

# Discourses That Matter



Discourses That Matter:  
Selected Essays on English and American Studies

Edited by

Maria José Canelo, Marta Soares, Marta Mancelos,  
Cláudia Pinto and Fernando Gonçalves

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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## INTRODUCTION

MARIA JOSÉ CANELO AND MARTA SOARES

A crisis forces us back to the questions themselves and requires from us either new or old answers, but in any case direct judgments. A crisis becomes a disaster only when we respond to it with performed judgments, that is, with prejudices. Such an attitude not only sharpens the crisis but makes us forfeit the experience of reality and the opportunity for reflection it provides.

Hannah Arendt

In the past decades, the Humanities have been facing an ever more insidious technologically-driven system, ruled by ideas of relevance, profit margin, productivity, and usefulness, which threaten to reduce this field of knowledge to merely instrumental roles in “scientific” tasks such as measurements and quantifications. The decline is particularly noticeable in the devaluation of this field in academia, as numerous humanities and arts programs are being cut and replaced by technical courses in more “profitable” areas. As Martha Nussbaum notes in her recent study *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, in addition to facing the global financial crisis that started in 2008, we are currently in the midst of “a world-wide crisis in education,” one that “goes largely unnoticed,” but which is likely to be “far more damaging to the future of democratic self-government” (2010, 1–2).

In spite of this overall devaluation, the truth is the Humanities have long learnt to reinvent themselves: from the 1960s onwards, the ground has been rife for the Humanities to deal with their social relevance. New alliances between literary studies, geography, history, and the social sciences, for instance, have since allowed for the emergence of critical methodologies and vocabularies aimed at the examination of complex cultural phenomena. From new historicism to cultural studies and discourse analysis, disciplines have dug deep into the social and political issues underlying any textual interpretation, as any cultural representation.

In tandem with the emergence of fields such as gender and ethnic studies, deeply influenced by social constructivism as well, the academia assumed knowledge as a larger construction, and opened a productive

dialogue with social movements and the life on the streets. The Humanities assumed their “worldliness,” to retrieve Edward Said’s compelling formulation regarding literature—“worldliness, circumstantiality, the text’s status as an event having sensuous particularity as well as historical contingency” (1983, 39)—, and thereby gained the right to have a word in social change. We take the present “crisis” to be another stage in this history—a moment for reflection and readjustment; certainly not for defeat.

How can English and American Studies be instrumental to conceptualizing the deep instability we are presently facing? How can they address the coordinates of such instability, such as war, terrorism, the current economic and financial crisis, and the consequent myriad forms of deprivation and fear? How can they tackle the strategies of dehumanization, invisibility, and the naturalization of inequality and injustice entailed in contemporary discourses? As scholars of English and American Studies, we know these are fields of a solid interdisciplinary nature, articulating a multiplicity of approaches in their attempt to apprehend the complexities of culture. We are also aware that their ability to intersect different areas of knowledge and transgress intellectual and disciplinary boundaries is matched by their strong concern about the political and cultural challenges posed by a globalized society.

These are the methods and perspectives in English and American Studies we are engaging with, when putting together this volume of essays. The present anthology grew out of an awareness of the need to debate the current role of these two fields of academic practice, a necessity that led us, in the first place, to organize an international conference in 2012. Held at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Coimbra, in Portugal, this conference sought to gather graduate students and young scholars so as to explore how the Humanities in general, and English and American studies in particular, relate to the present state of affairs. Our idea was to challenge especially young scholars to position their research concerning the ability of their fields to be *discourses that matter*; in the case in point, to be critical practices that make an active intervention in current debates.

Echoing Judith Butler’s study *Bodies That Matter* (1993), the title of this anthology intends to highlight, on the one hand, the ability of discourses to materialize *in*, or *as*, truth, and so support or decry particular constituencies. Drawing on Butler’s rethinking of materiality as the effect of power (1993, 2), we locate this anthology at the crossroads of discourse and power. As such, discourses matter—they are important—to us as

products and vehicles of power relations that can be subject to the analytical and interpretative tools of English and American Studies.

Discourses are also historically and culturally rooted, and our preoccupations about power and knowledge could not ignore the debates on the Humanities that have been taking place during the last decades. On the contrary, this is an undercurrent to many of the critical reflections collected here, bearing in mind that the predicament (or whatever other name you choose to call it) of the Humanities is not alien to the financial and economic crisis in place and the societal and intellectual models it endorses. Certainly, English and American Studies take root in the Humanities, that large field of inquiry that has sought to address the world critically, relationally, and creatively, not just in terms of the construction of meaning and the strategies involved in representations, but also of the ideological interests underlying them—and also, essentially, of the social responsibility that comes with them.

English and American Studies can both denaturalize the forms of knowledge or representations that discourses engage with and locate them proper in their alliances with institutions and other forms of power, even while assuming that English and American Studies, as disciplines of knowledge, are themselves located in institutions and discourses. This in itself poses no conflict, for, as Michel Foucault has remarked, the fact that a discursive formation contains contradictory discourses attests its vitality (1990, 102).

This volume brings to light nineteen different essays that cluster around the previously identified preoccupations. Section I reflects on the relation between language and the world or how language becomes the matter of ideologies and, as such, bears witness to issues of both power and agency. In “Narrative Cartographies in American Novels: A Literary and Philosophical Perspective,” Alessandra Tedesco brings to a fruitful dialogue Bertrand Westphal’s theory of *géocritique* and Franck Fischbach’s critique on alienation, applying them to literary representations of place in order to suggest how the latter potentially allow the subject to understand the world surrounding him/her; accordingly, more than simply representing the world, literature plays an active part in producing it. Marta Soares looks into the power of poetic discourse to question social matters such as the dehumanization entailed by violence, war, and financial deprivation. “What Are Poets For in a Destitute Time?” proposes a comparative examination of U.S. poets Adrienne Rich and Rae Armantrout in their commitment to represent September 11, the wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq (Rich), and the global financial crisis (Armantrout). Soares concludes that, although differing in their approach

and use of the poetic language, and deploying diverse understandings of poetry and its social space, both poets claim the responsibility of poetry to speak out and bear witness, particularly in times of destitution.

Also Ana Quintais's essay "Tracing an Absent Memory: Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* and Susan Silas's *Helmbrechts Walk 1998–2003*" deals with the quest for forms of representation that have witnessing and responsibility at their core, in this case, how language can produce the necessary memory of an unrepresentable—hence, unspeakable—past. Working on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, Quintais analyzes Foer's and Silas's artistic attempts to bring to light the trauma of the Holocaust. "Finding Hope through Mourning in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*," by Ana Luísa Pires, focuses on the period of transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa and provides us with another instance in which literature is involved in the creation of a necessary memory. Amidst the violence and chaos created by politics, Mda's novel directly engages memory as an ethics of survival that requires the imagination and artistic sensibility that only literature and the arts can provide.

Section II amplifies the topic of the relation between language and the world by exploring the Butlerian concept of performance, addressing it as a practice of self-representation and emancipation. Marta Mancelos's study of Japanese American poet Sawako Nakayasu's first full-length book, in "‘Making Displacement Permanent’: Language and Performance in Sawako Nakayasu's *So We Have Been Given Time Or*," explores the contribution of individual performance to the politics of language, along with its power to deconstruct those politics. Mancelos takes Nakayasu's experimental poetics as an allegorical account of the Asian American experience and identity in U.S. society, so that performative poetry is ultimately analyzed here as an experiment towards social integration.

But performance goes both ways and it can be limited to mere illusions of emancipation; this is the conclusion of both Gokce Tekeli's essay, "Hyperreality of Transsexual Performance: A Study of Christine Jorgensen," and José Miguel Moura's, "The Right to Remain Filming. Intimacy at Close Range in American Documentaries." Tekeli resorts to the notion of performance to deconstruct the discourse of transsexuality as an alternative to the norm. By analyzing the identity construction of Christine Jorgensen, the first transsexual celebrity in the USA, and Jorgensen's option for an essentialist defense of identity, the author concludes that Jorgensen's position boils down to a gender performance that is ultimately complicit with heteronormative binary divisions and sexual politics, thus perpetuating the heterosexual hegemonic discourse.

As such, it fails to achieve agency, remaining a mere reflection of simulation in what Jean Baudrillard calls hyperreality. In his essay, Moura calls into question the claim that the performative practices subscribed to by home-made documentaries such as *Tarnation* (Jonathan Caouette, 2003) and *Capturing the Friedmans* (Andrew Jarecki, 2003), while claiming the production of new visibilities, are not as emancipatory as they want to appear. Moura contests these filmic objects as subjective counterdiscourses, demonstrating instead how their engagement in creating self-empowerment remains a fallacy.

Section III articulates matters of exceptionalism and power. In “History Hijacked: American Indian Genocide Denial in the United States,” Fernando Gonçalves takes issue at different discourses on genocide in the context of U.S. history and Native American politics, namely the discourse of U.S. exceptionalism. The author looks into the latter as a strategy of denial of the effective genocide undergone by Black and Native American populations. Gonçalves names this strategy a holocaust denial and calls for a less biased, or less exceptionalist, comparative reassessment of genocidal events in U.S. history.

The link between superheroes, as U.S. cultural artifacts and global mass-marketed commodities, and U.S. exceptionalist discourse is the pretext for Cláudia Pinto’s analysis, in “Superhero Identity in a Postnational Context.” What changes, the author asks, when the discourse of U.S. heroicity turns from local into universal—as when Superman renounces his U.S. citizenship? Drawing from Donald Pease’s critical revisitiation of exceptionalism, Pinto examines how three graphic novels, *Marvels* (Kurt Busiek; Marvel Comics, 1994), *Kingdom Come* (Mark Waid; DC Comics, 1996), and *Marvel: 1602* (Neil Gaiman; Marvel Comics, 2002) employ different perspectives on the past and future of superheroes—and thereby of societies as well. Also Enrico Botta’s contribution uses a transnational, post-imperialist critical lens to examine anew how exceptionalism is written in Joel Barlow’s epic of the U.S. nation, *The Columbiad* (1807). Botta argues that contemporary American Studies readings based on a transnational and non-exceptionalist perspective can bring to light the universalizing Western discourse underneath U.S. nineteenth-century epic poems. Comparing Barlow’s poem to other European epics, Botta takes issue at instances or strategies that construct the United States as the final and exceptional stage of humankind’s progress.

Language and power are also at the core of the following section, in which discourses of gender and identity are dealt with and critically considered. In her comparative reading of the representation of female

characters in Raymond Chandler's original crime novels and their adaptation to film, "Chandler's Spider Women: Female Criminality from Page to Screen," Veronika Pituková denaturalizes criminal patterns based on gender as built in these representations. By conveying how the film versions from the 1940s through the 1970s added new dimensions to the representations of women and their crimes (while overlooking and simplifying Chandler's original characters), Pituková shows that these representations upheld discourses of masculinity that necessarily silenced women. In "Representations of the Marginalized: In Search of an Identity in the Poetry of Tara Hardy, Adrienne Rich and Tim'm West," Ana Rockov and Nikola Stepić consider the discursive means writers develop in order to produce their visibility in their own literary space. Poets Tara Hardy, Adrienne Rich and Tim'm West, whom the authors take as representative of particular groups typically marginalized by the canon as a reflection of sexual and social discrimination, resist that condition by writing. The authors propose a deconstruction of the strategies deployed in their poems and their ability to frame alternatives to the world as we know it.

Susanne Kopf, in her turn, resorts to the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to look into "women" as a concept in U.S. society, prevalent gender stereotypes, and the public's gendered perception of leadership ideals in the context of Hillary Clinton's run for the 2008 presidential election. In "A Critical Discourse Analysis: The Representation of Hillary Rodham Clinton and Women in the *New York Times*," Kopf contends that the way Clinton and women are represented by this written media venue involves certain aspects of social practice that are reproduced via such discourse. The discursive construction and representation of identity are also a crucial component of Zuzanna Sanches's essay "Friends and Relations: Deirdre Madden and her *Molly Fox's Birthday*." By addressing Irish writer Deirdre Madden's idea of identity as a fluctuating category between the private and the public spheres, Sanches looks into the writer's perception of identities as complimentary and dynamic exchanges.

Section V deals with discourses of race and ethnicity, following along similar lines to the previous sections, for the essays included here also focus on the representations and the connections between language, literature, and the real world. In "Sexual Difference, Race, and Power: The Autobiography of Black Women Writers," Gonçalo Cholant delves into an African American literary genre with a solid tradition in this community, the autobiography. By examining texts where race, sexual identity, and genre overlap, Cholant seeks for the relation between literature and

agency: can the autobiographical genre, in allowing the subjects to write themselves in literature, work as a conduit for their social representation as agents as well?

Patricia San José Rico's "'It's Black, It's White, It's Hard For You To Get By': Discourses of Race, Color, and Ugliness in Contemporary African-American Novels" deals with self-representation too, but from the perspective of the trauma of shame in physical appearance, namely the shame of racial difference. Rico's essay discusses the symbolism of skin color and how it is built in cultural and social structures and discourses. Combining extracts from contemporary novels by African American writers—Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Paradise*, Paule Marshall's "Reena," Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, Walter Mosley's detective novels, and earlier narratives such as George Schuyler's *Black no More* or Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*—, Rico examines the representations of the dilemma of colorism vs. self-hatred in the African-American community. Also Tommaso Caiazza's essay, "From the *Prominenti* to the *Leaders*: The Change in San Francisco's Italian-American Ethnicity," works towards a more thorough understanding of the social and cultural bearings of ethnicity, by tracing the history of the Italian American ethnicity in San Francisco. Drawing mostly on newspaper discourses, Caiazza demonstrates that the different components and phases in the invention of this ethnicity correspond to different moments in the history of this immigrant group in America, its relations with other ethnic groups, matters of class, and the position of the mother-country, Italy, in the world.

Susana Amante's and Sylwia Markiewicz Lopes's essays compose the closing section, which approaches issues of literature and interculturality. In "*Enwhisteetkwa: Walk In Water: The Okanagan Version of the History of the Encounter between Aboriginals and Settlers*," Amante takes children's literature, in particular a Okanagan artist, writer, and educator Jeannette Armstrong's picture book, as the ground to denaturalize ethnic difference through Armstrong's counter-representations to the official history of the encounter between Aboriginals and European settlers. And, finally, our discussion throughout this volume is rounded off with a question: "Why Should We Rethink Literary Borders?" in Sylwia Lopes's proposal to reassess Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* according to intercultural coordinates. By de-nationalizing Miller's novel, as it were, relocating it in France as a new context of reception, the author explores the possibilities and challenges posed by what promises to be a new epistemological approach in the field of literary and cultural studies: world literature.

The essays in this anthology pursue the chance to deepen, enlarge, and question both literary and cultural phenomena and their established critical readings, thus exploring the numerous possibilities offered by the discourses of the Humanities, namely their ability to foster critical thought, allowing us to think for (and outside) ourselves, their capacity to test, argue, and question, and their profound imaginative potential. These are abilities which, as Nussbaum points out, are deeply constitutive of a healthy democracy for enabling us “to transcend local loyalties” and “imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person” (2010, 7).

The challenge involved in this project has been to bring the young academics involved to think of their intellectual practice as contributing to a discourse that matters, in the sense of one that, in the best tradition of the Humanities, interrogates reality as given and helps us make sense of it by deconstructing the strategies deployed in representations. We ultimately would like this common, if diverse, reflection to encourage us to answer current challenges in both constructive and consequent ways. To recover Hannah Arendt’s prescient words, any crisis “tears away facades and obliterates prejudices” and so provides us with “the opportunity . . . to explore and inquire into whatever has been laid bare of the essence of the matter” (1993, 174).

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