Szeged Series in American Studies #5

Topics in American Studies: History, Literature, and Culture 2

Edited by
Réka M. Cristian, Zoltán Dragon and Ágnes Zsófia Kovács

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AMERICANA eBooks # Szeged Series in American Studies is a new book series launched by AMERICANA eBooks based at the University of Szeged, Hungary for the production and dissemination of academic ork in the multidisciplinary field of American Studies.

Series editors: Réka M. Cristian & Zoltán Dragon

Cover image:

Book design and layout: Zoltán Dragon

ISBN: 978-615-6872-09-8 (.epub);
978-615-6872-08-1 (PoD)

DOI: https://doi.org/10.14232/americana.books.2025.

AMERICANA eBooks is a division of *AMERICANA – E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary*, published by the Department of American Studies, University of Szeged, Hungary.
http://ebooks.americanaejournal.hu

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Representations of Regeneration and Healing in a Selection of American Literary Productions

Réka M. Cristian, Zoltán Dragon, and Ágnes Zsófia Kovács

This new volume of AMERICANA eBooks, part of the Szeged Series in American Studies (SZESAS), addresses the issue of US society and culture at the threshold of crisis and healing in a selection of American literary representations. American society and culture has mostly been fragmented along many fracture lines, and the volume offers a collection of essays that focus on literary representations of these. The papers explore a diverse range of texts from highly canonized to almost marginal by interrogating the possibilities of transformation, agency, and the limits to healing. The discussions target the potential agency literary characters have in the articulation, planning, and eventual transformation of their life trajectories, inviting diverse theoretical frameworks for analyzing these scenarios.

In the opening essay of the collection, András Tarnóc investigates the role of aggression in Hemingway's short story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." The story describes the culmination of several crises leading to aggression on various levels, eventually ending up in a tragic incident. The triangular relationship of Macomber, his wife Margot, and Wilson unfolds against the background of colonial Africa in the context of a hunting safari. The plot depicts several crises: marital, geopolitical, and colonial that unfold in the triangular relationship of Macomber, Margot, and their hunting guide Wilson. The essay investigates and evaluates the way members of the triangle respond to the respective crises. The analysis draws on Benson's hero development theory. The essay concludes that the responses given to the given crises are all futile. Macomber "paid the death he owes to God," Margot lost her dominant position in her marriage, and Wilson continues to be limited to the role of being a servant to wealthy clients.

Following Tarnóc's text, Sára Káldy Buschné's paper compares psalms by Anne Sexton and John Berryman. Sexton and Berryman wrote almost an identical number of psalms in their respective religious poetry sequences: Anne Sexton's sequence *O Ye Tongues* related to Christopher Smart contains

ten poems and John Berryman's cycle *Eleven Addresses to the Lord* contains eleven poems. Both poets are considered to be confessional poets by criticism. The paper argues that in this special case, the term "confessional" has an extra dimension that comes from the confessional nature of the psalms. The paper also claims that Sexton's and Berryman's poems present individual ways to process the "form" provided by psalm culture. On the one hand, Sexton's cycle employs intense imagery together with reminiscences of Biblical language and is mixed with voices of a mature woman and a child. On the other hand, Berryman's poems are closer to the text of psalms, the apostrophes invoke Biblical pretexts and retain the intimate nature of Biblical psalms.

Cristina Chevereşan's "The Great American Satire: Philip Roth's *Twilight of the Idols* "aims to investigate the creative ways in which satire combats nostalgia in *The Great American Novel* (1973). Roth dedicated the novel to baseball and its downfall as an axis of American mythology and (self)-representation. Since readings of this particular work have been rather scarce as compared to other parts of Roth's creation, the aim of the paper is to contribute to filling that gap. After the mockery of the Nixon Era from within, undertaken in *Our Gang* (1971) as an expression of frustration and discontent with the political climate, Roth returns to farce as an effective tool to warn about the pitfalls of America's post Second World War evolution, up to the 1970s. This humorous response to the fall of idols and ideals as part of the nation's transformation formulates an ingenious critique of the perpetuation and absolutization of myths and prefigures the dramatic tension of Roth's award-winning *American Pastoral* (1997). Preposterous as its discourses may sound at times, they can be viewed as coping mechanisms in an enlarged context of civic quandaries. By outlining some of its major elements, Chevereşan aims to supplement the already existing Roth scholarship with a fresh revisitation of a rather forgotten novel.

The next text of the volume is Rachele Puddu's "Bursting under the Pressure of Unspeakable Pain: Mickey Sabbath between Degeneration and Regeneration," which examines how Philip Roth portrayed human crises and wrote about illnesses and death from an autobiographical perspective in his *Sabbath's Theater* (1995). In the novel, Roth narrativized illnesses and human mortality by choosing an unusual character, Mickey Sabbath. The former puppeteer is torn apart by the pain caused by the death of his mistress and brother, by the failure of his career, and by the haunting of his mother's ghost. Despite the many attempts to cope with this unbearable pain, Roth seems to leave no room for his character's redemption. The paper discusses Sabbath's grotesque attempts to move beyond his crisis and pain. Puddu considers Roth's personal and artistic journey of healing and coping with his own troubles, which eventually culminates in the publication of the novel. This moment coincided with an astonishing turning point in Roth's career, a

regeneration that can be better understood through the study of one of his more outrageous characters.

Pál Hegyi "Blanks into Text and Visuality: Heterotopic Coping Mechanisms in Paul Auster's *Bloodbath Nation"* discusses Auster's 2021 book, which was created in cooperation with photographer Spenser Ostrander. Regarded as an intermedial piece, characterized by a constant dialogue between text and photos, this book negotiates intersecting domains of social, political, historical contexts aligned with sensationalist media representations of fear and violence fueled by the vicious cycle of mass massacres in the United States. Despite attempting to unravel conflicting stances between pro-gun versus anti-gun policies, or trying to accumulate arguments for and against different types of gun-control directives, Auster suggests that we "remove ourselves from the present" and "conduct an honest, gut-wrenching examination of who we are" (Auster 2021, 44). In Hegyi's view, self-inspection and reflection is made possible within the blank spaces delimited by the interplay of text and visual representations.

Focusing on the same author, Fanni Orsolya Kovács addresses the issue of trauma in Auster's last novel *Baumgartner* in the paper "Analyzing Trauma, Causality, and Healing in Paul Auster's *Baumgartner*." In the novel, Seymour Baumgartner, an aging professor of philosophy, is informed that his housekeeper's husband lost two fingers during carpenter work. This incident leads him to perform his own "phantom limb syndrome." The present paper aims to explore Baumgartner's trauma, arguing that the amputation of the fingers serves as the traumatic stimulus, indicating the belated nature of his trauma (Freud). The "phantom limb" not only functions as a trope in analogue with the loss of his loved one, a missing part of his—the trauma is seen as a hole (Lacan)—but as an attempt to verbalize the trauma as a catachrestic signifier of this void.

The chapter on "Unsentimental Historicizing in Barbara Neely's Crime Novel *Blanche Passes Go* (2000)" by Ágnes Zsófia Kovács and Réka Szarvas investigates ways of historicizing in African American hard-boiled crime fiction by exploring the representation of trauma processing in Barbara Neely's novel. The black female detective, Blanche White, confronts the traumatic memory of her own rape by a white man; a recurring trope in contemporary narratives of slavery called neo-slave narratives. The discussion is based on Gabriella Friedman's approach, who distinguishes a sentimental tradition of historicizing slavery and an unsentimental way of historicizing it in fictional neo-slave narratives. Friedman identifies three key features the uses of which define the difference between sentimental and unsentimental ways of historicizing: the examination of unsentimental language use, the interiority of characters, and evocations of the sympathy and empathy of readers. The article discusses the role of Friedman's

sentimental historicizing and unsentimental historicizing narrative traditions that are at work in Neely's crime novel.

Chapter eight of the book is Abdin Rahmeh's "Colonial Abjection in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*: Expelling Self and Other using the Master's Tools" explores themes of isolation and resistance against patriarchal oppression in Jackson's novel, as embodied by the protagonist and narrator, Mary Katherine. She attempts to subvert these oppressive forces through a performance of witchcraft. Although this defiant witchcraft symbolizes her dissent, her profound hatred for the townspeople is rooted in class-based *colonial abjection* laying claim to bodies and spaces. Utilizing a framework combining Abjection Studies, Spatial Studies, and Whiteness Studies, this analysis examines Mary Katherine's affinity for isolated spaces, revealing how it perpetuates a legacy of classist, racist, and colonial ideologies. Rather than achieving true inherently intersectional liberation, Mary Katherine becomes an agent of what Françoise Vergès terms a *civilizational feminism* that, as Alexandra Hauke notes, reinforces "American foundational beliefs about the frontier as well as its ongoing manifestations and usefulness in maintaining current orders of supremacy over the environment and subordinated groups, primarily women." The novel's title reflects the castle's role as a symbol of fortitude, both against outsiders and the passage of time, as Mary Katherine's rituals, as Shelley Ingram maintains, remain personal and inaccessible to others, as they are not transmitted through folklore and are rather a form of make-belief play.

The next chapter, "A Comparison of Radványi's Translation of *Looking Backward* with the Original Text(s)" by Aliz Smitnya analyzes Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and compares its 1888 and 1889 editions with Dániel Radványi's 1892 Hungarian translation. Through a detailed line-by-line comparison, the research uncovers textual differences and explores the historical and cultural contexts of these versions. The study highlights intriguing nuances in Radványi's translation, showing the balance between fidelity to the original and the demands of cultural adaptation. Notably, Radványi's work appears to draw from both English editions, blending elements from each. This insight enriches our understanding of the translation process, emphasizing its fluid and dynamic nature, and contributes to discussions on translation as a complex, culturally embedded practice.

Éva Urbán's "'She's Not Technically Their Grandma. Indian Way She Is:' Spaces of Identity Formation in the Urban Indian Context" traces how three narrators—Blue, Edwin Black, and Orvil Red Feather—try to find their place in Oakland's indigenous community as they construct their Native American identity in Tommy Orange's *There There* (2018). They are all disconnected from their cultural roots due to the long-term effects of relocation policies and the consequences of their direct or indirect connection to adoption and

the three main places where they can embrace their indigeneity is the Indian Center, the Big Oakland Powwow, and also different online spaces. The narrators become members of the urban Indian community that serves as an extended family for them by preparing for and participating at the powwow. This event is not only a reunion for Native Americans from all over the country, but it is also the place where Blue, Edwin, and Orvil meet some of their biological relatives for the first time in their lives. The chapter analyzes spaces and voices of Native American identity construction in the novel.

Hend Ayari's "Auto(bio)graphy(story): The Necessary Act?" explores the potentiality of the life writing genre for healing from trauma caused by settler colonial cultural erasure. The paper considers how women employ life writing as an act of resistance. By embracing the subversive creativity of the twenty-first century life writing and actively engaging in the movement for Indigenous resurgence, Native American women writers not only control self-representation but also rewrite the generic rules that have held their voices and stories captive within the staid conventions of the American autobiographical tradition. When read as biostories in Joshua Whitehead's interpretation of the term instead of memoirs, the texts I study affirm "survivance in the face of trauma" rather than "survival of trauma" (Madsen) through choices regarding self-representation, literary aesthetics (Indigenous storytelling techniques), and contemporary topics (activism and healing). The texts by Linda Le Garde Grover, Joy Harjo, Toni Jensen, Alicia Elliott, and Elissa Washuta advance an "active sense of presence" and "repudiate victimry" (Vizenor) in their re-story-ing of personal and collective traumatic experiences into stories of healing through self-representative and personal stories that upset the burden of ethnographic mis-recognitions.

In "Survival in a Post-Pandemic World: Reconstructing Society in Stephen King's *The Stand*" Korinna Csetényi discusses King's novel originally published in 1978, followed by the uncut edition in 1990, which has experienced an unexpected, unfortunate topicality precipitated by the Covid crisis in 2020, becoming a common cultural reference point due to its prophetic nature and uncanny resonance with contemporary reality. The book details the accidental release of a superflu from a secret military research facility, which kills off 99.4 % of the world's population. With the rest of humanity immune to the disease, the text focuses upon the struggles of the survivors and their gradual coming together to reorganize social structures and found a new society. A romantic at heart, King believes in human beings' freedom to make moral choices: he paints a huge canvas peopled with various characters who are either driven to search out a prophet-like old woman (representing the forces of good), or a demonic entity, summoning them from afar. Csetényi argues that this journey motif connects the work to the tradition of epic quests, where a clash between the forces of good and evil constitutes the narrative climax.

Aya Chelloul's essay explores the evolution of Arab American literature by focusing on key historical moments and authors who have shaped the genre. By charting Orientalist texts that have emerged early in the nineteenth century in the United States, to the contemporary twentieth century Arab American voices such as that of Joseph Geha, it aims to juxtapose the rich tapestry of experiences to undo persistent stereotypes. The essay also examines the impact of Orientalism, the progression of Arab American literary production across immigration waves, and the thematic concerns that define the genre. Through this analysis, the essay underscores the critical role Arab American literature plays in fostering cultural understanding and challenging monolithic narratives, especially through a focus on Joseph Geha's short stories representing hybrid Arab American identities.

The thirteen essays of the collection map diverse forms of crises and crisis management in twentieth century US literary representations, in which the road to healing is more often blocked than not. The management of fear, insecurity, rape, illness, marginalization, disaster takes diverse turns and oftentimes goes awry but this does not dampen the characters' quest for meaning making, interaction, and self-expression.