

Uncanny Kinship(s): Planetary Encounters in the USA

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To this day, Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* stands as the poetic bible of American democracy and its project of nationhood. Yet the voice that speaks “I am large. I contain multitudes” also connotes the sublime dream of an **American national experiment** that *cannot be contained by the nation alone*, “the manifest destiny redreamed” into “a spiritual and secular unity that will unite the globe as one organism” (Fuller 2022). Applying the sublime’s inherently **anthropocentric and logocentric logic**—through the **sublime** experience of being able to contain multitudes beyond itself (Kant 109), the rational self transcends, sublimity drawing the more-than-human world as little more than a resource to be absorbed and consumed—to the national project reveals justifications of **dominance over the Other** that is ‘Not-Me’. The sublime greatness of the American experiment hence always already contained its deepest abysses, from the **exploitation of the (e.g., racialized) other** and the **environment**, excessive **nationalism**, to U.S. **imperialism**. Globalization, primarily driven by American capital and culture, is only the last figuration of the sublime idea of America.

Addressing particularly the neo-colonial impetus of globalization as a homogenizing economic and cultural trajectory, there has been increasing attention towards the notion of the **planetary**. Rethinking and reshaping interactions between the human and the more-than-human, the planetary functions as a way to “recalibrate our critical instruments and aesthetic-critical vocabularies” (Elias and Moraru viii). This becomes quite pertinent, seeing how our current ways of imagining human, as well as more-than-human, encounters are not apt in dealing with the **multilayered social, political, and ecological crises of the 21st century**. In short: we are in desperate need of new imaginaries free from the constraints of a sublime globality that has seemingly run its course. In this vein, our panel seeks to tap into the potential of the uncanny—thought through the planetary—as a way of generating more socially and environmentally just modes of imagining encounters between humans as well as between the human and the non-or-more-than-human world. The uncanny—in many ways an uncanny double of the sublime that, however, rescinds sublimity’s sense of closed-offness, mastery, elevation, and control—may prove a more pertinent approach to the present. Whereas the moment of the sublime is the moment in which the human subject emerges as it transcends itself by controlling the object more-than-human, the uncanny is based in an insecurity over the distinguishability of that which is object and that which is subject.

The focus on the uncanny is already very much present in recent figurations of the planetary. Taking up Amitav Ghosh’s understanding of the environmental uncanny in which nature returns the

gaze, Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller for instance posit that thinking about a possible aesthetics of the Anthropocene “needs to deal not so much with the alienation of humans from nature but with a more thoroughgoing alienation—the *becoming uncanny* of the life-world” (*The Anthropocene* 101). Yet rather than viewing the uncanny as an obstacle that needs to be overcome, our panel seeks to go back to the uncanny as a more pertinent way of experiencing ecological coexistence, both between humans and more-than-humans. By mobilizing the uncanny as an alternative motor for thinking about ecology and kinship, we want to get closer to imaginaries that deal in coexistence and/as uncertainty and take account of nonhumans and humans alike. The papers on this panel will play through different modes of the uncanny in order to investigate its potential for **subversion, destabilization, and defamiliarization**, but also for **contact, affect, and jouissance**. How can American Studies (re)think the sublimity of the American experiment, egalitarianism, democracy, humanism, yet also ecology at large, in terms of the uncanny? How may a closer look at the uncanny states of America, from its beginnings until now, destabilize our traditional perspectives on U.S. ideology, imperialism and globalism and effect the return of a repressed planetary thought? Our panel seeks to explore modes of imagining kinship not through increasing familiarity (meaning an absorption of the other into the self that may only serve homogenization and control) but rather through a profound and indelible, radical **alterity**. To think globally is to think the sublime; to think planetarily, on the other hand, is to think uncannily.

Works Cited:

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Confirmed Paper:

Dominik Steinhilber (University of Konstanz) The Uncanny Roots of Black Selfhood—Unsettling Race and Ecology in Frederick Douglass’s Autobiographies