

Introduction:

Societal Transformations in American Fiction and Poetry Writing



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The function of literature, through all its mutations, has been to make us aware of the particularity of selves, and the high authority of the self in its quarrel with its society and its culture. Literature is in that sense subversive.

Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture* (103).

What is the power of a work of literature to affect a reader's perception of his or her world?

Paula Moya, *The Social Imperative* (5).

Lionel Trilling's assertion that literature is subversive encapsulates its enduring ambition as a transformative force. Beyond merely portraying societal changes, literature serves as an act of rebellion. Rather than functioning as mere chroniclers of social change, literary texts confront us with the implications of overarching societal developments, compelling us to take a stance. This special issue of *AmLit – American Literatures* navigates the intricate interplay between words and societal transformations. Each essay within this collection examines the symbiotic relationship between literature and societal change, offering insights into the transformative power of the written word. In this special issue, *Societal Transformations and American Literatures in the World*, we delve into realms where writing intersects with influence, stories mirror societal changes, and academic perspectives underscore the effect of literary expression on the ever-evolving fabric of America. This is highlighted further by Paul Moya's question about the social imperative when arguing that "the power of a work of literature [is] to affect a reader's perception of his or her world" (5), which in our current reality of ongoing crises proves to be urgently needed.

This realization calls for an exploration of societal representation in literary practice and raises the question: does society influence writing, determining its form and essence, or does representation shape our reality, thereby directly impacting our environment? Homi K. Bhabha has invited us to refrain from any teleological interpretation of the nexus between society and literature and rather look at its intricate underpinnings and political interdependencies. “[T]he dynamics of writing and textuality,” Bhabha writes, “require us to rethink the logics of causality and determinacy through which we recognize the ‘political’ as a form of calculation and strategic action dedicated to social transformation” (33-34). Culture is conceived here as a “structure of feeling,” as Raymond Williams famously put it (*Long Revolution* 69), a complex and intertwined system that interconnects social practice with its textual representation. “Now the fascinating thing about the structure of feeling [...] is that it is present in almost all the novels we now read as literature, as well as in the now-disregarded popular fiction” (Williams, *Long Revolution* 89). Literature is seen in this model not as a superstructure but as the very base that changes not the ‘objective’ world but our imaginative response to it. In this sense, “[a]rt reflects its society and works as a social character through to its reality in experience” (Williams, *Long Revolution* 91). If art functions as a “social character,” in Williams’s words, societal transformation must be understood as a complex process that simultaneously involves “diffusion and affirmation, the death and birth of the subject” (Eagleton, qtd. in Bhabha 92). All these observations reveal the spatial and temporal flux that human subjects are constantly confronted with as they try to come to terms with diverse challenges, changes, and transformations in their everyday as well as socio-historical and political reality.

This special issue discusses literary representations as much as it explores changes in society at large. Much has been written about the relevance of societal transformations and their impact on the way we feel and think. Thomas S. Kuhn has famously argued that scientific communities undergo paradigm shifts during periods of crisis, leading to radical changes in accepted scientific theories and methodologies. Far from being cumulative, scientific progress has often proven to be erratic and extreme, characterized by paradigm shifts that have radically changed societal norms and conventions (Kuhn 84-91). Samuel P. Huntington adds that global transformations, such as the democratization waves of the late twentieth century, were strongly influenced by overarching geopolitical factors that permeated social discourses (124-42). When it comes to social change, the local and communal are often subtly intertwined with overarching developments. The decline of social capital in American communities, Robert D. Putnam has shown in *Bowling Alone*, is linked to various factors, including changes in work patterns,

technology, and lifestyle (18-26). In Naomi Klein's reading, economic and political elites often exploit disasters and crises to implement neoliberal economic policies. She argues that moments of shock are seized to advance what she calls a "shock doctrine," pushing through free-market reforms that might face resistance during more stable times while creating "a radical neoliberal transformation" (151; see also 142-54). The digital revolution of the past decades has reminded us how fragile existing conventions and structures in western industrial societies have become in the face of fundamental technological transformation. This transformation pervades every facet of society and changes even our ways of thinking. In *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*, Klaus Schwab showcases the transformative impact of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and biotechnology, on society, economy, and governance (1-24). He emphasizes the need for a proactive and collaborative approach to harness the benefits of these technologies while addressing the associated challenges.

It is literary writing, as evidenced in fiction, poetry, and theater, that often takes this proactive role in our culture, pinpointing both the benefits and the dangers of societal change and raising awareness of its large dimensions and far-reaching impact. In his seminal introduction to literary theory, Terry Eagleton convincingly shows that literature possesses the potential to critique and reshape societal values, contributing to overarching social transformations. This trajectory use goes back to the eighteenth century when literature transcended the mere embodiment of social values, becoming an instrument for their deeper entrenchment and wider dissemination (Eagleton 15-46; quote on page 15). Roland Barthes further establishes literature as a space for a plurality of meanings, challenging fixed interpretations and promoting social openness (159-60). Building on Barthes's model, Julia Kristeva emphasizes literature's "key role" in what she terms "the system of discourses" (93). In her view, literature serves as a site for exploring the 'semiotic,' enabling a profound understanding of human subjectivity and societal structures. "As the borderline between a signifier where the subject is lost and a history that imposes its laws on him, literature appears as a specific mode of *practical knowledge*" (Kristeva 96, italics in the original). This notion of 'practical knowledge' aligns with Williams's perspective, framing literature as a social act rooted in the cultural imagination and grounded in concrete practice. Williams's concept of literature is inherently practice-driven, emphasizing the performative dimensions of literary texts:

Literature is quite obviously [...] a social activity, and value does seem to lie in the writer's access to certain kinds of energy which appear and can be discussed in directly literary terms (that is to say, as an intention

that has become language), but which, by general agreement, have a more-than-literary origin, and lie in the whole complex of a writer's relations with reality. (Culture and Society 362)

The writer's interconnectedness with reality, as suggested here, reveals the inner workings of literary practice that revolves around the co-witnessing of lived experience and its gradual transformation into an imagined and fictionalized experience.

Along these lines, Fredric Jameson has argued that literature is not merely a mirror reflecting society but a tool actively shaping societal self-perception—a “socially symbolic act” (1; see 61). This embedment in social practice and its symbolic significance enable literature to exert a remarkable force on audiences. Mikhail Bakhtin asserts that literature is “inseparable” from “the total context of the entire culture of a given epoch” (2), emphasizing its pervasive role in the cultural imagination. The fascinating interplay between writerly activity and social practice constitutes a crucial aspect of literary representation. Literature's operational approach to reality and its use of language to articulate sentiments, perceptions, conditions, and materialities are essential inquiries. Michel Foucault contends that literature has the capacity to transform and intensify ordinary language, systematically deviating from everyday speech:

[L]iterature is that which compensates for (and not that which confirms) the signifying function of language. Through literature, the being of language shines once more on the frontiers of Western culture - and at its centre - for it is what has been most foreign to that culture since the sixteenth century; but it has also, since this same century, been at the very centre of what Western culture has overlain. (44)

With these words, Foucault captures the animating capacity that language has to capture the seen and the unseen, the central and the peripheral, the known and the foreign in its effort to come to terms not only with the changes that are taking place but also with the attitudes, ideologies, and discourses that are prevalent in the course of different historical periods. Conceived in this manner, language exerts its own impact on the formation of the literary imagination. This should be considered a faculty that complements and eventually subtly merges with social practice, influencing it in the process. This moment of mutual interaction with society's transformative power is where literary texts derive their enormous influence. As eloquently phrased by literary critic Paul L. Holmer, “literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already

become” (28). In this sense, literature does not feature as an isolated action but as an ongoing negotiation of points of view, subject positions, voices, and experiences.

Based on this assertion, what are the implications regarding the current special issue and the transformations it attempts to bring to the readers' attention? Drawing on an array of literary texts and literary practitioners, this issue manages to bring together a variety of voices and viewpoints from different geographical locations and backgrounds in the American hemisphere. Such a diverse terrain of action cannot help but reinstate the importance of Bakhtin's realization, as expressed in *The Dialogic Imagination*, that “at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past ... these ‘languages’ of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying ‘languages’” (291). The linguistic plurality that is suggested here stands for an open and ongoing voicing, reading, and interpreting of stories and experiences, as proven by the primary sources each one of the essays hosted in this issue sheds light on. The acknowledgment of a multiplicity of voices, as these reach the readers via the intervention of literary imagination and the creation of multiple literary textualities, proves that multiple concerns exist that need to be revealed and addressed. Winfried Fluck, in his exploration of post-WWII American culture, urges scholars to embark on a bold quest that involves seeking a new way to structure the narrative of “America,” a task that eludes current capabilities within U.S. American Studies (102). In the context of the present *AmLit* issue, the specific urge becomes visible due to the effort made by the authors of the essays to bring to the attention of their audience texts that cut across any real, conceptual, and ideologically-constructed borders at different moments in time. Such a realization contests the indivisibility of America and exposes the multi-facetedness of its cultural traits.

For generations, scholars in our field took for granted that American culture and goods played a significant, albeit conflicted, role in the global push for democratization. However, the once straightforward political instrumentalization of cultural production is no longer assured. In our era of rapid political and cultural shifts, European and American Studies academics find it beneficial to anchor their scholarly analyses of American literature, culture, media, history, and politics in the contexts from which these shifts emerge and impact. This kind of anchoring, originating in the social sciences during the 1960s, serves as a valuable research method and strategy for the analysis provided in the essays of the current special issue. This involves an intellectual activity firmly grounded and rooted in hermeneutics, linking traditional methods of textual interpretation with qualitative approaches. This

dynamic epistemological and methodological framework should be tailored to meet the needs of the conceptual thinking at work each time an in-depth analysis is necessary. In this special issue, we aim to explore the insights that can be gleaned from American studies inquiries in an era that is marked by new border thinking. By embracing grounding as a method, we can navigate the complexities of our research terrain, while weaving together diverse perspectives and experiences in an effort to enrich our understanding of a far more diverse American literary practice that cuts across literal and figurative borders amidst contemporary challenges, transgressions, and subversions.

This recognition becomes evident in Paula Moya's *The Societal Imperative* which attempts to strike a balance between "believing that literary criticism has the ultimate power to interpret and change the world, and believing that it has none at all" (5). In her introduction, Moya recognizes a historical divide between science and cultural studies, bridging this gap by incorporating the perspectives of twenty-first-century social psychology into the examination of major societal issues as is the case of racial difference and racism within literary studies. It is important to highlight that social science has significantly influenced black writers throughout the twentieth century. While they have rejected race science, these writers have actively participated in social scientific inquiry, underscoring the enduring resonance of such approaches. Moya encourages us to explore the intricate connection between the elusive social concept of race and the practice of reading throughout history (cf. Larkin 2). The practice of reading and its power of transformation can be extended to other parts of American cultural and social environments, as evidenced in the edited collection by Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine titled *Hemispheric American Studies*. Here attention is paid to "the complex ruptures that remain within but nonetheless constitute the national frame, while at the same time moving beyond the national frame to consider regions, areas and diasporan affiliations that exist apart from or in conflicted relation to the nation" (2). What this statement reveals has to do with the current-day awareness that American literature and culture should be considered alongside the tensions and perspectives that derive from the multiplicity of its transnational and diasporic relations. This kind of approach widens the interpretative possibilities offered, while it allows for multiple voices to be heard and writing methodologies to be displayed and studied.

In the context of this *AmLit* special issue, the subsequent essays will demonstrate literature's capacity to enhance reality, while infusing our worlds with vibrant colors, emotions, and tactility. This ongoing exchange of perspectives between inner and outer worlds is what fuels the literary and artistic mind as well as enriches it with experiences that are not only innate but also part of the world at large. In the intricate tapestry of a multiplicity

of voices and literary texts and textures, this essay collection acts as a kaleidoscopic lens, as it attempts to reflect on the multifaceted ways in which literature mirrors and influences societal transformations. Each essay in this volume illuminates a unique facet of the special relationship that develops when literature, through the stories narrated, does not hesitate to expose ideologies, discourses, systems of belief, and stances in its effort to capture, even momentarily, the constantly shifting contours of an enhanced and geographically diversified American society. The essays cover a variety of topics, ranging from the issue of shame in Hemingway's fiction characters to climate change awareness through theater and innovative poetics, as well as efforts to reclaim Chamorro identity.

In the first essay "The Ritual of Shame," Wenwen Guo unveils the complex interplay of shame within Hemingway's works, exploring characters' struggles with the modern dichotomy of pursuit and retreat, desire and embarrassment. Guo's analysis spans Hemingway's career, from *The Sun Also Rises* to *The Garden of Eden*, capturing the inherent shame of modernity and weaving a narrative tapestry that reflects life's strivings and actions marked by shame. In the conclusion, the focus on affect, particularly shame, is emphasized as a primary mode of communication, surpassing verbal discourse. The ritual, as discussed by scholars like James Watson and Wade Wheelock, operates along channels of syntactic rules, conveying meaning through experiences and affects rather than explicit information. The essay underscores the significance of ritual in conveying the meaning of shame analogically, celebrating cyclicity and relationality while discrediting the linearity of time and history. The ritual practitioners in Hemingway's works turn to the rituals of life, akin to the bull in the bullfight, to grapple with shame, yet unlike the bull, they manage to move forward, finding new conceptions of shame to contend with in their ongoing journeys.

Jacob Zumoff's reevaluation of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* challenges prevailing interpretations, arguing against a Marxist perspective. Zumoff contends that Hammett's crime novel presents a nihilistic vision of society amid the shift from rural traditionalism to urban modernism. Zumoff invites readers to reconsider Hammett's perspective, highlighting the novel's reflection of societal changes during the rise of modernism. Despite Hammett's later political engagement, Zumoff cautions against shoehorning the novel into Marxist literature, asserting that the roots of Hammett's politicization lie in external factors of the 1930s rather than explicit political visions within his writings. The trajectory of Hammett's life, marked by his turn to Communism, contradicts any straightforward political interpretation of *The Maltese Falcon*, underscoring the novel's enduring ambiguity, skepticism, and cynicism.

Martin Praga's essay "More than Lost Cargo: Fragmentation in Craig

Santos Perez's *from UNINCORPORATED TERRITORY* series" explores the intersection of experimental form and political message in Craig Santos Perez's poetry. Perez's avant-garde epic reconstructs Chamorro identity from fragments found in oral history, court cases, songs, and myths. The essay delves into Guam's post-WWII history and the impactful presence of the US military on the island, addressing the consequences of military buildup, environmental disruptions, and the complex choices faced by the Chamorro people. Despite challenges, including the silenced subaltern voice, Chamorro activism achieves environmental victories, offering a glimpse of hope. Through strategic paratextual elements, Perez's poetry puts Guam "on the map," inviting Chamorros to "cling to every subtraction" as materials for building a new identity, emphasizing the potential richness of these "spoils of the empires" beyond mere lost cargo.

In "The Price of Virtual Utopia," Philip Steiner dissects Ernest Cline's virtual reality odyssey, *Ready Player One*, unveiling its intermedial portrayal and implications for society. Steiner delves into the juxtaposition of dystopia and utopia within the OASIS, emphasizing how Cline's novel serves as a virtual realization of the American dream. In the novel, the OASIS becomes a realm offering self-discovery, friendship, and love, showcasing the positive facets of a fully realized virtual reality. However, Steiner argues that beyond the OASIS lies a clear-cut dystopia, raising thought-provoking questions about humanity's relationship with reality and the potential crises associated with the advent of virtual reality. The novel, according to Steiner, presents a multifaceted portrayal of both dystopian and utopian possibilities, highlighting a deep appreciation for genuine reality while acknowledging the transformative power of human ingenuity.

Finally, Andrea Färber's essay, "Climate Change Theater and the Interrelation of Human and the More-Than-Human," underscores the urgency of climate change awareness through theater, emphasizing interconnectedness between humans and the more-than-human. Färber, drawing on Chantal Bilodeau's play *Sila*, contends that fostering empathy through theater is essential for instigating change. The essay explores *Sila*'s portrayal of interconnectedness beyond shared familial dynamics, encompassing shared grief and the importance of the Inuit concept of *sila*, symbolizing the interwovenness of all existence. The inclusion of polar bears in the play allows Bilodeau to address both human and more-than-human issues, avoiding trivialization and highlighting the urgency of climate change. *Sila*'s overarching message urges action against climate change, emphasizing the interconnected suffering of humans and the more-than-human, with the hope of evoking sympathy and prompting meaningful engagement from the audience.

As diverse as these essays may be, they converge on a central theme—the reciprocal relationship between literature and societal transformation. Each piece illuminates how literary works act as mirrors reflecting the complexities of contemporary issues, fostering awareness, reclaiming identities, and exploring the consequences of societal shifts. Together, these essays invite readers to explore the rich terrain where fiction, poetry, and theater intersect with the ever-changing landscape of society, offering revealing insights into the transformative power of words.

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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' (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

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