ABSTRACT

*Star Trek* has long used its unique situation as a socially and politically engaged television show to approach contemporary, historical, and futuristic ideas of race, labor, gender, nature, landscape, and place. The concept of alternate perceptions of history continues to provide engaging insights into historical representation. This paper explores how *Star Trek*, as an example of performance, media, and popular culture, contributes to dialogues of alternate pasts, presents, and futures. It builds upon these concepts to engage with and influence geographical dialogues of public space, nature, geopolitics, and societal structure. I explore examples from the television show and the wider universe, particularly two episodes from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* that are both influenced by historical figures and events and, through time travel, reveal their own historical narratives. While *Star Trek* continues to operate in fictional space, constructing an ‘idealized’ future and imagined landscapes, this paper recognizes that its influence shapes an experienced and an embodied sense of alternate past, present, and future.

Key Words: *Star Trek*; popular culture; history; imagined landscapes; futures

GEOGRAPHIES, FUTURES, AND *STAR TREK*

*Star Trek* first aired in 1966, followed by thirty seasons across six different series, with the newest premiering in January 2017. The various television shows, thirteen feature films, well over one hundred works of literature, and numerous expressions of fandom through conventions and exhibitions have found their way into the very fabric of our society, influencing even NASA’s first named space shuttle: Enterprise. *Star Trek’s* place both within and beyond popular culture has enabled it to engage with critical social and political issues. This engagement is enhanced...
through the show’s ability to approach modern, historical, and futuristic ideas of race, labor, gender, nature, landscape, and place. Because Star Trek is set between the years 2151 and 2378, even events that occur in our near future, when viewed through the narrative of the show, are examples of alternate “past” narratives. This mirror “back” into our future enables these alternate pasts to become manifest as alternate presents and futures.

Jane Palmer wrote that “the often invisible past may be a source of unexpected alternative futures” (2014, 30). Furthermore, it is important to recognize that our understanding of the past is simply the consumption of events interpreted and written by those with the power and means to do so. In this way, our past is simultaneously real and imagined. Depending on who holds power and how that power is challenged, there are any infinite number of very “real” pasts which can be consumed. These alternative histories, particularly within science fiction, as Barney Warf (2002) stated, hold “important implications for social and spatial analysis” and are inexplicably tied to alternate futures. Uncovering these alternate histories, and giving power to the voiceless, exposes alternative pasts for present and future consumption.

This conceptualization, coming out of the transdisciplinary field of futures studies, has yet to find traction within geographic research. Geographers often allude to the future, through geopolitics (Dittmer and Dodds 2008) and landscapes (Kadonaga 1995), but we have yet to engage with the nearly fifty years of literature, methods, and theory developed in the field of futures studies. This field explicitly addresses the role of futuristic perceptions to tangibly alter our present and our remembrance of the past. One exception to geography’s oversight of futures studies is the work of David Hicks. Hicks (2007, 181 citing Bell 1997, 236) applied futures studies – focused on “discovering or inventing, examining, evaluating and proposing possible, probable and preferable futures”—to geography through education. This article was one of the first times geography addressed futures studies, and it offered valuable perspectives into an enhanced geographic curriculum and pedagogy that encouraged students to actively construct their work around and apply it to perceived future issues and concerns, such as climate change. Hicks, however, does not offer applications of futures studies beyond education and pedagogy.

Despite being one of the longest running and most successful science fiction franchises, Star Trek is woefully underrepresented in geographical engagement, despite the recent popularity in popular geopolitics, cinematic geography, and fictive geographies (Sharp 2000). Probably most notable for geographic engagement with Star Trek was Jason Dittmer’s (2010) monograph, which began by using Star Trek as an allegory for geopolitics. While only a short engagement, Dittmer (2010, xiii) viewed Star Trek not as something that “followed from ‘real’ geopolitics,” but something filled with agency, because to him “[Star Trek] was geopolitics.” Heather Mair (2009) also engaged in this discourse of Star Trek as both imagined and real in an analysis of Vulcan, Alberta. Much like Riverside, Iowa, has transitioned from the fictional to the material “pre-” memorial landscape of where Captain Kirk will be born, Vulcan, Alberta1 has become a Star Trek-themed tourist destination. Besides hosting signage, artwork, and events from the franchise, the “vulcanization” of Vulcan challenged the community identity by, at times, forcibly embedding ideas of post-capitalist or post-racial society into a traditionally conservative community. Here Star Trek went beyond landscape and “became part of the mix that shapes how community life if experienced over time” (Mair 2009, 480). In both cases Star Trek is not relegated to simple representation of history, but becomes active, embodied, and experienced. In this article, I engage with Star Trek’s role as a memorial landscape, as a space and place of memory, and with its ability to create alternate pasts, presents, and futures, through an in-depth examination of two episodes of Star Trek: Deep Space Nine (DS9).
This work forms a new geographical framework utilizing futures studies. Ahlqvist and Rhisiart (2015, 94) cited the necessity for the field of futures studies to continue (and particularly expand) upon its history of critical engagement to contribute in social theory through its transdisciplinary aspects, through its methodological basis, or through its orientation as a discipline combining empirical analysis, specific philosophical basis, imagination, and a practical planning orientation.

While Sardar (2008, 893) stated that geographers were among those engaging with futures studies, Toni Ahlqvist (a geographer himself) and Martin Rhisiart (2015, 94) failed to cite a single study when they stated that human geography was among those social sciences that critical futures studies needed to further engage. This provides further evidence not only for the need to critically engage, as geographers, with the field of futures studies, but the amount to which that engagement has thus far been underdeveloped.

Futures studies engagement with geography, beyond a 1997 special issue in Futures (Batty and Cole), has been limited. Except for Saunders’ and Jenkins’ (2012) research on the role of fear and the envisioning of a future as a response to absent narratives in education, recent research does not follow the call for a transdisciplinary, socially engaged, and multi-perspective geographic engagement with futures studies. This paper begins a critical geographical engagement with futures studies, utilizing an understanding of a socially constructed ideal of the past and future. Davies and Sarpong (2013) stated that it is not the individual components, political and economic influences, imagining of the past, present or future, or the affect of art that forms a study. Rather, an analytical futures studies framework develops from attention to multiple scales, institutions, actors, and times. Futures studies’ unique situation at the confluence of many social sciences and the transdisciplinary nature of blended methodologies, perspectives, and disciplines is a valuable tool for the future geographer.

This work also engages with a unique aspect of landscape studies: imagined landscapes. Drawing on the work of Crouch (2013), Edensor (2005; 1997), Gonçalves (2016), Johnson (2004), Merriman and Webster (2009), Pollock (2004), Rogers (2012), Tyner (2005), and others, this paper examines the role of landscape construction through film, just as others have understood it through dance, theatre, literature, music, and art. In this way, though some of the representations (such as an artwork or a stage) may be visual and material, the experienced cultural, political, social, and physical landscape is constructed mentally. The impact this has on the memorial landscape is equally significant. Edensor (1997; 2005) for example, described the role of the 1995 film Braveheart in crafting an imagined, or “filmic,” landscape of memory and heritage in Scotland, which permeated audiences’ perceptions of Scotland and its history locally and globally, despite certain historical inaccuracies. In this case, the way audiences understood William Wallace, the rural Scottish landscape, and the significance of Scottish nationalism was mythically crafted through the imagined landscapes of the film. Harvey (2013, 153) pointed out this changing trend of heritage landscape analysis: from traditional enquiries of the material “…towards an analysis of the intangible and relational.” In this way, Star Trek is one of these intangible and relational landscape generators. In the examples below, the show provides ideas of both future and past urban, racialized, and class-based landscapes, which can become internalized as representations of what these landscapes might be like.

Star Trek itself has attracted scholarly attention from numerous fields, on subjects as diverse as Cold War geopolitics (Sarantakes 2005), narratology, or the study of narratives, (Jones 2016) and gender representation (Dove-Viebahn 2007). There are also many examples of scholars engaging with the se-
ries as an illustration of alternative pasts and futures. Some work has been done on role of Star Trek: The Next Generation as a narrative of jazz culture and a uniquely utopian future (Jones 2016; Barrilleaux 2015), but most other examinations take a more critical approach. Of particular interest has been the role of DS9 in breaking the racial hegemony of “whiteness operating as the determinant of historical memory” (Kilgore 2014, 31-32; Alexander 2016; Pounds 2009).

DS9 ran for seven seasons starting in 1993 (2369 in Star Trek time) and stood apart from the rest of the franchise in two very distinct ways. First, the majority of the show took place on a space station and not a mobile ship, so the show became more about relationships (personal and societal) than about exploration. Second, the captain Benjamin Sisko was played by African-American actor Avery Brooks. As the first Black star and captain portrayed in a Star Trek series, the show was presented with a number of obstacles and opportunities. The chief concern was Sisko's identity, as Alexander (2016, 151) wrote,

in other Star Trek incarnations, black human characters had few, if any, ties to black history and culture…. While race does not necessarily define Sisko's relationship to the people around him, Sisko retains connections to his racial heritage, and it does help to define his character.

This is done through Sisko's appreciation of African art, his interest in the Negro Leagues and famous Black baseball players, and his family heritage centered on Louisiana and Cajun food. My focus here is specifically on Deep Space Nine and its conceptualization of alternate pasts, presents, and futures.

Pound has argued that DS9 is set apart from the rest of the series:

These episodes suggest that at the centre of this new Star Trek series is an intention to use its lead character's complicated identity through which his ethnicity is threaded as a narrative engine for generating stories that might go beyond broken warp coils, trans mats and food processors and begin to ask audiences to be entertained by future societies' unfinished business in politics, religion, philosophy (issues ranging from defining terrorism vs. freedom fighting, examining euthanasia and exploring military culture vs. peace, etc.), Terran vs alien psychology, race (adoption of children from one alien group by a member of another alien race), being a bi-racial or bi-species being, raising gender issues and the imperialistic lust for power and domination (Pound 2009, 215).

Although DS9 did so most explicitly, many of the Star Trek series have followed creator Gene Roddenberry's vision that the show fundamentally address current issues (Alexander 2016). The Next Generation and Voyager both tackled topics of race and gender, for instance, in a multitude of ways (Jones 2016; Dove-Viebahn 2007).

Ostensibly, Star Trek depicted a utopian future that is non-racial, non-classed, and non-gendered. However, Kilgore has pointed out the irony in the often Western-oriented, white, human-centered future of Star Trek where command still remains “the exclusive right of white (human) males (from Iowa)” (Kilgore 2014, 34). These barriers were later broken down by DS9 and Voyager.

The importance of Star Trek is not always in the narratives it provides, it is in the way those narratives are delivered. Because the show is set in the future, it enables audiences to view the show's past (which can be our present, past, or future) in a different perspective. In other words, when the characters travel back in time, they may be traveling to the time that the show was made, or to any time between the date the show was produced and the date the franchise is set in. Thus, it is possible for the characters in Star Trek to travel back in time to the viewer's future. This enables historic stories that are often untold to be revealed (or changed), helps understand political or social move-
ments through their embodiment in an actor, and enables the viewer to visualize past or future places and landscapes. These may be landscapes we have experienced, imagined, or know nothing about; all are made ‘real’ through the art of science fiction.

**EXAMINING THE GEOGRAPHY OF STAR TREK**

By conducting critical narrative analysis on Star Trek’s content and imagined landscapes, I explore the various ways that Star Trek engages with historical and cultural geography, memory studies, and the role of popular culture in our understanding of history and memory. Narrative analysis has long been used in literature, film, music, and poetry as a means of extracting geographic meaning from media sources (e.g. Tyner et al. 2016; Tyner et al. 2015a; 2015b). Central to narrative analysis is the interpretation of broad themes used to generate meaning.

My focus in this manuscript is on two episodes, both within the same series. I do so for several reasons. First, the series, Deep Space Nine, is heavily cited as the most influential and provocative of the franchise when it comes to dealing with historical narratives. Second, the two narratives I chose are both time travel episodes that venture both into our not-too-distant past and into our future. Third, these two episodes are closely linked to my own expertise in early 20th century African-American history and current issues around the privatization of public space.

The second method I use is landscape analysis. Landscape analysis focuses on the extraction of memory, history, and culture from space and place. Landscapes are windows into the ideology and narratives of those who shape, influence, and experience them, and in the case of Star Trek, offer valuable information about the role of the past, present, and future in historical representation and narratives. Significant as well are the ways that audiences come in contact with these narratives, and that those in power script those narratives. Landscapes include both material artifact and performance, a palimpsest of past, present, and future social and cultural practices and their material evidence, in this case through sets, stages, and cinematography (Schein 2009). Not only do landscapes reveal ‘social worlds of the past’, but they represent continued values of the present (Doss 2010).

**IMAGINED LANDSCAPES & ALTERNATE “PASTS” OF STAR TREK**

When speaking of Star Trek’s creation of imagined landscapes out of events (altered, invented, and/or recreated) in our past, present, and future, the options are endless; the holodeck, time travel, and flashbacks continually offer glimpses into the fictional world’s past and often our own present, past, or future. What follows are two examples of Star Trek’s creation of these virtual landscapes through the use of time travel. In each section I describe and analyze the imagined landscapes and fictitious narratives, how those imaginary landscapes are also sites of alternate pasts, presents, and futures, and how these concepts situate more broadly within actualized historical landscapes and narratives.

“FAR BEYOND THE STARS” AND THE EMBODIMENT OF THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

The most-cited episode in the entire franchise regarding exploration of historical narratives is DS9’s “Far Beyond the Stars” (Kilgore 2014; Alexander 2016). In the episode, Captain Benjamin Sisko, played by the African-American actor Avery Brooks, is exposed to an alternate reality where he is actually a 1950s New York City science fiction writer named Benny Russell. The episode embodies a past of both Star Trek’s and our own universe, and explores issues of racial bias, segregation, and violence. While not based on any one specific story, the narrative hearkens back to one of Brooks’s own roles, as Paul Robeson, the African American singer,
actor, political activist, scholar, and athlete. In “Far Beyond the Stars,” Sisko’s Blackness is both an element that is to be hidden from the readers of the publishing house he is working for and a barrier preventing him from writing the types of stories (with lead African American characters) he would like to. In the episode, Benny Russell attempts to publish a pulp fiction novel about a futuristic space stationed captained by an African-American. Throughout this process he is ridiculed by those in the community and ultimately fired from the publishing firm.

Brooks’s 1995 Broadway performance of Paul Robeson, which depicts Robeson’s similar experiences as a lawyer in 1920s New York, came just three years before the airing of this episode and significantly influenced DS9’s writers and producers. William Shatner even stated in The Captains Close Up (2013), there would be no Star Trek without Paul Robeson. In this way, history (albeit represented in a fictional TV show with fictional characters) is visualized through the characters in Star Trek as embodied and empathized narratives of the past.

The historical landscape is also a significant portion of “Far Beyond the Stars.” Set in 1950s Harlem, there are a number of explicit and banal social and cultural references played out on the landscape. In the show, the publishing office itself is located in the Trill Building, a play on words combining Trill (an alien species common in DS9) and the Brill Building (for which the Brill Building genre of early rock-and-roll music was named). Again, while this is just a fictional landscape, this is still an act of commemoration, just as a university might name a building the Paul Robeson Cultural Center or the W.E.B. DuBois Library. In doing so, power is transferred via the commemorative process. In this case, the Trill Building comes to memorialize “an influential source of national and international musical activity at a crucial transitional stage in the evolution of popular music” (Inglis 2003, 214). Further examples of the historical Harlem landscape are expressed through boxing advertisements, street preachers, and jazz clubs and street performances.

The alternative representation of the past brings the opportunity for alternative presents and futures as well. Star Trek challenges the audience not only to identify with this embodied past, but to place it into the present. This episode particularly highlights the racialized violence of the 1950s. When Benny rushes to help a Black friend of his who has been shot by the police, he himself is viciously beaten badly enough that he cannot go into work for weeks, and even then must use a cane. Similarly, redlining is brought up when the local Black baseball star who plays for the Giants mentions that despite being wealthy he is still unable to live anywhere outside of Harlem.

These events and representations become excellent examples of the blurring of past, present, and future because of their continued relevance today. As Avery Brooks stated, If we had changed the people’s clothes, this story could be about right now. What’s insidious about racism is that it is unconscious. Even among these very bright and enlightened characters—a group that includes a woman writer who has to use a man’s name to get her work published, and who is married to a brown man with a British accent in 1953—it’s perfectly reasonable to coexist with someone like Pabst [the episode’s antagonist]. It’s in the culture, it’s the way people think. So that was the approach we took. I never talked about racism. I just showed how these intelligent people think, and it all came out of them. (Erdmann and Block 2000, 56)

Such stories in popular culture—about the real Paul Robeson or the imagined Benny Russell—enable relevant issues to transcend scale. They originate as ideas which occur to individual writers, those ideas are then produced at a global scale through television episodes aired around the world, and are interpreted again at the individual level as
audiences watch the episodes. Furthermore, these ideas become embodied in a character with whom audiences empathize and bond. Dittmer and Dodds (2008) studied the role of fandom in geopolitics, but fandom, the deep emotional bond that bridges material and virtual space, has an even broader impact when ideas of equality or social justice transcend the scales involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of popular culture.

The actors themselves speak for this process in a series of interviews about the episode. Supporting actor Armin Shimerman stated in 2002 that “Far Beyond the Stars” was “without a question my favorite episode. Star Trek at its best deals with social issues and though you can say, ‘well that was prejudice in the ’50s,’ the truth of the matter is here we are in the 21st century and it’s still there.” This episode reminds us of that continued prejudice. Co-starring actor Rene Auberjonois said it was “one the best [episodes] of the whole series,” while Avery Brooks stated that “it was the most important moment for me in the entire seven years” (Mission Inquiry 2003).

By connecting the racialized landscapes and spaces of the past to audiences well aware of the current events of the present, episodes such as this hope to influence change in the future. Whether the issue at hand is racial discrimination in the work force or racial segregation and landscapes of violence, presenting both the fictional and real landscapes and events of the past, embodied and experienced through empowering characters helps to challenge the continued social issues we face today.

“PAST TENSE,” PUBLIC SPACE, AND POPULAR CULTURE

DS9’s story arc also explicitly engages in debates and conceptualizations of public space and protest. In the two-part episode “Past Tense,” audiences are exposed again to a historic narrative, only this time, despite traveling back in time, the entire show takes place in the audiences’ future. The episode takes place 350 years before the time of DS9, which situates the events in the year 2024, thirty-one years after the episode’s 1995 airing. The plot of the episode centers on the notion that in the early 21st century the United States abandoned economic or medical support for citizens. Most cities then create what are called Sanctuary Districts, which were supposed to be safe economic zones where the homeless and unemployed could voluntarily go to seek employment and safety. The landscapes we see through the eyes of the Star Trek characters, however, are virtual prisons, entire blocks where anyone who is homeless, unemployed, or mentally ill are forced to go and then unable to leave. Inside, there are food and housing shortages, internal gang violence, and daily examples of police brutality. The plot of the episode revolves around staging a protest (known in the 24th century as the Bell Riots) to expose (and ultimately end) this enclosure and criminalization of public space and to bring back the 1946 Federal Employment Act, which was dismantled at some time prior to the riots.

In the episode, the dialogue between Captain Sisko and Dr. Bashir is revealing as to how the Bell Riots come to be memorialized in the future:

Sisko: You ever hear of the Bell Riots?
Bashir: Vaguely
Sisko: It is one of the most violent civil disturbances in American history and it happened right here, San Francisco, Sanctuary District A, the first week of September 2024…
Bashir: Just how bad are these riots going to be, Commander?
Sisko: Bad. The Sanctuary residents will take over the district. Some of the guards will be taken hostage. The government will send in troops to restore order. Hundreds of sanctuary residents will be killed… The riots will be one of the watershed events of the 21st Century. Gabriel Bell will see to that.
Bashir: Bell?
Sisko: The man they named the riots after. He is one of the sanctuary residents who will be guarding the hostages. The government troops will storm this place based on rumors that the hostages have been killed. It turns out, the hostages were never harmed because of Gabriel Bell. In the end, Bell sacrifices his own life to save them. He will become a national hero. Outrage over his death, and the death of the other residents will change public opinion about the sanctuaries. They will be torn down, and the United States will finally begin correcting the social problems it had struggled with for over a hundred years. (Past Tense, Part I 1995)

These conditions, while both fictive and futuristic, are based in historical events and speak to numerous geographical concepts. Gross and Altman (1995) reveal that Ira Steven Behr, a co-writer of this episode, based it upon two historical events: the 1971 Attica Prison riot and the 1970 Ohio National Guard shootings which killed four and injured another nine students on the Kent State University campus.

Chief among these geographical explorations is the theme of public space and its privatization (Mitchell 1995; 1997; 2003; 2005). We see this trend continuing in our future (or our alternative future). In the episode, the characters who time-traveled to what appears to be a ultra-modernized San Francisco Financial District are almost immediate accosted by law enforcement for laying down on the sidewalk next to subway station. Furthermore, once the protests in the sanctuary campus begin, there is an almost immediate response from local law enforcement and then the federal military to use force to quell the protest.

Post (2016), in a recent publication on public space and memory of the May 4 sites of Kent State, echoed these concerns about the privatization of public space. Overall, we are seeing the progressive neoliberalization of spaces of assembly, free speech, and protest. In the episode, not only is homelessness criminalized, those who violate such laws by not having a job in the ultra-capitalist future literally become less-than-human and are instead referred to through derogatory code names such as “dims” (i.e. the mentally ill) or “gimmies” (i.e. the homeless or unemployed). As one character in the show states, “the social problems just got too big… [people] forgot how to care” (Past Tense, Part II 1995).

One problem we continually see in commemorative space is the continued exclusion of certain narratives. Post (2016, 148, 150) addressed these concerns in the context of May 4 and “the annihilation of public space” as he stated, we need “a public pedagogy outside the classroom that empathizes with the causalities of tragedies such as May 4 and re-humanizes those victims…” Star Trek provides this pedagogy for both May 4 and other excluded narratives through the processes of embodiment. Humanizing narratives and ideologies, and exposing discourses that have been or are in the process of being threatened, such as human rights, public space, and processes of protest and activism, are key functions of this episode. And while these narratives are fictional, they instill powerful ideas of what could be remembered while still drawing from very real historic events and landscapes, such as May 4 and the Attica Riots.

CONCLUSION

Through the futuristic lens of history, Deep Space Nine challenges hegemonic conceptualizations of race and public space in our past, present, and future. Viewing these exposed (and often excluded) narratives opens the possibility for an alternate future on the grounds of a better understanding of racial discrimination, police brutality, homelessness, capitalism, and public space, both in our past and our present. This research paves the way for multiple future
studies. Further engagement with *Star Trek* by geographers is necessary, especially as the films and new television series garner attention. The feminized spaces in *Voyager*, for example, or a post-colonial or Marxist theorizing of the franchise as a whole have yet to be undertaken. Such work seems likely to reveal future affect and power structures imbued within the multiple manifestations of the series. Further engagement between media geographies and popular geopolitics and futures studies is also necessary. Finally, the material culture and spatiality of *Star Trek* through exhibitions, conventions, and other places of fandom have yet to be explored.

*Deep Space Nine* explored racialized, privatized, and exclusionary landscapes. The landscapes, however, are unlike those of, say, Martin Luther King Jr. (Alderman 2003) or slave narratives (Schein 2009), whose histories are rooted in a supposedly “true” past. Here, an imagined future’s imagined past (at times our present) is experienced through film and television. This empowers audiences to ask questions previously not thought of, expanding both the experiences of individuals and the possibilities of geography (Kadonaga 1995). Such fictionalized performances of memory are just as much key elements of historical representation as traditional memorial landscapes, because they similarly evoke emotions, narrate historical pasts in order to shape alternate futures, and are emotionally, visually, and sonically experienced. Likewise, science fiction employs the power of memory, memorial landscapes, and the development and transcension of space and place to shape alternative pasts and futures. In this way, both science fiction and memory serve as powerful agents for social justice and shapers of place, space, narrative, and landscape. These places, spaces, narratives, and landscapes of *Star Trek*, while often imagined, are embedded with meaning which have continually been written, re-written, and contested to address alternate pasts, presents, and futures.

**NOTES**

1. Vulcan is the name of the planet and species that Spock is from. Vulcans are both the first alien species to formally make first contact with humans and one of the original and primary civilizations in *Star Trek’s* United Federation of Planets.
2. In the holodeck, environments, people, and experiences were holographic. These rooms, or alternative versions of the holodeck, were prominent features of *The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, and *Voyager*. They enabled those who experienced these spaces to speak to historic individuals, relive pivotal moments from the past, or combine these past people and places with contemporary situations.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am indebted to my fellow panelists at San Francisco’s AAG meeting for collectively developing our ideas into this exciting special issue. Fiona Davidson and Hannah Gunderman were particularly helpful in earlier drafts of this work, and the editorial guidance of Steven Schnell is also greatly appreciated. I would like to further thank Chris Post, Jennifer Mapes, and the anonymous reviewers for their feedback. LLAP.

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