

Preface

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The Americas: Connection, Continuity, and Exchange

The Americas are not only an indivisible geographical entity but also a region sharing a history of coloniality, anti-colonial revolutions, and imperialist interventions. South, Central, and North America exist in a state of economic, political, and cultural interdependence. Recent interdisciplinary approaches to the history, economics, as well as the cultures and literatures of the Americas resist normative definitions that reflect European political epistemologies and/or national models. International scholars of the twentieth and the twenty-first century have opened new perspectives in the study of the North American, Ibero-American, and Afro-Caribbean regions. In the context of US Studies, the New American Studies, the Borders School in American Studies, and the new disciplines of Americas Cultural Studies, Transatlantic and Inter-American Studies have moved towards transnationality, postnationality, and globality in studying economic, cultural and social processes as well as forms of knowledge and expression. The critical essays included in the present issue of *Focus: Papers in English Literary and Cultural Studies* address themes and issues related to the study of “the Americas” in transatlantic, hemispheric, and global contexts.

The first four contributions explore historical memory and cultural heritage in fictional and non-fictional literary works, highlighting inter-American and transcontinental interdependencies and convergences. Carol MacCurdy discusses the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by the Dominican-American author Junot Díaz. Focusing on climactic scenes that occur in the sugar cane fields, the essay highlights the convergence of the history of African slavery, Spanish and French colonialism, as well as Dominican and US nation-making. After the fall of the violent Rafael Trujillo regime, the narrator Yunior puts forth his multi-vocal text to reconstruct Dominican history. In this polyphonous novel about the Caribbean diasporic experience, language becomes a means of resistance and self-empowerment. Spanglish, street slang, Tolkien’s Elvish language, “nerd” speak and Superhero lingo all contribute to countering the devastating effects of historical, racial, and gender classifications, and converge to forge the powerful voice and identity of the central hero whose life, although “brief,” turns out to be also “wondrous.” The polyphony of narrative voices is also central to the discussion, by Ágnes Zsófia Kovács, of Toni Morrison’s neo-slave narrative *Beloved* (1987). The essay explores the interdependence of racialized language, the multimedia elements in African American vernacular culture, and the function of alternative modes of knowing—hearing, feeling, singing, dancing—in the novel. By referring to Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s concept of ‘signifyin’ as a means of articulating the unsayable, Kovács argues that the “rememory” of slavery is integral to the discourse of African American folk culture.

Two critical papers highlight salient as well as lesser-known facts related to the trans-American and transatlantic circulation of ideas and influences. András Tarnóc's essay examines the development of the one-time slave Juan Francisco Manzano from "mistress's lap-dog to freeman." The first document describing the slave experience in Cuba, *Life of the Negro Poet, Written by Himself and Translated from the Spanish by R. R. M.*, was published in England in 1840. This unique document provides valuable bilingual insight into slavery in the Caribbean and Hispanic America. Incidentally, the English edition includes not only the actual experiences of the author but also his poems, along with the verses written by the Irish abolitionist and translator of Manzano's narrative, Richard Robert Madden. Cultural exchange between Ireland and the US is also addressed by Mária Kurdi's paper "A Fruitful Two Way Relationship: Arthur Miller and Irish Theater." The wide thematic range and innovative dramaturgy of the turn-of-the-century Irish theater, the work of G. B. Shaw, and the dramatists of the Literary Revival—especially John Millington Synge and Sean O'Casey—inspired some of the greatest American playwrights of the twentieth century, Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller among them. Kurdi points out the influence of Shaw and Sean O'Casey on the thought and art of Miller, and then turns to examine the reverse process: Miller's theater fertilizing Irish drama throughout the 1960s to the 1990s. The exchange does not stop here: the work of Irish directors, some extraordinary productions of Miller's plays, and the subtle affinities between *Death of a Salesman* and Martin McDonagh's *Pillowman* attest that the fruitful exchange between the American playwright and the world of Irish theater lasted, indeed, a lifetime.

A cluster of essays examines aspects of cultural and linguistic exchange among diverse American and non-American ethnicities. The paper "A Question of Pigment? The Representation of Mexicans in the Depression Art of Dorothea Lange" by Irén Annus discusses a series of portraits the outstanding documentary photographer created among migrant farmworkers during the Great Depression. Annus argues that Lange's photography evoked powerful emotions regarding the desperate situation of millions of agricultural laborers in the country. She displayed her powerful sense of humanity, sensitivity, and empathy towards everyone who had been touched by the general "social erosion" of the age, thus silently but openly challenged the racist, and, in particular, anti-Mexican, public discourses and official actions that characterized the decade. Mónika Szente-Varga's essay sketches the extraordinary career of Louis Schlesinger "from Hungarian major to Central American entrepreneur." As an officer fighting in the Hungarian War of Independence, Schlesinger was forced to emigrate to Nicaragua, where he became caught up, during the 1850s, in the country's internal unrest and the civil war. The paper highlights the Hungarian major's involvement in the failed filibustering attempt led by the US mercenary William Walker, and the consequences of the lost Battle of Santa Rosa (1856) on Schlesinger's reputation and later career. The contribution by Éva Forintos addresses the issue of language maintenance of bilinguals by examining the phenomenon of code-switching in the linguistically mixed written language encountered on the webpage of "The House of Hungary," a non-profit corporation serving the Hungarian community in San Diego, California. Forintos finds that language alterations in these texts are complementary and deliberate, reflecting the multifaceted identity of the members of this community. The issue closes with four book reviews.

As editor of the present issue, I am expressing my gratitude to the authors of the critical essays and reviews for their valuable contributions. I want to thank the members of the Advisory Board for their insightful comments and constructive advice. Special thanks go to Mária Kurdi, editor-in-chief of the journal, who thoughtfully guided the editing process. The responsibility for the remaining errors is entirely mine. I also acknowledge the financial support of the Hungarian Association for American Studies in the publication of this issue of the journal. I am hopeful that with this special issue of *Focus*, the University of Pécs has joined the efforts of the academic community to provide insight on “the Americas” in a way that does justice to the interdependence of the vibrant cultures that this continent nourishes.

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