

American and Italian American experiences via Kim Ragusa's autobiography *The Skin between Us* (2006). Ragusa's memorable portrayal of her Sicilian/Calabrian father sitting with her Black mother and grandmother and being "the darkest one there" (Ragusa in de Lucia 155) offers a vivid commentary on the constructed and fictional quality of Whiteness and Otherness. De Lucia also touches upon the ambivalent status of Sicily: a land suspended between Africa and Europe, Blackness and Whiteness. Sicily's liminal role as dispatcher and receiver of migratory waves highlights the book's relevance to current debates, as Italy is confronted with unparalleled migration flows that are likely to dramatically change the nation's self-narrations over the next years.

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**Sielke, Sabine, ed (in collaboration with Björn Bosserhoff), *Nostalgie / Nostalgia – Imaginierte Zeit-Räume in globalen Medienkulturen / Imagined Time-Spaces in Global Media Cultures*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2017. 286 pages. ISBN: 978-3-631-70081-5.**

Sabine Sielke's edited volume (in collaboration with Björn Bosserhoff) is a systematic historical exploration of one of the most complex, yet strangely elusive global phenomena: nostalgia. *Nostalgie / Nostalgia – Imaginierte Zeit-Räume in globalen Medienkulturen / Imagined Time-Spaces in Global Media Cultures* is a bi-lingual collection of fourteen articles (in either German or English) that maps the field of nostalgia and its various transnational occurrences. This multifaceted volume is preceded by an introductory overview in which Sielke provides three larger conceptual frameworks, namely the narrating, imaging, and inhabiting of nostalgia. These prove to be fruitful vantage points to analyze the spatial-temporal dynamics that nostalgia encompasses. The collection offers transnational and interdisciplinary approaches to current debates on nostalgia through explorations of novels, TV shows, and other cultural artifacts (not exclusively American), and the wide array of essays demonstrates how nostalgia can be conceptualized as an expansive tool of cultural analysis that outlines global cultural and political entanglements. The focus lies on mediated global time-spaces and digital media cultures in the contemporary moment, evoking the importance of nostalgia in both locally bound spaces and in time-warping digital spheres.

Sielke's introduction maps the different force fields that run parallel in this paradigmatic modern phenomenon. She delineates the blurry edges around the field and underlines that nostalgia functions as a political, economic, and cultural interpretative concept. Sielke emphasizes the importance of affective responses and how the concept shifts the experience and malleability of time (what Sielke calls *Zeiterfahrung*, see 11) and its influence on the formulating of affects (*Affektformulierung*, see 12). It is specifically the rhetorics of nostalgia that resonate within the current political climate and policy-making, for they evoke an alleged past "greatness" that has become one of the catalysts in the American self-conceptualization. These future conceptions of the United States may be indicative of how (temporary) coalitions between disparate groups form through evocations of an ideal(ized) past. Speaking to this, Linda Hutcheon outlines that "nostalgia is not something you 'perceive' as an object ... it is what you 'feel' when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight."<sup>1</sup>

The essays on the dwindling American white middle class and male discontent speak to these affective dynamics in a most productive way. Simone Knewitz's article positions the series *Mad Men* vis-à-vis older fictional interrogations of family values, individualism, and suburbia, namely Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922) and Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955). *Mad Men* engages "self-consciously with the phenomenon of nostalgia" — nostalgia unfolds in several directions, providing a simultaneous critique of materialism, uniformity, and social distinctions of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as creating a productive foil to the "socioeconomic anxieties and desires of the white (upper) middle class" (99). These questions of consumerism and class anxiety become visible in Christian Kloeckner's article on Paul Auster's *Sunset Park* (2010) and Dave Eggers's *A Hologram for the King* (2012). Kloeckner describes how the novels are linked by "nostalgic projections of a by-gone world of material objects" (74). He convincingly intertwines gender and nostalgia to allocate a "crisis of masculinity and nostalgia for material objects" (78), and claims that nostalgia has become "one of the most productive elements of white middle-class iconography and identity" (87). This focus on male disillusionment begs a reading of female-oriented nostalgia and a respective portrayal of

1 Linda Hutcheon. "Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern." *Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory: Studies in Comparative Literature* 30 (2000), 199.

alienation and discontent (see Sielke's essay; Gymnich's article).

Jan-Erik Steinkrüger's essay shifts towards idealized notions of suburbia as immersive experiences in Disney theme parks. 'Main Street' functions as a portal between reality and the fantasy world, and it overlays the present with a romanticized and idealized image of the past. Yet, these nostalgic built spaces do not speak to mere escapism but function as a retroactive utopia that counter processes of modernizations (see 241). The past is a stylized and commercialized experience for the entire family, and nostalgia becomes touchable, tangible, and consumable. The volume concludes with two essays focusing on (nostalgic) time-spaces in/ of New York. Nico Völker examines processes of gentrification and preservation and argues that sites in Brooklyn need to be "understood in terms of their usage of nostalgic tropes and discourses" and turns to the gentrification of neighborhoods (251). Nostalgia is not "merely a reaction to the process of gentrification. It is also a productive and often paradoxical part of gentrification" (250). This paradox shines through in Sielke's essay as well. Nostalgia for New York evokes ways of "reaffirming community, creativity, and ethnic diversity in a place that has always been dominated by economics and ethnic conflict" (277). Sielke underlines that nostalgia for New York is longing for a place that never was but may be --- the city must be understood as metonymical for the self-understanding of the United States. These affective modes mirror "the project America which in itself is highly nostalgic. American self-conceptions build on a fundamental paradox: having existed as an imaginary space even before it was 'discovered'" (277). Another temporal aspect emerges, and nostalgia is markedly future-oriented, outlining that the coordinates of America are constantly readjusted.

The contributions allocate cultural productions in global media cultures and outline how the nostalgic mode positions a global consumer market, the financial sector, and ever-new emerging media technologies as images of the future. Nostalgia is a "complex, multi-layered, and ideologically pliable phenomenon," as Kloeckner explains (73). Still, the essays also underline that nostalgia blossoms in the relationship between individual and community, between subject and market. Nostalgia's affective dimension and its ability to disrupt and distort is prevalent, and there is something inherently productive to nostalgia. Sielke emphasizes how nostalgia is a way of "misremembering, of forgetting, a creative act that brings forth something that did not exist before, yet is central to both an individual desire and a cultural imaginary" (266). Understanding nostalgia as this creative, yet

fragile concept outlines most effectively the dynamics between yesterday and tomorrow, and this complex analytical prism helps grapple with the current cultural and political climate in the United States.

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**Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 361 pages. ISBN: 978-1-107-18424-4.**

“The people of the South” were not “led into secession, against their will and their better judgment, by a few ambitious and discontented politicians,” wrote former Confederate president Jefferson Davis in 1881 in his memoir on *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (199). On the contrary, “[t]he truth is, that the Southern people were in advance of their representatives throughout, and that these latter were not agitators or leaders in the popular movement” (200).

Keri Leigh Merritt’s *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South*, in many ways masterfully dispels the Confederate president’s argument by demonstrating the deep-seated tensions between slaveholders and non-slaveholders in antebellum southern society. Despite poor whites leaving “virtually no written records” behind, Merritt – drawing on court records, census data, newspaper articles, veterans’ questionnaires, and slave narratives, among other sources – convincingly argues that poor whites, who found few job prospects and little bargaining power in a slave economy, became increasingly militant during the antebellum era and “helped push slaveholders into disunion” (3, 26).

Building on work by southern historian Charles C. Bolton, Merritt defines poor whites as people “owning neither land nor slaves,” including only those individuals who owned less than 100 dollars (16). Thus, “scholars can safely assume that by 1860, at least one-third of the Deep South’s white population consisted of the truly, cyclically poor” (16). Yet, due to the scarcity of poor whites’ written records, Merritt at times has difficulty documenting where these poor whites lived and how many they were at any given time. This occasional lack of definite proof forces Merritt to qualify her argument (e.g. through the use of “likely,” “relative,” “indicate,” and “seems”) and this along with chronological leaps between the historical