course of my master's degrees I realized that I wanted to try: a corporate job sounded much less fun than graduate school, and I couldn't keep pursuing master's degrees forever. The decision to go to the US then partly stemmed from my inability to settle on a topic.

There are great opportunities to pursue a PhD in Europe too, but you have to wait for the right vacancy and tailor your research proposal to the topic at hand. In the US, you can just apply with your own interests and hope for the best. That appealed to me because I work better when I am truly passionate about a topic. I also liked the idea of doing two more years of course work to orient myself. Since I only started studying US history after completing my bachelor's degree, spending two more years reading books sounded helpful.

As for advice, I think the most important thing is to know yourself. It can be quite difficult and lonely to move to the other side of the Atlantic. Bureaucracy is terrible anywhere but much worse when you are not familiar with the system (and the woman on the phone at the IRS asks you to spell "the Netherlands" three times, either unable or unwilling to recognize it as a valid country of origin). The academic culture is also different: Americans take themselves a lot more seriously and have a very different understanding of work/life balance than Dutch people do. The intensity of a PhD program can take a toll on your personal life and physical health too. That is something to watch out for. On the other hand, if you love the work and believe in your project, grad school can be really exciting. I have made a lot of friends who are equally nerdy and suffer the same stresses as I do. Some programs are a bit toxic and overly competitive, but ours strikes a good balance. If you show that you are willing to cooperate and have a good sense of humor, even the most ambitious people are likely to loosen up.

The best advice I can give to those debating whether to apply is to talk to people who know both you and the academic field well. Current PhD students and professors should be able to tell if it is a good fit. I was very skeptical when someone told me: "grad school is tough but you're eccentric enough to enjoy it;" but it turns out they were right. If you are still on the fence after talking it through, you can also just apply. The application fees are criminally high (approximately 100\$ per application), but I think it is better to apply and not get in than to spend the rest of your life wondering "what if?"

Question 3: What has been your experience of the PhD program so far? Has anything surprised you?

Oh, it has been lovely; intense and tiring, but lovely. The first two to three years are somewhat similar to doing a master's degree in the Netherlands, but much faster paced. Afterwards, you take your comprehensive exams (also known as general or candidacy exams), which qualify you to do dissertation research. I take mine next spring and should be ready to start working on my dissertation after. I like taking courses alongside people with similar interests. Everyone is always exceptionally well-prepared, so the discussions are usually good. You can learn a lot from each other. Outside of class, we rely on each other to unwind too. Especially during the first semester, a lot of us really invested in making friends. I have seen some of the smartest people I have ever met crumble during drinking matches. I will remember that in case they ever become famous.

The worst and most surprising aspect of grad school, by far, is the ubiquity of sports. This might more so apply to me, as I go to a big sports university, but I think it is true in general. Two of my fellow students convinced me once to go to a basketball game with them. Everything was utterly commercialized. There are even mini games attached to the game, in which the audience can win things such as T-shirts and fried chicken. The games are well

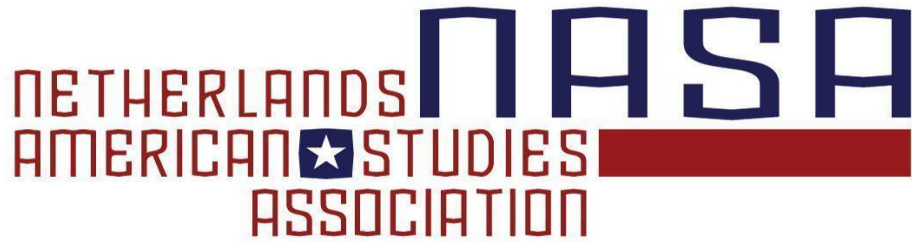
attended too, even by historians who, in my opinion, should have more important things to concern themselves with.

Question 4: Have you noticed any impact from the current political climate?

How is the atmosphere on campus?

The atmosphere is good. You can detect the impact of politics if you look for it, but it is also easy to ignore. International students are advised to always carry their documents – not just passports and visas but also a host of registration forms – and we receive notifications when the authorities are on campus (which has happened a few times). For the most part, though, it is business as usual. People do not talk about politics as much as you would think. Academia is relatively left-leaning, but that does not mean that everyone is on the same page about everything. I feel like most people avoid political topics in case they lead to heated discussions. There is also a sense of resignation, I think. Perhaps this is different in other areas, as Ohio is a relatively conservative state. I can imagine that other US universities might have very lively activist scenes. When I walk to the history department, conversely, I am much more likely to be invited to join some fringe religious denomination than I am to run into a political protest.

Thank you Kirsten for speaking with us, and best of luck with your ongoing academic journey!



Call for Papers

Do you also want to publish a paper in the *Netherlands American Studies Review*? That is great news! We are always looking for contributions! Below you can find our submission guidelines. Selection procedures usually take place in March for issue 1 and September for issue 2—we will post specific calls for papers with deadlines to be considered in those selections, so do keep that in mind when submitting your work. We are open to submissions, however, year-round.

Submission Guidelines

We welcome papers written by bachelor's, master's, and PhD students from Dutch universities. Students do not have to be enrolled in an American Studies program, but submissions must be relevant to at least one of the journal's (sub)fields. Recent graduates can send in work written in the last two years. We welcome **book reviews** (500-700 words) or **papers** (2000-5000 words, not including footnotes). Papers may be based on a thesis, as long as they meet the word limit.

All submissions must meet the following requirements:

- Submissions must include the author's **name**, **university**, the **title of the course** and **program** it was written for (specifying BA/MA/PhD), and the **semester** it was written in.
- All papers submitted must include an abstract. This abstract must be on a separate page from the body of the article and may not be longer than 250 words.
- Texts must meet the **word count** mentioned above, references do not count towards the wordcount.
- All authors must use **Chicago Style with footnotes** for citations. If you are unfamiliar with this style, please consult www.chicagomanualofstyle.org before submitting.
- Documents must be submitted in Word format (**.doc or .docx**).
- Texts must be written in **American English**. Please check your text for spelling and grammar before submitting.

Submissions can be sent to NLAmericanStudiesReview@gmail.com. We make a selection of papers several months before the publication of each issue and will get in touch with you in due course. If we accept your paper, we will start the editorial process. During this process, you are expected to improve and adjust your paper in consultation with several of our editors. If you are curious about our previous issues, please check <http://www.netherlands-america.nl/nasa-review/>.