

Introduction:

Body Politics in North American Literary Fictions



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"The love of the body of man or woman balks account,
 the body itself balks account."

Walt Whitman, "I Sing the Body Electric" (128)

The human body has been described in diverse—and sometimes contradictory—ways across cultures. Travis Foster claims that the body can be viewed "as a biological entity, clothing for the soul, a site of cultural production, a psychosexual construct, and a material encumbrance" (1). Bodies serve as places of identification and representation, through which basic parameters of a given culture can be negotiated, reviewed, and adapted. Judith Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter* that bodies are not solely material entities but are constructed through language and discourse. Regulatory norms of sex and gender shape the body and establish power dynamics (Butler viii–xxx). This view of the body as a "battleground" (as referenced in Barbara Kruger's famous piece of conceptual art) has fundamentally challenged the traditional understanding of the body as a pre-existing, natural entity, emphasizing its significance in the realm of politics and identity formation.

During the COVID pandemic, the body resurfaced as a central topic in identity politics, laying bare the vulnerability of physical bodies and the significance of the represented body. "Bodies are contested sites of global politics that are acted upon and act relentlessly in life and beyond—to the point of their continual redoing and undoing" (Purnell 1). This multifaceted

perspective has sparked considerable exploration in various fields of research, including anthropology, environmental studies, history, literature, media studies, politics, theology, and psychology. Scholars within these disciplines have engaged in critical analyses of the formation of identities and subject positions, delving into the representations and narratives surrounding the human body. However, due to its inherent nature as a contested and ever-changing entity, attempts to fully comprehend the body have proven notoriously difficult (see Hillman and Maude 1–9), echoing Walt Whitman’s sentiment in his poem “I Sing the Body Electric”: “the body itself balks account” (128).

This special issue of *AmLit*, titled *Body Politics in North American Literary Fictions*, offers a comprehensive exploration of the intricate relationship between the human body and politics in a diverse range of North American literary works. By exploring the nuanced portrayals of the body within these narratives, this essay collection provides profound insights into the body as a contested site where power dynamics, social constructions, and acts of resistance intersect. In North American literary fictions, the body becomes a charged terrain embodying, negotiating, and challenging political ideologies. It serves as a canvas reflecting social and cultural contexts, where different forms of power are inscribed and contested. These narratives encourage readers to critically engage with the politicization of bodies and their reciprocal influence on the prevailing political landscapes. As this collection demonstrates, the body assumes symbolic significance in North American literature, often functioning as a metaphor for larger sociopolitical issues. Characters’ bodies are imbued with meaning beyond their physicality, becoming vehicles through which authors explore and critique social hierarchies, systemic oppression, and cultural prejudices. Consequently, the body represents a powerful tool for authors to navigate and challenge prevailing power structures, offering readers a lens to examine the intricate interplay between corporeality and politics.

Body politics in North American literary fictions encompass not only individual bodies but also collective bodies, such as communities or social groups. Bodies emerge as sites in which historical narratives are engraved (Trouillot 560). They illuminate how bodies collectively mobilize and resist dominant power structures. Characters from marginalized communities utilize their bodies as sites of resistance, subverting societal norms and power imbalances (see e.g., Brown 2013, Brandt 2007, Mossner, Mikić, and Grill 2022, Teuton 2022). Through acts of protest, performance, or reclaiming agency over their bodies, these characters disrupt established power dynamics and assert their identities and autonomy. Furthermore, North American literary fictions often address the intersectional nature of body politics, exploring how

different aspects of identity—such as race, gender, sexuality, and disability—intersect with the body and shape experiences of power and marginalization (see Collins and Bilge 2). These accounts reveal the complex ways in which bodies are racialized, gendered, and sexualized, underscoring the impact of intersecting power structures on individuals' lived experiences. By exposing the embodied nature of discrimination and oppression, these works invite readers to critically examine how bodies are both shaped by and resist multiple forms of oppression.

This volume comprises five illuminating articles that explore various facets of body politics through the lens of diverse narrative forms, such as dystopian novels, non-fiction, and science fiction. Each textual manifestation unveils a plethora of body representations, offering insights into different aspects of subjectivity formation and examination. The contributions within this issue shed light on the symbolic significance of colors, delve into the impact of epidemics on marginalized communities, explore the psychoanalytic dimensions of self-expression, and examine the performative nature of age and gender. Each article presents unique perspectives that enrich our comprehension of the intricate relationship between the body and politics in North American literary fictions. They reveal the depth and richness of the discussions that emerge when exploring themes related to the body. From symbolic representations to critical analyses, this collection opens up a prolific and multilayered field of discussion, emphasizing the significance of body themes in contemporary literature and society.

The articles highlight an essential aspect, namely that, beyond the bodies portrayed in the primary sources, there are also the bodies of the readers engaging with the narratives under examination. Consequently, the embodied experiences conveyed through these stories are absorbed by readers' own bodies, which possess distinct temporal, spatial, and cultural understandings of the world. As a result, each narrative being analyzed transcends its own storyline, aiming to establish both intellectual and sensory connections with the readers themselves. This interaction goes beyond the mere storyline, profoundly influencing their diverse socio-cultural and political perceptions while enhancing their comprehension of a wide array of topics. These subjects encompass everything from issues of sexual and racial discrimination to the trauma caused by epidemics, the realm of psychoanalysis, and the exclusion experienced with aging. In essence, this volume reveals the profound impact of literature on readers' lives, as the narratives not only entertain but also provoke contemplation and introspection. By bridging the gap between the depicted characters and the readers, these literary texts foster a deeper understanding of complex societal issues, urging us to critically reflect on the world we inhabit.

Lisa Buchegger's article "In Burning Red"—Red as the Color of Female Shame in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" delves into the color symbolism employed in Atwood's renowned novel. Focusing on the color red, it explores how it functions as a marker of shame and sin for the female protagonists, particularly the handmaids. By contrasting the color-coded women in the novel and drawing on biblical imagery, the essay reveals how the association of lust and sin with the color red highlights the reduction of women to their bodies and sexual identities, exposing the underlying hypocrisy within the novel's dystopian society.

Anna Ferrari's contribution, "The Obsessive Body: David B. Feinberg's Attempts at Distance while Facing the AIDS Epidemic," examines the role of the body in the works of New York author David B. Feinberg, who grappled with the traumatic experience of the AIDS epidemic. Analyzing both his fiction and non-fiction, the essay demonstrates how the theme of the body becomes a means for Feinberg to provoke reactions, cope with trauma, and address the stigmatization of PWAs. By exploring key concepts such as humor, political subversion, and the negotiation of cleanliness, the paper highlights the significant place of Feinberg's work within AIDS literature.

Giulia Magro's "Blackness as Infectious: Racialized Plagues and Anti-Plagues in Anglo-American Works of Science Fiction" reveals the long-existing connection between fears of contagious diseases and racial discrimination, which becomes especially virulent in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through an analysis of anglophone science fictional films and novels, the article explores a problematic narrative trope that links infectious diseases with racial contamination, often portraying black people as the culprits of contagion. However, it also examines Ishmael Reed's Afrofuturist novel *Mumbo Jumbo* as a contrasting narrative that redefines infectiousness as a tool of resistance and affirmation for African Americans, emphasizing the power of collective movements for social and racial justice.

In "A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Suicide in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," Fabiola Mazzola challenges the controversial interpretations surrounding the protagonist's suicide in the aforementioned novel. Taking a psychoanalytic perspective, the essay argues that Edna's suicide should be seen as a triumph rather than a failure. Drawing on Kristeva's concept of the abject and Freudian writings, it posits that Edna's awakening and confrontation with societal constraints lead her to liberate the deepest drives of her unconscious through this ultimate act of self-expression.

In "'The stock character of a middle-aged woman?' Rediscovering *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* through Age and Gender Performance," Marta Miquel-Baldellou explores the performative nature of aging and its parallels with gender performance. Referencing the works of Anne Basting, Katharine

Woodward, Margaret Gullette, and Deborah Jermyn, the article emphasizes the significance of analyzing the portrayal of older actresses in narratives centered around performance and aging. Specifically focusing on the character of Karen Stone in Tennessee Williams's novel *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, the paper examines the social responses arising from her refusal to conform to societal expectations of aging, highlighting the character's ability to both challenge and resist constructed norms of age and gender.

In all the cases examined above, the body serves as a locus of action and reaction, upon which attitudes, perceptions of power, and diverse socio-cultural ideologies of gender and race are reflected or inscribed. Whether portrayed as weak or empowered, excluded or embraced, sickened or healed, the body becomes a tangible conduit through which multiple paths of exploration and negotiation are paved. Every literary text examined in this collection of essays acts as a mediator bridging external reality and embodied experience. Readers' engagement with this diverse terrain of socio-cultural and socio-political activity enriches the overall experience conveyed through multiple points of view. These perspectives emerge from how each writer crafts narratives, characters, and means of expression. Moreover, the body itself provides a tangible foundation for living experiences, enabling their immersion into a heterogeneous and diverse reality.

**Works
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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 Ph.D. 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).

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. Rapatzikou 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.

Biography

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: *Gamma, 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.