

Abstracts

Stefano Luconi, “The Least Worst Place”: Guantánamo in the US “War on Terror”

“The least worst place” in the world to hold “unlawful combatants,” in Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld’s words, the military detention camp within the US naval base at Guantánamo Bay stands out as the epitome for the primacy of national security over due process, habeas corpus, and the safeguard of human rights in Washington’s “War on Terror.” Since late 2001, in the eyes of the federal administration, GITMO has enjoyed the double benefit of being under US jurisdiction but in a foreign country, which has enabled Washington’s personnel to be in control but has also allegedly exempted them from applying US laws. As such, though not without precedents, the existence of GITMO, along with the related indefinite confinement without trial and resort to torture of prisoners, points to the blatant inconsistency between, on the one hand, the US longing for global leadership in the promotion of freedom and the enforcement of the rule of law and, on the other, Washington’s failure to protect these values in times of national emergency. Drawing mainly upon the rulings by the US Supreme Court on previous and coeval cases, this article reconstructs how jurisprudence initially supported Washington’s arrogant and go-it-alone style in waging the “War on Terror” by crushing the Guantánamo inmates’ most basic rights, too. It also highlights how political expediency has subsequently interfered with the slow inroads of due process and habeas corpus into GITMO.

Alessandra Calanchi, Out of Exception, Into Emergency: Fast-forward to Earth Zero

Inevitably interconnected with the “Great Acceleration” of the Anthropocene, space race has played a substantial role in the reassessment of humankind’s identity as interplanetary. The growing perception of new possible frontiers beyond the Earth’s borders, whether on the Moon or on Mars, has opened an era of neo-colonial projects involving language(s),

culture(s), and media. More than in Elon Musk's and Robert Zubrin's recent proclamations, however, my article focuses on the durable effect of the myth of nation building on the quest for extraterrestrial territories. It is a fact that the current debate on Terraforming and manned expeditions frequently refers to Pilgrims, pioneers, transplantation, Dream, and Destiny. What is almost completely absent, on the other hand, is the awareness that counter-narrations existed since the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century. As early as 1890, in *Mars as the Abode of Life*, astronomer Percival Lowell insisted that extraordinary measures be urgently taken to keep the Earth from meeting the same destiny as the red planet – that is, to be reduced to a wasteland. Long before climate change, globalization, and world pandemics, Lowell was fully aware that neither our planet nor America were *exceptional* sites: on the contrary, they were places on the verge of an unprecedented and irrevocable state of *emergency*. This essay deals with such counter-narrations and with their controversial legacy.

Salvatore Proietti, The Provisional Utopia and the State of Exception: On *Ceremony* and *The Stand*

Both written in the late 1970s, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Stephen King's *The Stand* participated in the contemporary revision of the notion of utopia highlighted by critics such as Fredric Jameson, Tom Moylan, and Darko Suvin. I argue that in both novels this revision occurs because they stage, in different ways, a refusal of solutions akin to Schmitt's and Agamben's state of exception, shown as inadequate to the task of rebuilding a sense of community in the aftermath of radical crises. Silko's 1977 landmark in Native American fiction is the story of WW2 veteran Tayo who turns to the ceremonies of his people's oral culture in his search for healing, a way out of his post-traumatic stress, presented as a personal analogue to the drought affecting his Laguna Pueblo reservation. In the shadow of white people's wars, including nuclear experiments, the native tradition must meet forms of renewal, capable of rejecting the threat of downward spirals of individual and collective counter-violence. King's 1978 post-apocalyptic novel juxtaposes genres, from realism to science fiction and religious fantasy. In the aftermath of disasters that include deindustrialization, a global pandemic spawned by military research, and the Bomb, *The Stand* gathers a polyphony of viewpoints, with a sophisticated encyclopedia of cultural allusions, from

literature to rock music, to approach and challenge many facets of US national self-confidence, from expansionist rhetoric to racial conflicts, self-consciously aimed at contesting survivalist rhetorics of emergency. Both novels include a *pars construens*, in which survivors to literal and cultural world-shattering catastrophes try to imagine their future as *novum*, in contrast to scenarios of extraordinary measures breaching rules of law and human dignity, a reconstruction presented as inseparable from the ecosphere's healing, and above all as provisional – its self-doubt the evidence of a lasting awareness, grounds for utopian hope.

Ali Dehdarirad, "The Other Side of the Ditch": (De)Constructing Crisis in William Vollmann's *Imperial* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Although in different ways, William Vollmann's *Imperial* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* engage with environmental and societal problems. Representing a state of ecological crisis, among other things, they indicate the fragility of human beings in the world. Against the backdrop of their shared, though not similar, conceptualization of climate issues, the article examines how these books depict the USA as an ongoing site of emergency through an ecocritical approach. More broadly, I analyze how the economic and political apparatus have historically exploited America's natural resources for capitalist profiteering, most often by recourse to states of emergency. *Imperial* depicts Southern California as a dystopian wasteland as well as a haven of possibility. Imperial County's arbitrary border with Mexico delineates the violent imposition of human will on the natural territory for economic and political reasons. At the same time, it represents hope for Mexican immigrants. Vollmann's Imperial County shows immigration as a long-lasting, neglected issue of concern at the US-Mexico border. *The Road* offers a post-apocalyptic vision of the world where natural resources are exhausted. The unfolding of the (natural) catastrophe has led the main characters, a man and his son, to migrate across the USA. Like in *Imperial*, migration seems to promise a better condition of life. Nevertheless, the gray sea at the end of the journey suggests "a world unheard of." By providing such descriptions of the American landscape, these books delve into the anxiety of living in an uncertain world while challenging the US system of socio-political governance.

Cinzia Schiavini, Constructing and Contesting the State(s) of Exception: Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* and the American Transnational Novel

The article investigates how the state(s) of exception generated by 9/11 events, post-national dreams and not-so-postnational realities are at play in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008). Constructed as a series of flashbacks from the narrative present of 2006 in London, the story is told from the perspective of the Dutch-born equities analyst Hans van der Broek, who, after moving to New York in 1998, experiences the social and psychological consequences of 9/11 and becomes emotionally estranged from his wife Rachel (who decides to return to England with their infant son). He seeks refuge and companionship in the immigrant world of American cricket and in his friendship with Chuck Ramkissoo, an Indo-Trinidadian immigrant, entrepreneur and small-time gangster, whose dream of building the nation's first multicultural cricket park ends with the recovery of his body in a canal in Brooklyn. With a special focus on the self-reflexive dimension of the novel, the article explores the dialectics between the 9/11 anxieties and the endless promises of the American Dream, and in particular the state of emergency/exception as an identitarian mode of representation and the processes of memorialization and (re)memory it engenders.

Angelo Arminio, An Alternate History of the Warring States: Matt Gallagher's *Empire City* and Global War in a State of Exception

Matt Gallagher's 2020 novel *Empire City* features an alternate history where the USA, having emerged victorious in Vietnam, have gone on to wage an endless war in the Mediterranean while citizens live in a militaristic police state. This article argues that Gallagher's novel moves between alternate history and superhero fiction to highlight the consequences of an indiscriminate use of executive power through the imposition of a perpetual state of exception – a pervasive feature of western democracies according to Giorgio Agamben. This alarming rupture between the government, citizens, and soldiers exposes an authoritarian threat that, unlike in typical alternate histories, is not tied to a foreign menace or ideology. Rather, it originates within the American democratic state, where the alienating absence of truly democratic decisions on military operations results in a sharp divide between civilians and service members, raising questions

about the motives of the US imperialist practices. In this context, the story reads like a cautionary tale that responds to a perceived state of emergency of American democracy and its declining global hegemony.

Stefano Franceschini, A “Maze of Stone-shadowed Twilight”: The Disorienting Nightmarescape of H. P. Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness*

This article analyzes H. P. Lovecraft’s only novel *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), the author’s most representative endeavor of what I would refer to as “neosupernatural parascientific fiction” – a literary mode defined by the efficacious interplay of (dreadful) unnatural phenomena and science-oriented veracity. Interrogating the persistent oscillation between linguistic overdescription and referential ambiguity in Lovecraft’s longest story, while assessing its evident but idiosyncratic indebtedness to E. A. Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1837), I argue that *At the Mountains of Madness* dwells on conceptual, chronospatial as well as textual complexity to establish a connection between form, content and readerly experience. I turn to Graham Harman’s weird realism theory and Joseph Frank’s seminal notion of literary spatiality to posit that the story’s thematic apparatus, labyrinthine discourse, and intertextual dynamics concur to set up a trap into which readers are lured, in order to elicit in them a growing sense of disorientation.

Livia Bellardini, Assessing a Poetics of the Lyric with Claudia Rankine and Jonathan Culler

From the publication of her first poetry collection *Nothing in Nature Is Private* (1994) to the successful reception of *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) twenty years later, Claudia Rankine has both engaged with established models of the lyric genre and altered the genre’s parameters to suit her own ethical purposes. Mainly drawing on Jonathan Culler’s *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), I argue that by creating a dialogue between his approach to the lyric form and lyric reading, and Rankine’s thrust towards formal experimentation, we can fully appreciate the surprising impact that the lyric has on readers. Moreover, we can trace comparisons between poems from different times and identify their foundational points of contact. In this light, the attention both Culler and Rankine give to the potential social

role of poetics derives from their shared trust in the powerfully intriguing language of lyric to broaden one's imagination. However, whereas Culler identifies the capacity of the lyric to inform the imagination with its use of unordinary language and indirectionality, Rankine's *Citizen* fulfills its imaginative endeavor by directly calling upon the readers' participation in the text.