

## Introduction

This volume is the proceedings of the *10th Annual Conference of the Croatian Association for American Studies: Breaking Stereotypes in American Popular Culture*, which was hosted by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek, on September 9–10, 2022. The conference, which brought together twenty-two early-career and senior scholars from across Europe, was co-organized by the Croatian Association for American Studies and two research centers affiliated with the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Osijek—Centre for Popular Culture and Center for North American Studies. The keynote lecture, *Challenging “Karen” Stereotypes*, was delivered by Kamilla Elliott, Professor of Literature and Media at Lancaster University. A rich variety of the contributions, in addition to the interdisciplinary scope and the relevance and appeal of the conference theme, provided an excellent forum for a productive exchange of ideas on the construction and persistence of stereotypes and stereotypical representations in the context of both global popular culture and the American cultural space. The eight chapters contained in this volume aim to continue this conversation by exploring how the dynamics of making and breaking of stereotypes has been addressed in American cultural industries while illuminating a range of stereotypical tropes and processes of their production and dissemination as well as their wider (cross)cultural resonances, both historical and contemporary. Focusing on diverse cultural and semiotic practices and mediascapes—from fiction, drama, film, and music to social-media blog, podcast, and memoir—and approaching the subject matter from various theoretical and disciplinary angles, this volume explores not only the patterns inherent to the mobilization, cultural apprehension, and reinforcement of ste-

reotypes but also mechanisms through which stereotypical attitudes, expectations, and representations can be circumvented, contested, and upended.

In Chapter 1, “How to Nurture (Little) Men and (Little) Women: New Directions in Louisa May Alcott’s Educational Novels,” Jelena Šesnić discusses Louisa May Alcott’s March family trilogy—*Little Women*, (1868–1869), *Little Men* (1871), and *Jo’s Boys* (1886). Šesnić argues that the three novels not only disrupt stereotypes contained in antebellum educational concepts and practices by proposing an alternative reform-based pedagogical vision invested with the Transcendentalist principles but that they also became vitally engaged in a transitional moment in the evolution of American modern public schooling. She maintains that even though they primarily adhere to the Transcendentalist ideas, Alcott’s educational novels juxtapose, and to a degree also bridge the gap between, the spiritually informed sentimentalist Transcendentalist approach to education on one hand and the empiricist, scientifically structured, and disciplinarian educational model, which was being revived by the emerging concept of Social Darwinism, on the other, and that, as such, they provided an alternate heterogeneous platform for the nineteenth-century American public education debate and continue to serve as its valuable archive.

In Chapter 2, “Challenging Gender Stereotypes in Holly Black’s *The Folk of the Air* Trilogy,” Valentina Markasović fills the gap in academic research on Black’s young adult fantasy series by analyzing its main couple, June and Cardan, in relation to traditional romance protagonists. By applying Regis’s definitions of the romance hero and heroine to the series’ three installments—*The Cruel Prince* (2018), *The Wicked King* (2019), and *The Queen of Nothing* (2019)—Markasović argues that Black’s protagonists complicate gender stereotypes. Specifically, Jude is portrayed as steadfast and assertive in both her political fight against the oppressive fairies and her private relationship with Cardan. By refusing to give up her agency in favor of the hero, she thus breaks the traditional gender stereotype of a submissive romance heroine. In occasionally displaying what

are typically seen as male characteristics, such as dominance over Cardan and aggression while fighting political oppression, Jude resembles female protagonists of fantasy and young adult literature. However, Jude's characterization eschews even those archetypes since she also emphasizes her femininity by wearing dresses and painting her face. When it comes to Cardan, Markasović maintains that Black's male protagonist straddles Regis's prototypes of a "dangerous hero" and "sentimental hero" in need of healing but that he fits neither of them fully because of his non-stereotypical male appearance and tendency to wear eye make-up as well as the fact that he overcomes his psychological issues mainly by himself. Finally, the author analyzes Jude's and Cardan's connection to nature and magic and concludes that Black's hero and heroine also subvert the stereotype about the connection between women and nature by showing Cardan as a (pro)creator, which is a role usually reserved for women.

Chapter 3, "Reconceptualizing the Ill Body: Laurie Brooks's Jack McCall as the Hero of the Romantic Mode," by Lucija Periš discusses the portrayal of illness in Laurie Brooks's play *The Secret of Courage* (2019). Periš points to Brooks's awareness of negative societal perceptions of illness and her efforts to help demystify and destigmatize health concerns by embroiling her fourteen-year-old protagonist, Jack McCall, in an engaging array of challenges in his out of the ordinary battle against leukemia. The author applies Northrop Frye's theory of myths, outlined in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, to show that Brooks's play reflects the six phases of the mythos of summer. According to Periš, by blending reality with fantasy and employing the heroic quest pattern to conjure the protagonist's courageous and triumphant battle with the disease, Brooks's play portrays Jack McCall as the hero of the romantic mode instead of stereotyping him as an ostracized and undesirable villain or victim. The author concludes that *The Secret of Courage* thus challenges negative and harmful stereotypical imagery of illness, demonstrating that literary works can break entrenched biases and contribute to making a positive shift in the public perception of "medical conditions that are still considered taboo."

Chapter 4, “*Encanto*: Everyday Hero(in)es and the Power of (Colombian) Community,” by Jelena Pataki Šumiga explores the subversion of several stereotypes in Disney’s animated film *Encanto* (2021), which focuses on a magical Colombian community. Considering the lack of academic papers on *Encanto*, this chapter is a welcome discussion on one of Disney’s most recent titles. It argues that the film breaks the stereotypes linked to Hollywood’s portrayal of Latinos and Latin Americans, Disney’s traditional portrayal of race and gender, and the larger-than-life superhero/ine trope. Drawing on Charles Ramírez Berg’s *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance* (2002), the author maintains that *Encanto* dismantles the ubiquitous stereotypical depiction of Colombians and other Latin Americans as brutes and criminals by offering an authentic portrayal of and celebrating the Colombian culture. The latest Disney animated release, she claims, also challenges previous Disney films’ endorsement of heteronormativity and their stereotypical representation of race as it not only refrains from the blond, blue-eyed, tall, slim, and romantically committed princess ideal but also refuses to oversexualize non-White female characters and portray non-White characters as inferior. Finally, Pataki Šumiga contends that *Encanto*’s heroine, Mirabel—the only family member without a magical gift, whose strength is found in her self-acceptance and acceptance of her community—subverts the superhero/ine stereotype, typically portrayed as a figure larger than life.

In Chapter 5, titled “The Woman in the Bath tub: Elderly Women and Sexuality as a Horror Trope,” Filip Medar explores non-stereotypical portrayals of older women in American horror films, more precisely, in the slasher genre. By employing Kristeva’s concept of the abject, the author first argues that horror films typically present naked bodies of older women as belonging to “monstrous crones” or “hags” who frighten, torture, or kill, as opposed to the sexually appealing “final girls.” He then describes the specific characteristics and the functioning of the “crone” trope—its monstrosity and the concomitant stereotyped portrayal of the old and naked female body—based on the examples of the apparition

from *The Shining* (1980) and *Doctor Sleep* (2019), the diabolic protagonist of *The Witch: A New-England Folktale* (2015), and the shape-shifting monster in *It Chapter Two* (2019), embodied by the old Mrs. Kersh. The second part of the analysis explores the portrayal of the old female body in Ti West's slasher film *X* (2022). Medar argues that, unlike the other four films, in *X*, West employs the naked old woman motif not only as a device to convey and amplify the horror effect but also as a salient narrative formula underlying the film's subversive undertones that, combined with filming techniques such as exposition, diegetic music, and the "mirroring of the killer and the survivor," ultimately disrupts the viewers' preconceived expectations by inviting empathy for the villain. Medar concludes that, in that way, *X* undermines both the anticipated manifestation of the abject as well as the clichés of the slasher genre.

Chapter 6, "The Emergence of the 'Final Girl' in Stephen King's *The Shining*," by Iva Romić discusses the role of female characters in Gothic fiction. It traces the evolution of female stock characters in Gothic fiction—from the "damsel in distress" stereotype, who, due to her weak, submissive, and passive nature is in constant need of rescuing by the male hero, to the modern version, the "final girl," an empowered female character who is no longer depicted as a victim waiting to be rescued but survives against all odds and is able to "defeat the monster" by herself. Romić argues that the emergence of the "final girl" character is reflective of the socio-historical changes in gender dynamics as well as the appeal of the Gothic genre to the female target audience. She explicates the stereotypical traits of the "final girl" on the example of Wendy Torrance from Stephen King's 1977 horror novel *The Shining*, observing that, in order to save her child and herself, Wendy abandons the "angel in the house" role of a wife subservient to an abusive husband and, forced into an overwhelming fight for survival, transforms into a strong, courageous, and resourceful woman able to evade her husband's attacks and the demonic entities manifested by the hotel. The author sums up that although initially Wendy is more a victim than a force to be reckoned with, her ability to

persist and survive despite all probability align her with the “final girl” trope.

In Chapter 7, “Breaking Blackface: African Americans, Stereotypes, and Country Music,” David Livingstone discusses country music and its principal instrument, the banjo, both of which have their roots in African-American culture but were appropriated by and incorporated into the dominant American culture and were eventually alienated from African Americans through blackface and minstrel tradition. Even though African American presence in nineteenth-century country music tradition was obscure and frequently bolstered blackface minstrelsy racist overtones and harmful clichés, as in the case of composer James Bland, Livingstone argues that for all the exploitation and stereotyping it suffered in the past, African-American country has survived and has continued to thrive in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Apart from “ghost writers,” such as Lesley Riddle and an unknown African-American woman, originator of “Dink’s Song (Fare Thee Well),” whose music was capitalized on and whitewashed by White artists, Livingstone pinpoints a number of twentieth-century African-American musicians, such as William Ledbetter (Lead Belly), Mississippi John Hurt, Elizabeth Cotton, DeFord Bailey, and Charley Pride, who made a name for themselves in the folk music industry. He argues, however, that it is alternative (alt-)country, a genre that has gained increasing attention and popularity in the last thirty years, that has truly brought African American country singers and songwriters to the mainstream. Focusing on the old-time string band Carolina Chocolate Drops, in particular its acclaimed song “Cornbread and Butterbeans” (2010) and solo and collaborative projects of the band’s (former) members—Rhiannon Giddens’s “Julie” (2017), Our Native Daughters’s “Polly Ann’s Hammer” (2019), and Dom Flemons’s version of the folk standard “Home on the Range” (2018)—as well as Amythyst Kiah’s “Black Myself” (2021), David Livingstone’s discussion reveals the significance of alt-country in reclaiming banjo music and shedding its tainted racist baggage. Livingstone concludes that the contemporary revival of Black folk

music has re-envisioned a new African American musical idiom that has obliterated stereotypes associated with country music and “returned the tradition to its roots.”

In Chapter 8, “Breaking Stereotypes across Cultures: The Croatian and Hungarian Stereotypical Representations of American Culture,” Jadranka Zlomislčić and Lívía Szélpál present the results of their joint comparative research into cultural stereotypes, conducted at three universities—the University of Pécs (Hungary), the University of Szeged (Hungary), and the University of Osijek (Croatia). Using the Critical Discourse Analysis methodology and focusing on stereotypes about Americans envisioned by Hungarians and Croatians and vice versa, this study seeks to facilitate the intercultural dialogue by broadening Hungarian and Croatian English major students’ perception of American culture, developing their intercultural competences, increasing their responsiveness to cultural diversity, and heightening their awareness of harmful intergroup biases and stereotypes. The first part of the study explores the American–Hungarian cross-cultural stereotypes, drawing upon different scholarly, literary, and non-literary sources—historical data, Hesna Al Ghaoui’s blog and her Internet diary *Hesna amerikai naplója* [Hesna’s American Diary], Jessica Keener’s novel *Strangers in Budapest* (2018), and an interview with Paul Kantor, former Fulbright scholar in Hungary. It also reports the results of a qualitative analysis conducted in a Hungarian higher education classroom setting in order to detect and possibly dismantle stereotypes envisioned by the two cultural groups about each other. Following a similar methodological strategy, the second part of the study focuses on the Croatian perspective of America and Americans and vice versa. It first discusses two memoirs written by Cody McClain Brown, an American expatriate in Croatia—*Chasing a Croatian Girl: A Survivor’s Tale* (2015) and *Croatia Strikes Back: The Unnecessary Sequel* (2018)—and then presents the results of a classroom survey taken by a group of Croatian English major students at the University of Osijek, comparing their (projected) hetero-stereotype responses to their views after being exposed to an intercultural

communication situation through interaction with the author himself. While maintaining that stereotypes can be a “helpful mental tool for testing or assisting in social encounters,” the paper also highlights the importance of combating rigid generalities loaded with biased assumptions through intercultural pedagogy, communication, and exchange.

We hope that this volume, with its cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approach and identification of novel research subjects, will extend the vista of American studies by opening up new scholarly terrains and bringing fresh perspectives to those already mapped. As editors, we sincerely thank all the contributors for sharing their scholarship on the topic of breaking stereotypes and for their excellent collaboration in putting together this volume. We acknowledge with gratitude financial support for this volume that came from the research project *Transatlantic Literature and Mobility in the Long Nineteenth Century*, led by Tatjana Jukić Gregurić and funded by the University of Zagreb. We are also very grateful to Jelena Šesnić for commissioning this book for the series *Working Papers in American Studies* and ensuring its smooth production as well as to FF Press for bringing this manuscript to publication. Last but not least, a special word of gratitude goes to our colleagues from the Sub-department of Anglophone Literatures, Department of English, at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek—Ljubica Matek, Valentina Markasović, Biljana Oklopčić, Jasna Poljak Rehlicki, and Zvonimir Prtenjača—for their invaluable input and generous assistance along the way.

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