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BELONGING AND NARRATIVE
A Theory of the American Novel
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## Contents

### PREFACE

1 BELONGING, NARRATIVE, AND THE ART OF THE NOVEL 13

2 POISONED LETTERS FROM A GOTHIC FRONTIER 41
   Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly*

3 THE ART OF ATTACHMENT 73
   Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*
   Topophilic Dispositions. The Sketch and the Journey. Receptive Agency. Consecutive Endings, Editorial Care, and the Book as Dwelling Site

4 DWELLING IN WHAT IS FOUND 105
   Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*
   Childhood as Immigration. Space as Felt, Storied, and Scripted. Found Stuff as Narrative Foundation. Yearnings for Autonomy and the Aching Limits of Belonging

5 OF CRANES AND BRAINS 135
   Richard Powers’s *The Echo Maker*

WORKS CITED 163
This is a book about the intricate ways in which belonging and narrative condition each other, and about the ways in which their relation can elucidate our understanding of narrative art and of the art of the novel in particular. Belonging as I conceive it is not an anthropological given; it is continuously produced in and through narrative. I like to think of it as basic constituent of human being—the yearning for a place in the world without which both place and world would crumble. Moreover, I think that much of narrative’s sweeping allure (it can be found in any culture) stems from its capacities to emplot and emplace our lives. The traction that narrative has gained in recent theories of identity is a powerful testimony to the fertile relation between belonging and narrative that is the concern of this book. And while life-stories are becoming more and more novelesque in our thoroughly mobilized, digitalized, and crisis-ridden age a popular fantasy of the self as a writer (enhanced by new possibilities of self-publishing) is that of the novelist.

We tell and we listen to stories because we yearn to belong, and ever since its modern inception the novel has become a viable testing ground in this matter. With its endlessly malleable form, its preferred tropes of quest and trial, and its oddly detached characters in search for meaning and mooring, the novel is a perfect candidate for such exploitation. If and how we belong—by way of leaving home, building new homes, dwelling in multiple homes (some of which might be imaginary), or dismissing the idea of home all together—depends largely on narrative. This book argues that the novel, with its generic affinities to troubled states of belonging, has incessantly shaped both the yearning for a place in the world and the narrative vectors and affective currencies in which such a place can be forged. The final stretch of writing this book in the winter of 2015/16 coincided with the daily realities and reports of staggering numbers of refugees leaving their homes in search for a more salient future—mobilized by war, social injustice, and electronic media. Today’s world is a world in which rumors, news, stories, and images circulate in the blink of an eye to even the remotest corner of the globe, with vast impact on our sense of the near and the far, the neighbor and the foreigner. The geopolitical consequences of the recent upheavals are still unforeseeable, but from redrawing maps to charting itineraries and (de)regulating borders, and from re-structuring places and communities to mending broken biographies narrative will
play a crucial role in the outcome. For better or for worse, the world we will inhabit in the future depends on the stories that we tell ourselves today.

Among scholars of literature and culture, however, narrative has yet to recover from the bad reputation that it gained in the wake of poststructuralism. As a “structure of desire, a structure that at once invents and distances its objects and thereby inscribes again and again the space between signifier and signified” (Stewart ix) narrative is thought to be generative of symbolic order, and symbolic order is viewed as the executive branch of ideology. No doubt, narrative and ideology are natural allies (not least because all ideology asserts narrative form). But narrative is also a practical component of dwelling in the world. We use it to connect sense impressions and memories; to orient ourselves in the world and familiarize us with places and people; to draw boundaries between inside and outside, public and private; to build institutions and regulate our attachments. Both socio- and psychogenesis relies on it. From an anthropological perspective narrative has been aptly described as “one of the large categories or systems of understanding that we use in our negotiation of reality, specifically [...] with the problem of temporality; [wo]man’s time-boundness, and [her] consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality” (Brooks xi). This is a useful starting point to think about the fertile relation between belonging and narrative for sure. But is narrative not just as invested in our existence in space? Our relation to space may be more tangible than our relation to time, more pragmatic and this-worldly than our quarrels with mortality and the existential unknowability of our own death, but it is just as crucial to our sense of belonging, and certainly no less reliant on narrative.

My interest in narrative as a practical component of dwelling in the world thrives on my wish to complicate, and perhaps even move beyond representational assumptions about narrative that dominate our understanding of what narrative is and does to this day. I have learned much from structuralism and narratology, especially from their shared tendency to view literature as an integral and quantifiable part of human signifying practice, and I owe a considerable debt to Peter Brooks’s psychoanalytic approach to narrative as a system of understanding that progressively unfolds over time, driven by the dynamics of memory and desire in its creation of meaning and form. But I disagree with a bedrock assumptions of these theories; namely, that narrative is superimposed retrospectively on an experience (or an entire existence) that is on some deeper level unmediated, and as such part of the non-narrative flux of the real. Based on my understanding of media as something that we both use and are—yes, our bodies are media, and they are places, too—I believe that no matter how deeply we delve into the fabric of our being, our experiences are never unmediated. Against the rigid oppositions between subject and object, or life and narrative that such (often tacit) implications about raw experience and secondary mediation bring to bear on our understanding of narrative, this study assumes that being in the world always entails being engaged with the world; that narrative is a basic mode and mediator of this engagement;
and that living and telling our lives are continuous and interdependent because of our deep-seated need to belong.

In short, this book is invested in moving beyond narrative as a mode of representation to learn more about narrative use. Its job is to put forth an understanding of narrative as an endlessly useful resource of orientation and emplacement that both feeds and is fuelled by narrative art. Like any work of theoretical ambition (and, as it happens, like any novel), this book searches and squabbles rather than posits and proves. My endeavors to chart a narrative theory based on the human need to belong have led me to traditions as divergent as philosophical anthropology, human geography and social psychology. Some of these traditions are explicitly engaged in ongoing efforts to rethink the relation of life and narrative. Others offer insight into the inherently progressive constitution of space and place, “the unutterable mobility and contingency of space-time” (Massey, Space, Place 5) that, in turn, prompts questions about narrative’s stakes in both propelling and coping with these dynamics. But what does all of this have to do with art? And what is the role that literature plays in these narrative operations? Taking my cue from social psychology, I argue that the stories we live by draw from those artistic (and often fictional) narratives that we consume when we read novels and comics, watch movies and television, play computer games, etc. The widely shared hunger for narrative artifacts at work in this pattern made me wonder why our life stories gravitate so notably toward them. And when thinking about the matter in the light of this study it occurred to me that one thing that makes these artifacts so immensely attractive for someone who yearns to belong is an amplified sense of narrative agency. I use the term to describe the capacity to make choices about the telling of one’s story and impose them on, relate with, and ultimately be in the world. A main claim that I unfold in this book is that the novel exploits this kind of agency (which happens to be just as endlessly malleable as its searching form) to the end of suturing troubled life-worlds. In fact, since its modern inception the novel has been so conducive to dealing with troubled states of belonging that it became the main provider of the narrative frames and formulas that modern individuals need to dwell in the world.

But this book does not attempt to cover all the varieties or even the basic types of narrative forms and agencies that have gained shape in and through the art of the novel. Instead of writing a survey of this development, I chose four iconic American sites—the frontier, the region, the ghetto, the homeland—to explore how four paradigmatic American novels give voice and form to concerns with belonging particular to these sites. Of course, there are other sites, novels, and concerns with belonging than those dealt with here, and as any student of narrative knows, a different selection and combination would have amounted to a different story. The story that I tell through my examples takes us to a series of conflicted sites of U.S. cultural history that are prone to bring out both the salience and significance of having a place in a changing world, and the proactive role that
narrative assumes in the making und unmaking of this place. The letter, the sketch, the found object, and the brain-as-storytelling-machine are the main protagonists in this story, and their adventures revolve around mending and suturing troubled life-worlds. Charles Brockden Brown’s frontier gothic Edgar Huntly, or, Memoirs of a Sleepwalker (1799) exploits its narrator’s compulsive habits of letter-writing and sleepwalking to stage a narrative act of recovering a haunted ground previously traversed with no proper sense while uncovering a state of impossible belonging. Sarah Orne Jewett’s regionalist masterpiece The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896) endorses the “minor” art of the sketch in an exercise of familiarization and attachment that destabilizes both the medium of the book and the genre of the novel at a time when defamiliarization and detachment become the hallmarks of narrative art. Henry Roth’s Call It Sleep (1934), written with the ambition that ethnic literature should absorb the experimental impulse of modernism, mediates the experience of immigration through a fearful Jewish boy with a rare gift of gathering objects, people, and stories to dwell in them. And Richard Powers’s The Echo Maker (2006) depicts the Midwestern homeland as a product of two interactive eco-systems: the life-sustaining environment and the nonstop narrating human brain, one geological, the other neurological, one endangered by global capitalism and post-9/11 trauma, the other threatened by a brain disease that spreads through colliding storylines.

At the end of my story I hope to have made tangible how the human need to belong operates as a driving force of literary production, and vice versa; and how the American novel, because it comes from a place where belonging is even less of a given then in other parts of the modern world, makes for a particularly rich field of study in this regard. Hence, much will be said in this book about what narrative brings to the human need to belong, and how narrative art and the art of the novel are involved with this need. But even if my story persuades its readers that narrative is a practical component of dwelling in the world—can one actually be at home in it? My answer to this question is simple: To the tenuous degree that one can be at home at all, it is in and through narrative. There is no other way.

Writing this book in a language that is not my mother tongue has taught me a lot about not belonging, or not quite belonging—about the comfort that is lacking when being unable to tap into the secret wisdom of one’s own language where thoughts turn in circles or come to a halt. Writing this book as a member of an academic institution made me aware of that institution as a place of support and care. This book grew out of my Habilitationsschrift at Freie Universität Berlin, titled “No Place Like Home: The Ontological Narrativity of Belonging and the American Novel, 1799—1934—2006.” I am grateful to Winfried Fluck, whose unwavering support and intellectual guidance have been instrumental not only to completing...
my Habilitation and this book but to my entire academic career. And I am grateful to Susanne Rohr, who has accompanied every stage of this book and the questions about belonging and narrative that it raised in its author, and who has become a close friend along the way. I also wish to thank my colleagues at the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies at FU Berlin, where this book was conceived and most of it written, especially Heinz Ickstadt, Ulla Haselstein, Andrew Gross, Florian Sedlmeier, and Johannes Völz, for glorious years of collaboration. The German Academic Exchange Service generously funded a research stay at the University of California at Berkeley in 2011/12, and I am grateful to Anton Kaes for being an inspiring and generous host. Helmut Lethen invited me to IFK Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaft in Vienna in 2015/16, where I was able to revise my Habilitationsschrift for publication in conversation with him, Hartmut Böhme, Penelope Deutscher, Michael Hagner, and Katja Petrowskaja, and I am grateful for that. Sieglinde Lemke and Wolfgang Hochbruck have provided a home at the University of Freiburg for me at a crucial junction in my career, and I am immensely grateful for that as well. Over the years of working on this book, I have benefitted from the generous support of many people, among them Charles Altieri, Rita Felski, Frank Kelleter, Günter Leypoldt, Philipp Löffler, Ruth Mayer, Donald Pease, John Carlos Rowe, Ramón Saldívar, Joshua Shannon, and Hayden White. I am fortunate that many of those mentioned here not only offered their guidance in giving feedback on chapters and talks, writing support letters, and drawing my attention to unknown texts but also their friendship. Dominik Fungipani, Kalina Janeva, Rieke Jordan, Evelyn Kreutzer, and Anirudh Sridhar have been indispensable in proofreading and setting the manuscript in its various stages. And Daniel Bonanati and Anne Poppen at transcript have been miraculously suave and efficient in getting the manuscript published.


This book is dedicated to Dustin Breitenwischer, who is familiar with every thought processed in it, and who has shaped its final form through countless conversations in our various homes and en route between them. Belonging has gained a brighter and broader horizon with him in my life, and I thank him for that with my whole being.
Belonging, Narrative, and the Art of the Novel

Having mastered her adventures in Oz, Dorothy learns the secret of the ruby red slippers: There is no place like home. Repeating the phrase over and over, she calls her home into existence. There is indeed no place like home unless one calls for it. And there is no reason to call unless that place seems uncertain. But something is curious about this lesson, and this something becomes tangible in its repetition. Does the phrase mean that there is no place like home? This would attest to an almost sacred exclusiveness. Or does it mean that there is no place like home, which would attest to its elusiveness or even sheer absence? As one meaning dovetails the other, there is an eerie sense that home may be forever gone, or, once seen from Oz, turn out to never have existed. Alas, the return that stands at the end of Dorothy’s story does not put an end to the concerns with where, how, and to whom she belongs that made her leave home in the first place—and that are perhaps the single most powerful generator of narrative.

Belonging as I conceive it is an inescapable condition of human existence—“not just being, but longing” (Bell 1), the desire for a place in the world without which both place and world would crumble. To feel and direct this longing we need a mediating structure; narrative is that structure. Just think of the many people who write diaries in times of trouble, and stop once things have smoothened out. In turning to narrative, we grapple with unsettling experiences and conduct the semantic, psychic, and geographic movements unleashed by them within the shifting parameters of space and time. Narrative’s sweeping allure (it can be found in any culture) thrives on its promise to give meaning and mooring to our lives (which may include the dissolution of old and obsolete ties). Where, how, and to whom we belong depends on the stories we tell (or do not tell) ourselves. Today, matters of belonging are most rigorously debated in the contexts of transnationalism, post-colonialism, and queer and gender studies, usually to highlight states of troubled belonging caused by experiences of migration, diaspora, racist or sexist discrimination. These debates have brought out the centrality of these experiences in the formation of modern cultures, and they have been crucial in replacing notions of belonging as set (and saturated) in stable (and unjustly distributed) correlations of place and self with an understanding of belonging as inherently fabricated and provisional. Salman Rushdie’s “imaginary homelands,” Homi Bhabha’s “third
space,” Mary-Louise Pratt’s “contact zones,” Paul Gilroy’s “black Atlantic,” Iain Chamber’s “impossible homecomings,” and James Clifford’s preference of “routes” over “roots” capture this critical impetus.

I have learned much from these debates, and I fully subscribe to their insistence on the tenuous, quintessentially performative nature of belonging, its contested and often precarious relation to space, race and gender, its nostalgic inclinations and cosmopolitan potential. For my own purposes, however, the (identity) political framework of these debates is limiting. Rather than focusing on particular sets of experiences, their proper recognition, and their capacity to resist hegemonic renderings of belonging (the national homeland, the nuclear family), I want to consider belonging as an anthropological premise of narrative. Yet pursuing this interest against the backdrop of these debates throws into sharp relief the racist, sexist, and imperialist implications that are couched in the notion of the human in part through its relation to narrative. In fact, narrative art, and the art of the novel in particular, were essential to creating the sense of self that (with its enlightened capacities of inner growth, rational conduct and critical interrogation) has come to define what it means to be human in the modern age. So yes, the human is a haunted point of reference, far easier dismissed from a position of white privilege than from one of systematic exclusion (to this day black activism gains force by insisting on its share of the human)—and hence vexed with the very dynamics of belonging that this book sets out to explore.¹

In pairing belonging and narrative I hope to gain a new angle from which to address what narrative is and does; or rather, what we do with it, what it does with and for us, and why we are so endlessly inclined to engage with it.² With this focus, I am less concerned with narrative as a mode of representation and more with narrative use. In foregrounding the practical and pragmatic dimension of narrative, my study aligns itself with the work of scholars such as Barbara Herrnstein Smith, James Phelan, and, more recently, David Rudrum, in its conviction that “any definition of narrative that ignores the importance of use is […] incomplete” (200). While our engagement with narrative can certainly not be reduced to use in a utilitarian sense, it always occurs “on a particular occasion” and “for some purpose” (Phelan, Rhetoric 218). This also means that engaging with narrative always

¹ From the first slave narratives written in support of the abolitionist movement to Ta-Nehisi Coates’s recent protest essay Between the World and Me, “being human” serves as a rallying point against racial discrimination and injustice. The main reason for this insistence is, of course, the fact that modern slavery was based on a systematic denial of humanity to those degraded to the status of property. I discuss how Edward P. Jones’s neo-slavery novel The Known World exploits these vexed aspects of belonging in my essay “Property, Community, and Belonging.”

² The heightened attention that narrative has recently gained in theorizing identity, social action and agency is a powerful testimony to the conundrum of belonging and narrative that is the concern of this book. See Somers, Ezzy, Gergen and Gergen, Taylor, Ricoeur, “Narrative Identity,” Cavararo.
has practical value—a value that exists in relation to those who use it and their everyday needs. Based on these premises, what I put forth in this opening chapter is an understanding of narrative as an endlessly useful resource of orientation and emplacement on which we draw to shape, order, and sustain our relation with the world and everything in it. I argue that we engage in narrative to reach a more adept state of belonging; and that, in this basic sense, narrative is foundational to our being in the world, especially to our practical need for emplacement.

Moreover, building on this anthropological approach to narrative, I propose an understanding of narrative art in which the novel, with its endlessly malleable and searching form, assumes a special place. The following four chapters are meditations on this place, each based on one novel with its own situational and formal ramifications for the project of theorizing narrative use based on the human need to belong, and conjointly reaching across four centuries in probing narrative modes of emplacement and agency. These novels are American novels, which means they come from a place where belonging is even less of a given then in other parts of the modern world. They will take us to four iconic and conflicted sites of U.S. cultural history—the frontier, the region, the ghetto, the homeland—that are prone to bring out both the salience and significance of having a place in a changing world, and the proactive role that narrative assumes in the making and unmaking of this place.

**Uses of Narrative**

In a most basic sense, narrative is a kind of language use in which an act of telling serves the end of interconnecting dispersed elements across space and time, generally to reconstruct what has happened. And just as any other kind of language use, narrative is inherently dialogic—which is, of course, crucial to its use. It is geared toward a receiver with the hope of engaging her in an act of exchange. This exchange is never neutral; on the contrary, it always entails a desire for change in the receiver, be it of opinion, feeling, or mood. But change will not occur unless the receiver gets in on the narrative act. Participation can be light and wavering, a cruising through a narrative to grasp the plot and indulge in select passages (Barthes, *Pleasure* 10-13), but ideally it takes the form of playing along with the demands put forth by a specific mode of exchange. Yet no matter how we participate, it is the particular and concrete form of a narrative that regulates the terms of participation and exchange.

Theorists have described the dialogic dimension of narrative in terms of contract, transfer, transference, transaction, and feedback loops (Barthes, *Pleasure* 95-96; Iser, *Fictive* 236-48; Fluck (building on Iser), *Romance* 365-84; Brooks, *Reading* 216-37; Schwab, *Subjects* 22-48; Phelan, *Fiction* 5), and they have defined its purpose or use in terms of pleasure, desire, imaginary self-extension, and inner growth.
In all of these cases, time is the implied measure of purpose and use. Engaging in narrative can yield a pleasure that either confirms or disrupts the continuity of one’s self (Barthes, *Pleasure* 14). It can keep the boundaries of the self open over time (Iser, *Prospecting* 242-248; Schwab, *Subjects* 22-28). And in progressing from beginning to end, it can cultivate of judgment (Phelan, *Fiction* 133-148), advance fictional justice and recognition (Fluck, *Romance* 389-400; 446-449), and endorse and suspend the death-bound logic of time (Brooks, *Reading* 107-112). Given the widely accepted understanding of narrative as a representation (and hence reconstruction) of events that have happened in the past, and given the vast body of theoretical work dedicated to the structural and philosophical problems that arise from this retrospective mode of engaging with the world, this inclination is hardly surprising. Some of the most sweeping and philosophically ambitious narrative theories (Paul Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative*, Peter Brooks’s *Reading for the Plot*) conceive narrative as a dialogical model of understanding that is especially useful to grapple with the problem of human temporality and time-boundedness. They examine, for instance, how narrative, in both structuring time and progressively unfolding over time, teaches us basic lessons about the difference between past, present and future, or time and memory; and how narrative provides a virtual playing field for staging conflicts between Eros and the death drive, ultimately to the end of confronting our mortality (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3.; Brooks, *Reading* 90-112).

So yes, narrative is an immensely useful resource when it comes to grappling with the complex and intangible realities of time, and in unfolding over time it can generate such marvelous things as insight, awareness, affirmation, and joy. But are the ties to human temporality as exclusive in determining narrative use as it appears through the lens of this scholarship? Consider, for instance, that narrative creates spatial (with Mikhail Bakhtin we may say “chronotopic”) orders without which it would be incomprehensible. Such orders are always symbolically laden through hubs of power, areas with restricted access, conflicting regions (country vs. city), or journeys to foreign places. According to Jurij Lotman, whose narrative theory displays a rare awareness of matters of space, “[a] plot can always be reduced to a basic episode—the crossing of the basic topological border in the plot’s spatial structure” (*Artistic Text* 238). But space not only organizes narrative, it also drives and directs it. Moreover, and crucially, the medial and material form in

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3 If Lessing arguing in the *Laocoon* that literature a temporal, and hence more sophisticated art than the spatial art of painting is an early expression of this conundrum, Seymour Chatman’s *Story and Discourse* and Paul Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative* are narratological and philosophical monuments. For more recent work on the topic see Currie, *About Time*; Grethlein; “Narrative Configuration.”

4 The works of Bakhtin and Lotman are two notable exceptions to the negligence of space by narrative theorists. See Zoran, “Space” for an early attempt to assess the significance of space for narrative theory.
and through which we engage with narrative is always extended in space. The size of a book in our hands, the layout of letters on a page or a screen, the space between individual words, paragraphs or images, all this directly affects our mode of engagement. Narrative’s relation to space becomes even more basic when we consider that storytelling presupposes emplacement. Narrative acts are always conducted from somewhere, and this somewhere has a concrete spatial form (the face-to-face situation of oral storytelling, a particular desk at a particular place in time). And because narrative is inherently dialogic, it reaches out from that place toward an interlocutor who engages with it at an equally particular place (a favorite reading chair, a beach, a subway car, a prison cell). The transformative effects aimed for by any narrative act materialize in the space unfolding from this extended “narrative situation.”5 They are bound to change the mode of emplacement on either side of the dialogical bond, and the storyworld harbored by a narrative is the space in which the terms and trajectories of this transformation are laid out. There is indeed a complex network of spaces and places produced and interlinked in any narrative act that determine its use.

Hence, an important claim that I make in this book is that narrative does not merely engage us in ways that resemble real-life experience.6 Positing that one’s state of belonging can effectively change through narrative engagement implies that life and narrative are somehow continuous, that the boundaries between the storyworld and the actual world are more porous and permeable than it is usually assumed. Rethinking the relation between space, place and narrative is key to substantiating this point, which Edward Casey squares as: “No implacement without implotment” (461).7 Perhaps inspired by the heightened currency of matters of space and place in literary and cultural studies, yet certainly under the influence of “postclassical” extensions of their field, narratologists have recently begun to pay more attention to the underrated relation between space and narrative.8 Sparked by the advance of cognitive narratology, there is, for instance, a sizable interest in the spatial metaphors that we use to describe what narrative is and does. Scholars

5 The term is drawn from Stanzel, who uses it strictly to describe structural features of a narrative text.
6 This would be the constructivist approach embraced by narratologists such as Monika Fludernik, Ansgar Nünning, and Meir Sternberg, and recently reinvigorated in the burgeoning field of cognitive narratology, especially by David Herman and Manfred Jahn.
7 As much as I like how Casey’s formula captures the first-person-perspective of phenomenology through the repeated “i,” for the purpose of theorizing narrative it makes more sense to stick with the term “emplotment” and the corresponding “emplacement.”
8 Among these extensions of classical narratology are inclusions visual and oral media, non-fictional genres such as memoir and autobiography, and rhetorical theory and cognitive sciences. The term “postclassical narratology” was first coined by David Herman in his book Narratologies and quickly gained traction thereafter. For a recent overview of this development see Alber and Fludernik, Postclassical Narratology and The Living Handbook of Narratology.