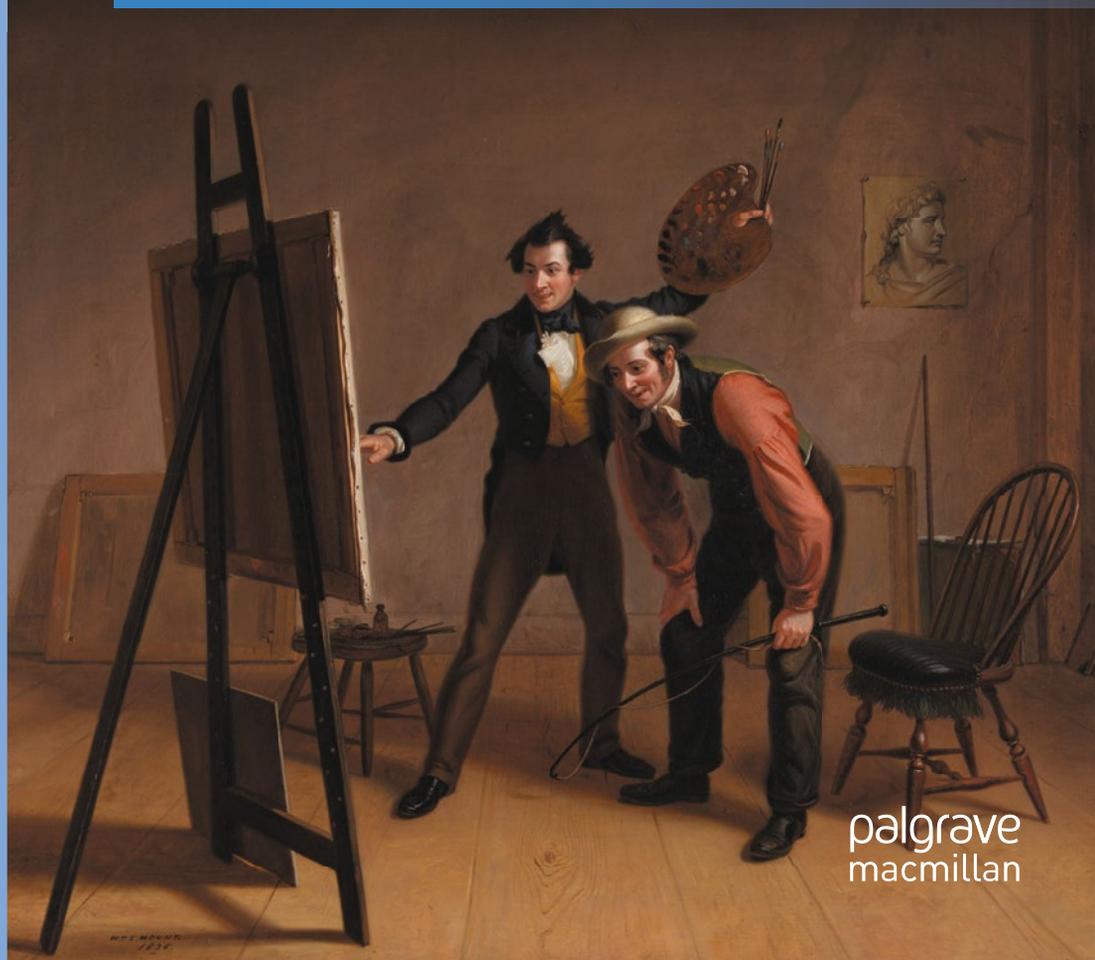




RENEWING THE AMERICAN NARRATIVE

Moveable Designs, Liminal Aesthetics, and Cultural Production in America since 1772

Stefan L. Brandt



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Nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, moulds, makes it. The immobility or bruteness of nature is the absence of spirit; to pure spirit it is fluid, it is volatile, it is obedient. Every spirit builds itself a house, and beyond its house a world, and beyond its world a heaven.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (1836).¹

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (1836; New York et al.: Penguin, 1985), 54.

PREFACE

“ACHTUNG! Sie verlassen jetzt WEST-BERLIN”—these words on a large metal sign, printed in prominent black letters on a white background, must have been the springboard for this book. In West Berlin, where I grew up, signs like this one seemed to be everywhere—a haunting presence in everyday life, cautioning residents against the dangers and costs of boundary crossing. To trespass this border meant to cross over into what appeared to be dangerous territory. Warning signs were not only posted in physical form at Checkpoint Charlie and other border checkpoints but were literally floating all around, embedded into the organizational discourse of the Iron Curtain as well as conveyed in the medial discourses of both West Germany and the so-called German Democratic Republic. While the demarcation lines between one political sphere and the other were obvious, real life in West Berlin was full of contradictions and blurred boundaries.

Here we were, geographically in the ‘heart of the GDR’ (as I would sometimes jokingly tell people when they asked where I was from) but with no affiliation to the land that surrounded us. Architecturally a reminder of the horrors of the Nazi regime and culturally a living homage to the liberalism the city had personified in the 1920s, the Berlin of my own mental map will always be remembered as a hub of intellectual communication, with a radiating Jewish community in the early 1930s, including Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt. (Growing up near Breitenbachplatz, one cannot help but see Arendt’s ghostly presence and her warnings of totalitarianism.) A political enclave that belonged to the

Federal Republic of Germany, the old West Berlin of the 1980s did not have much in common with the country in whose ‘heart’ it happened to be situated. Despite the political separation, there was always a sense, at least for me, that the signs at the German-German border were no more than volatile symbols of a boundary that was often overcome, if only symbolically.

Was West Berlin not a ‘contact zone’ between East and West, after all? We were able to watch the *linientreu* state-run television of the GDR, which, next to unbearably ideological programs, also offered entertainment and even U.S. American films if they were deemed critical enough of the class enemy (like, apparently, Sergio Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in America*). Sometimes we would take the U6 or U8 subway line underneath that enigmatic twin city of East/West Berlin along numerous ‘ghost train stations’ in the Eastern part—always an adventurous and eerily inspiring experience. The ‘West’ in ‘West Berlin’ seemed to mock the very fact that we were actually very far in the East. Living in West Berlin also meant developing a curious sense of self-deprecatory humor that could be described as ‘double consciousness.’ Closed in by walls, West Berlin was a city of paradoxes—the greenest city of West Germany and probably the hippest and most self-aware. There was even a popular discotheque, the ‘Linientreu,’ that made fun of the absurd regime that was so close and yet so far. When my parents decided to move away from West Berlin—they were terrified of the outlook that the city could become a state of its own (for me as a kid a superb thought) or, worse, incorporated by ‘Big Brother’ outside the gates (a thought that did not even cross my childish mind)—I felt bereaved.

Until this very day, I am convinced that my upbringing in West Berlin has somehow mysteriously formed my personality and sown the seed for this book on moveable designs. I am even more convinced when I think of all those “No Trespassing” signs and especially that one particular sign we would sometimes see when approaching the Brandenburg Gate which shouted at us in huge letters: “YOU ARE LEAVING THE AMERICAN SECTOR.” Maybe in protest—but maybe also in silent agreement with the sign’s underlying warning—I have never done so, this book being vivid proof thereof.

I would like to thank my colleagues at the Department of American Studies in Graz, especially Martin Holtz, Manuela Neuwirth, and Scott Zukowski, for helping me expand and polish the final version of this book.

My whole-hearted thanks also go to Katie Beth Neubert and Veronika Rom who have proofread the drafts, to Lisa Buchegger, the heart and soul of our little research area, as well as to Sonja Schmech and Sandra Posch who helped me find the time to write this book by taking care of the organizational apparatus. It is a true privilege to work in the intellectually inspiring and engaging environment provided by the University of Graz. I thus want to thank all the colleagues in Graz who have accompanied me in one way or another in the ‘green heart of Styria,’ especially Klaus-Dieter Ertler, Kurt Hahn, Gabriele Haug-Moritz, Hildegard Kernmayer, Susanne Knaller, Evelyne Krummen, Gerhard Lamprecht, Sarah Mercer, Anne-Kathrin Reulecke, and Steffen Schneider, but also many other dear colleagues I might have forgotten to mention in these hectic days of polishing the book manuscript. My gratitude also goes to the previous universities and departments where I studied, taught, and/or conducted research for this book, especially my alma mater, the Freie Universität Berlin and the John F. Kennedy Institute (JFKI) for North American Studies and its library. Without the research opportunities at the JFKI and the assistance of the library staff (especially Jutta Oppat and Medea Seyder), the bibliography of this book would easily be cut in half. Winfried Fluck, Heinz Ickstadt, Frank Mehring, and Hannah Spahn, just to name a few, have been part and parcel of my academic life in Berlin. Their inspirations have never ceased to stop influencing my academic thinking. *Moveable Designs* would not exist without the academic exchange I was blessed to enjoy here in Graz, but also at the University of Siegen, the University of Vienna, Ruhr University Bochum, Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, and other research institutions around the world. Here, I want to especially thank Philip Barnard, Nancy Bentley, Philipp Berghofer, Ina Bergmann, Lawrence Buell, Jerry Carlson, Selvi Demir, Jane Gaines, Stephen Jay Greenblatt, Walter Grünzweig, Tapati Gupta, Thomas Heise, Gerd Hurm, Rich King, Natia Kvachakidze, Antonia Lant, Saptarshi Mallick, Gabriele Piszcz-Ramirez, Tatiani Rapatzikou, Erik Redling, Jani Scandura, Andrea Schlosser, Malini Johar Schueller, Irakli Tskhvediani, Alexandra Urakova, Len von Morzé, and Devin Zuber for their intellectual input. On a personal level, I need to thank Karsten Berger, Nadia Colditz, Sugar de Santo, Regina Franke (†), Michael Grosz, Petra Gutsmann, Jochen Kulmer, Ursula Meyer-Luyken, Monika Schön, and Guido Wegner who have been invaluable pillars of assistance as friends and

partners in crime. My sincerest thanks go to the authors of the blind reviews whose constructive criticism and suggestions tremendously helped in sharpening the argument in individual chapters. Last but not least, I am extremely grateful to the editors and the production team at Palgrave Macmillan for all their help in bringing this book to publication. Thank you all!

Praise for *Moveable Designs, Liminal Aesthetics, and Cultural Production in America since 1772*

“A sweeping, sophisticated study of American cultural production from the 1770s to the present, *Moveable Designs* uncovers a liminal imaginary of boundary crossing, heterogeneity and transcendence, desirous of negating the conflict and divisiveness of the nation. Using an eclectic array of theoretical perspectives from design theory to critical whiteness studies, Brandt brilliantly uncovers the heterotopian dimensions of canonical writers such as Henry James and Salinger and TV series such as *Mister Ed*.”

—Malini Johar Schueller, Professor of English and Director of the Asian American Studies Certificate Program at the University of Florida, and author of *Campaigns of Knowledge: U.S. Pedagogies of Colonialism and Occupation in the Philippines and Japan*

“This book is a hugely inspiring and much welcome contribution to the growing literature on liminality. Brandt invites the reader into a fascinating journey across liminal aesthetics, literature, design, cinema and carnivalesque humor. It is an entertaining and deeply engaging travel through space and time, from the boundary of the gendered body to outer space. On the road we learn something new about the American cultural experience. We also learn something quite crucial about how to make sense of the world in which we all live through the prism of liminality. Hugely recommended.”

—Bjørn Thomassen, Professor at the Department of Social Sciences and Business at Roskilde University, Denmark, and author of *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between*

“A bold and dazzling contribution to the study of American literature and culture. In this expansive book, Brandt makes the convincing case that transgressivity, restlessness, and inner conflict have been America’s most enduring features since the nation’s founding. They are part of the ‘design’ of the U.S., he argues, which hegemonic culture fashions into a fragile semblance of coherence and unity that is always already splintering internally from its social and political contradictions.”

—Thomas Heise, Associate Professor, Pennsylvania State University (Abington), and author of *The Gentrification Plot: New York and the Postindustrial Crime Novel* and *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture*

“This book is a rich and rewarding dialogue about the history of American self-fashioning that illuminates the ways in which cultural texts have marked, negotiated, and crossed boundaries to foster a hegemonic image and identity. Impressive in its scope and range of examples, it takes readers on a revealing tour through American literature and culture that highlights the centrality of liminality to the fabrication of unity. Of special importance is its attention to design and its use of the concept of design thinking to understand the American experience, which allows the reader to see America anew. This work has special urgency at this moment of apparent disunity and conflict.”

—C. Richard King, Professor and Chair of Humanities, History,
and Social Sciences, Columbia College Chicago, and author of
Beyond Hate: White Power and Popular Culture

“In an interdisciplinary tour de force, Brandt masterfully develops breathtakingly nuanced readings of seemingly well-worn theoretical traditions, from intersectionality to historicism. He then applies his enlivened methodologies to as wide an array of texts as can be imagined, from canonical literature to the television sitcom. In the endlessly fascinating pages of this book, Brandt identifies a complex America that is anything but what it at first seems. *Moveable Designs* is a great book about the United States, one that is far better than the country deserves, but offers what the country so desperately needs.”

—Walter Metz, Professor of Film Studies, School of Media Arts in the College of
Arts and Media at Southern Illinois University, co-editor of *Film Criticism*, and
vice president of the Literature/Film Association

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stefan L. Brandt is Professor of American Studies at the University of Graz and former President of the Austrian Association for American Studies. After receiving his Ph.D. and Venia Legendi at Freie Universität Berlin, he was awarded lecturer positions at Chemnitz University of Technology and Ruhr University Bochum, as well as professorial positions at Freie Universität Berlin, University of Siegen, and University of Vienna. He was affiliated—on the research and teaching level—with numerous other universities, among them Università Ca' Foscari, Radboud Universiteit, University of Toronto, and Harvard University. Brandt has talked and written on a wide range of topics in American Cultural Studies, having written three monographs—*Männerblicke* (Metzler, 1997), *Inszenierte Männlichkeit* (WVB, 2007), and *The Culture of Corporeality* (Winter, 2007)—and (co-)edited eight anthologies, most recently *In-Between: Liminal Spaces in Canadian Literature and Culture* (Lang Canadiana Series, 2017), *Space Oddities* (with Michael Fuchs, LIT Verlag, 2018), *Animals on American Television* (with Michael Fuchs, special issue of *EJAS*, 2018), and *Ecomasculinities: Negotiating Male Gender Identity in U.S. Fiction* (with Rubén Cenamor, Lexington Books, 2019). He is also one of the founding members of the international, peer-reviewed journal *AmLit—American Literatures* (www.amlit.eu) and the European research network ‘Digital Studies’ (<https://www.eaas.eu/eaas-networks/643->

[eaas-digital-studies-network](#)) (together with Frank Mehring and Tatiani Rapatzikou). Brandt is currently working on a book project dealing with the transatlantic origins of U.S. formation literature (*Burgeoning Selves: Transatlantic Dialogue and Early American Bildungsliteratur, 1776–1860*).

More detailed information can be found on Brandt's website <https://homepage.uni-graz.at/en/stefan.brandt/>.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Welcome to the Twilight Zone

MOVEABLE FICTIONS—CULTURAL (DIS)UNITY AND BOUNDARY TRANSGRESSION

After the November 2015 terrorist attacks at the Bataclan concert hall in Paris, France saw the rise of an unlikely bestseller—Ernest Hemingway’s buoyant memoir *Paris est une fête*. The book had first been published more than fifty years earlier under the suggestive title *A Moveable Feast*.¹ In the wake of the mass shooting, during which ninety people were killed and more than 200 were wounded, the sales of Hemingway’s work, known for its exhilarating celebration of life in Paris, soared in the city’s bookstores. At the same time, copies of the book in the French translation, *Paris est une fête*, could be found among the bouquets and candles in the improvised commemorations of the murder victims created by Parisians.² The emergence of Hemingway’s book as a symbol of survival and vivacity at a time of shock and confusion begs several questions: How could a book that celebrated the vibrancy of the now devastated city—and one written not by a French author, but by an expatriate American—become

¹ Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (1964; London: Arrow Books, 2004).

² See Adam Chandler, “How Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* Has Become a Bestseller in France,” *The Atlantic* (23 Nov. 2015), <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/11/ernest-hemingway-paris-attacks-a-moveable-feast/417294/> (accessed 20 May 2022).

an icon of French cultural identity during a period of national mourning and crisis? Moreover, what does this astounding adaptability of *A Moveable Feast* reveal about the underlying mechanisms of literary and cultural practice in general, especially when employed by U.S. American authors? One explanation for this phenomenon can be found in the book's narrative technique of constantly shifting between the local setting of Paris and the global context of Hemingway's biographical background in the U.S. In her essay "An All-Too-Moveable Feast," Catherine Keyser argues that this tension between the local and the global constitutes the aesthetic basis of the book.³ I want to extend Keyser's argument even further, contending that *A Moveable Feast*'s success in post-terror Paris exemplifies the symbolic potential of poetic works in general. Hemingway's book represents the ability of literary and cultural texts to transcend boundaries. Literary works can provide—or rather *afford*, to use a common term from design theory—aesthetic effects that engender a sense of identity formation that goes well beyond the work's narrow composition or authorial background. Hemingway's memoir is not the only 'moveable book' in terms of its capability of adapting and inscribing itself into different contexts of reception; many other literary and cultural works as well are 'moveable texts.'

This study—*Moveable Designs, Liminal Aesthetics, and Cultural Production in America since 1772*—is an attempt to explain the mystery and fascination that surround many works of art. It wants to decipher the operational mechanisms of poetic texts within what Pierre Bourdieu calls "the field of cultural production."⁴ The term 'cultural production' can be traced back to the Marxist concept of "productive forces,"⁵ by which we may subsume "all and any of the means of the production and reproduction of real life."⁶ Following Raymond Williams's usage of Marx's theory, the operational target of these 'productive forces' is "the application and development of a certain body of social knowledge."⁷ This knowledge production cannot rely on seemingly fixed thought structures or stable mechanisms of reception but has to adapt the reservoirs of knowledge to the ever-changing conditions of cultural practice. "The specific kinds of

³ Catherine Keyser, "An All-Too-Moveable Feast: Ernest Hemingway and the Stakes of Terroir," *Resilience: A Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 2.1 (Winter 2014): 10–23; 11.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. and introd. by Randal Johnson (1993; Cambridge, UK: Polity P, 2017).

⁵ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1977), 75.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷ *Ibid.*

knowledge enabled by literary works,” Michael Niblett postulates, “can sensitize readers to the possibility of new types of social practice [...] and new analytical optics,”⁸ thus engendering more flexible and adaptable forms of cultural production. One strategy employed by hegemonic culture to deal with the unpredictable nature of social practice is what I call ‘moveable designs.’

The concept carries a reference not only to Hemingway’s enigmatic memoir (which functions as a springboard for my later analyses of the ‘moveability’ of cultural works) but also to the concept of *design*, which this study aims to apply to the world of cultural production. Such a theoretical connection of insights from design theory with approaches developed in literary and cultural studies is long overdue. *Moveable Designs*⁹ argues that ideas of design thinking can be productively used to better understand the composition and effect of cultural texts. Seminal studies such as Jane Tompkins’s *Sensational Designs* (1985) and Caroline Levine’s *Forms* (2015) have already linked the notion of ‘design’ to literary and cultural texts.¹⁰ Similarly, Judith Fetterley’s landmark study *The Resisting Reader* from 1977 employs the term “palpable designs”¹¹ to critique the rigid ideological structures of American fiction. For Fetterley, it is a chief goal of feminist literary theory “to make available to consciousness that which has been largely left unconscious and thus to change our understanding of these fictions, our relation to them, and their effect on us. It is to make palpable their designs.”¹² Despite these attempts to put the term ‘design’ on the radar of literary criticism, a theoretical and methodological

⁸ Michael Niblett, *World Literature and Ecology* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 4.

⁹ While the book’s full title is *Moveable Designs, Liminal Aesthetics, and Cultural Production in America since 1772*, all future references in the text will use the shortened version *Moveable Designs*.

¹⁰ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985); Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2015). See also J.M.Q. Davies, *Blake’s Milton Designs: The Dynamics of Meaning* (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill P, 1993). Other recent attempts to employ design theory for literary and cultural studies include the following anthologies: Stephan Moebius and Sophia Prinz (eds.), *Das Design der Gesellschaft: Zur Kulturanthropologie des Designs* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012); Elizabeth Grierson, Harriet Edquist, and Hélène Frichot (eds.), *De-Signing Design* (London, New York, et al.: Lexington Books, 2015).

¹¹ Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977), 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, xi–xii. The term ‘unconscious’ is used by Sigmund Freud to characterize the reservoir of thoughts, emotions, desires, and recollections that exist outside of conscious awareness. S. Freud, “An Outline of Psychoanalysis,” 1938, in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. Adam Phillips (London et al.: Penguin, 2006), 1–63; 12–19.

approach that relates the key findings of design studies to an interpretation of literary and cultural production has not been provided until now.

Moveable Designs interrogates the notion of a presumptive unity or exceptionalism of the American experience, arguing that inner conflict, divisiveness, and contradiction are integral to the nation's cultural designs, themes, and motifs. The concomitant pervasive liminality of U.S. cultural production—its restlessness—is the key to understanding the resilience of American culture. The book illuminates numerous crucial phases of U.S. literature and culture, from the American Revolution to the post-modern era. It combines a wide array of approaches, from cultural history and social anthropology to reception aesthetics, phenomenology, and deconstruction. In addition, it employs critical whiteness studies as well as gender and postcolonial theory to better understand how the moveable designs of literary and cultural texts impact and interconnect with American social practice. In its multidisciplinary methodology, the book sees itself in the tradition of *intersectionality* as an analytical framework making visible the ideological underpinnings of hegemonic culture while also exploring the potential of “coalition building within the academy [...]”¹³ Coined by American law scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1991 article “Mapping the Margins,”¹⁴ intersectionality “views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age—among others—as interrelated and mutually shaping one another.”¹⁵ This concerns the hidden designs of power relations as well as their effects on the social world. Focusing on “understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences,”¹⁶ an intersectional approach involves critical cultural geography, phenomenology, and reception aesthetics, since all these disciplines are interested in the interplay between representation and social practice. A key feature of intersectionality studies that this book utilizes is the attempt to create productive synergies out of the

¹³ Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (2nd ed., Cambridge, UK et al.: Polity P, 2020), 90.

¹⁴ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, 43: 1241–1299. See also Collins & Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 91; Nina Lykke, *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 78.

¹⁵ Collins & Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

convergence of disparate academic fields, thus engendering “new directions for rethinking existing areas within a traditional discipline.”¹⁷

Moveable Designs puts forth the argument that the dominant cultural imagination in the U.S. has always been marked by what I call ‘liminal aesthetics,’ that is, a desire to transgress symbolic boundaries and create an illusory veneer of unity and inclusion. It is the purpose of “literary liminality studies,”¹⁸ as Hannah Murray describes this particular research field, to expose the invisible patterns of social control at work in hegemonic culture. Liminality studies do not necessarily have to target marginalized literatures but can also increase our understanding of a given culture by focusing on the canon. “Texts by canonical authors,” Isabel Soto writes, “yield rich insights if we locate our reading of them precisely in [...] liminal or betwixt-and-between spaces [...]”¹⁹ Since canonized texts are also situated ‘betwixt and between’ (albeit in a different way than minority literatures), an analysis of these texts and their liminal structures helps produce crucial insights into the aesthetics of hegemonic cultural and social practice. As Michael Niblett notes, “social knowledge [is] fundamentally interwoven with the reproduction of material life.”²⁰ In other words, the literary and cultural representations of this material life also reflect the knowledges produced in a given society. Thus, ‘social knowledge’ constitutes the reference point for all forms of cultural production, being a collaboration between society as a whole and its segments (that is, individual behaviors, politics, history, works of art, architecture, and so on).

In his pathbreaking study *Social Systems*, the sociologist and philosopher Niklas Luhmann explains that, in the cultural formation of societies, “unity can come about only through a relational operation, [...] it must be produced.”²¹ This ‘production’ of unity necessitates that the parts of a whole are put into relation to each other through acts of *symbolic* interconnection, which often ignores their actual disparities and differences. The illusion of unanimity is then generated by meaningful, yet inchoate articulations of self-determination within this culture—a procedure typical

¹⁷ Ibid., 46.

¹⁸ Hannah Lauren Murray, *Liminal Whiteness in Early US Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2021), 6.

¹⁹ Isabel Soto, “Introduction,” *A Place That Is Not a Place: Essays in Liminality and Text* (Madrid: Gateway P, 2000), 7–16; 15.

²⁰ Niblett, *World Literature*, 3.

²¹ Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems* (1984; Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), 33.

of what Luhmann terms “self-referential systems.”²² The conjunction of the individual parts of society into a meaningful whole is vital to the production of cultural unity. To be successful, this process requires that the boundaries within a heterogeneous whole are interconnected. Following Luhmann, the production of unity through relational operations between individual units can be observed in social systems; however, similar practices are also at work in the creation of cultural texts. An aesthetics of boundary transgression—for which I use the term ‘liminal aesthetics’—fulfills the function of endowing whole texts with life and meaning. The practice of liminal aesthetics finds its expression in what I call ‘moveable designs,’ by which I define a set of constructed, yet dynamic features within a given text as well as within the cultural imaginary of each historical period.

In American cultural history, this artificial ‘unity’ has consistently served to conceal the real-life experiences of *disunity* and *disparity*. The maxim of *e pluribus unum*, already proposed in foundational documents of the U.S., serves as an invisible master narrative in canonized fictional texts, suggesting diversity and complexity. Underlining America’s claim to a productive coexistence of heterogeneous forces, such narratives of unity support the (misleading) impression that hierarchical markers like gender, class, and ethnicity were no fixed categories in the land where ‘all men are created equal.’ In his analysis of the “cultural richness”²³ of modern societies and its (mis)representation, Derek Attridge focuses on the narrative modes of omission through which social complexity is reflected in literature: “At any given moment,” he writes, “this complexity is a divided and contradictory one, its *semblance of coherence* sustained by the repression or exclusion of some elements and possibilities, subject to constant challenge from the outside as well as to ongoing tensions within.”²⁴ Attridge’s observation concerning the ‘semblance of coherence’ in heterogeneous societies applies to the construct of America in particular. Perhaps more than other countries, the U.S.—in its hegemonic documents of self-representation—seems permeated by a long history of fissures, rifts, and internal boundaries. Many literary works—both canonized and peripheral—celebrate the project of ‘America’ as symbolically *overcoming* these mental and

²² Ibid., 32.

²³ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (2004; London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 34.

²⁴ Ibid.; my emphasis.

geographical frontiers as well as the inner conflicts that have formed the nation. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt have postulated that “the limits of the sayable and thinkable” are rendered permeable in practically all societies through literary and cultural practices. “[I]n any culture that has left a complex record of itself [...] there turn out to be virtually no boundaries that are not transgressed by someone or other (or imagined by those in power to be transgressed in some dark corner).”²⁵

In U.S. history, the concept of boundary transgression can be traced back to the nation’s colonial beginnings, as Tzvetan Todorov has demonstrated in *The Conquest of America*.²⁶ According to Todorov, it was one of the chief stratagems of the early settlers, beginning in the sixteenth century, to create a symbolic image of America, in which *the other* seemed connected to *the self*. Since the project of ‘America’ is intimately linked to the yearnings of the European pioneers, it carries elements of reconciliation of the Old World and New World in its design. While the nation was involved in centuries of ‘Indian Wars’ from the 1620s onward, the official discourse created legends of ‘noble savages’ and peaceful unions (as in the Pocahontas tale), just as the government denied basic civil rights such as citizenship and suffrage to indigenous tribes. Despite the official doctrine of a strict distinction between ‘self’ and ‘other,’ a subliminal discourse of symbolic inclusion and integration opened up an alternative gateway. As Todorov observes, citing the French poet Rimbaud “[w]e can discover the other in ourselves, realize we are not a homogeneous substance, radically alien to whatever is not us [...].”²⁷ In America, the concept of the ‘radically alien’ was effectively integrated—at least on a symbolic level—into the vision of a unified nation. Americans learned that they could, indeed, feel a bit *like* the Indian and profit from their presumptive closeness to the natural environment. Sacvan Bercovitch mentions George Bancroft as one of the first scholars to describe this paradoxical nature of U.S. cultural self-formation in the first volume of his epic *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent* (first published in 1856).²⁸ American nationhood is characterized in Bancroft’s study as the result of

²⁵ Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago and London: The U of Chicago P, 2001), 26.

²⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (1982; Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1999), 3.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ George Bancroft, *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent I* (Little, Brown, and Company: Boston, 1856–1874).

fluctuating, constantly shifting processes. From this perspective, the destiny of the whole nation revolved around “the country’s ongoing struggles” and its desperate fight to find a “telos” for its existence.²⁹ Accordingly, the American Revolution marks the beginning of “an indefinitely self-renewing rite of passage,” in which Americans heroically succeeded as “a people in transition, advancing generation by generation through severe trials of character toward a consummation that remains forever beyond the next frontier.”³⁰ In his 1893 essay that laid the foundation for the ‘frontier thesis,’ the historian Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the existence of a boundary line between ‘civilization’ and ‘barbarism’ in the nation’s colonial history fundamentally shaped American cultural identity. The *frontier*, Turner’s text contends, provided a forceful template for the practice of boundary crossing in American history as part of the westward movement and beyond.³¹

The symbolic construction of America as a nation in *continuous transition*—a rhetoric of which the ‘frontier thesis’ is a powerful example—demanded the creation of narratives that accentuated boundary crossing, transcendence, heterogeneity, and union over conflict and duality. In his study of American cultural identity, Giles Gunn proposes a model that understands “[t]he Other’ [...] not simply as the opposite of the self, but also as [...] a kind of construct of the self, a construct, one might say, of [...] the self’s own imagined alterity.”³² This conjunction between the self and ‘the other’ is an important premise for the formation of national communities, since it interconnects heterogeneous elements within the process of cultural production. Contrary to Attridge, who claims that “straightforward *production*, what is often called ‘making,’ introduces no alterity and instigates no transformation of the cultural field,”³³ I am arguing in this study that alterity and transformation are, indeed, crucial factors

²⁹ Qtd. in Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York et al.: Routledge, 1993), 180.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 1893, in: George Rogers Taylor (ed.), *The Turner Thesis: Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History* (Boston: D.C. Heath & Company, 1949), 1–18.

³² Giles Gunn, *Thinking Across the American Grain: Ideology, Intellect, and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago and London: The U of Chicago P, 1992), 10. For a discussion of the psychological concept of ‘the other’ and its relevance for cultural theory, see Stephen Frosh, “The Other,” *American Imago*, 59.4 (Winter 2002): 389–407.

³³ Attridge, *Singularity*, 34; emphasis in the original.

in the making of ‘America’ as an imaginary construct. Such a holistic approach conceives national identity formation as an intricate process encompassing contradictory and seemingly paradoxical positions. It views identity as a structurally unstable and malleable concept, thus acknowledging the processual, versatile nature of national self-modeling. Stuart Hall has suggested the following definition of identity that capitalizes upon the fluctuating character of self-expression:

[I]dentity is not a set of fixed attributes, the unchanging essence of the inner self, but a constantly shifting process of *positioning*. [...] In fact, identity is always a never-completed *process* of becoming—a process of shifting *identifications*, rather than a singular, complete, finished state of being.³⁴

Hall’s notion of identity as a ‘process of shifting identifications’ is an important reference point for my study. *Moveable Designs* argues that U.S. cultural and literary practice has always capitalized upon the transgressive, shapeshifting nature of fictional texts. American national self-fashioning, in this view, is grounded in a type of literature that proffers a dynamic process of positioning and becoming. According to Wolfgang Iser, literary fiction is always designed through “an act of boundary-crossing”³⁵ that aims at “finding oneself outside oneself.”³⁶ Far from letting the individual leave the boundaries of the self (as in Plato’s parables), fictionality enables an experience of transgression *within* the limits of the self. On this testing ground, “fictional ecstasy permits us to step outside the contexts that normally define what we are.”³⁷

During this aesthetic experience, the reader is allowed the pleasures of a dissolution of boundaries while still moving within the safe space of literary fiction. In his landmark work of literary theory, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes has demonstrated that the typical reader of fiction is a *boundary crosser* who joyfully revels in the idiosyncrasies and paradoxes produced in the realm of imagination. It is a reader

³⁴ Stuart Hall, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands* (Durham: Duke UP, 2017), 16; emphases in the original. Cf. Collins & Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 167.

³⁵ Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1993), 22.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 84. Iser here refers to the Bakhtinian concept of ‘differenciation,’ which enables a convergence of *self* and *other* within the imaginary field of the text.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

who abolishes within himself [*sic*] all barriers, all classes, all exclusions, not by syncretism but by simple discard of that old specter: logical contradiction; who mixes every language, even those said to be incompatible; who silently accepts every charge of illogicality, of incongruity.³⁸

In addition to the text's transgressive character on the semantic level, the process of textual composition itself can be conceived as an act of boundary crossing. "[T]he meaning of a literary text," Iser notes, "is not a definable entity but, if anything, a dynamic happening."³⁹ If the fictional text is not just black letters on white paper but an "event,"⁴⁰ as Iser insists, we must consider the mechanisms of transfer that enable this "dynamic *interaction* between text and reader."⁴¹ In order to lure the reader into the world of the text, a complex process of aesthetic involvement must be engendered. This engendering ultimately defies the boundaries between text and reader, reality and fiction.

These general observations inform the key argument of this study. *Moveable Designs* claims that the boundary-crossing nature of literary and cultural fiction (on both the semantic and the aesthetic level) is an essential premise for the related process of *national self-fashioning* in America. My use of the term 'national self-fashioning' is inspired by Luhmann's view of societies as "self-referential systems"⁴² and Maturana and Varela's concept of "autopoiesis"⁴³ that describes the process by which social entities organize themselves through acts of self-formation. In a similar vein, the New Historicist concept of *self-fashioning*, employed by Greenblatt and others, enables us to better understand "the complex interactions of meaning in a given culture."⁴⁴ "Self-fashioning," Greenblatt explains, "is in effect [...] the cultural system of meanings that creates specific individuals by

³⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (1973; New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 3.

³⁹W. Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1976; Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), 22.

⁴⁰Ibid., 125.

⁴¹Ibid., 107.

⁴²Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 32.

⁴³The term 'autopoiesis' was originally developed in biology to illustrate the self-maintaining nature of living cells, but is equally applied to social and cultural systems that create self-reflexive models of their own structure. Cf. Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (1972; Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1980), 96–108.

⁴⁴Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980; Chicago and London: The U of Chicago P, 2005), 3.