

# **I Solitude and American Studies**



Ina Bergmann

# Cultures of Solitude: Reflections on Loneliness, Limitation, and Liberation in the US

**Abstract:** These introductory remarks to the essay collection reflect on loneliness, limitation, and liberation in American culture. They focus on the particular relevance of the diverse practices of solitude and their creative reverberations in the US, while also highlighting the more universal conditions and implications of seclusion and isolation.

## 1. Solitude, Individualism, and Freedom

Solitude, “the quality or state of being alone or remote from society” (“Solitude”), is an international and transhistorical phenomenon. Indeed, it is an anthropological constant which has continually prompted popular and artistic treatment as well as scholarly scrutiny.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the publication in hand explores specifically American cultures of solitude and their representations in cultural products.

Cultures of solitude in the US are of particular interest because solitude is directly related to concepts of individual independence and liberty which are venerable American ideals. “The Declaration of Independence” states this most prominently in its well-known second sentence. An individualist understanding of freedom is at the core of US national history and identity (Smallwood 111). Personal freedom was the initial motivation for many early settlers to come to the New World. Later, individualism and freedom motivated westward expansion and turned out to be the underlying features of the frontier spirit, as pointed out by Frederick Jackson Turner. Over the course of American history, freedom was sought in numerous arenas such as religious freedom, economic independence, political autonomy, female emancipation, the abolition of slavery, and the absence of social restrictions, among many others. Johann Georg Zimmermann states in his seminal work *Solitude Considered with Respect to Its Influence Upon the Mind and the Heart* (*Über die Einsamkeit*, 1783–85) that “[I]berty, true liberty, is no where [sic] so easily found as in a distant retirement from the tumults of men” (302). Reclusiveness and eremitism can be understood as extreme manifestations of the ideals of liberty and individualism, which are a significant, if not the second most important American cultural motif, besides, and closely linked with the theme of the settlement, colonization, and reclamation of the New World. Cultural representations of hermits and recluses, whether fictional or historical, abound in American cultural history. Media depicting solitaries range widely in time,

from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century, and in genre, from broadsides to novels, from poems to plays, from biographies to blogs, from songs to musicals, from ballet to opera, from engravings to paintings, from documentaries to TV shows, and from computer games to social network sites.

## 2. Spaces, Places, and Terms

The spaces and places of solitude are just as diverse as the reasons for eremitism. Hermits find freedom in living alone in the wilderness. They spend their lives isolated in nature. Urban recluses live outside society without spatially retreating from the city. Instead, they withdraw into the privacy of their room or house. The space the solitary inhabits is always neither here nor there, secluded from civilization, yet still a part of it, or within nature, yet apart from it. In “Of Other Spaces” (1986), Michel Foucault defines such spaces, set off from the everyday world, as heterotopias.

Both types are secularized versions of early religious solitaries. The original hermits were the Desert Fathers and Mothers, Christian hermits who removed to the deserts of Egypt and Palestine from the third century onwards (Dyas, Ellis, and Hutchinson 208; Jones, *Hermits*). The European anchorites of the Middle Ages, who followed their example, were their earliest urban equivalents (Kingsley 329; Mulder-Bakker). They are also identified as “town hermits” (Clay 66) or “recluses” (Licence 11). They lived their lives in solitude and prayer in a cell attached to a church (Dyas, Ellis, and Hutchinson 207). Originally, the terms ‘monk’ from the Ancient Greek *μόνος* denoting ‘alone,’ ‘anchorite’ from *ἀναχωρέω* ‘to withdraw, to retire,’ and ‘hermit’ from *ἐρημία* ‘a wilderness, a desert’ were used interchangeably (McAvoy, *Medieval* 2). Over the course of the Middle Ages, however, the words came to designate distinct vocations (Jones, *Hermits*). A ‘monk’ is therefore defined as a member of a male religious society, an ‘anchorite’ or ‘ anchoress’ is a person who spends his or her life in an ‘anchorhold,’ and a ‘hermit’ is a person who has retired from society to lead a (spiritual) life in solitude (Kingsley 14). Unlike anchorites, hermits were not confined to one place (Dyas, Ellis, and Hutchinson 208). They found equivalents of the Eastern desert in the wildernesses of the West (Jones, “Hermits” 5).

In the American context, the idea of the hut in the wilderness is deeply embedded in culture. Abraham Lincoln most famously exchanged a log cabin for the White House. And Henry David Thoreau’s hut at Walden Pond, where he famously wrote *Walden* (1854), an account of his retreat to nature, is now regarded as the birthplace of the American conservation movement. The modern second home in the countryside mimicks this apogee of nature dwelling and gestures towards the

ideal of simple life, even if it is equipped with central heating and air conditioning (G. Campbell 50–51). During the late nineteenth century, the US was marked by increasing urbanization due to industrialization and population growth through immigration. While most people were cramped in tenements, a few well-off individuals retreated to urban mansions and lived their lives in isolation. Prominent early examples of urban reclusiveness are Ida Mayfield (1838–1932) and Huguette Clark (1906–2011). But ultimately, it is probably only of minor importance whether the solitaries dwell in a town or in the country. Crucial is not “the fact of space,” but the “sort of space” that the solitary inhabits, “a space in which time and place fall away, a space of awakening” (Dumm, “Thoreau’s” 334).

Solitude manifests itself in a wide variety of forms. Many terms such as ‘isolation,’ ‘seclusion,’ ‘aloneness,’ ‘privacy,’ ‘secludedness,’ ‘separateness,’ and ‘solitariness’ are generally understood as synonyms of ‘solitude.’ But all of them actually further define the respective state of solitude. Related words such as ‘loneliness,’ ‘lonesomeness,’ ‘confinement,’ ‘incarceration,’ ‘retirement,’ and ‘withdrawal’ additionally differentiate the quality of being alone (“Solitude”). The solitary may be deliberately seeking out a retreat or s/he may be forced into isolation. The hermit may temporarily or definitely withdraw from society. The loner may occasionally mix with other people or completely avoid human contact. The recluse may rejoice in seclusion or feel alienated and lonely. Solitude comes at a cost, but it also has its benefits. It entails limitation as well as liberation, as the title of this collection asserts.

### 3. Limitation and Liberation

While habitually perceived as exile or enclosure, reclusiveness and eremitism often manifest themselves as a form of liberation, independent of the topographies of isolation, the politics of solitude, and the ideologies of privacy involved. Indeed, the element of liberation can be traced back to the very origins of the term ‘recluse.’ In classical Latin, *recludere* denoted ‘to un-close,’ ‘to disclose,’ or even ‘to reveal.’ Although in late Latin it came to mean ‘to shut off,’ ‘to close,’ or ‘to enclose,’ it retained its active charge: a believer opted for seclusion, thus freeing her- or himself from a restrictive environment (Licence 11; Mulder-Bakker 6). Thoreau, the epitome of the American solitary, explains his motivation for withdrawal: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately” (72). The Latin *deliberare* means ‘consider carefully, consult,’ literally ‘weigh well.’ But etymology also hints at the fact that *liberare*, from *librare* meaning ‘to balance, make level,’ may have been altered by the influence of *liberare* ‘to free, liberate’ (Harper). The conscious decision implies the privilege of freedom of choice. Solitude offers freedom from social constraints and opens up spaces for reflection and self-encounter. Spending

time alone can be beneficial and it is essential to productivity and creativity (Long and Averill; Storr). This liberating quality of solitude has been described as “the power of lonely” (Neyfakh).

At the same time, eremitism and reclusiveness also entail confinement and limitation. The liberating effects are quite often the result of an initial situation of withdrawal without alternative. Ageing, old age, and resulting pathologies may, for example, be causes for undesired isolation (Granick and Zeman). Imprisonment, especially as solitary confinement, is another form of enforced seclusion, generating unfreedom (R.A. Ferguson, *Inferno*; Manion, *Liberty's*, “Prison”; Smith, “Solitude,” “Emerson,” *Prison*). Even if the retreat is willfully sought, it goes hand in hand with deprivations of all kinds. Asceticism and frugality are, for example, physical limitations that often flank eremitism in nature. And ‘loneliness’ is the term that describes the negative feelings that involuntary solitude, the limitation or utter absence of human contact can trigger (Dumm, “Thoreau’s” 326).

#### 4. Dichotomy and Liminality

Hermits and recluses in the US illustrate typically American values such as independence and self-reliance, liberty and privacy (Fitz and Harju; Rybczynski; Slauter, *State*; Whitman). At the same time, withdrawal from society runs counter to equally prominent and venerable American merits such as community, sociability, and the social compact (Coleman; Slauter, *State*; Winthrop). They follow an ideal which emphasizes the importance of individuality, expressed in John Stuart Mill’s maxim “over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign” (14), against the idea of democracy as the “tyranny of the majority” (8). Solitude is a threat to the ideal of national (or republican and liberal) citizenship, which rests on the balance between rights and responsibilities to a community (Parker). Yet, solitude can also be interpreted as an affirmation of global citizenship, of the idea of one humanity that is transcending geopolitical borders (Berlant 41–42). Deliberate solitude can be born out of an “ecological citizenship” (Alfred Hornung qtd. in Adamson and Ruffin 2; see also Dobson 83–140). In the anthropocene, the private realm is turned into a space in which citizenship is redefined with regard to sustainability and the personal ecological footprint (Parker). US-citizenship is especially a field of contestation where competing forces, definitions, and geographies of freedom and liberty are lived out (Berlant 42). In what can be read as a discussion of citizenship, Thoreau claims in his chapter on “Sounds” in *Walden* that the cockerel has to be “naturalized without being domesticated” (100). Being naturalized means s/he is a citizen of the land s/he inhabits, but to

be domesticated means to be subjected to conformity – a life that is no life for a free person (Dumm, “Thoreau’s” 332).

These conflicting issues do have a long tradition in the American mindset, originating, respectively, in the colonial and the constitutional era. And they are still enormously relevant today. The present pertinence is obvious by its immediate connection to contemporary public discourses. Protest against public surveillance today paradoxically coincides with the breaching of all barriers of privacy in social media, which are “typically ... made up of two types of users: voyeurs and exhibitionists” (Pitchford 13). Loneliness is ironically battled but also enhanced by new technology. Our confessional culture obeys a cult of therapeutic openness. Self-help books trade on stories of people who have transformed themselves from depressed solitaries into social butterflies (Moran, “What”). Contemporary social and cultural practices such as controlled diets, ascetic or simplistic lifestyles, anti-consumerist and environmentalist political attitudes, and ameliorative activities flank or prompt willful withdrawal from society. Social disadvantages such as illness, disability, old age, unemployment, and poverty are triggers for undesired isolation. The surge of recent newspaper, magazine, and e-journal articles about contemporary forms of eremitism, reclusiveness, isolation, and loneliness reflects the present relevance of solitude as a germane topic (El-Hal; R.A. Ferguson, “Alone,” “When”; Finkel; Jordan; Neyfakh; Ortberg). Depending on the chosen perspective, solitaries can be read as trailblazers for an alternative future or as symptoms of a pathological society.

The solitary’s existence is thus a liminal one in more than one respect. Victor Turner defines the term ‘liminality’ broadly: “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (*Ritual* 95). Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau’s mentor, says of solitude and society: “We must keep our head in the one and our hands in the other” (14). John D. Barbour similarly argues that “solitude at its best – when it realizes its fullest ethical and spiritual value – is not oriented towards escaping the world but to a different kind of participation within it” (qtd. in McAvoy, *Medieval* 5). For Barbour, the solitary her- or himself thus becomes a ‘site’ where a whole range of different ideologies, political and religious interests, and discursive practices come together and compete (McAvoy, *Medieval* 5–6). Coby Dowdell calls the position of the hermit between society and solitude, society and nature, inclusion and exclusion, head and heart, self-interest and disinterest, and life and death a “weaning stage” (“American” 131; 139). He identifies the discovery of the hermit’s manuscript, which tells the hermit’s story and spreads his wisdom – and which is often identical with the actual cultural product in hand – as

the “crucial element” of the generic formula of “the American hermit’s tale” (130). It is also “crucial for understanding the liminal status of the hermit” (131). The very existence of such a manuscript is not only evidence of the hermit’s awareness of her or his own publicity, it also renders the withdrawal a “perceptible political gesture” (131). With the manuscript, the hermit obviously aims at triggering social change or at least at initiating a discourse about social defects.

## 5. Archetypes and Universality

When pondering solitude or solitaries in American culture, one’s first association is usually with Thoreau, still “one of America’s best-known seekers of solitude” (El-Hal) and an often-studied figure of eremitism. Thus, one’s first mental image is unmistakably that of a white – more often than not bearded – man who retreats into nature to live a simplistic, contemplative life. The painting *Old Man Loy* (*Der alte Loy*, c. 1925) by my late grandfather Alois Bergmann-Franken, the cover image for this collection, might be considered an illustration of such an introverted, white, male, and, not to forget, bewhiskered hermit. The stereotypical urban millennial hipster, with his well-groomed beard, his trendy plaid flannel shirt, and Levi’s worker’s jeans, his observance of political correctness, his love of outdoor activity, his environmentalist activism, his strict commitment to vegan diet, and his perusal of *WALDEN* – not the original book, but the outdoor magazine (2015-present) – is a contemporary, albeit ironic, citation of the Thoreauvian hermit archetype. However, this archetype is problematic because hermits, solitaries, and recluses come in a variety of shapes and sizes in American literature and culture, then and now. The search for solitude is a much more general and widespread endeavor. In her book *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), Sarah Orne Jewett aptly captures and expresses the universality and relevance of solitude: “We are each the unaccompanied hermit and recluse of an hour or a day” (83). Elizabeth Cady Stanton even diagnoses a constant “solitude of self” (248). And Emily Dickinson condenses the notion of the essential solitary state of the human existence into the last lines of her lyric poem #1695: “A Soul admitted to Itself – Finite infinity” (1834).

## 6. New Trajectories and Key Aspects

The topicality of the subject of solitude further derives from the concepts and issues that inform and flank the withdrawal from society, such as the topographies of isolation, the politics of solitude, the cultures of privacy and home, the artistic and creative potentials of reclusiveness, the spiritual promises of exile, the mental and physical conditions of retreat, the social preconditions of withdrawal, and the



function of shifting representations of solitude. The contributions in this collection are arranged around a number of trajectories and key aspects in the field.

Astonishingly, the importance of space for solitude is debatable. As mentioned before, it is arguable whether or to which degree the general outline between wilderness and civilization, between open and closed spaces informs solitude. Regardless of the specific place the solitary inhabits, her/his abode is a liminal space. Ann, the narrator of Rick Bass's short story "The Hermit's Story" (1998), inhabits such a liminal space in the solitary Yaak Valley in Montana, a place between civilization, represented by a town some forty miles away, and wilderness, which is located further north, in the Canadian tundra of Saskatchewan. When she retreats to this space, it is only to find herself in a much more liminal space than before. She and her Native American companion discover a lake that is frozen on the surface and dry, warm, and hollow underneath. Ann and Gray Owl travel through the lake, safe from an ice storm, in a space that is real and at the same time magical, outside of all conventional western notions of space and time. It is a heterotopic, heterochronic, and liminal space (Achilles and Bergmann, "Betwixt"; Foucault; V. Turner, "Betwixt"). Paradoxically, Ann feels "alive in the world, free of that strange chitin" (Bass 4) in this confining space (Bergmann, "Blue").

Often, politics prompt withdrawal from society. Separateness can function as a form of denial or as an act of critiquing society, social norms, consumerism, capitalism, environmental exploitation, and other social attitudes. Jon Krakauer's non-fiction book *Into the Wild* (1996) and Sean Penn's movie adaptation (2007) relate the story of Christopher McCandless (1968–1992), the infamous American wanderer whose endeavors to leave behind civilization and to lead a self-sustained life in nature have been glorified and damned alike since his untimely death in the wilderness of Alaska. Before his final hike, the young man, who created an aptly-named persona, 'Alexander Supertramp,' for himself, wrote down what he hoped to find in isolation in nature in his personal declaration of independence: "Ultimate freedom" (Krakauer 163).

Religion or spirituality can become the motivation to retreat from society. Often, the hermit's withdrawal is perceived as a sign of sacredness or holiness by his/her followers. Yet, cultural products regularly present these conditions either as religious delusion or even as spiritual hubris. Richard Digby, the stern Puritan of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Man of Adamant: An Apologue" (1837), believes to be the sole person who is of the true faith. To fully enjoy his 'chosenness,' he decides to seclude himself from society and to live isolated in a cave in the wilderness. He even resists the saintly apparition of a dead woman, symbolizing actual true faith, who tries to lure him back to society. In Hawthorne's

unparalleled allegorical style, Digby only drinks the water that drips from the rock of the cave and then, one day, turns into stone himself, becoming a memento of spiritual rigidity for future generations.

Strict gender norms can trigger a complete abandoning of society. Yet, solitude may also initiate the creation of alternative gender roles. In 1915, Alice Gray (1881–1925), a graduate of the University of Chicago in Mathematics, Astronomy, Latin, and Greek, came to live on the sand dunes of Lake Michigan for seven years, until her death. Soon after her arrival, she became known by the sobriquet ‘Diana of the Dunes.’ In an interview with a newspaper in 1916, she allegedly claimed the following as her motivation for her eremitism: “I wanted to live my own life – a free life” (qtd. in Urbanik). Besides her environmentalist agenda and her criticism of the modern work situation, Gray wanted to rid herself of the societal pressure for proper female conduct. By living as a recluse in nature, she successfully defied traditional gender roles (Edwards; Urbanik).

Race is frequently the cause for alienation and isolation. The practices of slavery and segregation even force individuals to withdraw from society. The slave narrative *Life and Adventures of Robert, the Hermit of Massachusetts, Who Has Lived 14 Years in a Cave, Secluded from Human Society. Comprising, An Account of his Birth, Parentage, Sufferings, and providential escape from unjust and cruel Bondage in early life – and his reasons for becoming a Recluse. Taken from his own mouth, and published for his benefit* (1829) relates the captivating story of Robert Voorhis, a hermit and former slave, who lost his freedom due to deceit and was separated by force from his family. Robert chose solitude and became a hermit out of desperation and distress. He could only achieve a certain measure of freedom in total withdrawal from society (Cope).

Regardless of the motivations or reasons for seclusion, the body is a site of contestation for solitaries. The dichotomy of mind vs. body is a recurring motif in hermit tales. The path to spiritual enlightenment is often paved by the neglect of bodily needs. It is the triumph of the soul over the abjection of the body (McAvoy, “Introduction” 6). The willful castigation of the body ranges from frugality to asceticism and from fasting to self-inflicted starving. The sublimation of sexuality is another aspect that is often tied to seclusion. Bartleby, the protagonist of Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street” (1853), can be considered the archetype of the author’s ‘isolatoe’-figures (Asselineau; Cahir; Massie). His gradual denial to perform his work, expressed in his dictum “I would prefer not to” (20) – which only recently made him the posterboy of the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement – leads to his liberation from the constraints of ‘the system’ and to maintaining his intellectual independence, albeit isolating him. His

workspace becomes his “hermitage” (21). When he also refuses to conform to the conventions of supposedly ‘proper’ nourishment, he more than simply turns into a “vegetarian” (23), as his boss assumes. His complete rejection of food leads to his physical demise and ultimately to his death.

Reclusiveness is also represented as social or mental deviation and is frequently accompanied by or manifests itself as a form of pathology. The solitary may show signs of madness or insanity or more particular mental disorders such as agoraphobia, claustrophobia, scopophobia, and autism. Isolation may also be generated by physical illness and by effects of ageing and old age. The brothers Homer Lusk (1881–1947) and Langley Wakeman Collyer (1885–1947) inhabited a Gilded Age mansion on upper Fifth Avenue. Over time, the two Collyers became recluses and hoarders who were known as the ‘Hermits of Harlem.’ Whether it was their mental illness, an obsessive-compulsive disorder which caused their notorious withdrawal from further social contact other than their sibling’s, or whether their reclusiveness was advanced by aspects of ageing and one brother’s blindness, as suggested by Richard Greenberg in his play *The Dazzle* (2002) and E.L. Doctorow in his novel *Homer & Langley* (2009), remains a mystery. It is recorded fact, though, that, when both men had died in 1947, the authorities had to clear hundreds of tons of junk objects the Collyers had hoarded in their house before they could get to their bodies (Achilles and Bergmann, “Greenberg”; Erskine; Lidz).

Self-prescribed reclusiveness is often also the means to create art. Isolation or solitude are fertile grounds for contemplation and this may lead to or opens up spaces for creativity (Chiavaroli; Fahs). Writing is especially perceived as a solitary activity (Emilyroese). While most artists choose only temporary seclusion, the withdrawal to a room of one’s own can also be taken to the extreme. In *The Poet in Her Bedroom* (2008), the first volume of the biographical television trilogy *Angles of a Landscape: Perspectives on Emily Dickinson* (2008–2012), an anecdote from the poet’s life is told. It is revelatory with regard to her notorious reclusiveness. Dickinson is said to have taken her niece up to her room in which she spent most of her life and – unbeknownst to almost everyone outside her close circle of family and friends – created about 1800 poems. When the two had entered the room, the ‘Queen Recluse’ made as if to lock the door from the inside with an imaginary key and explained: “Matty, here’s freedom.” While her reclusiveness has often been pathologized, this episode is evidence that the female poet paradoxically felt creatively liberated when physically confined to her Amherst room.

## 7. Literature and Visual Culture

Media depicting solitude and solitaries are broad and varied. First, fiction, but also the genres of life writing, children's and juvenile literature, poetry, drama, film, television, photography, painting, song, and musical come to mind. As early as 1924, Charles P. Weaver called the hermit the "apotheosis of solitude" (7) and predicted that this type would be of perennial interest in literature. And indeed, when reflecting upon American solitude, what immediately suggests itself are newly informed readings, particularly of well-known and canonized American fiction such as Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1819), which features a male solitary in nature. Hawthorne's "Wakefield" (1835), who abandons his family for twenty years, can be considered an urban counterpart of Rip. Jewett's "A White Heron" (1886) and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, with the characters of Sylvia and Joanna, feature female hermits in nature. A more urban female recluse is Louisa in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "The New England Nun" (1891). Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) and Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), with their respective pair of siblings, offer juxtapositions of female recluses with male solitaries in closed space scenarios. A well-known text about an African American recluse which touches upon the racial implications of solitude is Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952). More recently, Paul Harding's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Tinkers* (2009) and Denis Johnson's shortlisted novel *Train Dreams* (2002/2011) featured solitaries. Further hermit tales can be discovered among the lesser known works of canonized authors: Kate Chopin's "The Maid of Saint Philippe" (1892), with its freedom and solitude-seeking, Joan of Arc-like protagonist; Eudora Welty's "At The Landing" (1943), in which the secluded protagonist becomes an abuse victim because of her unworldliness; and Edith Wharton's "The Hermit and the Wild Woman" (1908), which might be read as an allegory or as an autobiographical portrait of the relationship between Henry James and the author herself.

Apart from (adult) fiction, the topic of solitude is also covered by a wide range of other traditional as well as more innovative forms of cultural representations: There is a recent outpouring in life writing by women in which solitude features as a trigger for self-discovery. The most noteworthy and diverse among these books are probably Emily White's *Lonely: Learning to Live with Solitude* (2010) and Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012), which was adapted for the movies under the title *Wild* in 2014, featuring Reese Witherspoon.

Scott O'Dell's children's novel *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1960) tells the fictionalized story of the woman who became known as Juana Maria, a Native American of the Nicoleño tribe, who spent the eighteen years between 1835 and 1853

isolated on San Nicolas Island off the shores of California (Meares). Isolation of a different kind is described in the first African American prison memoir, Austin Reed's (1820s-?) *The Life and the Adventures of a Haunted Convict* (2016), written between the 1830s and the 1850s.

In his painting *The Hermit (Il Solitario, 1908)*, John Singer Sargent expresses pantheism by picturing a male figure which almost blends into the surrounding nature, while Edward Hopper's famous *Nighthawks* (1942), but also lesser known paintings such as *Hotel Room* (1931), represent visual expressions of the loneliness and isolation of modern American urban life (Fridman; Levin). Solitude and loneliness are also often captured in photography (Yanagihara), for example in Ansel Adams's photographs of the divine landscape of the West, which depict the solitude of American national parks but also reflect on the solitude of the artist-photographer (Hammond); in Dave Heath's *A Dialogue with Solitude* (1965), which intersperses pictures of scenes of American city life with shots from the war in Korea; and in Alec Soth's *Broken Manual Series* (2006–2010), which consists of photographic portraits of contemporary hermits, recluses, and outcasts.

Robert Zemeckis's movie *Cast Away* (2000) features Tom Hanks as a contemporary Robinson Crusoe, while Martin Scorsese's *The Aviator* (2004) is a biopic about the reclusive eccentric Howard Hughes (1905–1976), who spent the later decades of his life secluded in his hotel suite. The song "Maybe" (1979) by Thom Pace evokes a desire to flee the urban rush and retreat to the wilderness, similar to the protagonist's withdrawal from society in the television series for which it served as musical theme. This series, *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams* (1974–82), depicts the adventures of a hermit in the American wilderness, based on the life of John "Grizzly" Adams (1812–1860), a famous California mountain man and trainer of grizzly bears and other wild animals. Reality television series like *Mountain Men* (2012–present), now in its fourth season, follow the lives of men who have withdrawn to and eke out their living in the American wilderness. One of them, Eustace Conway, has been exalted by Elizabeth Gilbert's *The Last American Man* (2002). *Nature* (2015), a horror television series, shows a nature activist who ventures into the wild alone in pursuit of bigfoot and presents its protagonist's descent into solitary madness in found footage style.

Even in musicals like Doug Wright, Scott Frankel, and Michael Korie's *Grey Gardens* (2006), recluses take center stage. Here, they are Jackie Kennedy's eccentric aunt and first cousin Big (1896–1977) and Little Edie Bouvier Beale (1917–2002), former socialites who retreated to a dilapidated mansion in the Hamptons, where they then lived secluded for decades. Their fascinating life story was also covered in a documentary by the Maysles brothers (1976) and became the theme

of the HBO movie *Grey Gardens* (2009), starring Drew Barrymore and Jessica Lange (Bergmann, “Little”).

## 8. The State of Research

Given these and countless further cultural reverberations of solitude in the US, it is surprising that the topic has generally failed to interest scholars. Three non-scholarly and two scholarly books address the issue of hermits in nature and approach the topic from a broad transnational, transatlantic, and transhistorical perspective, but thereby, if at all, only include one American example, the solitary archetype of Thoreau (Balcom; G. Campbell; Colegate; France; Reed, *Herd*). To my knowledge, there is only one article which solely and directly addresses the issue of solitude in Thoreau’s work (Dumm, “Thoreau’s”). Scholarly approaches to examples of American solitude and solitaries other than Thoreau hardly exist at all (Buell; Larsen; Roorda). Most of the few articles and single book chapters that do focus on representations of American hermits are temporarily confined, focusing exclusively on the late eighteenth or the first half of the nineteenth century (Cowper; Cope; Dowdell, “American”; Slauter, “Being,” *State*). There is a recent, booklength study of the notorious hermit of Palm Springs, born Friedrich Wilhelm Pester in Germany in 1885 and of Nat King Cole’s “Nature Boy” (1948) fame (Wild). And there is one biographical study of the female hermit in the Michigan sand dunes, Alice Gray (Edwards). Beyond that, there is also a homepage on eremitism, but it merely collects and does not critically question solitary lifestyles (*Hermitary*).

Urban solitude in the US is explored in a book of idiosyncratic popular philosophy from the 1930s (Powys). Another, spatially and temporarily very limited book on American recluses primarily serves a journalistic purpose and dates from half a century ago (Erskine). A recent homepage lists reclusive celebrities in tabloid style (Cuncic). And a few individual cases of urban recluses such as the Collyers (Achilles and Bergmann, “Greenberg”; Herring; Lidz), Ida Mayfield (Abbott; Bramhall; Cox), or Huguette Clark (Dedman and Newell; Gordon), the reclusive characters of Jewett’s and Willa Cather’s writings (Dowdell, “Withdrawing”; Romines; Stout), Hawthorne’s, Chopin’s, and Wharton’s solitaries as well as Melville’s ‘isolatoes’ (Asselineau; Cahir; Massie; More), and reclusive authors as diverse as Jonathan Edwards, Hawthorne, Dickinson, Flannery O’Connor, Greenberg, and Don DeLillo (Achilles and Bergmann, “Greenberg”; Dana; Dudar; Giannone; Gorman; Moran, “DeLillo”; Whitney) have received some critical attention. There is a small volume which juxtaposes Hopper’s paintings with poetry of solitude, but offers no further insights into the uses of solitude in both art forms (Levin). Two slim exhibition catalogues are slightly more insightful, as they offer accompanying essays. One

centers on the representation of rural as well as urban solitude depicted in American art (Sokol). The other focuses on the representation of solitude in the paintings of American impressionist Walter Launt Palmer (Price).

Recent sociological studies on social isolation caused by the economy or new technology, on living alone, and on solitary, everyday actions (Cohen; Klinenberg; Olds and Schwartz; Putnam; Slade; Turkle), a study on the philosophical meanings of solitude (Koch), a study of loneliness as a way of life by a political scientist (Dumm, *Loneliness*), a psychological handbook on solitude (Coplan and Bowker), psychological studies on solitarization and social withdrawal (Petroff; Rubin and Coplan), an exploration of the human need for social connection by a social neuroscientist (Cacioppo), an essay collection which combines literary theory, autobiography, performance, and criticism concerning female solitary spaces (Malin and Boynton) as well as a book on loneliness in psychology, philosophy, and literature (Mijuskovic) all shed light on a variety of global cultures of solitude from the perspective of the authors' respective disciplines. A collection of autobiographical essays on the function of social retreat (Slovic), another memoir offering cultural criticism of urban loneliness (Laing), a collection of semi-autobiographical essays on women and solitude (Wear), a recent study on the spiritual meanings of solitude (Lewis), and a book on the nature of loneliness in fiction (R.A. Ferguson, *Alone*) all narrow their focus to the American scene. But overall, these studies cannot reveal the wide-ranging historical and cultural dimensions of the phenomenon. A broad interdisciplinary consideration of the diversity and variety of cultural forms and representations of social retreat in the US is a *desideratum*.

## 9. Cultures of Solitude

The new trajectories outlined above offer up a myriad of intriguing perspectives on cultural representations of solitude in the US. As early as 1935, Walter Leisering, in his study of the motif of the hermit in the literature of English Romanticism, called solitude a research topic for the Humanities in its best sense, as it partakes in the most diverse fields (1). In the present collection, an array of distinguished North American and European scholars from a wide range of subdisciplines of American Studies broaden and pave the path Leisering pointed out. They explore representations of retreat, withdrawal, and isolation in American culture and thereby investigate the liberating and limiting aspects of solitude. Many of the contributors have already distinguished themselves in the field (Achilles and Bergmann, "Greenberg"; Cohen; Cope; Coplan and Bowker; Dowdell, "Withdrawing, "American"; Larsen; Lewis; Roorda; Rubin and Coplan; Slovic), are internationally and nationally renowned experts in their respective areas of American Studies,

or are younger, emerging scholars, who nevertheless already bring a particular expertise to the project. The contributors approach cultures of solitude in the US from the perspective of their particular disciplines, among them Cultural Studies, Literary Studies, Media Studies, Film Studies, Art History, History, Religious Studies, Sociology, and Psychology. Among their subjects of scrutiny are novels, short stories, poetry, drama, (auto-)biography, nature writing, letters, ephemera, movies, television shows, paintings, popular music, and social media. The collection covers a time frame of American cultures of solitude ranging from the eighteenth century to today. The authors critically approach their subjects through the lens of established as well as cutting edge theoretical approaches such as Gender Studies, Women's Studies, Body Studies, Studies of Affect, Cultural Narratology, Gender History, Cultural History, Studies of Space and Place, Comparative Studies, Transatlantic Studies, Social Media Studies, Performance Studies, Intermediality Studies, Visual Culture, and Ecocriticism. The topics and issues the contributions cover include sex and gender; race and ethnicity; religion and spirituality; space and place; pathology and illness; poverty, unemployment, and social disadvantage; identity, childhood, and development; ageing and old age; community and communality; domesticity and privacy; marriage and love; creativity, art, and literature; new technology, the internet, and social media; politics and reform; lifestyle and dietary trends; and ecological concern and environmentalism. Overall, they scrutinize a wide variety of representations of withdrawal and retreat, which mainly fall into two categories: hermits in nature, individuals who seek solitude away from society, retreat to the wilderness and dwell in a cave or cabin, and urban recluses, who withdraw within civilization, experience aloneness, lonely- or lonesomeness in society or retreat to a digital space. All of them suffer from the limitations of isolation and alienation. But many also experience the liberating effects of their enforced seclusion or deliberately seek solitude for its releasing quality.

The first three essays in the collection approach 'early solitude' from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century in transatlantic and transhistorical perspective while focusing in particular on aspects of language, body, and gender. Svend Erik Larsen explores solitude in "‘Alone, Without a Guide’: Solitude as a Literary and Cultural Paradox" in transatlantic dialogue, including discussions of texts such as Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* (*La Divina Commedia*, 1321), Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (*Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, 1782), Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Henrik Pontoppidan's *Lucky Per* (*Lykke-Per*, 1898–1904), and Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934) and focusing on the paradox that through language, solitude becomes part of a collective universe. Kevin L. Cope considers the portrayal of early-American hermits such as James Buckland



and John Fielding's *A Wonderful Discovery of a Hermit, who Lived Upwards of Two Hundred Years* (1786), Amos Wilson's *The Sweets of Solitude!* (1822), and Voorhis's *The Life and Adventures of Robert, the Hermit of Massachusetts* (1829) with regard to an Enlightenment interest in sustainable life-support processes and the attainment of unusual goals such as longevity in his paper "The Enigmatic and the Ecological: American Late Enlightenment Hermits and the Pursuit of, in Addition to Happiness, Permanence." He then traces their tradition into the present by contemplating twentieth-century hermits such as Gypsy Boots (1914–2004), situation comedies like *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–71), and reality shows such as *Alaskan Bush People* (2014-present). Coby Dowdell further expands his previous studies on ascetic practice and American hermits, extending his examination to aspects of gender and applying these to a reading of Hannah Webster Foster's seduction novel *The Coquette* (1797) and its European precursors such as Eliza Haywood's *The British Recluse* (1722) and Marchioness de Lambert's novella *The Fair Solitary; or, Female Hermit* (*La femme hermite*, 1749) in his essay "'The Luxury of Solitude': Conduct, Domestic Deliberation, and the Eighteenth-Century Female Recluse."

Three contributions concentrate on a crucial period for the American nation and the shaping of cultures of solitude in the nineteenth century, dealing with issues such as gender, politics, and poetics. In my contribution "Away to Solitude, to Freedom, to Desolation!': Hermits and Recluses in Julia Ward Howe's *The Hermaphrodite*," I focus on the depiction of diverse types of female hermits and recluses, in particular their mental withdrawal and their bodily asceticism as well as the liberating and limiting aspects of their retreat, as a form of critique of the prevailing gender norms in an exceptional work of nineteenth-century women's writing. Margaretta M. Lovell ponders the dichotomies and contradictions of the idea of solitude in nineteenth-century paintings by American artists, among them Sanford Gifford, Winslow Homer, John Singer Sargent, and John Frederick Kensett, with regard to Thoreau's meditations on solitude in *Walden* in her contribution "Thoreau and the Landscapes of Solitude: Painted Epiphanies in Undomesticated Nature." Hélène Quanquin focuses on the main paradox in the cultural history of nineteenth-century abolitionists, who fought for liberty for others while they themselves were living a life of limitation and withdrawal in "'The World to Each Other': The Joint Politics of Isolation and Reform among Garrisonian Abolitionists."

A set of two contributions traces cultures of solitude from the nineteenth to the twentieth century from a literary, sociological, and cultural perspective, focusing on society, spirituality, and religion. Ira J. Cohen explores solitary withdrawal from the nineteenth through the twentieth century as a sociological phenomenon which is always shaped by cultural circumstances and biographical situations. He

identifies “Three Types of Deep Solitude: Religious Quests, Aesthetic Retreats, and Withdrawals due to Personal Distress” by focusing on Thoreau, Thomas Merton, and May Sarton. Kevin Lewis aims at a differentiation of solitude, loneliness, and lonesomeness by offering, in his essay “American Lonesome: Our Native Sense of Otherness,” an interpretation of lonesomeness as an example of an implicit religious or spiritual expression. The essay covers ground from the nineteenth to the twentieth century by tracing expressions of lonesomeness in poetry by Walt Whitman and Dickinson, fiction by Mark Twain, Sherwood Anderson, and Jack Kerouac, paintings by Hopper, and songs by Hank Williams, among others.

Three contributions cover representations of solitude in the twentieth century in a wide variety of media, with a focus on space, gender, and ethnicity. Randall Roorda focuses on a key element to narratives of retreat in nature, the ‘cabin scenario,’ in his contribution “‘Mind Is the Cabin’: Substance and Success in Post-Thoreauvian Second Homes.” His analysis specifically concentrates on Henry Beston’s *The Outermost House* (1928), Edward Lueders’s *The Clam Lake Papers* (1977), and Charles Siebert’s *Wickerby: An Urban Pastoral* (1998). Nassim Winnie Balestrini explores the dramatic representation of the reclusive artist in plays such as Susan Glaspell’s *Alison’s House* (1930), William Luce’s *The Belle of Amherst* (1976), K. D. Halpin and Kate Nugent’s *Emily Unplugged* (1995), and Edie Campbell and Jack Lynch’s *Emily Dickinson & I* (2005) in her essay “Socially Constructed Selfhood: Emily Dickinson in Full-Cast and Single-Actor Plays.” Jochen Achilles studies shifting representations of ethnic reclusiveness in a female *Künstlerroman* from the 1980s in his paper “Changing Cultures of Solitude: Reclusiveness in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*.” Female eremitism is here presented as both a form of repression and the precondition for the battle against it.

Two contributions focus on cultures of solitude from the twentieth to the twenty-first century and center on space, identity, and pathology. Clare Hayes-Brady analyzes expressions of solipsism and alienation across the author’s oeuvre in her paper “‘It’s What We Have in Common, This Aloneness’: Solitude, Communitarity, and the Self in the Writing of David Foster Wallace.” In his contribution “Alone in the Crowd: Urban Recluses in US-American Film,” Rüdiger Heinze concentrates on characters in turn-of-the-century films who lead a reclusive life at or even beyond the fringes of society, but whose hut is a tenement apartment and whose wilderness is the ‘urban jungle,’ with specific emphasis on *Finding Forrester* (2000).

In the last section, three contributors discuss representations of solitude in the twenty-first century, with particular focus on the issues of technology, community, and identity. The contributions examine issues as diverse as the contemporary literary scene, social media, university programs, and psychological states. In his

contribution “Solitude in the Digital Age: Privacy, Aloneness, and Withdrawal in Dave Eggers’s *The Circle*,” Stefan Hippler offers a close reading of a recent novel, thereby highlighting topical as well as controversial issues such as social media surveillance and diminishing cultures of privacy. Scott Slovic presents the unique social and pedagogical experiment of the University of Idaho’s ‘Semester in the Wild’ program, which sends a dozen undergraduate students into the largest wilderness in North America for three months to study various aspects of wilderness, including literature and writing. His paper “Going Away to the Wilderness for Solitude . . . and Community: Ecoambiguity, the Engaged Pastoral, and the ‘Semester in the Wild’ Experience” emphasizes the combination of solitary wilderness experience and rather intensive exposure to community that occurs among the participants of this program. Robert J. Coplan and Julie C. Bowker review and synthesize psychological perspectives in the study of solitude, with a particular focus on the positive and negative effects of spending time alone in their essay “Should We Be Left Alone? Psychological Perspectives on the Implications of Seeking Solitude.”

## 10. An Emergent Research Topic

This edited collection provides the first interdisciplinary study of American cultures of solitude. It offers a broad diachronic consideration of the diversity and variety of cultural forms and representations of social withdrawal and isolation in American culture, which also reflects upon the transhistorical and transatlantic significance of this issue and highlights its particular topicality at the present time. What evolves is a profounder understanding of this anthropological constant that is at the backdrop of both currently pressing social challenges and popular contemporary lifestyle trends. The research offered here will introduce solitude as a topical and pertinent research issue across the Humanities and beyond.

## Notes

1. Some examples are Alger; Andre; “Askese//L’Ascèse”; Assmann and Assmann; Dames; Davis et al.; F. Ferguson, “Malthus” and *Solitude*; Fitzell; Gösweiner; Höbel; *Isolation*; KNA; Leenen; Macpherson; Mettler-von Meibom; Mills; Möhrmann; de Montaigne; Peplau and Perlman; Riehle; Welge.

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