The Mythic Life of Culture Wars: Editorial

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Abstract

This essay frames the special issue on *The Mythic Life of Culture Wars*, which examines how myth operates as a dynamic technology of mediation within contemporary culture wars. We argue that today's culture wars run on myth as narrative form, media infrastructure, and political technology. From Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence's *American Monomyth* to Jeffrey C. Alexander's theory of symbolic performance, US public life repeatedly casts conflict in dramaturgical terms, invoking heroes and villains, symbols rendered powerful via cumulative charge, values made sacred via collective historical investment, crisis and redemption. In digital environments tuned to emotion and repetition, such mythopoietic templates migrate across platforms, naturalizing ideology and converting attention into legitimacy. Drawing on scholars of myth such as Roland Barthes and Chiara Bottici, we frame myth as ongoing work on narrative patterns that organize belief and belonging. Reception studies further ground our claim that myth's "afterlives" are interventions that can entrench power or contest it. In tracing what the issue's contributions reveal about these processes, we map how myth adapts to changing aesthetic and technological forms, and how it mediates between crisis and community. We also show how the essays extend existing debates while opening new pathways through which myth can be studied. The essay concludes by proposing critical myth-work as both interpretive and political practice; a means of decoding how myths render conflict intelligible, legitimate, and, at times, reparable, while also enabling us to imagine futures that might yet be otherwise.

Keywords: myth, culture war, performance, mythopoesis, media.
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Introduction

American culture has always had a flair for drama. Scholars and cultural critics have repeatedly remarked on its persistent tendency to frame social experience in symbolically heightened narratives that make the boundary between history and legend porous. As early as 1978, Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, in their provocatively titled *American Monomyth*, argued that the United States (henceforth US) has habitually recast its national identity in arcs drawn from classical mythology. Decades later, in 2004, Jeffrey C. Alexander's *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* advanced the idea of public life as symbolic performance, and though his work is not confined to the American case, he shows how this idea finds particularly vivid illustration there. In the US, even political disagreements tend to arrive onstage armed with narratives and buoyed by a sense of cosmic significance.

Take the so-called "culture war." What began in the 1990s as a culture "war" between conservatives and liberals over issues like abortion and multicultural curricula has, more

recently, mutated into something stranger and—perhaps thanks to the internet—significantly more contagious. More than arguments over policy or preference, these are clashes of worldview saturated in story and staged in the language of symbols, heroes, high-stakes plots, and sacred values. Whether it's Medusa reclaimed as an emblem of female rage and resistance in the aftermath of *Dobbs* (see Di Liscia),[1] the "Great Replacement" theory cast as mythic invasion (see National Immigration Forum), or climate change denial reframed through heroic individualism (see Moore and Roberts), today's culture wars lean heavily on myth. And myth here is no incidental inflection but central grammar; a kind of symbolic and semantic scaffolding for the conflicts to grow potent. Examples like the above trade in archetypes, but also feed on spectacle and on a shared sense that something far larger than legislation is at stake: identity, morality, even fate.

That the term *culture war* now circulates globally, often in connection with distinctly American icons and idioms, should come as no surprise. Helen Lewis quipped recently that "the world is trapped in America's culture war," and if that reads like an exaggeration, it's not a wild one. The debate over drag story hours in Texas finds strange echoes in suburban Melbourne (Taylor), and school curricula in Poland and Brazil now tremble under the weight of American-imported ideological anxieties (Norris; Rogero). It seems the US exports its most heated symbolic battles.

This virality is hardly an accident as culture wars flourish in digital environments. Their building blocks—emotion, opposition, moralism, repetition—are algorithmically sound, especially when it comes to social media, insofar as the above components align with how these platforms are programmed to prioritize content. Social media, in fact, do much more than amplify political drama; they shape it, select from us for it, and curate it into shareable, attractive forms (see, indicatively, Milli et al.). And myth, with its condensed meaning and emotional pull, fits this mold perfectly. A story doesn't have to be factually persuasive if it is narratively effective. It only has to *feel* true, or at least familiar.

So, where does myth end, and the culture war begin? That is not a trick question, but neither is it easy to answer. As Rhys H. Williams has argued, the culture war itself can be understood as a myth; not (necessarily) as fiction, but as framework. Something that explains social tension by placing it within a recognizable narrative and dramaturgical form: there are heroes and villains, fateful choices, sacred principles under siege, climactic moments of reckoning, theatricality, plot-driven meaning-making, and so on (12). The whole affair runs on stagecraft as much as substance. In this sense, the culture war doesn't just *use* myth; it *is* myth, staged and lived out on the ground, online, in legislation or litigation, in protest or parody, or all the above.

This special issue takes that observation seriously. Essentially, it asks: what happens when we look at the culture war through the lens of myth; that is, as interpreters of narrative, symbol, and media form? How do stories get enlisted, revised, rebranded, or weaponized in these cultural clashes? And what does the reception of myth across media and contexts tell us about how societies process conflict?

[1] Medusa is powerfully evoked in US feminist visual culture and protest art, including the 2020 NYC "Medusa With the Head of Perseus" installation tied to the #MeToo movement (see also lucianogarbati.com/medusa).

We also pay close attention to the flip side: how culture wars shape the afterlives of myth. Because reception is never neutral. It's anything but. When a myth is pulled into a school board fight, streamed in a sci-fi series, remixed into a country song millions lip sync to, or repurposed as a meme, it changes. It may gain weight in one place and lose subtlety in another. Arguably, the myths that will survive our moment are those that play well on screens; those that are sharp and striking, while others will keep getting flattened, sidelined, or reanimated only to be commodified and stripped of their depth.

In foregrounding the relationship between myth and cultural conflict, this issue builds on *Ex-centric Narratives*' long-standing interest in cultural reception, media transformations, transnational literary and cultural flows. To mention just a couple of cases in point, recent work in the journal has traced how Greek and American mythic narratives are reimagined in Chicanx performance and feminist borderland expression, and how digital and locative media reshape narrative space (to be discussed later). Here, we take these and other strands, and knot them into a broader inquiry: how does myth become a medium for contemporary social struggle?

A clarification is due at this juncture. We see myth as anything but some timeless, universal solvent, or remedy. On the contrary, the essays gathered here treat myth as a mercurial substance, capable of coherence or distortion, mobilized toward justice or intolerance, always already open to contestation. Another thing they have in common is that they all read myth as one of the primary terrains of the culture war.

This essay, then, sets the scene for an exploration of culture war as both storytelling engine and site of ideological performance. It sketches the stakes, and signals that myth is not an ornamental vestige of past civilizations, but a living and—we dare claim—occasionally dangerous thing, wandering streets, timelines, classrooms, and courtrooms. Besides framing the conversation, the essay extends an invitation to think through the tensions between myth and cultural conflict with critical sensitivity, but also with a sense of cultural urgency. But to understand how we have arrived at today's state of affairs, we must first situate the culture war within its longer genealogy.

Background

Though the term itself dates to the late twentieth century, culture wars are not a contemporary phenomenon in the US In his 1991 book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, James Davison Hunter put a name to what has been brewing since the early days of the Republic: a clash—sometimes a protracted conflict—of moral visions rooted in divergent understandings of, among other things, national identity, public demeanor, ethics, order, and, at bottom, what matters most, in (national) life. What Hunter diagnosed has thenceforth multiplied and mutated.

Earlier moral panics, such as the savage tumult of the Salem witch trials (Norton), and ideological battles, such as those that raged over evolution (Miller), unfolded as a rule along clearly drawn battle lines between factions. This gradually changed, as other literal and symbolic battles continued to shape American consciousness. Indeed, the fault lines became far more tangled in Antebellum and Reconstruction struggles over slavery and women's suffrage, with racial politics getting inseparable from voting rights debates (Delahaye and Ramdani; "A Nation Divided"). Yet, even as late as the 1990s, it was still possible to pit

"traditionalists" against "progressives" with relative safety in discussing the period's culture wars. The contemporary scene, however, resembles something closer to a carnival of crises, competing yet bleeding into each other, playing out on screens and stages large and small. It's impossible not to notice—if not appreciate—how sprawling it has all become.

The past few years have witnessed conflicts over TikTok bans, climate policy, trans athletes, mask mandates, and so much more, all jostling for attention in a crowded—conceptually as well as emotionally—marketplace of (at best) indignation and (at worst) outrage. From the mid-1990s until the mid-2020s when this is written, movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter have greatly influenced public discussions of gender and race; QAnon has adapted conspiracy into participatory performance art; heated disputes over statues have turned city squares into frontlines. And, as noted in the previous section, ideological clashes of this kind now travel faster than ever before by algorithm, packaged as binge-worthy stories for a global audience. The more emotionally charged a heated school debate or an incendiary soundbite are, the more preferential treatment they receive by platforms like Facebook, X, TikTok, and YouTube, whose coding ensures it will be rewatched—and, if rewatched enough, most probably be memed—into cultural ubiquity (Munn; Bilton). Hence broadcasting morphs into cultural programming. The upshot of this is that the boundaries of what counts as "culture war" and whose war it is have blurred so thoroughly that Lewis's remark, poetic hyperbole aside, is not far from the mark.

If anything unites these disparate battles, it is their reliance on emotionally charged and relatable—perhaps because also appropriately condensed—stories that make even the untidiest conflicts feel legible. And this is where myth takes center stage as political technology. As Roland Barthes famously argued in *Mythologies*, myth is not a kind of old fable to be preserved in a display case but a "type of speech," a semiotic technology that naturalizes ideology by making cultural constructs appear self-evident (109). Bruce Lincoln sharpened this idea by showing how myth functions as an "instrument" of authority, cloaking political agendas in the aura of the "sacred" (30-36). More recently, Chiara Bottici, in her brilliant *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, framed myth as "a process, one of continuous work on a basic narrative pattern that responds to a need for significance in order to live in a world that is less indifferent [to us]."[2] "This is particularly true in the realm of politics," Bottici argues, as social groups and societies draw from the endlessly renewable cultural resource of myth to "orient" themselves (*A Philosophy* 1-3), and "to come to terms with the multifaceted character of the political world" ("Myths" 915). The aforementioned views underscore myth's political vitality, partly deriving from the fact that myths are not merely inherited but constantly reactivated and repurposed to meet the needs of the present.

Importantly, Mark Bevir reminds us that mythic narratives "are not learned but rather apprehended through a more or less unconscious cumulative exposure to them" (*Mythic Narrative*) From listening to the radio on our way to work in rush hour traffic to scrolling on

[2] It is worth citing Mark Bevir's elaboration on the difference between meaning and significance when it comes to how societies employ myth: "A myth does not simply provide meaning but also significance to human existence. *Significance* is more than meaning; something can have meaning and still remain completely insignificant. Mythic narratives add significance and drama by accounting for the origins of things or where things are going. It is from the identification with such a drama that the specific *pathos* of a mythic narrative derives."

our phones at night until we get sleepy, "we are exposed to a large variety of stories, some of which have a deep mythical impact on our psyche. When this happens, mythic narratives influence our political choices in ways that, to a large extent, escape our capacity for critical scrutiny" ("Mythic Narrative"). This is why myth works so well in culture-war environments; precisely because it inhabits our most fundamental perceptions of the world, myth is practically, cognitively, and aesthetically resonant, as Bottici makes clear, especially when also sensorially encoded in attractive ways, and thus very easy to mobilize ("Myths" 915).

Myth, then, plays a dual role in the present context. On the one hand, it serves as a symbolic arsenal. Let's consider a few more prominent examples. Climate activists adopt Prometheus-like imagery to dramatize ecological rescue (Kim); Atlas is invoked as a figure of free-market heroism holding up capitalism in think-tank branding and capitalist rhetoric (Burns 174); and mythic framings of "heroic mothers" and "innocent children under siege" frequently dominate debates over school curricula and gender identity, portraying parents—especially women—as defenders of innocence guarding vulnerable youth while, at the same time, marshaling moral panic around educational content seen as threatening ("Report"). Such flashpoints show how myth provides both symbolic imagery and semantic structure, distilling ideology into a form seemingly easy to decipher. They evince that myth shapes the culture war itself as lived *mythos*.

On the other hand, then, the culture war functions as *mythos*, in the sense of a narrative-based system, immersive and intertextual, through the working of which collective concerns, identities, allegiances, and enmities are organized. Rhys Williams's argument, cited earlier, namely that culture wars are not merely fought with myths but are themselves mythic performances enacted in diverse settings, is echoed by Alexander et al.'s observation that politics is, after all, "symbolic performance" in action, with inbuilt ritualized roles and story arcs (15-18). Alexander had already expounded in his landmark *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* on how public figures cast themselves as characters in narratives, staging meaning but also crisis and crisis resolution as collective drama primed for media spectacle. As the essays in this special issue show, such performances take shape in domains as diverse as post-9/11 cinema and ethnographic encounters with the American Dream.

This performative dimension is further elaborated by critics like Neil Gabler, who offers a context-specific study of how and why American political life increasingly resembles mythic drama performed as entertainment; a show that plays out in legislative chambers, townhalls, public schools, and live streams alike. While Roger Chapman's *Culture Wars: An Encyclopedia* does not advance this idea directly, it is worth noting, because its extensive documentation of moral and political battles both illustrates how deeply myth affects their presentation and stakes, and sheds new and much-needed light on "what is unique about what has been occurring in American society" (xxxi). Those *Encyclopedia* contributors who discuss American culture-war rhetoric underscore, for instance, how political discourse often frames opponents as existential threats, privileges divisive topics, and presents disagreement as a war of cosmic proportions.

Reception studies sharpen this picture further. Especially scholars like Stuart Hall, Lorna Hardwick, and Carol Gillespie, Charles Martindale, and Richard F. Thomas, who have persuasively demonstrated that myth reception is never neutral, but rather an ideologically invested act of revis(ion)ing, whether through reinterpretation or reinscription, equally

concerned with reshaping myth as with preserving it. This strand of scholarship has expanded in recent decades through postcolonial and decolonial approaches. For example, Hardwick and Carol Gillespie Gillespie's *Classics in Post-Colonial Worlds,* and Emily Greenwood's *Afro-Greeks* examine how classical traditions are reimagined in contexts of colonial legacies and "epistemic resistance." It has also been enriched through intersectional analyses, such as Nancy S. Rabinowitz's work on race and gender in classical reception.

These frameworks allow us to appreciate how myths are continually revisited to make sense—sometimes misleadingly—of overlapping crises across gender, race, ability, ecology, immigration, and now also the jarring sphere of digital presence and speech. As the essays in this issue show—from Grace Miller's reframing of US literature as a counter-archive that disrupts the "meta-myth" of American exceptionalism to Christina Dokou's genealogy of the American zombie, which exposes how competing mythologies of the undead and the American Dream cross to narrate dispossession—reception serves as cultural practice of the highest stakes. It is a way to "hack" long-standing storylines, often by mobilizing one set of mythic narratives to challenge or rewrite another. Seen this way, even a graffiti mural, a TikTok reel, or a looping GIF inspired by a classical myth, especially when embedded in debates over reproductive rights, climate justice, or migration, are not trivial cultural detritus. They are, rather, instances of myth reception that sometimes perform political interventions in contentious *topoi* of significance, therefore altering the very terrain of cultural contestation.

Evidently, this themed issue emerges from several ongoing scholarly and public fermentations, and seeks to enrich them—perhaps even push beyond them. As the preceding paragraphs illustrate, in developing its conception, we drew on reception studies that examine how audiences repurpose inherited narratives across platforms, and we were guided by myth studies that treat myth as a dynamic, living discourse. Alongside Barthes, Lincoln, and Bottici, we found particularly influential Marcel Detienne's post-deconstructionist explorations of myth, and Robert A. Segal's myth-based philosophical work, both of which deepened our understanding of how myth can be thought with and through. Our engagement with the idea of the culture war, likewise, rested on scholarship examining symbolic conflicts in public life, not only Hunter, Rhys H. Williams, and Chapman, but also the contributors to *Culture Wars: Opposing Viewpoints* (edited by Mary E. Williams), whose collected perspectives elucidated for us the migration of the "culture war" from a 1990s US political lexicon into a defining frame of twenty-first-century global discourse. Finally, our thinking was informed by media and technoculture research, like Henry Jenkins' on participatory culture, Zizi Papacharissi's on affective publics, and Shoshana Zuboff's on surveillance capitalism and platform architectures, which helped us conceptualize the digital and algorithmic conditions amplifying myth in the present.

Yet, for all that has been written on culture wars and myth, key dimensions are still underexplored. For instance, digital myth-making, as in fast-changing social media habitats, has only begun to be theorized (Rakiwski et al.; Růžička et al.; Artamonov et al.). The transnational afterlives of American mythologies, although circulating widely, remain poorly mapped. And while reception studies have shed lots of light on how diverse audiences reinterpret the stories of the past, the latter's role as active cultural intervention—for example, as counter-myth-making or myth-hacking in digital game or fandom clans—demands deeper attention. These blind spots are less benign than one might think, to the extent that they

obscure how myths are currently mobilized and contested in the volatile symbolic terrain we inhabit. This themed issue enters precisely at that pressure point, taking up myth as a shape-shifting and combustible force that drives imaginaries and, by extension, politics, identities, and sense-making apparatuses.

This special issue also builds on ground that *Ex-centric Narratives* has already broken. The journal has long explored how cultural narratives migrate across media and borders, literal and metaphorical; how traditions are reconfigured in contemporary contexts; and how Anglophone cultural production reflects and reshapes political realities within and without US's geocultural ambit. These threads will be elaborated further when, in a later section, we situate the present issue within the journal's recent contributions to these conversations.

Why This Issue?

If culture wars are the stage on which American politics now plays out, as theorists of political discourse argue, myth provides both the raw material for the script and a mode of performance (Alexander et al.). These wars—or battlegrounds, where the terms of reality itself are contested—are here to stay. They will most likely evolve to be more globalized and intense as time goes by. So, it is incumbent upon us, students of culture, to understand how myth animates old and new conflicts, to interrogate the assumptions they normalize, and to imagine how narratives might be rewritten on more than just assumptions. At a moment when political conflict is conducted as much through the moral theatrics of platform posts and podium spectacle as through policy debate, the need to take myth seriously has never been greater. The themed issue *The Mythic Life of Culture Wars* begins from the simple but urgent premise that, precisely because myths are not inert relics of some distant past but cultural actants, to study the culture war without myth is to miss its *modus operandi*, and more specifically, its emotional logic and dramaturgy, and therefore, its staying power.

This is the *raison d' être* of the issue: to interrogate how myth operates within and through the symbolic and semantic infrastructures of culture wars, to highlight the new formats and media where these narratives now live, and to amplify transnational and transcultural perspectives that decenter strictly US-bound debate readings, even as they recognize that US culture-war discourse reverberates across global networks. Crucially, we and the other contributors to this issue approach these questions at a point in time when diasporic and postcolonial epistemologies are not only strengthening cultural analysis but reorienting how we understand both myth and crisis—irrevocably entangled, since crises demand "mythopoiesis," which is never more generative than in moments of crisis (Bottici, *A Philosophy* 7-11). We now understand them both as living knowledge forged in migration, memory, resistance, and reinvention. These modes of knowing make it possible to pursue the foregoing inquiries with enhanced attention to marginalized perspectives, so as to also foreground myth as a resource for resilience but also as a variable factor in the devising of social worlds. This is of great significance, because culture wars are themselves crises of meaning, where myth-making becomes most consequential. Here, it is equally important to clarify what this issue is not. It is neither a catalogue of canonical myths refashioned for a new age nor a collection of narrowly American case studies. Rather, it is an exploration of

myth as cultural technology, at once a scaffold for power and for rethinking the very terms of exercising that power in the real world—work that is imperative.

The exploration on which we have embarked also carries significant policy weight. Culture wars are not confined to headlines and hashtags; not when they influence curricula, legal action, heritage management, media regulation, bioethical protocols, and, increasingly, AI-related governance and ethics. Fathoming myth's role in contemporary politics means penetrating into the workings of cultural policies as these get instrumentalized and revised, and into why this is of so much consequence for public discourse, social praxis of various kinds (including artistic, educational, and entertainment practices), and, of course, for civic cohesion in an era when the symbolic feeds into and off the legislative.

In this way, the issue extends *Ex-centric Narratives*' mission to explore Anglophone literature, culture, and media through interdisciplinary and decentered lenses. By convening scholarship at the junction of research areas like myth studies, reception theory, American political discourse, and technoculture, we aim to equip cultural practitioners—from students and educators to policymakers—with conceptual tools, and to furnish opportunities for decoding and engaging a conjuncture that often feels decidedly indecipherable. If myths are the operating system of American culture wars, as we postulate, this collection offers both a diagnostic and a provocation to read viral cultural stories as the narrative code of our political moment, and think how that code might yet be rewritten.

Continuities and Expansions in Relation to the Journal's History

This themed issue, then, emerges from and advances *Ex-centric Narrative*'s ongoing efforts to examine how stories travel, transform, take roots, but also, at times, unexpected routes across cultures and geopolitical contexts; across sites where narratives, technologies, power converse and converge. Previous issues have shown particular strength in mapping myth's afterlives in diasporic, gender-critical, and transcultural frames. For instance, essays such as the editorial to the journal's third issue, released in 2019, "Identity Broodings in Chicana/o Culture," co-written by Francisco A. Lomelí, Juan Ignacio Oliva, and Sophia Emmanouilidou), and the article "Brown Medeas: Reconfiguring Mestizaje for the 21st Century" by Aikaterini Delikonstantinidou have shown how mythic narratives, American as well as Greek, surface in Chinanx performance and cultural identity projects, transforming symbols like Aztlán or Medea into agents of mestizx and borderland expression. These contributions foreground how myth operates as a living vocabulary for negotiating histories of displacement and dispossession, but also cultural hybridity and empowerment. This is an approach that the present issue takes up and broadens.

The journal has also made significant inroads into the study of myth and narrative across digital and hybrid media, which resonate strongly with our inquest into culture-war mythopoiesis. Pieces like the editorial to the journal's eighth issue, released in 2024, titled "Mobile Locative Media and Hybrid Narrative Spaces," co-written by Vasileios N. Delioglanis and Manuel Portela, and "Space, Narrative, and Digital Media in Teju Cole's *Open City*" by Despoina N. Feleki have charted how storytelling becomes spatially and technologically reconfigured, while "The Evolution of Fantastical Storyworlds: A Study of Tabletop Role-Playing Settings" by Dimitra Nikolaidou offers insight into participatory forms of narrative that reflect the "prosumer logics" (Toffler) driving, for instance, online

subcultures (like hacktivists, meme warfare communities, or gamified raid groups) that relish myth-hacking. These explorations help outline the algorithmic and interactive grounds where culture-war myths now thrive.

Other essays, such as "H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* and Joan Jonas's *Lines in the Sand*" by Anna Fyta, and "The Legacy of (Post-)9/11 (Fiction): Architectural Ekphrasis and the Shapes of Memory in Amy Waldman's *The Submission*" by Angeliki Tseti, have traced the aesthetic and political labor of myth in performance art and post-traumatic cultural memory. Both contributions demonstrate how mythic symbols mediate between grief and space in ways that are politically and culturally productive. Even in book reviews, like that of Jay David Bolter's *The Digital Plenitude* by Sacha Pöhlmann, the journal has engaged with how media (digital media, in this case) recondition cultural memory, thus offering critical tools for further unearthing the algorithmic remolding of myth.

By weaving together the strands of myth reception as intervention, performative reimagination, technological remediation, and cultural critique, the ninth issue carries forward conversations already alive in the journal. Yet, it also pushes them into new urgent territory; namely, the supercharged space of the culture wars. In doing so, it positions itself as a continuation and deepening of *Ex-centric Narratives*' commitment to probing Anglophone cultural production at its most transformative edges.

Mapping the Issue's Intersections and Interventions

The five essays collected in this special issue are united by the shared question of how myth operates as a living technology of mediation that shapes how communities imagine themselves and the forces of power and belief, as well as identity, coursing through and across them. Their approaches span theology, media studies, political theory, and literary criticism, aligning with but also complicating the frameworks outlined earlier: myth as political instrument, reception as ideological practice, and participatory culture as both accelerant and arena for myth-making. While they do not always name the canonical interlocutors of these discussions, they extend their insights in strikingly contemporary directions in the process of translating relatively abstract notions into analyses of concrete case studies of myth at work in culture-warring production. Collectively, they show that myth today functions as an organizing logic through which various vectors, from the aesthetic to the institutional, converge. What they share, above all, is an insistence that myth is a decisively mediated technology that both animates and unsettles the culture-war imaginaries it sustains.

The first axis, Elena Natalia Romea Parente and Christina Dokou, reinvigorates the study of myth and modernity through figures of resurrection. In "*RoboCop*: A Dystopian Allegory of Capitalism and Redemption," Romea Parente's reading of *RoboCop* reframes Verhoeven's cyborg as a techno-Christ of late capitalism, fusing redemption with corporate control, and extending Bottici's sense of myth as continuous political work. In "The Graves of Wrath: A Hypothesis on the Creation of the American Zombie," Dokou mines the cultural memory of the Great Depression as the locus for the zombie's metamorphosis from Haitian "zonbi" to Romero's post-industrial undead—jobless, homeless, and insatiably hungry. Dokou reads the zombie horde as a mythic embodiment of capitalism's broken promises of work and home, as well as—perhaps most importantly—of dignity. These contributions trace

how theological/religious and bodily/gendered archetypes are repurposed in technological landscapes where affect and embodiment remain central to meaning-making. They bridge political theory, theology, media studies, and affect theory to, in effect, reposition mythopoiesis as a theory of modern resurrection: capitalist and biopolitical systems renewing themselves through sacralized imagery of death and rebirth, and, in doing so, illuminate enduring culture-war flashpoints around faith, power, and the ethics of technological might.

The second axis, Sarah Wagstaffe and Maggie Willis, traces how myth adapts to the architectures of mass and digital media. In "Popularity Is Power: Public Image and the Myth of the Hero," Wagstaffe extends Neil Postman's critique of entertainment politics into the algorithmic age, reading *The Boys* as a parable of post-truth populism in which corporate storytelling and celebrity spectacle substitute for civic discourse. Her analysis of Homelander's mediated charisma shows how mass entertainment "mythologizes greatness" by collapsing political authority into spectacle, and thus exposes the media's complicity in the manufacture of modern hero-worship. Willis's "Gender Trouble: The Myth-Making Power of Country Music Playlists" shifts the focus from screen to sound, examining how algorithmic curation and radio rotation reproduce masculinist mythologies of home/land and authenticity. By bringing Diane Davis and Thomas Rickert into the discussion, Willis treats playlists as ambient rhetorical ecologies, digital infrastructures where gendered myths of belonging are continuously performed and naturalized. By extending mythopoiesis to the level of interface and infrastructure, she reframes digital mediation itself as an ideological actor in contemporary culture. Together, Wagstaffe and Willis expand media and reception theory by demonstrating how platforms and their infrastructures of attention, along with publics, co-produce contemporary mythic authority, or how affective engagement becomes belief by other means.

Grace Miller's contribution anchors the issue's literary and historiographical dimension. In "Subverting the Myth of American Exceptionalism: Literature as Counter-Memory to US Imperialism and Historical Erasure," she interrogates the "meta-myth" of American exceptionalism, showing how US literature functions as a counter-archive that resists the erasures sustaining this national mythology. Drawing on Edward W. Said's contrapuntal method and the critiques of exceptionalism advanced by Donald E. Pease, Godfrey Hodgson, and Hilde Restad, she situates myth as both a legitimizing apparatus for imperial expansion and a potential site of resistance. By juxtaposing Native American and Asian American narratives of the boarding-school system and Operation Babylift, Miller demonstrates how fiction and testimony reclaim suppressed histories and destabilize the redemptive logic of US empire. In doing so, she extends reception studies beyond interpretation toward political memory, at the same time revealing how reading itself becomes a form of decolonial witness. Her essay extends reception studies beyond interpretation toward political memory, and reframes literature as a medium of historical resistance within mythic statecraft, one that exposes the culture-war contest over American identity as, at its core, a struggle between competing myths of virtue and violence. In this way, Miller exemplifies the issue's broader investment in counter-memory as critical praxis.

Read in tandem and in conversation, the essays generate a field of four intersecting debates that define the issue's scope and coherence: media spectacle and post-truth politics, political theology and mythopoiesis, counter-memory and exceptionalist metanarratives, and

the affective economies of crisis and renewal. Rather than dwelling in discrete domains, though, each essay trespasses into the others' terrain; for instance, Wagstaffe's and Willis's analyses of mediated charisma and sonic ideology echo Romea Parente's and Dokou's explorations of resurrection and exhaustion, while Miller's counter-archival reading supplies the historical depth that grounds these same mythic processes. What emerges is a shared inquiry into how modern myths are made and remade through the media that sustain them.

This handful of scholarly "interventions" situates the ninth issue of *Ex-centric Narratives* within and beyond several enduring scholarly currents, from Roland Barthes's semiology and Bruce Lincoln's sacred politics to Chiara Bottici's philosophy of political myth; from Jeffrey C. Alexander's sociology of performance to Zizi Papacharissi's and Neil Postman's analyses of mediated publics; and from Edward W. Said's contrapuntal reading to the deconstructions of exceptionalism advanced by Donald E. Pease, William V. Spanos, and Godfrey Hodgson. The contributors extend these traditions but also bring them into collision, generating new points of contact between semiotic, sociological, media-theoretical, and postcolonial approaches. In doing so, they reveal that myth's vitality lies in its mutability; in its capacity not only to migrate across but, in fact, absorb the highs and the lows of culture, disparate art forms, new media, affective registers, political vocabularies, without losing its power to organize meaning and structure belief.

In light of the above, then, what the issue contributes across fields is, first, a shared analytic of myth as method for examining how narratives and images organize collective life. Each essay treats mythic form—for example, the savior, the martyr, the horde, the chosen nation—as a technology through which institutions and media produce feeling and authority, yet also one that artists and critics can rework. Secondly, it contributes a cross-scale account of mediation, from Hollywood spectacle and broadcast news to digital feeds and state archives, as the collection traces how such infrastructures decide who is rendered visible, human, monstrous, salvable, or expendable. It also advances counter-memory as praxis, pairing theoretical critique with readings of art, whether in visual or literary form, and thereby modeling how cultural works do archival work—for instance, reinscribing erased bodies, labor, and grief to public consciousness. Moreover, by situating myth within the long history of disaster or decline—the zombie read through Depression imagery, "post-truth" historicized through television's long turn to entertainment, techno-messianism traced to enduring sacrificial grammars—crisis is shown to be a reservoir from which myths continually draw. The implications have practical force: they refine what counts as media literacy, bring political theology into dialogue with media industry studies, widen critiques of exceptionalism through comparative and transnational frames, and link horror studies to the economics of memory. Therefore, the issue presents myth as the dynamic circuitry through which culture wars claim, canonize, or contend with their own legitimacy—in other words, what makes conflict matter, or not.

New Avenues of Research and Exploration

The essays in this themed issue also carve out new intellectual territory. It wouldn't be an overstatement to claim that they propose methodological and conceptual pathways for future scholarship in asking, through their analysis of diverse cultural texts, what myth can reveal about the material and immaterial forces that shape contemporary public life. Whereas

the previous section mapped the essays to existing conversations, in this section we reorganize them by the new research trajectories they open.

One trajectory concerns myth as a resource for processing collective trauma. Dokou reperiodizes the American zombie by tying its post-industrial features to Depression-era memory, turning an oft-allegorical monster into a record of dispossession. Miller, reading American exceptionalism contrapuntally, shows how fiction and testimony act as counter-archives that unsettle imperial self-narration at home and abroad. Both contributors suggest a line of inquiry that treats myths as blueprints for navigating disorientation while also building repositories of political memory (whether through spectacle, horror, counter-narrative, or other affect-laden forms). This invites comparative studies of exceptionalist mythologies beyond the US, and/or of myths as vehicles for reinventing (trans)national identities, as well as collaborations between literary analysis, oral history, and community archiving. Their work is also conducive to renewed attention to how trauma circulates across media ecologies (from the documentary image to the looping clip), and sediments in mythic form.

Another trajectory concerns the engineering of belief through media platforms and formats. Wagstaffe's account of *The Boys* demonstrates how corporate storytelling and attention economies fuse celebrity with authority in post-truth mediascapes. Willis turns to digital sound, showing how radio rotations and algorithmic playlists naturalize masculinist myths of home/land and authenticity. Both reposition mediation itself as myth-work, their approaches calling for deeper inquiry into how different media translate ideological narratives into affective, consumable experiences that fuel public discourse. They point toward platform ethnographies of recommendation systems and industry-studies outlooks to how franchises script legitimacy. More actionable possibilities might revolve around methodological pairings that join close reading with interface analysis, metrics tracing, qualitative algorithmic research, and policy research on curation and discoverability. Pedagogically, they point to the kinds of literacies that gain in significance vis-à-vis mythic affordances, such as fluency in feed logics and sonic address.

A third trajectory concerns myth in relation to embodied, gendered, and cultural-sacral practice. Romea Parente's *RoboCop* essay tracks a techno-messianic grammar—crucifixion and resurrection routed through corporate sovereignty—that contemporary media redeploys to authorize, or critique, violence. Willis's findings on gendered listening infrastructures disclose how playlists organize belonging and exclusion in felt, everyday time. These interventions open space for research on the circulation of sacred forms within platform capitalism; on how gendered and racialized bodies are rendered audible or inaudible by curation; on how streaming ecologies re-inscribe or disrupt hegemonic narratives; and, more broadly, on the ethics of automated cultural stewardship in archives and licensing regimes.

The foregoing trajectories push myth studies toward the sociocultural sites and formations that sustain myth as an evolving and self-revising system in the present and in contexts like newsroom rundowns, "for-you" feeds and metadata fields, school boards, diasporic reading circles, and so on. They encourage cross-media comparison; mixed methods that combine textual analysis, fieldwork, and infrastructural study; and policy-adjacent inquiry into how cultural regulation, heritage management, platform design, and system logics development set the conditions under which myths mutate or are forgotten. In

short, they recast myth as a system we can both study and teach, and, where needed, intervene in.

Conclusion: Rewiring Conflict through Critical Myth-Work

If one lesson emerges from the essays in this themed issue, it is that myth remains profoundly ambivalent, at once a conduit for reactionary power and a catalyst for radical transformation. Across cinema, fiction and non-fiction, playlists, and ethnographic contexts, our contributors show how myths are mobilized to secure nationalistic projects and sustain exclusionary visions of belonging, yet, also, how they can be rearticulated as means for contesting dominant ideologies and imagining alternative futures. This ambivalence underscores a central provocation we feel strongly about: culture war is—and always has been—a struggle over the symbolic architecture of the moral order of the human and the more-than-human. To frame the culture wars as mere squabbles over taste or representation risks obscuring their deeper stakes. They are profoundly and inescapably involved in how meaning-making proceeds; whose stories are remembered and whose futures are rendered thinkable.

Myth reception, thus, emerges as a critical tool for historicizing and reconfiguring myths at work within and across cultural spheres. Such critical mythopoesis is urgently needed. The escalation of contemporary culture wars—fueled by misinformation and outrage no less than by authoritarian populism—threatens democratic discourse, pluralism, global solidarity, even the very concept and value of "truth." But as we hopefully have shown, myth reception offers tools for intervening, exposing culture war's code and writing new programs for collective life. Seeing conflict through this lens requires attending to myth's dual capacity to naturalize power and unsettle it so that we may hold space for myth-work geared toward more just and capacious futures. It also demands crossing disciplinary boundaries to grasp how myths circulate through networks of affect, materiality, cultural intangibles, and representation.

This essay closes with an invitation. Let's move toward actively intervening in the symbolic make-up of culture wars, cultivating critical literacies for decoding myth, fostering counter-mythologies that amplify suppressed voices, and treating myth as a dynamic practice of worldmaking. If culture wars are battles over the stories that shape our shared reality, then our task is to ensure these stories generously open up to reparative and—why not—remedial possibilities.

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