**American Literature and Therapeutic Cultures**

International conference at the Maison de la Création et de l’Innovation (MaCI)

Université Grenoble Alpes

14-16 June 2023

*in partnership with*

The Institut des langues et cultures d’Europe, Amérique, Afrique, Asie et Australie (ILCEA4)

The Institut universitaire de France (IUF)

Organization: Nicholas Manning (UGA/IUF)

This three-day international conference will explore the dynamic forces of attraction and antagonism that exist between literary studies and an array of neglected psychological discourses and practices in the United States from the mid nineteenth century until today, in the light shed by the relatively new concept of therapeutic culture. These exchanges will notably be prolonged on the occasion of the Fifth International Conference of the French Society for Modernist Studies (SEM), entitled *Therapeutic Modernisms*, which will also take place at UGA in June 2024.

At times seduced by therapeutic conceptions of language, emotion, and the self, while at others violently rejecting them, American literary texts have tended to both reflect and challenge a variety of beliefs forged within therapeutic ideologies. Moreover, since the New Criticism, theoretical models of literature’s relationship to psychology have often been highly restrictive, either banishing psychology altogether or privileging specific therapeutic discourses to the detriment of those emerging from “popular” or “alternative” contexts. Simultaneously, common therapeutic notions—such as emotional intelligence, empathy, or interpersonal communication—are increasingly used in the United States, often in problematic ways, to justify literature’s cultural legitimacy in an age of its perceived devaluation. Such utilitarian justifications must be broached if we hope to take account of literature’s current and future cultural relevance.

In order to explore this terrain, this conference will bring together specialists of American literature and culture, affect studies, and the historical ties between literature and psychology. For indeed, “therapeutic culture” is a far broader field of enquiry than that which has traditionally interested literary scholars in their thinking of the ties between literature and psychology. How are we to understand the fact that literary theorists have commonly focused on a reduced segment of psychological method—such as psychoanalysis—as the privileged locus of encounters between the literary and the psychological, to the exclusion of other therapeutic practices? What vision of the self comes to be emphasized if we analyze literature’s relationship to a variegated spectrum of other “psy” cultures extending from self-help books to alternative health, cognitive behavioral therapies to Gestalt theory, New Age spirituality to narrative medicine? And finally, why has the notion that literature may heal past wounds, improve the self, and provide psychological or spiritual guidance, become ever more disseminated in our contemporary moment, at the same time as literature’s general cultural value is seen to be under threat?

In contrast to other approaches to the literary-therapeutics interaction—and notably those motivated by purely optimistic convictions regarding literature’s healing power—participants to the conference are invited to take a critical view of these historical and contemporary dynamics, questioning the utilitarian vision, in neoliberal societies, of literary texts as a curative apparatus. Counter to initiatives that take a purely positive view of literature’s ties to therapeutic ideologies, papers will also challenge myths of literature as a restorative device, creating new models for analyzing the literature-therapeutics interaction which go beyond the scientific positivism and cultural optimism of many medical humanities initiatives.

Within the parameters of this conference and its subsequent collective editorial ventures, it is not a question of determining literary texts’ place in therapeutic culture—thus instigating a static hierarchy of the type posed by many prior models of literature’s engagements with psychology—but rather of seeing the literary and the therapeutic as two intricated cultural environments, which have never ceased to actively forge one another. Situated at the epicenter of an ever-expanding therapeutic ethos, American literature provides a unique opportunity to interrogate this paradigm. For though notions of the improvement of the self via art was foundational to many aspects of the Victorian moral ethos, it has been in the modern United States—fueled by a unique mixture of capitalistic fervor, cultural optimism, and ideologies of autonomy—that the principle of literature as a curative technology has taken on its most radical forms. The mid nineteenth century has been chosen as this conference’s temporal starting point in order to encompass the immense shifts which occurred before, during and after the American Civil War (1861-1865) in literature’s perceived relations to therapeutic ideals.

The contemporary term “therapeutic culture,” forged in response to overly restrictive definitions of the sphere and influence of psychology, implies a recognition that the therapeutic may be conceived as an entire network of psychological practices and discourses with which the modern self interacts. As invited speakers Timothy Aubry and Trysh Travis have observed in their collection of essays *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture*: rather than being restricted to a set of curative or remedial strategies, the therapeutic “is best understood not merely as a healing technology, or even a zeitgeist, but rather as a culture, a complex web of shared assumptions, behaviors, and institutions that brings individuals together and shapes their values and ideals”.

It is this broader sense of the therapeutic that this conference seeks to explore. Questioning literary texts’ forceful influence in such a culture will thus encompass not merely the therapist’s couch or the psychiatric hospital, but also, and even above all, extra-institutional loci of psychotherapeutic activity.

The interactions between therapeutic and literary cultures thus run the gamut from welcoming to violently antagonistic. These dynamics traverse a broad spectrum of clinical to non-clinical contexts. Moreover, African-American, Hispanic and Latinx, or queer literatures provide crucial insight into the way therapeutic outlooks have often been primarily accessible to, and weaponized by, privileged groups, rather than those struggling against inequities. In this way, this conference’s goal is to analyze not merely literature “as” therapy, or in its relation to historically privileged discourses such as psychoanalysis, but with regard to literary culture’s extensive interactions with therapeutic cultures as a whole, in a simultaneously transhistorical and transdiscursive perspective.

**Confirmed speakers at the conference** include Timothy Aubry, Isabelle Blondiaux, Peter Boxall, Beth Blum, Jean-Christophe Cloutier, Thomas Constantinesco, Adam Frank, Martin Halliwell, Michael Jonik, Rachel Greenwald Smith, and Trysh Travis.

**Proposals for individual papers, joint panels, and roundtable discussions are invited on the following (non-exclusive) fields of enquiry:**

* the neglected ties between American literary texts and specific psychological disciplines, methods and protocols such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapies, Gestalt, or discourses like self-help
* the shifting representations of psy cultures, sites, and professionals in American literary texts
* the depiction of psychotherapy in American fiction, theatre, and even poetics
* literary authors’ engagement, in both autobiographical and fictionalized texts, with psychotherapeutic experience
* therapeutic cultures’ contributions to the creation of new literary genres (such as the sanatorium novel)
* re-readings or novel approaches to the interactions between literature and psychoanalysis, beyond more traditional theoretical frameworks
* the increasingly widespread cultural trope in the United States and beyond of literature as a “healing” art, including the emergence of clinical practices such as bibliotherapy
* the potential political and/or aesthetic risks of associating literature with therapeutic aims, both throughout American history and in the present moment
* paradigms of reception and reader response to the blurring of boundaries between therapeutic and literary discourses
* etc.

This brief list is merely indicative, and proposals will be considered across a wide range of subjects related to the ties between American literary and therapeutic cultures, in the broadest senses of both of these categories.

Proposals of 300 words maximum for individual papers, and 1000 words maximum for joint panels and roundtable discussions, must be sent for consideration before **31 January 2023** to the following address: [nicholas.manning@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr](mailto:nicholas.manning@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr)

A response as to the proposal’s acceptance will be given by **February 15 2023.**