Introduction

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Abstract In this introduction, I will approach the special issue's theme of positionality as informing critical reading approaches of North American literatures by and about minority subjects in a personal tone to match the required positionality statements in the essays. As an example, I will outline my own motivation for thematizing positionality after observing lived connections between my travels to Canada and the U.S. as well as becoming aware of how my family's intergenerational experiences against the backdrop of transatlantic relations critically position myself. I will argue that reflections of one's own positionality matter for researchers, while drawing from decolonial scholarship's warnings against knowledge appropriation, extractivism, and a contemporary criticism of identity politics in an age of social protest. Instead, a responsibility towards the minority literatures that are being researched is posited in the essays included in this special issue from which self-reflexive statements are quoted in their original form. This special issue hopes to promote inclusive dialogues, beginning with self-positionings of global contributors within the field of North American Studies.

Keywords Experience; Positionality; Remembrance; Self-Reflexivity; Transculturality.

DOI: 10.25364/27.5:2025.1.1

Positionality—it is a term that appears as apparent as it is crucial, at least as the following special issue of *AmLit* hopes to demonstrate. In fact, as a German woman, descendant of Europeans who either immigrated, fled, or were expelled from their countries of birth, and doctoral researcher with a Master's degree in North American cultural and literary studies, I only first discovered during my travels to conferences in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Dallas, Texas how positionality is widely understood and made use of in North American academic settings where talks often begin with a brief self-positioning with respect to one's research topic and method. Particularly, land acknowledgements ahead of presentations that I heard in Canada provided ample opportunities for researchers to situate themselves vis-à-vis the settler colonial history of their country without diminishing their ethical responsibilities. On the one hand, such a moment of self-reflexivity seemed to hold potential that had been trained in the German *Erinnerungskultur* (*culture of remembrance*) which had spread in Germany following its liberation from the Third Reich by the Allied Powers. At the same time, there is a disturbing trend in Germany as in North America to delegate memories and knowledges of genocides to the realm of distant history despite warnings against repeating the latter. While strongly dismissing perceptions of positionality statements as a burden, on the other hand, questions such as, "What does your topic mean to you as a person and as a researcher?" or even "Where did your interest come from and what do you hope to achieve?" could also take scholars from the mainstream of their respective societies by surprise. After all, they might already harbor intensely sympathetic feelings if not fascination for the marginalized communities whose literatures they are passionately studying within their own academic safe spaces.[1]

Against this backdrop, two possible ways emerge to contextualize the increase in scholarship on literatures by and about Black, Indigenous, and other people of color and/or with experiences of migration or from religious minorities, women, 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, and people with disabilities simultaneously to the rise of social justice movements on behalf of these communities, such as, for example, Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, and MeToo. On the one hand, much-debated policies with the goal of diversity, equity, and inclusion have enabled greater numbers of researchers from marginalized communities to enter academia. Significantly, these policies have been criticized for superficially prioritizing issues of representation over a genuine transformation of academia away from its complicity with exclusionary formations of power. To this end, researchers from marginalized communities within academia, but also their allies, have contributed unique insights by reflecting on both their scholarly and personal positionalities. For example, Hartmut Lutz, Florentine Strzelczyk, and Renae Watchman begin

their volume *Indianthusiasm: Indigenous Responses* (2020) "[b]y locating ourselves within kinship, our family relationships, our backgrounds" in order to "reveal our intent as researchers, our relationship to the project, and our responsibility as researchers who seek to work with Indigenous researchers" (7). Without such self-reflexivity, researchers from outside the communities of the authors they study face ethical challenges regarding the theories they apply. In addition, the outcomes of research may not reflect the intentions of the researchers due to their limited approaches, as Eve Tuck (Unangax) and K. Wayne Yang state that "the academy as an apparatus of settler colonial knowledge already domesticates, denies, and dominates other forms of knowledge" (235). The latter issue should especially concern literary scholars from Europe, who belong to the mainstream of their societies but whose work participates in global discourses on inequalities resulting from Eurocentric histories of colonialism. Yet, writing about their institutional contexts in Canada, Watchman, Carrie Smith, and Markus Stock advocate that, for example, "Indigenous and German Studies can be bridged (and relations built) by reflecting critically on their mutual influences and definitions of each other" (318).

Building such connections could appeal to scholars worldwide whose engagement with minority cultures invites comparisons to their own contexts while being grounded in identity politics. Here, the second possibility to contextualize the increase of scholarship on minority literatures emerges to point towards desires of learning from previous civil rights discourses and building coalitions for the future. For example, in his criticism of contemporary identity politics, Asad Haider writes from the perspective of a Pakistani American about how the autobiography of the founder of the Black Panther Party, Huey P. Newton, actually "set for me a model of the life of the mind that was far more convincing than the bohemian hedonism of Henry Miller or the self-serving social climbing expected of members of a 'model minority'" ("Introduction"). With an interest in such transcultural approaches, this journal issue aims to center concepts of universality and particularity insofar as they are reflected by minority literatures and as they can inform critical readings. Although the call for papers for this special issue allowed for a broad understanding of "literature" to include figurative narratives with aesthetics referencing their genres and modes of production, the contributions focus on written literatures ranging from autobiographical to novelistic genres. My original goal was to supplement decolonial concerns from North America by allowing contributors to trace overlaps between their local contexts. Accordingly, the contributors were encouraged to use the first person rather than only refer to themselves in the depersonalized third person in order to give space to their own personal as well as scholarly reflections.

Firstly, Dr. Debarchana Baruah from the University of Tübingen titled her powerful essay "Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's *The Undocumented Americans*: Between a Memoir and a Manifesto" to highlight the intersection between literature and activism that cannot be glossed over. Baruah grounds her scholarly interest in Villavicencio's work in her own position as "a migrant myself from the global south" (32) who has

> observed the struggles of outsiders like me to establish ourselves in the First World academia—our dependence on intellectual distinction to get out of the Third World, the expectation of gratitude when allowed entry into the First World, seeking validation from Eurocentric institutions of power and cultural capital, knowing full well many of these draw their accumulated wealth from colonial legacies. (32)

Baruah postulates a vision of collective empowerment rather than individual success echoing

> Villavicencio's bold voice, which claims her undocumented identity and autonomy despite being critically vulnerable, [that] instills courage and faith in the larger (more privileged) migrant community to which I belong. It forces me to imagine a future where we do not wait any longer for a seat at the table, where we have declared a table of our own. (32-3)

Secondly, Dr. Svitlana Kot from Saarland University, formerly from Petro Mohyla Black Sea National University in Mykolaiv, Ukraine, kindly contributed her moving essay "We/They Are Displaced: Children-Refugees in American Literature and Beyond" upon my invitation. After being lucky to know Kot as a dear colleague for years, I contacted her because I could not comprehend how she could possibly cope with the circumstance that her life story came to uncannily mirror her timely research. As she admits, "[w]hile various parts of the world have been suffering from continued armed conflicts, for many, including myself as a Ukrainian and a researcher, wars in Europe seemed to be a barbaric vestige of the past" (37). Yet, Kot's outstanding strength and infectious solidarity shine through, as she draws knowledge from her positionality:

> Despite my status as a displaced individual and a refugee, I am personally privileged to be able to continue working in academia. This privilege not only allows me to research refugee narratives, a primary focus of my scholarly pursuit but also enables me to relate to the experiences of

> those who have been compelled to flee their countries due to conflicts and warfare. (39)

Indeed, the blend of her scholarly and personal voices appears haunting, as she details the circumstances under which she found herself writing her essay and as an editor, as well as a colleague, and, most basically, as a human being, I am in absolute awe of Kot's personal courage and scholarly self-reflection exemplified by the following lines:

> Little did I know when I first read the book for my initial research on refugee children that I would be finishing an article on refugee children for submission in a bomb shelter just a week before embarking on a journey with my own children across five international borders to escape the war. What I must admit is that my perspective has evolved significantly due to the transformation of my life experiences. While my own journey as a refugee may not be as harrowing as some, I resonate emotionally with certain aspects that are emblematic of the narratives shared by displaced individuals. This resonance provides me with a deeper sensitivity and a broader perspective from which to engage in researching refugee narratives and representations in culture. (39)

Thirdly, Dr. des. Steph Berens from the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich submitted the highly contemporary essay, "Bursting the 'Transsexual Narrative': Genre, Form, and Belonging in Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars*." In an age where trans experiences have become mediatized in popular culture to the point of sensationalism, Berens' essay bravely performs vulnerability to bring sensitive issues of gender and sexuality home to readers, so to say. In this sense, Berens challenges any notion of a singular trans experience with the personal recollection that,

> [f]or me, one of these early affirming experiences was when my "Intro to Trans Studies" professor, who was incidentally responsible for my nonbinary awakening, asserted that "if somebody who looks like me is trans," meaning somebody who could easily pass as cis if they wanted to, "then anybody can be trans." After confessing to that professor that I thought I might be nonbinary and them chuckling congratulatorily while offering me their "they" pronoun pin (which I, sadly, vehemently declined at that point because openly wearing my gender still peaked my anxiety), I used the tools I had learned in their class and began a deep dive into fiction that might be able to tell me more about this "transgender thing" and gender messiness in general. A master's

> thesis on trans road narratives and an ongoing dissertation project on contemporary North American trans fiction later, I still often question if I am "really, truly" trans, despite the theory and the fiction and other trans people meeting those doubts with an emphatic "fuck yeah, you are." How is this question so persistent and so pervasive within trans communities? (62-3)

While it is impossible to put into words how moved I was to read the deeply personal account of self-questioning that Berens generously shares, I am also empathetic to the approach to the subject of positionality of Lieutenant Colonel Dr. Jeff Gibbons from the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. In his essay, "Queer and Refugee Positionalities in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*," he reflects on the author's performance of fictionality to address even readers beyond his community. As the last but certainly not least essay in this special issue, Gibbons concludes with regard to the novel's Vietnamese American protagonist Little Dog that,

> In a world currently (and seemingly, indelibly) overwhelmed with war, violence, death, displacement, and suffering, it undoubtedly is quite challenging to attempt to view the plight of thousands of war victims in any type of positive light. Still, Little Dog's conclusion challenges us, again even in the face of immense global conflict, to do so—as he asserted, he and his family "were born from beauty. Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence." (101)

This closing reminder—that Gibbons as a member of the U.S. military derives from his study of a literary text—is as crucial as it is poetic in the current galvanized political climate that fuels the dehumanization of thus perceived "others" who struggle to survive in the face of military invasions and terrorism. Like the previous statements from authors that I have cited, any summary of mine would fail to do justice to their voices which is why I decided to reproduce the selected lines above in their original form.

Indeed, my own understanding of the complexities of postwar positionalities was broadened during the editorial process by my visits to my multiracial military family in El Paso, Texas. To my ancestors, the U.S. had already represented a mythic destination for Transylvanian immigrants at the turn of the last century or the liberator of Germans from the horrors of the Third Reich. In my own lifetime, childhood visits to my relatives' home while they were still stationed in Bavaria, Germany, must have inspired me to later theorize my observations of lived transatlantic and transcultural unity and work towards promoting further dialogues.

Of course, my stay in El Paso was invaluably enriched by the conversations I was privileged to have with Dr. Marion Rohrleitner at the University of Texas at El Paso.[2] My belief in the urgent need to spread, preserve, and mobilize around awareness of genocides as recounted by survivors in life narratives is further strengthened when I consider the waves of extremist ideologies that are currently sweeping across Western democracies. At the same time, the life stories of members of recent waves of unprecedented numbers of refugees should remind comparatively comfortable citizens of the First World to value the European and North American postwar consensus on universal human rights and international peacekeeping alliances. In this sense, I must acknowledge that the mostly unpublished personal narratives that I heard from Syrian, Iraqi, and Ukrainian refugees when I volunteered in a refugee shelter at the height of the German *Willkommenskultur* (*welcoming culture*) have impacted my outlook—my positionality—on some of the essays of this special issue in these regards.

Even if, unfortunately, not every proposed contribution could be included in this special issue, the final compilation is united by the timely and engaging sound of personal but nonetheless theoretical voices that I have sought to echo in this introduction, instead of delivering, for example, an abstract overview of sociological standpoint theories to be made fruitful for literary and cultural studies. To conclude, it is my hope that this special issue, with its experimental objective to showcase contemporary cutting-edge literary and cultural studies research that is informed by diverse and complex positionalities at its core, will inspire innovative visions of "doing" North American Studies comparatively in the future—wherever or however one may be positioned. May reading this special issue give as much joy to readers as guest-editing it has given me![3]

Notes

[1] Indeed, this special issue about the relation between positionality and critical reading approaches would not exist if I had not been one of four Ph.D. students from the Emerging Scholars' Forum of the Association for Canadian Studies in German-Speaking Countries who were challenged to consider our positionalities by our keynote speaker Dr. Renae Watchman (Navajo) from McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, when we co-organized a virtual workshop to discuss with our peers and invited experts how to approach Indigenous literatures and cultures from Turtle Island in our diverse research projects. Our conversations with Dr. Watchman led us to conclude that we are in fact not "doing" the discipline of Indigenous Studies as outsiders from Europe, but, nevertheless, we were pursuing a form of understanding. Furthermore, our second keynote speaker, Prof. Dr. em. Hartmut Lutz from the University of Greifswald, alerted us to the problem of "'German Indianthusiasm'" (12) that he had identified and spent decades studying. Beyond academia, "German Indianthusiasm" might lead to appropriations of Indigenous cultures by

Notes

Germans in the shape of, for example, the Winnetou series of novels by the author Karl May from the 19th century, the Yakari franchise for children from the 20th century, carnival costumes, or theme parks that continue to perpetuate disempowering stereotypes. Within North American academia, however, "Indianthusiasm" knowledge extraction and the legitimization of culturally genocidal policies under the guise of assimilationist welfare, as embodied by the legacy of forced residential schooling.

[2] When she kindly invited me during Black Heritage Month in 2024 to give a guest lecture on Afro-Québécois narratives (re-)imagining the legacy of the black slave Marie-Joseph Angélique, who had been hanged for allegedly incinerating Old Montréal in 1734, the concept of local cultures of remembrance came up during the discussion and I was honored to be able to contribute my understanding as a German.

[3] Nevertheless, with my best intentions for this special issue, I must admit that it would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of the *AmLit* general editors' board, the Graz editorial team, and the reviewers whom I often contacted last minute, as they generously provided their vast expertise on such diverse subjects as discussed in the following essays. In alphabetical order, I would therefore like to thank Dr. Adina Balint from the University of Winnipeg, Dr. Hannah Champion from Bordeaux Montaigne University, Dr. Saskia Furst from the University of The Bahamas, Dr. Verena Laschinger from the University of Erfurt, Dr. Miguel Oliveira from the University of Lisbon, Inés Paris from the Complutense University of Madrid, and Dr. Mareike Spychala from the University of Bamberg.

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Biography

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