Introduction:

Electronic Wastelands? Information Management, Cultural Memory, and the Challenges of Digitality[1]

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> Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
> Falling towers
> Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
> Vienna London
> Unreal
>
> T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922, 68)

The apocalyptic scenario of a world lying in shambles conceived by British American writer T.S. Eliot more than one hundred years ago looks eerily familiar today, albeit under different auspices. If Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1922) portrays whole tracts of land in debris and vast regions ravaged, we can equally imagine our digital landscapes—the world of digital information and communication via social media (from Facebook and Twitter to Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok)—as marked by "cracks" and "bursts," looking "unreal" to many observers. The exponential growth of new electronic devices and the subsequent digital lifestyle of billions of consumers worldwide has generated an unsustainable growth of waste of electronic equipment. As a matter of fact, e-waste is the fastest-growing solid-waste stream. According to the Global E-Waste Monitor, we can expect to reach 74.7 million tons annually by 2030.[2] In addition to the production of physical waste, we are confronted with two additional problems:

> 1. the production of digital waste which is defined as "the data we choose to neglect or discard, equivalent to layers of sediment hidden in devices and storage facilities much of it never to be used or recycled again, alongside the infrastructures and devices that are integral for their operation" (Cameron 251);

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> 2. a dangerous tendency towards disinformation in the digital age, with challenges for democracy, state, and society including the spread of false information, from fake news to propaganda wars, proliferation of hate speech, and violent content on digital media platforms (see Penninckx).[3]

Are we currently witnessing the failure of the revolutionary digital era? Are we experiencing an "electronic wasteland" one hundred years after the publication of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in 1922 which has often been read as a poem of failure—a "painful nostalgia for a wholeness that is no longer possible" as Harold Bloom argued (132)?[4]

Likewise, our present age seems to face the loss of *wholeness* and the fragmentation of reality into bits and pieces. The boundaries between real and unreal, past and present, material and immaterial, are getting more and more blurred—to the extent that we can no longer distinguish between the material world and the 'brave new world' of digitality. What's more, the digital world gradually *replaces* the real world, becoming an integral part of our perceived reality, if not its indistinguishable replica. Jean Baudrillard, a pioneer of postmodernist theory, envisaged this development as early as 1981:

> By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials—worse: with their artificial resurrection in the system of signs, a material more malleable than meaning [...]. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all vicissitudes. (2)

With new technical possibilities such as *deep fake*, the age of simulation has transformed into the age of "post-truth" and "fake news" (see Bruin & Roitman 1; Smith & Mansted 5). Users find it harder than ever before to recognize false information on the internet and distinguish between *human actors* (of flesh and blood) and *artificial actors* (induced by AI); this trend is demonstrated by the rising number of "terrorist-style" cyberattacks via bot accounts and the increasing tendency of social media to engage in what one author calls "information warfare" (Prier 65, 73). This transformation of the hegemonic imagination is tied to what Brian Thill terms "digital wastelands," namely, the emergence of vast and incoherent digitized spaces in our homes and minds that have replaced fact-based information by a colorful spectacle of emotionally charged parallel universes:

> These are wastelands that are simultaneously sites of forgetting and remembrance, of desire and abandonment, available to us in ways that are fundamentally different from the object-worlds of our homes, where we gather what is supposed to be important to us, and the trash that we put

> out every single week. By their very nature, these digital wastelands trouble the old distinctions between desire and abjection, past and present, and, therefore, most importantly, between old selves and the new self that is constantly forming, not just in the streaming, proliferating present, but with the ongoing influences of the digital pasts that we drag along with us, wanted and unwanted all at once. (Thill 9)

Such "digital wastelands" may be the result of particular global developments in the postmodern age. Yet, the tendency to create a reservoir of alternative truths is intimately linked to the history of American thought. What the American literary master Herman Melville once stated about a characteristic feature of the so-called American genius also resonates with our digital age. In "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Melville blamed the literary market for the relative lack of popularity of his masterful literary colleague. He argued that the market valued literary trash more than works of quality. Melville insisted: "[F]ailure is the true test of greatness" (1164). We live in an age in which the digital transformation has affected all our lives from the social to the political, economic, and education sphere. Digital Humanities scholars such as Stanley Fish speak of a quasi-theological vision according to which the digital world

> promises to liberate us from the confines of the linear, temporal medium in the context of which knowledge is discrete, partial and situated—knowledge at this time and this place experienced by this limited being—and deliver us into a spatial universe where knowledge is everywhere available in a full and immediate presence to which everyone has access as a node or relay in the meaning-producing system. ("The Digital Humanities and the Transcending of Mortality")

Many others, however, feel that in the process of developing Digital Studies, the results are still comparatively meagre despite large amounts of funding and a general emphasis on the productive potential of the digital revolution. Critics such as Timothy Brennan attack new digital scholarship, arguing that "digital humanities is a wedge separating the humanities from its reason to exist" (online). Others warn about the limitations of "over-hasty announcements of an intellectual revolution" (Dunst & Mischke 139) or point to the potential of moving from text-based data mining to semi-automatic computer-assisted reading (Mehring 234). As John Bryant, director of the Melville Electronic Library, puts it, it is vital for digital scholarship to "sufficiently and coherently embody a critical vision" (158).

With our reference to "electronic wastelands" in this special issue of *AmLit*, we want to address the question of problems, challenges, and failures of the ongoing digital revolution and find ways to critically assess theoretical and methodological approaches to literary texts and archives. At the same time,

this thematic issue addresses the challenges that digitalization as a process of information (mis)management poses for the production of cultural memory, including the creation of *empty discourses* in the realms of political and cultural practice. To what extent is the digital world—and are we—equipped to cope with the pitfalls of an unhinged distribution of half-truths and barely reflected knowledges? How do these, oftentimes denunciatory, practices generate and influence communication in everyday lives and lead to a dynamics of 'failure'? As Bryant reminds us with an eye to Melville's assessment of the importance of failure:

> [F]ailure has no practical value unless it either promotes a deeper understanding of theory or engenders a consideration of whether one's theory is the one to pursue. Technicians will tell you that anything can be done digitally—with "Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience" (as Melville also once put it)—but once achieved, a technical solution (elegant or not) is worthless unless it sufficiently and coherently embodies a critical vision. (158)

With the emphasis this citation places on failure from a technical point of view, it brings to the fore how fragile and susceptible to error technology can be when it is kept in isolation and away from human critical thinking and wellbeing.

In our current time and age, the speed with which digitality envelops every aspect of human action—physical, intellectual, and cognitive—brings us face to face not simply with the omnipresence and omnipotence of technology but with the realization of how expendable everything is. With electronic vulnerability and ephemerality being an unquestionable fact if one considers how quickly gadgets and online software become outdated, one can realize that a total wipe out and erasure of all that has been created or preserved with the use of digital technologies is inevitable. In such an ambivalent reality, humans are being caught up in a race of ongoing updates and online platform migrations in an attempt to resist technological redundancy. Kamilla Pietrzyk, in her exploration of the speed at which information is disseminated as well as lost in our digital age, locates this problem in "capitalism's systemic imperative toward social, economic, and technological acceleration, and the associated cultural lack of interest in the problems of duration" (127). This observation very much brings to the center of attention Manuel Castells who identifies postindustrial economy with the dominance of information technologies or, what he calls, *informationalism* which is "oriented towards technological development, that is toward the accumulation of knowledge and towards higher levels of complexity in information processing" (17). This realization marks a transition to an accelerated production of data that cannot be analyzed by the human mind but only by intelligent machines, which heralds an uneven distribution of power and intelligence.

In such an ominous environment of impending digital doom, fear should not overwhelm us. The current appearance of the ChatGPT AI tool that completely effaces the distinction between ubiquitous technologies and human cognition makes imperative, as N. Katherine Hayles had written a few years ago, to "recognize the mutuality of our interactions with [intelligent machines], the complex dynamics through which they create us even as we create them" (243). It is interesting that both Castells and Hayles, though they approach digital technologies from different standpoints, comment on its "complexity" or "complex dynamics." This complexity, even though it sounds abstract and vague as a notion, should not deter us from engaging in depth with it in an attempt to comprehend what it stands for and how it explains the human-machine symbiosis and synergistic interaction. Hayles already attempted to raise awareness when she stated that

> [a]s digital media [...] become more pervasive, they push us in the direction of faster communication, more intense and varied information streams, more integration of humans and intelligent machines, and more interactions of language with code. These environmental changes have significant neurological consequences, many of which are now becoming evident in young people and to a lesser degree in almost everyone who interacts with digital media on a regular basis. (11)

The changes that this observation highlights, as regards the impact digital technologies have on our thinking and communication capacities and hence on our identity, may seem inevitable and irreversible, gradually leading to the 'electronic wastelands' this volume sheds light on. This thought is reminiscent of Baudrillard's realization which he summarized by claiming that we are entering an abstraction of the real "whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself" (1). The "desert" he is referring to is what he also terms as "simulation" or the "hyperreal" in the citation that follows: "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1). Such a proclamation has somehow paved the ground for the technological ubiquity we are nowadays experiencing that makes any differentiation between human action and digitality indistinguishable on an international scale. However, we are still walking on solid ground and the way digitality is experienced around the world is not the same for everyone if we consider internet availability and access worldwide. So it is essential at this stage of our existence to consider the extent to which we still have time to gain insight into what makes our engagement and interaction with digital technologies complex: Is it the multiple combinations of data? The forward and backward movements or loops that the users consciously or unconsciously perform? The random

activation of information when users tap on their keyboards and electronic screens or surf on the net? The algorithmic processes that are set into motion? These are all functions that may appear to be overpowering and overwhelming but, simultaneously, they widen our perspective with regard to the capabilities of the networked computer.

With our everyday digital experience being shaped by the sensorial pleasures and the data that the digital interfaces generate, it becomes necessary to acknowledge uncertainties and transitions as well as the opportunities and risks that define our present moment. Despite the ubiquity of digitality, there are still differences in the ways each one of us tackles it. This lack of uniformity in how digitality is perceived combined with the constant rise of its usage certainly does not leave any domain of human action unaffected, but it also offers us the opportunity to articulate our questions and elaborate on our findings. What everyone understands is that the vastness and expansiveness of the present-day digital media move beyond the mere manifestation of plurality but into an unbound and polymorphic terrain within which multiple and varied processes can be executed. Such an observation corresponds to Lionel Ruffel's remarks when he comments on our contemporary moment, saying that "[it] feels more like a concordance of temporalities than a single time, a concordance that is also more subjective than collective: it's not postulating that a single unique, unified present is shared by the community but rather that what the community shares is a subjectivized polychronicity" (178). Possibly within the existence of multiple temporalities, subjectivities, singularities, and communities, a glimpse of opportunity may still be visible for an exchange of experiences, viewpoints, and practical skills between users as well as between different disciplines before the electronic wastelands overtake us. Humanity has proven that at major challenges—with COVID-19 being the most recent one—only meaningful synergies matter.

Moving away from celebrating digital transformations, this thematic issue of *Electronic Wastelands* attempts to critically map, analyze, and evaluate certain problematic developments of the digital era we live in. As for the acknowledgement of the limitations, failures, and sometimes dangerous developments of digitality, this constitutes the first step towards a more democratic, productive, and participatory consideration and questioning of the impact and effects digitality can have in academia, art, culture, and society.

The contributors to *Electronic Wastelands*, coming from different geographical territories, critically engage with topics such as electronic information (mis)management, digital strategies of memory-making as well as conspiracy theories concocted in social media.

John Rodzvilla opens our volume with his article on "The Hollowed-Out Bookstore: Amazon's Promotion of Empty Discourses in Their Online

Bookstore." He takes an initiative by representatives Adam Schiff (D-CA) and Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) as the springboard for his article. In September 2021, they sent letters to Amazon about promoting books that provide misinformation on the COVID pandemic. This was not the first time Amazon had been involved in some kind of algorithmic manipulation of the way books appear on their site. Previously, the "world's largest bookstore" removed the sales rankings from over 57,000 titles, most of which were LGBTQ+ titles and blamed the removal on a coding error. Outside of their well-documented manipulation of titles from traditional publishing, Amazon's self-publishing marketplace, Kindle Direct Publishing, still allows authors to publish all manners of print and digital "books," including: conspiracy theories, blank books, scans from mass digitization, and even selections of entries from Wikipedia. Rodzvilla looks at the different ways Amazon has hollowed out their bookstore and made it a source of misinformation in both print and digital formats.

In their essay, Paschalia Mitskidou and Vasileios N. Delioglanis turn to the *Internet Archive* to engage with questions of how to best preserve American cultural memory in times of sheer unlimited digital storage opportunities. Websites, blogs, videos, images, and software, they argue, run the risk of becoming ephemeral and obsolete, as they are constantly disabled by no longer being available for use. The essay concentrates on the *Internet Archive*'s Wayback Machine, a digital tool serving as an online library that enables the discovery and archiving of obsolete webpages as well as the restoration, preservation, management, and classification of these "electronic wastelands," while also adding to their historicity. Exploring the challenges posed by digitalization as a process of culture making, the authors investigate the ways in which the *Internet Archive* contributes to the preservation of cultural memory of the United States. The authors propose that this web archive offers a solution to the problem of disinformation by turning electronic wastelands, under certain circumstances, into a repository of cultural knowledge that handles and systematically organizes the various online materials, thereby contributing to the formation of a 'healthier' information ecosystem.

In "Bodies, Brains, and Burnt-out Systems in Don DeLillo's *The Silence*," Despoina N. Feleki investigates literary representations of electronic wastelands in twenty-first-century American fiction (markedly, waste as 'wasted mind power'). Highlighting images of cultural and moral decadence in a digitized world where the omnipresence of the internet is criticized, Feleki addresses the ills of an uncritical use of and exposure to new media. The novella *The Silence* (2020) by Don DeLillo, one of the most influential living American writers and declared critic of American culture, is explored to shed light on the health and the ills of the American nation in the digital era.

As DeLillo's obsessions with the obscenities of the real world currently shift, he expresses his anxieties over the terrifying effects of our digitized world, interrogating excessive exposure to the screen. By scrutinizing instances of existential crisis in DeLillo's narrative (the denial of one's sense of self, the disruption of one's presence in space and time as well as the loss of cultural memory), Feleki draws attention to the agonizing questions concerning these challenges caused by electronic systems that manipulate human bodies and minds. Analyzing *The Silence* as a metaphor for the end of discourse *per se*, the author pinpoints how we have all become immersed in a new media order that is deeply pervasive and exploitative.

In his article "The Barcode Monster: Supermarkets, Supermarket Data, and Surveillance in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," Andrew Warnes explores the rise of the American supermarket system, tracing its evolution from small self-service grocery stores in the early twentieth century to the giant conglomerates of today. Over the course of the 'American' century, after all, food—by definition sensual and material—has become *information*, too, as it arrives on supermarket shelves and then online, representing itself and holding its actual contents beneath a coded system. Both supermarket items and online life address the individual as an individual even as they constantly harvest data on this individuality to group it into types. Observing these similarities, Warnes turns to an American novel published in the digital age, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), showing how it valorizes *food* beyond the supermarket's textualizing network.

Throughout this special issue, each of the contributing essays attempts to highlight a different aspect of contemporary digital reality that is still developing in an unrestrained manner. The observations and conclusions the authors draw underline the multifacetedness of digitality but also the need to articulate different points of view in an analytical, critical, and discursive manner. The essays also prove that culture still remains the hub and incubator of ideas and perspectives. The more we learn the more we battle ignorance about the digital world around us, but the more digitality expands the more urgent the need to take action becomes. What this issue of *Electronic Wastelands* hopes to offer to its readers are additional elaborations, speculations, and considerations on an ever- and currently-changing terrain of digital intensification.

Notes

[1] This special issue of *AmLit* emerged from a series of papers delivered during a shoptalk organized by the EAAS Digital Studies Network at the EAAS Conference in Madrid (2022). See https://www.eaas.eu/eaas-networks/643-eaas-digital-studies-network. Accessed 9 Jan. 2023.

[2] Global E-Waste Monitor, https://ewastemonitor.info/gem-2020/. Accessed 5 Jan. 2023.

[3] Patrick Penninckx gave his speech in his function as the Head of Information Society Department at the Council of Europe on 7 Apr. 2022.

[4] The dawn of the "roaring twenties" seemed unreal to Eliot. In times of the electronic wasteland and at times of global crises, a desire for wholeness has become quite real (or rather 'hyperreal,' in the Baudrillardian sense) among our generation.

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Biography

Stefan L. Brandt is Professor of American Studies at the University of Graz and former President of the Austrian Association for American Studies. After receiving his PhD and Venia Legendi at Freie Universität Berlin, he was awarded lecturer positions at University of Chemnitz and University of Bochum as well as professorial positions at Freie Universität Berlin, University of Siegen, and University of Vienna. He was affiliated—on the research and teaching level—with numerous other universities, among them Università Ca' Foscari, Radboud Universiteit, University of Toronto, and Harvard University. Brandt has talked and written on a wide range of topics in American Cultural Studies, having published four monographs—among them *The Culture of Corporeality: Aesthetic Experience and the Embodiment of America, 1945–1960* (Winter, 2007), and *Moveable Designs, Liminal Aesthetics, and Cultural Production in America since 1772* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)—and (co-)edited eight anthologies, most recently *In-Between: Liminal Spaces in Canadian Literature and Culture* (2017) (Lang Canadiana Series), *Space Oddities: Difference and Identity in the American City* (2018) (LIT Verlag, with Michael Fuchs), and *Ecomasculinities: Negotiating New Forms of Male Gender Identity in U.S. Fiction* (2019) (Lexington Books, with Rubén Cenamor). Brandt is currently working on a book project dealing with the transatlantic origins of U.S. formation literature (*Burgeoning Selves: Transatlantic Dialogue and Early American Bildungsliteratur, 1776–1860*). He is also one of the founding members of the European research network 'Digital Studies' (https://www.eaas.eu/eaas-networks/643-eaas-digital-studies-network) (together with Frank Mehring and Tatiani G. Rapatzikou).

Biography

Frank Mehring is Professor of American Studies at Radboud University, Nijmegen. His research focuses on cultural transfer, migration, intermediality, and the function of music in transnational cultural contexts. In 2012, he received the Rob Kroes Award for his monograph *The Democratic Gap* (2014). His publications include *Sphere Melodies* (2003) on the intersection of literature and music in the work of Charles Ives and John Cage, *The Soundtrack of Liberation* (2015) on WWII sonic diplomacy, *Sound and Vision: Intermediality and American Music* (2018, with Erik Redling), *The Politics and Cultures of Liberation* (2018, with Hans Bak and Mathilde Roza), or *Islamophobia and Inter/Multimedial Dissensus* (2020, with Elena Furlanetto). Mehring unearthed a new visual archive of transatlantic modernism with articles, lectures, exhibitions, editions, and catalogues such as *The Mexico Diary: Winold Reiss between Vogue Mexico and Harlem Renaissance* (2016) and *The Multicultural Modernism of Winold Reiss* (2022). With Tatiani G. Rapazikou and Stefan L. Brandt, he is the co-founder of the European Digital Studies Network and the online journal *AmLit—American Literatures*. He organized the first performance of the Marshall Plan opera *La Sterlina Dollarosa* and co-curated exhibitions on Winold Reiss, Joseph Beuys, the Marshall Plan, and Liberation Songs in Kleve, New York, Nijmegen, and The Hague.

Tatiani G. Rapatzikou is Associate Professor at the Department of American Literature and Culture, School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTh), Greece. She holds a B.A. from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece, while for her graduate studies she holds an M.A. from Lancaster University and a Ph.D. from the University of East Anglia, Norwich, U.K. (funded by the Board of Greek State Scholarships Foundation, I.K.Y). She was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the M.I.T. Comparative Media Studies program (2009). She has received various fellowships: the Arthur Miller Centre Award (2000), the BAAS Short Term Travel Award (2000), the British Library Eccles Centre for American Studies Visiting Fellowship (2020). She was a Visiting Research Scholar at the Program in Literature at Duke University, U.S. (2012), the Department of English at York University, Toronto, Canada (2016, 2022), and the Department of Fine Arts & Humanities, Augustana Campus, University of Alberta, Canada (2022). She has written the monograph titled *Gothic Motifs in the Fiction of William Gibson* (Rodopi 2004), while she recently co-edited: *Ethnicity and Gender Debates: Cross-Readings of the United States of America in the New Millennium* (Peter Lang 2020); *Visualizing America* (Hellenic Association for American Studies Digital Publications, National Documentation Center 2021); and the special journal issue *The Cultural Politics of Space* (2020: *Gramma, Journal of Theory and Criticism*). She is one of the founding members of two online peer/blind review journals (*Ex-centric Narratives: Journal of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Media* and *AmLit: American Literatures*) and of the EAAS Digital Studies Network (together with Stefan Brandt and Frank Mehring). Between 2019 and 2022, she served as the Director of the Digital Humanities Lab "Psifis" (AUTh). Her teaching and research deal with: contemporary American literature, postmodern writing practice, cyberpunk/cyberculture/cybergothic (William Gibson), electronic literature, print and digital materialities.