Department of American Studies: Literature and Media at the Faculty of English,
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland

Re-Examining American Literature (REAL) Student Symposium

CALL FOR PAPERS

"I sing the body electric...:"
The Body in American Literature and Culture

Online Symposium, MS Teams

Saturday, March 13, 2027

The Faculty of English
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland

What is the theme of the conference?
Before Walt Whitman famously proclaimed, "I sing the body electric," early American literature frequently presented the body as a source of temptation, suffering, or shame. In Anne Bradstreet's "The Flesh and the Spirit," for example, the two personified sisters argue over earthly pleasure and spiritual salvation. Whitman's poetry offers a different vision. He celebrates the body as inseparable from human identity. In "I Sing the Body Electric," Whitman asks: "And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?"

Taking Whitman's declaration as our point of departure, the symposium explores the many meanings attached to the body in American literature, film, theater, comics, visual art, and popular culture. How are bodies represented, described, disciplined, celebrated, transformed, or erased? What cultural assumptions determine which bodies are considered beautiful, respectable, healthy, productive, dangerous, vulnerable, or worthy of protection? How do individual identity, social norms, and political power shape the body?

The history of the United States has made the body a complex cultural and political category. Black, Indigenous, Brown, immigrant, and other racialized bodies have been subjected to enslavement, displacement, segregation, exploitation, surveillance, and violence. At the same time, literary and cultural works have reclaimed embodied experience as a source of memory, resistance, creativity, solidarity, and communal identity.

The body is also central to feminist thought and activism. American literature and culture have repeatedly examined the regulation of bodies, reproductive rights and reproductive justice, motherhood, pregnancy, sexuality, beauty standards, bodily autonomy, and gender-based violence. The body, shaped by legal, medical, religious, economic, and political forces, remains a central topic of contemporary debates.

Finally, American literature and visual culture address the body in a state of disability, illness, and pain. We thus also wish to reflect on the meanings of bodily suffering and recuperation across literary texts, cinema, and the visual arts. Topics of discussion may include disability, chronic illness, physical and psychological pain, aging, and dependency. We seek to explore how artistic representations of vulnerable bodies challenge dominant notions of health, while literature and visual culture might be considered as a space where alternative forms of community that embrace bodily difference and belonging might be imagined.

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We invite B.A., M.A. students and doctoral candidates, to submit conference papers (approx. 20-minute presentations) on American literature, theater, film and art, concerning (but not restricted to) the following issues:

- the body and the soul in Puritan and early American literature;
- Whitman, embodiment, sensuality, and democracy;
- Black bodies and the legacies of slavery, segregation, and racial violence;
- Indigenous bodies, land, colonialism, and survivance;
- Brown, immigrant, and racialized bodies;
- theories of embodiment;
- reproductive rights and reproductive justice;
- bodily autonomy, consent, and the politics of bodily regulation;
- queer, transgender, and nonbinary bodies;
- disability, illness, pain, and vulnerability.

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Who is our keynote speaker?

Our keynote speaker will be **Professor Kirsten Fischer** (The University of Minnesota, USA).

Kirsten Fischer is an award-winning professor and historian whose research focuses on race, religion, inequality, and intellectual culture. She is the author of *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Cornell University Press, 2002) and *American Freethinker: Elihu Palmer and the Struggle for Religious Freedom in the New Nation* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021). Her current project is a hybrid family history and memoir about her father's family in twentieth-century Germany.

Professor Fischer has received the Horace T. Morse–University of Minnesota Alumni Association Award for Outstanding Contributions to Undergraduate Education and the Arthur "Red" Motley Exemplary Teaching Award. She has held visiting appointments at Heidelberg University, Sorbonne University, and the University of Graz. In autumn 2026, she is a visiting scholar at the University of Helsinki, and in spring 2027 she will be a Fulbright Fellow at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

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Suggested theoretical books, articles, websites:

Baldanzi, Jessica. *Bodies and Boundaries in Graphic Fiction: Reading Female and Nonbinary Characters*. Routledge, 2023.

Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. With a new foreword by Leslie Heywood. University of California Press, 2003.

DeTora, Lisa, and Jodi Cressman, eds. *Graphic Embodiments: Perspectives on Health and Embodiment in Graphic Narratives*. Leuven University Press, 2021.

Foster, Travis M., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to American Literature and the Body*. Cambridge University Press, 2022.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia University Press, 1996.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie, Michael Mark Chemers, and Analola Santana, eds. *Freak Inheritance: Eugenics and Extraordinary Bodies in Performance*. Oxford University Press, 2024.
Ross, Loretta J., and Rickie Solinger. *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*. University of California Press, 2017.
Strings, Sabrina. *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*. New York University Press, 2019.
Szép, Eszter. *Comics and the Body: Drawing, Reading and Vulnerability*. Ohio University Press, 2020.
Yancy, George. *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008.

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What should you send to us and when?
Please send an abstract of 200-300 words and the title of your talk, stating also your name, email address, and institutional affiliation by **January 15, 2027** to the conference secretaries: Piotr Matczak (piomat3@amu.edu.pl) and Hanna Stelmaszczyk (hanna.stelmaszczyk@amu.edu.pl).

All submissions must also include a 100-word biographical statement (a short paragraph in which you state your affiliation, research interests, and other academic achievements).

Please make sure your abstract and your bio note are in the same Word file. Please name your file in the following manner: LAST NAME_FIRST NAME_Abstract REAL 2027 (e.g. SMITH_JANE_Abstract REAL 2027).

The submissions will be evaluated by the organizing committee, and you will receive our decision by January 31, 2027.

All queries should also be sent to the conference secretaries: Piotr Matczak (piomat3@amu.edu.pl) and Hanna Stelmaszczyk (hanna.stelmaszczyk@amu.edu.pl).

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There is no conference fee. The Symposium will take place online on MS Teams.

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REAL Organizing Committee:
dr Katarzyna Macedulska (Head) (kkasia@amu.edu.pl)
dr Małgorzata Olsza (malgorzata.olsza@amu.edu.pl)
dr hab. Paulina Ambroży, prof. UAM (apaulina@amu.edu.pl)
mgr Piotr Matczak (Conference Secretary) (piomat3@amu.edu.pl)
mgr Hanna Stelmaszczyk (Conference Secretary) (hanna.stelmaszczyk@amu.edu.pl)

Conference webpage: LINK