

# Situated Readings: Introduction to the Special Issue on *Yellowstone*

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As we write this, the 10 November 2024 release date of the highly anticipated second half of the fifth, and final, season of Taylor Sheridan's epic neo-Western drama, *Yellowstone*, lies on the horizon. Within the space of eight years, Sheridan's series, initially a niche standalone drama picked up by the Paramount Network, has expanded into a large, shared story universe. Despite the popular success of *Yellowstone*, the flagship property in this story universe, this neo-Western drama, along with its spin-offs (*1883* and *1923*), has to date been largely ignored by mainstream critics and academics. Adrian Horton (2022) of the *Guardian* summarises the possible reason for this well:

*Yellowstone* [is] a word-of-mouth hit in the heartland, for lack of a better term for the loose but distinct geographical segmentation in the US, and a phenomenon of cultural silos between urban-skewing consumers of premium cable and ex-urban (smaller cities surrounded by agricultural land, suburbs, small towns, rural communities) consumers of basic cable.

As scholars of cultural and literary studies, we found the series interesting for its evocation of certain well-established tropes of the Western. Whereas this type of nostalgia is certainly key to the success of the series, its blending of the fetishisation of a simpler, rural life with elements of modern family drama and spectacle certainly contributed to a level of popularity that could not be attained by other such attempts at reviving the popular neo-Western, such as had been the case, for instance, with the short-lived 2012 drama series revival of TV soap opera *Dallas*.

The epic scale and romanticised depiction of a rural life reminded us of such depictions closer to home, particularly the Afrikaans *plaasroman* (farm novel), but on a meta-level also of the emergence of nostalgic appropriations of the Afrikaner Boer imaginary, and the concomitant utopian farm ideal. This manifests not only in literature, or popular cultural texts, but also in online discourses, and imagined communities, with the most

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extreme of these being narratives of white victimhood and “white genocide,” which arguably serve to restore a sense of white hegemony. Significantly, these parallel, international “nationalist” discourses also give South African whiteness, historically regarded as a “lesser whiteness,” access to global, normative whiteness, which holds the potential to validate its hegemonic ideals.

It therefore came as a sincere surprise that five years after the debut of *Yellowstone* no serious attempt at scholarly engagement with the series had yet been undertaken. This special issue of *Journal of Literary Studies* is, to our knowledge, the first focused publication to critically consider *Yellowstone*. When the call for papers was distributed, we were hoping that critical interest in the series would also prove to go beyond the traditional centres of the Anglophone. The wide-spread, transnational nature of the responses attests that this is, in fact, the case. This special issue includes contributions by scholars from South Africa, Germany, Spain and the United States—thus indicating that not only does Sheridan’s series now garner international scholarly attention, but it extends beyond the traditional English-speaking centres of the United Kingdom, North America, Australia, etc., which substantiates the importance of extending and refining the critical conversation around the show.

We invited diverse perspectives on, and approaches to, *Yellowstone* within broadly conceptualised cultural and literary studies. Quite organically, these have coalesced around several focus areas which can loosely be categorised as: branding; gender and race; space and place; and situated readings of the series. The contributors are all experts in their various subfields—including drama, media studies, comparative literature, and food studies—and their articles astutely and enthusiastically approach *Yellowstone* from different, but often overlapping thematic and disciplinary perspectives, ultimately conceiving new meaning around this series (and in some cases, its spin-offs), thereby placing it within contemporary scholarly discourses to help us understand this cultural phenomenon.

The power of branding, both inside the text but also outside of it, is the focus of the first two articles in the issue. In the opening article, “The Power of a Brand: Paramount, Heartland Narrowcasting, and Taylor Sheridan’s *Yellowstone*,” Joshua Sperling (2024, 1) approaches the series in terms of its economic and cultural positionings. He argues that in the age of harsh competition within streaming television, on the one hand, and severe cultural divides due to the so-called culture wars, on the other, “the political economy of media corporations and the narrative aesthetics of media texts must be understood in tandem.” Indeed, Sperling illustrates the powerful overlapping of “narrative entertainment, commodity fetishism, and identitarian politics” in *Yellowstone*. Nieves Pascual Soler, in her article, titled “Dining with the Duttons: Food Values and Political Polarisation in the *Yellowstone* Cookbooks,” investigates two texts that operate within a liminal space between text, paratext, and epitext by analysing two cookbooks related to *Yellowstone*—one part of the official merchandise, and the other an unofficial companion. Like Sperling, Pascual Soler complicates simplistic

understandings of fandom and how it may relate to the intentional or incidental political positioning of a text such as *Yellowstone*, finding that “even though *Yellowstone* fans have been said to lean conservative and the series has been labelled as ‘red state’ and ‘Republican,’ the food in the cookbooks appeals to conservatives and liberals” (2024, 1).

In a series that operates on, and plays with, the tropes of the Western, it is not surprising that a prominent theme that emerged from the contributions we received was the role of gender, with a recurring focus on the charming, but contentious, character of Beth Dutton. Writ large both in the narrative world of the Duttons, as well as in the broader conventions of the genre, patriarchy, and more broadly gender, is a prominent point of departure for the analysis of the text. The following three articles all touch on this. Inke Klabunde, in her contribution titled, “Ambiguous Women: Complicating Gendered Readings of Beth Dutton and Monica Dutton in *Yellowstone*,” contends that both these characters function as paradoxical when read against the background of gendered and racialised stereotypes (2024). While both characters initially display the potential to circumvent these stereotypes, they both simultaneously perpetuate antiquated gender, and racial, roles. Linked to this, Anthea Garman’s contribution, “Tropes Have Fangs: Elsa Dutton, 1883, ‘Going Native,’ Adaptive Whiteness and Trope Resilience,” stays with the female characters but widens the scope to link gender to whiteness, space, and place. She argues that while the Elsa Dutton character in the 1883 series challenges notions about adaptive whiteness, agency, and power, certain narrative tropes “work against intentions to tell an old story differently” (2024, 1). The creator of the *Yellowstone* story universe might have “embraced an enlightened approach to respecting the cultures, languages, dress and customs of Native Americans,” Garman (2024, 11) argues, but it is an approach that is steeped in a whiteness that still “reinscribes the baseline ambivalence and irresolution about being white in another’s land” (2024, 14).

Garman’s theorisation of how Elsa’s character complicates concepts of freedom and autonomy links beautifully with the theorisation of place and space in Chris Broodryk and Lelia Bester’s article. In “‘There Is No Heaven to Go to, Because We’re in It Already. We’re in Hell, Too. They Coexist’: Place-Making and the Television Western Series 1883 and *Yellowstone*,” the authors present a provocative comparative analysis focusing respectively on John and Elsa Dutton. The authors weave together a complex argument about occupation versus inhabiting, and how the conventions of a genre can inform gendered place-making, where the Elsa character’s “passionate creation and navigation of trails and knots make transcendence possible” (2024, 16).

The argument presented by us in our own contribution can be linked to the contributions that precede it, in that it also emphasises this re-visited, in a way almost repurposed, nostalgic yearning for the rural comprehensibility that is depicted in *Yellowstone* on a denotative level—in our case, bringing it home to South Africa. Our piece is titled “Fertile Ground: Reading *Yellowstone* through the Analytical Lens of the Afrikaans

*Plaasroman*,” and its argument is that a comparative analysis reveals something about the contemporary moment, not only in an international context, but rather in a transnational context. Such transnational understandings, and the centre-periphery opposition of approaching the text from a local perspective, hope to write into existing work the subversive potential that the indigenisation of genre holds.

This special issue of *Journal of Literary Studies* may represent the first focused scholarly conversation about *Yellowstone*, but it also serves as a starting point for further explorations of Sheridan’s popular story universe. Moreover, this issue successfully establishes a first critical discussion about the transcultural exchanges that can be found in popular cultural texts such as this that manage to go well beyond their intended boundaries. At the same time, then, this discussion speaks to the locality of meaning and how even a show that is a testament to the popular possibilities of modern television Americana can draw out critical conversations in worlds far afield from its own.

## References

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