

## REVIEWS

**Eric A. Moyen and John P. Thelin. *College Sports: A History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2024, 466 pages.**

In the introduction to their ambitious book *College Sports: A History*, Eric A. Moyen and John P. Thelin clearly state that their “resolution is to look within and beyond institutional structures to exhume and explain the culture of college sports as part of the campus, community, and country” (xi). Their historical research points to “a system plagued by abuse” (3), built on exploitation of teenagers and young adults by institutions which are supposed to educate them and shape their character. The phrase “modern day slavery” has been used over and over in reference to college athletes, until it was brought to a halt by the NCAA introducing the Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) policy in 2021. Moyen and Thelin prove that college sports have always been a big deal. What changed is the revenue and the level of professionalism, which eventually led to athletes being able to profit from the NIL.

Nowadays the programs are run like professional sports teams, with coaches recruiting future students primarily through the summer competition organized by the AAU (the Amateur Athletic Union) and not performances during high school games, let alone the grades they get. This puts into question the whole idea of student-athlete, with its presumed nobility. Talking to elite student-athletes in interviews for *Swish Appeal*, I found a common thread connecting their college careers—they have no doubt that they were recruited to college on basketball ability, not academic merit. Big college programs were always expected to run big, expensive sports programs, contributing to the overall experience of the students, increasing their local pride and providing them with a sense of community, which lives on long after they graduate. They often return to campus every summer to work with current players, offer guidance and support. They play a role in recruitment as well, and keep the donors engaged in sustaining the excellence of their alma maters, which proves how culturally important the sports aspect of the college experience is.

Moyen and Thelin start by explaining the difference between college and university, which by mistake are used interchangeably, despite significant differences in mission and scale (4). College is only concerned with higher education, whereas the university covers additional issues, such as the development of athletics, and is generally considered larger and more independent. The authors explain the difference between college and university through the changed meaning of the word “discipline,” which used to signify order in the classroom, but at universities stood for the discipline of studies, the area of research in which the school excelled at. Sport was introduced at universities to build character and bodies of the students, while instilling in them the ideas of teamwork, competition and success.

At least that is how it was presented to the general public. In practice, since its inception in the 1880s, college sports, did not have any rules regarding eligibility and the teams used that leeway to play graduate students and professionals, increasing their chances of winning. Initially the competition was informal, but in 1895 a group of seven college presidents took their plans back to faculty, who then

organized the Intercollegiate Conference of Faculty Representatives. Composed of Chicago, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Northwestern, Purdue, and Wisconsin, the organization was soon called the Western Conference and eventually renamed to the Big Ten, which exists till this day. The reason for forming what eventually became known as conferences was to officiate and regulate. So the organizations presided over schedules and championship competitions, which further increased the importance of sports. With it came the rising importance of fundraising and recruitment, as the higher sports prestige translated to the overall prestige of a university, making it more desirable for regular students, who saw the on-field success as the extension of the program's overall success.

The evolution of college sports is also responsible for the development of sports journalism, as the popularity of such disciplines as football and baseball translated to the reporting, which was expected to not only provide game scores, but also promote the disciplines it was depicting. This gave rise to journalists like Grantland Rice, who revolutionized sportswriting with his heroic depictions of athletic contests, elevating athletes to the level of modern-day heroes. Before him though, Joseph Pulitzer recognized the potential of sports journalism, utilizing pictures from games to aid the popularity of athletic contests, while increasing the circulation of his papers in the process.

Moyen and Thelin tell the story of American sports chronologically, focusing on main events rather than key figures, but with attention also paid to “‘minor’ (or Olympic sports), women’s teams, and historically Black colleges and universities” (xvi), which for decades remained underfunded, despite billions of annual revenue coming from around 80 institutions and their big-time athletic programs (2). The authors paint a comprehensive picture of college athletics, with respect paid to various sports and their importance to various regions—wrestling in Iowa, American football in Alabama, basketball in Indiana, etc. The last sport had a particularly big impact on college sports. In 1891 James A. Naismith invented basketball, intended to provide physical activity for students during the colder months, since they could not play football due to the harsh New England winters. The introduction of the sport is important not only from the point of view of March Madness, which became the mainstay of the American sports and cultural landscape in the 1980s, but more so because it allowed female students to participate in athletic competition, as physicality in early basketball was significantly limited and increased women’s participation in team sports. Still, women’s basketball was soon almost universally banned, apart from Iowa, in which the regional strain of six-on-six basketball survived up until the implementation of Title IX in 1972.

Opening participation to both sexes broadened the spectrum of college sports, which covers: the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW), the National Invitation Tournament (NIT), and sports at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). The schools labeled “mid-majors,” as well as institutions participating at the Division II and III levels of the NCAA are also part of the story, which spans for around 150 years and represents the essential changes underwent by amateur sports in the United States. Moyen and Thelin offer a comprehensive picture of the historical,

social and cultural impact of college sports, showing their importance for the outlook of the modern-day United States.

Łukasz Muniowski  
University of Szczecin

**Tomasz Jacheć. *The Myth of Michael Jordan in Popular Culture*. Routledge, 2024, 245 pages.**

In *The Myth of Michael Jordan in Popular Culture*, Tomasz Jacheć combines the discipline of an academic with the enthusiasm of a basketball fan, as he analyzes the mythical persona of Michael Jordan through the lens of Joseph Campbell's understanding of myth. Following Campbell's interpretation of the journey of a mythical hero, who embarks on a journey of personal discovery, which culminates with the hero bringing overall betterment to the community, retired basketball superstar Michael Jordan can be seen as a modern-day embodiment of a mythical hero. His journey began in North Carolina, where he became one of the best young basketball players in the United States, only to move to Chicago, the third-biggest media market in the country, where he was allowed to blossom into the most recognizable athlete in the world and, more importantly, the first branded individual, who incorporated sports excellence into anything he plastered his likeness on. Jordan made the most of the "mechanisms of mythmaking processes in the modern world characterized by the codependence of business, media, and sports" (23), and he was allowed to do that by utilizing the privileged position afforded by modern-day society to exceptional athletes. His rise to fame coincided with the fall of the Eastern Block and the expansion of capitalism, making him one of the faces of America's soft power, colonizing the global imagination through sporting competition rather than military dominance.

There were many scholars who recognized Jordan's transformative potential, but still, the sheer scope of Jacheć's research is impressive in itself. Through the years, the scholar was able to collect around 300 academic articles about, or at least mentioning, Michael Jordan. "In the majority of these texts, Jordan is replaceable, and any other name could be used" (3), which is counterintuitive to the overall status of this basketball player in popular culture. Being named "the Michael Jordan of" something meant (and oftentimes still means) that a person excels all others in a given field. And various companies piggy-backed on his status, regardless of whether they sold fast food, shoes or isotonic drinks. In a mythical sense, buying those products was akin to participating in mythical rituals, keeping up the myth of the exceptional individual alive. As pointed out by Jacheć, even though "today, Michael Jordan is no longer 'the hero' journeying through the courts and challenges of the NBA; as a basketball player Jordan of today can be viewed as a mythical figure whose legendary achievements are well documented" (5). By becoming a remnant of the past, Jordan only cemented his status as an unreachable hero, one whose status will remain unchanged and untouched.

While Jordan's global appeal was undeniable, his myth was, as Jacheć observes, quintessentially American. In the American monomyth the hero's journey begins with a threat to the local community, and the ultimate goal is to save it. The

biggest difference between the two is that while in the Campbellian monomyth the focus is on the journey, the American monomyth is primarily focused on the defense of an innocent community by the hero (17). Reminiscent of the cowboy figure in Westerns, the hero of the American monomyth fights not only in his own name, but also in the name of those too weak to stand up to oppression on their own. This standing up takes on many forms and one of them is setting an example for the community, giving them something to aspire to and serving as proof that everything is possible. After all, “American culture, like no other culture, celebrates success as a result of excellence in a given field” (vii) and Jordan constructed his career narrative around that set of beliefs.

Jacheć discusses a whole spectrum of ideas and observations surrounding Jordan, dimming the light on him as a person and highlighting primarily what he stands for. In consequence, his work makes a significant contribution to cultural studies broadly defined rather than sports studies exclusively, showing how, in the present era, storytelling shapes the global imagination through the same mechanisms as those already identified by Campbell in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *The Myth of Michael Jordan in Popular Culture* is a mandatory read for anyone interested in myths, their importance, relevance and endurance.

Łukasz Muniowski  
University of Szczecin

**Ewa Antoszek, Ewa Barbara Łuczak, Jadwiga Maszewska, Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis and Grażyna Zygałło. *Chicanas. Pisarki pochodzenia meksykańskiego* [*Chicanas: Women Writers of Mexican Origin*]. University of Warsaw Press, 2025, 176 pages.**

*Chicanas: Women Writers of Mexican Origin* is the latest contribution to the “Masters of American Literature” series published by Warsaw University Press. This timely volume is authored by five scholars whose research encompasses ethnicity, race, migration, as well as border and food studies within American literature and culture. Each contributed a chapter on a different Chicana author, and Grażyna Zygałło also wrote a comprehensive introduction.

While the volumes in the “Masters of American Literature” series typically feature a variety of contributions edited by one or two scholars, this one is a multi-author compilation. It focuses specifically on contemporary Chicana writers, including Ana Castillo, Cherrie Moraga, Reyna Grande, Sandra Cisneros, and Carla Trujillo. Zygałło explains that all these authors engage with feminist perspectives, explore the process of physical and symbolic border crossings, and ponder their positioning within the Mexican-American diaspora in the United States (38). It might seem surprising that Gloria Anzaldúa is not included in this selection. However, Zygałło clarifies that this decision was based on the recent publication of her monograph dedicated exclusively to Anzaldúa, titled *Zmieniając siebie, zmieniam świat*, in Poland (39). Still, Anzaldúa’s writings on borderlands and Chicana feminism are integral to this volume, which is reflected in its rich theoretical framework.

Grażyna Zygadło provides an insightful and informative introduction that effectively contextualizes Chicana literature, setting the stage for the chapters that follow. Although she covers a wide range of topics—from the complexities of Latinx-related terminology to the history of the Mexican diaspora and immigration to the United States, as well as the politics of the publishing industry—the introduction remains coherent and lucid. It can serve as a great reference resource not only for academics but also for students and a general audience.

Zygadło emphasizes a shared evolution of language and literature, illuminating the etymology and usage of terms like *Hispanic*, *Latino/a*, and *Chicano/a* as well as their connection to ethnic identity and class. She also sheds light on the concept of *borderlands*, which recurs throughout the chapters, and discusses the significance of political and cultural change for the development of Chicana literature, introducing the readers to the Chicano Movement (El Movimiento) of the 1960s and 70s. From a scholarly perspective, I particularly appreciate her discussion of how Chicana Studies redefine American Studies and how feminist politics and poetics are at the heart of Chicana writing.

This volume effectively illustrates that Chicana literature is political. However, this does not mean that form and poetics are insignificant or secondary to major sociocultural concerns. I agree with Zygadło's critique of Raymond Paredes' claim that Chicana writing is interesting from an ideological perspective rather than an aesthetic one (37). There is a critical tendency to reduce ethnic literatures to identity or ideology, overlooking their experimental nature and attunement to form. Many Chicana authors develop a syncretic style of writing, which brings together tradition and newness, helping to redefine the concept of radical experimentation. Through aesthetic explorations, they also refigure Chicana subjectivity. Zygadło highlights, for instance, the role of *corridos* in Mexican poetic tradition. Their cultural importance is immense, similar to that of the blues for African Americans. These fast-paced ballads, rooted in Aztec myths and culture, transcend genre boundaries and influence contemporary poetic forms. Importantly, they serve a decolonial purpose, playing a crucial role in reclaiming Chicana identity. This demonstrates that in Chicana literature, form is political, too, and functions as a vehicle for cultural activism.

The idea of both aesthetic and cultural syncretism is compellingly explored in Ewa Barbara Łuczak's chapter on Ana Castillo's 1993 novel *So Far from God*. Łuczak demonstrates that Castillo not only incorporates *rasquachismo*—Mexican American folk aesthetics—but also reinterprets it through a feminist perspective. Her exploratory writing led to the emergence of a new type of *rasquache* aesthetics, which is termed *domesticana rasquache*. Łuczak's analysis shows that Castillo strategically assembles a variety of textual strategies, cultural references, spiritual quests, and feminist practices to create a hybrid and hyperbolic form characterized by "baroque" excess. It is through such an excessive form that she enacts her radical politics. Castillo also uses non-aggressive humor and irony without lapsing into a didactic tone often associated with political writing, as Łuczak illustrates. Łuczak's essay effectively builds on the arguments made in the introduction, showing that Chicana writing nomadically refigures the form while questioning patriarchal dominance.

Jadwiga Maszewska's chapter focuses on contemporary iterations of *curandero*, a figure rooted in the story of Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, a 16th-century Spanish explorer who lived among Indigenous peoples, serving as a cultural intermediary and healer. Maszewska argues that his nomadic positioning is also reflected in the role of contemporary Chicana writers, who navigate the intersections of Indigenous, European, Mexican, and American cultures. To illustrate her point, she analyzes Cherrie Moraga's 2000 play, *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*. Although the chapter occasionally lacks cohesion, Maszewska offers an interesting interpretation of Medea in Moraga's queer drama as a modern *curandera* who strives to heal her community. This perspective also helps her to explore the tensions between an individual and the community, as well as trauma and healing.

Ewa Antoszek's chapter examines the concept of the *borders* in Reyna Grande's *Across a Hundred Mountains*, *A Dream Called Home*, and *The Distance Between Us*. Following Grande, Antoszek offers a broad and nuanced understanding of the *border* that extends beyond the physical one and includes symbolic dimensions related to "language, culture, law, economy, education, gender, and career" (75). The chapter is divided into three sections: the first introduces different conceptions of *border* as articulated by Chicana/o authors; the second analyzes how the notion of the *border* evolves in Grande's writing; and the third explores how Grande's perspective influences the formation of a hybrid, nomadic identity. The chapter is highly informative and presents a range of compelling ideas; however, the writing could be a bit more concise, as the chapter's length dilutes its focus. The section on theory initially seems to work as a framework for analyzing Grande's works. Still, the author later references very different theorists like Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, Jacques Derrida, and Mikhail Bakhtin, among others, which occasionally makes the argument difficult to follow. That said, I appreciate the analysis of how border crossing is explored not only on a thematic, but on a formal level, which includes examination of structure and style.

Grażyna Zygałło's chapter examines the significance of family narratives in the works of Sandra Cisneros, one of the most renowned Chicana writers. Focusing on *The House on Mango Street*, *Caramelo*, and "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," Zygałło analyzes the role of family structure and community in the process of identity formation. She demonstrates that while a sense of belonging is vital for their Chicana women's identity, it is equally essential to transcend some elements of traditional socialization that might hinder their liberation. This involves, for instance, challenging patriarchal norms. Zygałło's chapter sheds light on how Chicana literature offers insight into the dynamics of Chicana family structures and generational shifts, illuminating the intersections of ethnicity and gender.

Zygałło's chapter beautifully connects with Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis's analysis of Carla Trujillo's 2003 debut novel, *What Night Brings*. It is a cogently argued and focused essay, which examines family dynamics and identity, too, but from the perspective of food and queer studies. By exploring the process of Marcia's self-discovery, Niewiadomska-Flis demonstrates how culinary practices help to challenge gender paradigms and resist *machismo* within domestic space. Here, moving away from traditional cuisine emerges as a creative and experimental

practice, which impacts Chicana women's subjectivity. Niewiadomska-Flis's chapter effectively illustrates the "transformative potential" of queer Chicana literature (124).

Overall, *Chicanas. Women Writers of Mexican Origin* is a valuable companion to Chicana contemporary writing as inseparable from feminist practice. All chapters speak to one another and form an interconnected and polyvocal whole. It is a strong contribution to the "Masters of American Literature" series, which can appeal to a wide audience. The volume offers compelling perspectives on both fiction and drama, but it would be even stronger if it also included a chapter on contemporary poetry, which is crucial to a Chicana conception of literature and politics.

Joanna Mąkowska  
University of Warsaw

**Mirosława Buchholtz, editor. *Flannery O'Connor*. University of Warsaw Press, 2024, 242 pages.**

"Of course, this is not exactly the way I look but it's the way I feel. It's better looked at from a distance"<sup>1</sup>—these words are at once affectively precise and strategically distanced; aptly, then, they serve as a fitting motto for the collection *Flannery O'Connor*, edited by Mirosława Buchholtz (University of Warsaw Press, 2024), that seeks to reframe the writer through fresh scholarly lenses. This carefully composed volume resists canonising O'Connor; rather, it intends to examine the shifting contours of her (not only) contemporary reception, her stylistic peculiarities, and her philosophical intransigence—sometimes with awe, sometimes with caution, always with affection.

Buchholtz opens the collection with a richly textured introductory essay which elegantly blends biography, archival excavation, and aesthetic theory. The eponymous pheasant becomes both muse and doppelgänger, evoking a portrait of the artist concerned as much with surface as with what lies beneath. It is the same visual doubleness—something between image and its shadow—that, as Buchholtz claims, that makes O'Connor's work both difficult to simplify and continuously appealing to readers, translators, and filmmakers alike. Indeed, one of the key values of this volume is that it acknowledges the *visibility* of O'Connor, not only her place in literary syllabi or theological debates, but also her increasing cultural legibility across media. That the Southern Gothic and its aesthetic siblings have found their way to animated Lego films and documentary biopics is not simply a trivia footnote; it is a mark of narrative plasticity and ongoing cultural curiosity; an observation I find particularly compelling in this essay.

Flannery O'Connor's presence in the visual imagination has never been merely coincidental. Her stories: densely symbolic, grounded in grotesque materiality, and charged with quiet unease invite cinematic treatment, yet resist

1 Flannery O'Connor. *Collected Works*, edited by Sally Fitzgerald, The Library of America, 1988, p. 962. Quoted after: *Flannery O'Connor*, edited by Mirosława Buchholtz, 11, note 12.

sentimentality and narrative closure. John Huston's *Wise Blood* (1979), a strikingly faithful adaptation of O'Connor's first novel, remains a powerful example of how her prose translates into images that hover between intensity and absurdity. More recently, this cross-media translation has continued in documentary formats such as *Flannery* (2019), directed by Elizabeth Coffman and Mark Bosco and in more experimental forms including the brickfilm adaptation of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (2021) by Silleck, or the immersive operatic installation based on *Wise Blood* created in 2008 by the duo Jay Scheib and Anthony Gatto.

What this volume captures particularly well is not just O'Connor's media afterlife, but also the roots of her "visual literacy." The introductory chapter by Buchholtz argues persuasively that O'Connor's early work as a cartoonist and illustrator shaped her prose aesthetics: from the sharply drawn silhouettes of her characters to the almost storyboard-like rhythm of her scenes. Reading this collection, one begins to see O'Connor not merely as a Southern writer or a Catholic one, but as an artist whose textual instincts were, from the start, inseparable from the image.

The volume itself comprises ten substantive chapters, framed by Buchholtz's introductory essay and culminating in Sława Krasińska's powerful reading of *The Violent Bear It Away*. Rather than adhering to a rigid chronological or thematic structure, the volume follows a pattern of associative logic, allowing connections to emerge between texts and tracing links between biography, letters, translation, theology, pedagogy, and philosophical inquiry. This apparent looseness is, in fact, a strength: it allows for both coherence and polyphony. Eventually, then, O'Connor emerges not as a fixed figure, but as a writer continually renegotiating and renegotiated across disciplines and generations— what digital culture might call a morph: a form in constant movement, open to reframing and reactivation.

The first chapter, by Mirosława Buchholtz, offers a pointed and witty analysis of how O'Connor has been received—and resisted—by various reading publics. I love this essay; it morphs between American high school textbooks, German lexicographic omissions, and Polish literary anxieties, mapping O'Connor's uneasy afterlife as a (southern) writer both canonised and marginalised. The tone is measured and occasionally ironic—Buchholtz observes, for instance, that notes that "O'Connor did not merit an individual entry in the 2002 Suhrkamp *Autorinnen Lexikon*, although she is mentioned as a source of inspiration for Israeli writer Ruth Almog and Canadian author Alice Munro" (20, translation mine). This is a chapter that refuses the stiffness of academic convention: it opens up the conversation around reception, positioning O'Connor within not only religious and racial debates, but also within the often-overlooked politics of curriculum and translation. Especially noteworthy is the reading of *The Crop* (O'Connor's early metafictional short story) as a playful self-commentary on class, gender, and the ambition to be "literary." The author's choice to juxtapose this with textbook annotations and real student markings adds an ethnographic texture rarely seen in literary scholarship.

Jacek Gutorow turns to a quieter, more interior aspect of O'Connor's oeuvre: her correspondence. The title, which recalls Wisława Szymborska's iconic poem, signals a shift from public perception to private voice. Gutorow treats the letters not as mere biographical supplements, but as a genre of literary intimacy.

His essay brings into focus an “epistolary rhythm” that shaped O’Connor’s way of moving between daily routine and theological thought. This chapter does not seek to dramatise O’Connor’s illness or romanticise her solitude. Instead, it presents a quiet and perceptive look at letter-writing as the space where O’Connor’s voice, faith, and sense of humour meet. Gutorow writes in a way that matches his subject—careful, clear, and never overly emotional. His argument—that O’Connor’s letters shape a form of friendship with the reader—is both persuasive and moving.

Marek Paryż’s “Literatura, region, religia. Eseje Flannery O’Connor” (“Literature, Region, Religion: Flannery O’Connor’s Essays”) offers a clear and thoughtful account of the three key elements that shape O’Connor’s literary world. Paryż manages to draw clear thematic arcs across her essays collected in *Mystery and Manners*, while placing them in a wider discussion about place (region) and reception. Striking is Paryż’s ability to reveal O’Connor’s idiosyncratic religiosity as far from comfortable: her Catholicism, he argues, though often treated as central, is always in tension with the Protestant cultural backdrop of the American South—resulting in a vision that feels more unsettling than “doctrinal.” The analysis of O’Connor’s essays is both respectful and bold, drawing attention to her theological provocations, her views on race and history, and her absolute resistance to moral relativism. This chapter does not attempt to “rescue” O’Connor from controversy; rather, it shows how her work insists on confrontation and fracture—both within the text and the reader. It thus suggests that O’Connor’s authorial position is less fixed than often assumed, and better understood as—precisely—a kind of cultural morph: shifting, reactive, and productively dissonant.

Anna Głąb shifts the focus from essays to fiction yet maintains the same philosophical register. Her reading of O’Connor’s Christian message is not framed through orthodoxy or piety, but through aesthetics and existential encounter. The title itself—juxtaposing the mystical with the material—aptly reflects Głąb’s central claim: that O’Connor’s stories expose “the mystery” not through didacticism, but through the immediacy of embodied/lived experience. Particularly strong is her interpretation of “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” as an anti-sentimental parable in which grace appears not as comfort, but as disturbance. Głąb’s style is clear and intellectually rich; she traces the Thomist definition of art as “reason in construction” (88) thus approaching O’Connor’s writing not through abstract theological argument but close reading. The result is a chapter that deepens our understanding of O’Connor not as a theological novelist, but as a writer attuned to (existential) tension.

While Głąb approaches O’Connor through a theological-aesthetic lens, Beata Williamson shifts the focus to the affective and pedagogical. In her essay Williamson revisits O’Connor’s fiction not through the lens of doctrine or critique, but through an attentive and emotionally responsive mode of reading—one clearly inspired by Olga Tokarczuk’s notion of the “tender narrator”; a stance that privileges empathy, nuance, and relationality over interpretation as mastery. Drawing on this idea, Williamson foregrounds a perspective attuned to subtle emotional shifts, flickers of grace, and pedagogical openness. In its tone and approach, the essay recalls *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) by Azar Nafisi—literature becomes here not only a subject of analysis, but a space of shared intimacy, ethical reflection,

and everyday courage—especially within the classroom. I truly admire and find Williamson’s article deeply moving. It stands out in the volume not only for its clarity and warmth, but for the way it affirms the joy of reading as an act of relational presence—something tender, resistant, and quietly radical. This is an affective text—and one that lingers.

Rev. Andrzej Persidok shifts the volume’s tone dramatically moving from the joy of reading to the metaphysics of grace. If Williamson’s “tender narrator” foregrounds empathy and relation, Persidok seems to reintroduce a more absolute voice: a kind of “divine narrator,” unsentimental and unyielding. His essay deepens the theological dimension of the collection by examining the theme of divine intrusion in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. Intellectually precise, Persidok’s reading nevertheless avoids abstract theorising. Rather than treating O’Connor’s stories as moral allegories, he interprets them as dramatic moments of spiritual crisis, informed by Karl Barth’s “theology of crisis” and the Protestant-Catholic tensions that animate O’Connor’s world. Particularly compelling is his insistence on preserving the English title of the collection—arguing that the Polish word *spotkanie* cannot adequately convey the metaphysical value of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. This chapter places O’Connor within a theology of grace without consolation—radical, destabilising, and embodied.

Krzysztof Majer delivers one of the most intricate and illuminating chapters in the volume. With the deftness of a literary cartographer, he examines not only how O’Connor’s fiction has been translated, but also the ways in which translation itself involves distinct sensibilities—ways of feeling, perceiving, and making meaning across languages and cultures. I so appreciate that Majer reminds us that to read O’Connor in Polish is to read both her and her translators. His discussion of Maria Skibniewska’s classic renderings, placed in dialogue with Michał Kłobukowski’s more recent efforts, is never polemical, but instead attuned to historical nuance, linguistic texture, and the ethical dilemmas of fidelity, while also remaining sensitive to the affective labour, cultural intimacy, and relational care that translation often entails. Particularly thought-provoking and evocative in this respect is the reflection on editorial strategies: the choice to publish a hybrid volume—part archival, part contemporary—reveals translation as a space shaped by cultural sensitivity, intuitive judgement, and the negotiations that meaning requires. Majer’s chapter is not only a model of translation criticism; it is more a literary meditation on what happens when the haunted world of the U.S. South also encounters the landscapes of a Slavic tongue—something closer to *The Witcher* than to Faulkner.

Following Krzysztof Majer’s discussion of translation as a cultural and affective negotiation, Joseph Kuhn offers a daring rereading of *Wise Blood* through the lens of postwar trauma and psycho-theological dislocation. His perspective—translated fluidly and sensitively by Mirosława Buchholtz—traces O’Connor’s early fictional universe in tune with not only her theological roots, but also the collective unconscious of a country recovering from WWII. Kuhn’s Motes is a survivor, and his obsession with sight, while echoing, according to Kuhn, Freud’s ghosts and Barth’s theology of crisis, does not refrain from incorporating Walter Benjamin’s image of vision full of wreckage and delay. What makes this chapter stand out is

that it does not treat theology and psychology as opposites. Instead, Kuhn weaves them together into a reading that captures both the strangeness and the beauty of O'Connor's first novel. The essay is also a quiet reminder of what transatlantic scholarship can offer—when translation becomes more than just a change of language and turns into a real exchange of ideas.

Sława Krasińska's essay offers a closing that is both moving and well thought-out. Focusing on *The Violent Bear It Away*, she traces the novel's long, difficult gestation and the autobiographical anxieties woven into its fabric. Krasińska's most striking insight lies in her reading of the boy from *The Violent Bear It Away*—not as a fixed symbol, but as a layered, shifting figure that resists closure. Her essay, placed at the end of the volume, mirrors the arc of O'Connor's novel: a story of struggle, rupture, and eventual transformation. In this sense, the collection itself, too, becomes a narrative of change. Krasińska's final chapter, therefore, does not simply analyze the novel—it reflects on the act of reading O'Connor anew, closing the volume with a sense of movement rather than finality. Such looseness in turn allows the reader to approach this book—as well as O'Connor's the way the writer herself approached the pheasant: not for symbolic coherence, but for presence, confrontation, and strangeness—the morph indeed.

Beata Zawadka  
University of Szczecin

**Marek Paryż, editor. *Joan Didion*. University of Warsaw Press, 2024, 190 pages.**

When in 2017 Netflix released a documentary on American author Joan Didion, the writer's online cult reached its peak. Two years earlier, the eighty-year-old Didion—her face largely obscured by oversized black sunglasses—appeared in the advertisement of the French fashion brand Céline. The campaign prompted Hermione Hoby from *The Guardian* to observe that Didion's name and image were “in danger of eclipsing her actual work.” To illustrate how Didion had been co-opted by popular culture, Hoby cited the opening line of *The White Album* (1979)—“We tell ourselves stories in order to live” (13)—which had become so ubiquitous as to lose its original meaning.

Contrary to popular interpretations, this line is hardly meant to celebrate the power of storytelling. Instead, the “stories” refer to the “narrative line[s]” that writers impose on the images they see in order to make sense of lived experience (Didion, *The White Album* 13). Didion then goes on to question her own ability to do so at a time when her mental condition and the tumultuous events of the late sixties conspired to produce a sense of life unfolding as disjointed pictures—“not a movie but a cutting-room experience” (*The White Album* 14). Although Didion laments her slipping capacity to discern the logic of events—while also admitting that many of those events were, in fact, devoid of any logic—she simultaneously reveals something essential about her writing, and about her imperative to write.

In his “Introduction” to *Joan Didion* (2024)—the essay collection which is the subject of this review—Marek Paryż observes that Didion viewed writing as

the only way to make sense of the images before her. At the same time, writing was for her “the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people” and thus “an aggressive, even a hostile act” (Didion, “Why I Write”). The paradox that drives Didion’s work—an almost organic need to grasp and convey the meaning to the reader, paired with a conscious resistance to authorial imposition—is at the centre of the collection edited by Paryż for the “Masters of American Literature” series (Mistrzowie Literatry Amerykańskiej). The volume, which consists of Paryż’s comprehensive introduction followed by ten essays, taps into the recent surge of interest in Didion’s writing in Poland, spurred by the 2021 publication of the Polish translation of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) and the release of five more of her books in Polish translation. Although Didion might not yet enjoy cult status in Poland, the volume responds to readers’ growing interest in her work by offering an overview of her oeuvre, including her essays, novels, and autobiographical writings.

In bringing Didion closer to the Polish reader, the collection strikes a good balance between specialist insight and accessibility. While it does assume the reader’s familiarity with Didion’s work, the volume should engage both long-time readers of her journalistic non-fiction and those who know her mainly through her memoirs and would like a fuller picture of the author. Most importantly, it does not eclipse Didion’s work—to recall Hoby’s concern—but instead illuminates the main threads and motifs that run through it, encouraging the reader to explore them for themselves.

In addition to the tension between the urge to seek meaning and the reluctance to impose it, the volume explores the following key threads in Didion’s work: the significance of her native California in her writing; politics as a board game; and Didion’s life as literary material. Although the volume follows a chronological order—beginning with Didion’s early works and concluding with her autobiographical writings—these threads are placed in dialogue with one another, helping the reader to grasp the recurring themes and concerns throughout her body of work.

In the first essay of the collection, Katarzyna Nowak-McNeice explores the evolution of California’s settlement myth in Didion’s writing, demonstrating how Didion problematizes what she once took for granted: the ethos of westward expansion, self-reliance, and pioneer virtue that undergird California identity. Nowak-McNeice suggests that while Didion exposes the amnesia at the centre of the myth—especially when it comes to the violence of settlement, the destruction of Native lives, and dependence on government support—her vision never quite becomes inclusive or heterogeneous, attesting to the writer’s own uneasy negotiations with the ambivalence of the myth she had been brought up with.

This ambivalence is further explored by Elżbieta Horodyska in her essay on Didion’s 1970 novel *Play It As It Lays*, set against the backdrop of Hollywood. Horodyska convincingly argues that Didion not only offers a naturalistic portrayal of the “dream factory” as an alienating mirage—where obsessive focus on the visual erodes human connection—but also implicitly interrogates the myth of California and, more broadly, the American Dream, in a world marked by increasing anomie and social atomization. The strength of Didion’s prose, Horodyska argues, lies in her ability to alternate between narrative precision and deliberate silence, compelling the reader to reflect on what remains unsaid.

Jerzy Jarniewicz seems to express a similar sentiment in his essay on *Slouching Towards Bethlem* and *The White Album*, suggesting that there would be no Didion the journalist without Didion the novelist, and vice versa. While the blending of literary techniques with traditional journalistic practices is characteristic of New Journalism—with which Didion is often associated—Jarniewicz highlights how her writing stands out through its combination of faithful factual reporting and a narration that captures the pulse of events without imposing interpretation. When reporting on the turbulent decades of the sixties and seventies, Didion does not erase herself; her honesty lies not only in refusing to force the social disarray she registers into a neat narrative, but also in acknowledging that she is hardly immune to it.

Didion's channels her journalistic experience into *Democracy* (1984)—a postmodern novel blending political commentary and personal drama—which is the focus of Krzysztof Andrzejczak's essay. Playing with the conventions of New Journalism, Didion inserts herself into the novel as an unreliable narrator whose fragmented and shifting perspective mirrors the instability of the reality it depicts. The novel's disjointed structure exposes storytelling as an artifice; a clever construct aimed at bringing chaos into line. Well-aware of the impossibility of this feat, Didion experiments with the language and form to register fake tones and manipulations behind the façade of democratic principles.

The illusive nature of politics is capitalised on in Paryż's essay on *Miami* (1987), a nonfiction book which centres on the Cuban diaspora in the city. The essay situates *Miami* within the tradition of *romance*—the term proposed by Nathaniel Hawthorne to underscore the allegorical and symbolic nature of American fiction. Didion seems to draw on this tradition in portraying Miami as a phantasmagorical city built on myths that need to be factored in when examining both the collective identity and the political ideas of the Cuban diaspora. As tends to happen in Didion's work, a selected fragment of reality—here the diaspora's commitment to the myth of *el exilio*—expressed through their linguistic and behavioural distinctiveness and fuelled by Ronald Reagan's anti-Castro rhetoric—becomes a departure point for a broader reflection on how the American administration uses certain social groups as pawns in its political game.

Reagan returns in *Political Fictions* (2001)—a collection of essays written between 1998 and 2000—examined by Łukasz Muniowski. Didion uses Reagan and other political figures, such as Bill Clinton, to explore the mechanics of electoral process. In doing so, she exposes voters' choice as illusory, suggesting that the political differences between democrats and republicans serve primarily to reinforce the bipartisan structure of American politics. Didion's depiction of the electoral process as a media-orchestrated spectacle—with the candidate as a mouthpiece for a particular narration—allows Muniowski to extend Didion's insights to the political phenomenon of Donald Trump, who has used the mediated nature of the process to his advantage, skilfully playing on the voters' emotions and their vague desire for change.

In *Where I Was From* (2003), Didion returns to the myth that shaped her. Tadeusz Pióro's discussion of this collection usefully complements Nowak McNeice's essay by underscoring Didion's ongoing negotiations with the California settlement myth. Pióro carefully unpacks this myth for the Polish reader, showing

how Didion dismantles the narrative of pioneer self-sufficiency by scrutinizing specific social realities of the Golden State—including the massive penitentiary system, whose 1995 costs far exceeded expenditures on higher education, and the rising poverty rate that contradicts the enduring vision of California as America’s “promised land.”

The next two essays in the volume engage with Didion’s acclaimed autobiographical works: *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), written after the unexpected death of her long-time husband and fellow writer, John Gregory Dunne, and *Blue Nights* (2011) prompted by the untimely passing of their adopted daughter, Quintana Roo. Hanna Serkowska and Marcella Coppoletta place *The Year of Magical Thinking*, within the genre of *grief memoir*, whose zig-zag-like form mirrors the unpredictability of grief itself. Not only is the memoir an intimate insight into Didion’s grief over the death of her husband, but it is also a testament to what the scholars refer to as *the work of mourning*. For Didion, this work is intimately intertwined with her identity as a writer: to navigate through her loss, Didion applies her journalistic objectivity to profoundly personal material, positioning herself as an I-witness to the tragedy that has befallen her.

If Serkowska and Coppoletta foreground the act of writing as Didion’s way of making sense of her grief over Dunne, Katarzyna Macedulska’s nuanced analysis of *Blue Nights* (2011) reads it as Didion’s way of preserving the memory of her daughter but also as a candid examination of their relationship. Faced with unbearable loss, Didion engages in an almost obsessive scrutiny of past events, looking for harbingers of the tragedy to come in Quintana’s childhood and her own behaviour as a mother. As Macedulska highlights, Didion turns writing into a form of atonement for her parental mistakes. However, writing about Quintana is also a form of survival, as remembering her daughter is the only way for Didion to make sense of herself when part of her is irretrievably lost.

In the concluding essay of the collection, Sebastian Słowiński revisits Paryż’s observations on the tensions underlying Didion’s writing. Drawing on her last published work, the essay collection *Let Me Tell You What I Mean* (2021), Słowiński reflects on Didion’s style—her Hemingway and Orwell-inspired *grammar*—where the precise wording and syntax convey meaning without imposing it on the reader. The power of Didion’s writing lies in her engagement with the realities she observes and her commitment to portraying them with accuracy. This, in turn, allows her to transcend artificial objectivity to register instead the pulse of events and the tensions behind *facts*. Rather than indulge in easy categorization and ready diagnosis, Didion’s writing searches for truth in the margins of familiar images, inviting the reader to do the same.

There is no doubt that, through its insightful and multifaceted examination of Didion’s work, the reviewed collection leaves us better equipped for this very task.

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Martyna Bryla  
University of Málaga

**Katarzyna Jaworska-Biskup and Beata Zawadka, editors. *Performative Identities in Culture: From Literature to Social Media*. Brill, 2024, 240 pages.**

*Performative Identities in Culture* (2024), edited by Katarzyna Jaworska-Biskup and Beata Zawadka, provides a collection of thirteen (including Introduction) academic texts, in which the authors share their insights into the fascinating field of Performance Studies by applying theories on performativity and performance to literature, film, cultural events, and social media. The contributions to the monograph are grouped into four Parts: 1. Spatial-Temporal Performance of Identity, 2. Performative Female Identity, 3. Performing Racial and National Identity, and 4. Othering as (Post)Performance. These sections—each comprising three chapters—are preceded by Notes on Contributors and Introduction.

In her Introduction, subtitled "Performativity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Profligacy and Promise," Beata Zawadka does an excellent job of presenting the state of Performative Studies (PS) as well as the concepts of performance and performativity which, she notes, "appears as a particularly effective way of understanding the world" (3). Zawadka's introduction is laid out so well that even a novice to PS can immediately grasp the ideas and theories which are explored in the subsequent chapters. The Introduction also features a helpful and quite detailed overview of what particular chapters of *Performative Identities in Culture* explore. Given the above, I shall restrict myself to a brief list of topics and themes that can be found in each chapter.

In Part 1, Tomasz Basiuk, in his "Spatial and Temporal Theories of Performatives and Performativity," discusses—as the title indicates—temporal and spatial aspects of performativity in his analysis of writings by Segdwick, Austin, Derrida, Arendt, Lyotard, and Rancière. Basiuk also explores and explains a very intriguing concept of periperformativity. Irina Kudriavtseva's "Representation of Migration Experience in *The Dollmaker* by Harriette Arnow" focuses on "the role of performance in the process of identity formation" (38) as exemplified by Arnow's protagonist's, a southerner Gertie Navel's, adaptation to new life in Detroit. "Performative Identity in Selected English-Language Works about Wales and the Welsh" by Katarzyna Jaworska-Biskup presents a person's identity, which manifests itself "at various levels [:] ... regional, local, national, and personal" as a spatially and temporarily "dynamic concept" (56).

Part 2 features three chapters on the performance of the feminine. Susana María Jiménez-Placer's "Domestic Performance in the Jim Crow South" analyzes the implications of the performative nature of white Southern ladies and African-American mammies (and Jezebels) whose stage is "the white home" (78). "The Purest Patriotism Nerved Him to His Ceaseless Labors': Rebels Performing

Patriotism in Augusta Jane Evans's *Macaria; or, Altars of Sacrifice* (1864)" by Peter Templeton presents Evans's novel as a propaganda in which gendered, regional identities of the characters engage in the "performance of patriotism" (100). Maria Juko, in "Performing the British Gentlewoman in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* and Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop*," uses Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* guidebook for gentlemen, as starting point to her discussion of the performance of gendered, and sometimes hidden, female identities in Victorian England of Wood's and Levy's novels, which Juko reads as "attempt[s] to rebuke myths of the ideal feminine" (121).

Part 3 focuses on the race and ethnicity as a performance. While the so-far mentioned chapters treat performance mostly in terms of theatrical "act," Ewa Klęczaj-Siara, in her "Material Objects as Scripts for Performance in Jacqueline Woodson's Children's Picturebooks," focuses on agency and analyzes performance (in this case of childhood) more as an "action." In Ewa Klęczaj-Siara's view agency of the Black Child—when promoted—can render them "an agent of positive social change" (141). "#NoDAPL as a Performance of Indigenous Identity and Sovereignty of the Standing Rock Sioux" by Elżbieta Wilczyńska is a brilliantly composed analysis of the somewhat theatrical performance and its actors that, in Wilczyńska's reading of the event, #NoDAPL was. The impact of the performance on the "[r]estored [b]ehavior" (153) and culture of the Native American protestors, as presented by Wilczyńska, is especially illuminating and inspiring. Urszula Gołębiowska's "It's a Complex Fate Being an American': Performing Americanness in Henry James's Late Writings" probes beneath the surface of stereotypes and clichés portrayed by James to explore the challenges that the performativity of Jamesian American characters in Europe poses to the concept of cosmopolitanism.

The final Part 4 is the most diverse of the four parts when it comes to its subject matter. "(Self)Performativity as an Act of Resistance to Social/Symbolic Death in David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives*" by Krystian Marcin Grądz is a study of Wojnarowicz's memoir as a "performative resistance" to the "death of subjectivity" (190) in the context of hegemony and homogeneity. Beata Zawadka's "The South [Is] in *The Shape of Water* (Guillermo Del Toro, 2017)" explores the performance of the South in Del Toro's film. In the chapter, Zawadka skillfully juxtaposes the "performative orientation of modernism" (208) and the "southern 'Tragic Other' identity" (223). Christopher McMahon, in his "In Football Terms: The Performativity and Performance of Football Twitter," analyzes how football fans shape their identities through performative actions in the social media, and he frames those performances within the "ideology of neoliberalism" (227).

*Performative Identities in Culture* is a fascinating read, which I found highly useful as it opened to me new perspectives through which I might conduct my own research. As I read the book and pondered the role and manifestations of performativity in culture, I must say I shared Zawadka's (and other contributors') conviction that performativity can be "a particularly effective way of understanding the world" (3). The only criticism I have concerns the absence of an index. Given the wealth of theoretical approaches to performativity, source texts, authors, and applications of performance theories, which make *Performative Identities in Culture* an excellent material for those who want to delve into performativity and to have

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ready-made materials for students, the choice of not including an index of names and terms seems to be an odd decision.

Tomasz Jacheć  
University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn