

Dying Protagonists in Two Gay Southern Novels: Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* and Jim Grimsley's *Dream Boy*

Roman Trušník

ABSTRACT

The present article explores two southern novels, Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) and Jim Grimsley's *Dream Boy* (1995). These two novels are at first sight a deviation from the contemporary tradition of coming-out (i.e., gay coming-of-age) novels, as their teenage protagonists do not successfully develop a proud gay identity but die a violent death, by suicide and murder, respectively. However, a closer exploration of the texts themselves as well as the literary context will also reveal that even though both novels do constitute a departure from the previous tradition of gay coming-of-age novels by their extensive use of Gothic elements, they still contain a plausible story portraying the interplay of the social and psychological facets of growing up.

KEYWORDS

American novel; southern literature; gay literature; Gothic elements; Randall Kenan; *A Visitation of Spirits*; Jim Grimsley; *Dream Boy*

Surveying American gay fiction geographically both from the East Coast to the West Coast and from the North to the South as well as in terms of genre and subgenre, i.e., mainstream literature to genre fiction, quite a few interesting gay novels are set in the South. In the late 1940s when gay themes were being introduced to the general reading public in novels such as Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948) and James Barr's *Quatrefoil* (1950), the South brought forth Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) full of queer and campy characters.

The South also emerges where few readers would expect it: perhaps the best portrayal of the pre-AIDS New York gay ghetto is Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* (1978), actually a novel-within-a-novel framed by correspondence with a man relocated to the South who is enjoying and extolling the everyday pleasures of southern life. Moreover, Holleran, one of the two most renowned novelists among the members of Violet Quill, a New York-based group of gay authors, actually moved to the South himself and became a southern writer, with his later novels *Nights in Aruba* (1982), *The Beauty of Men* (1995) and *Grief* (2006) firmly set in the region.

Attitudes to homosexuality in the South are rather unique as well. John Howard notes that "Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people would seem to encounter more difficulties in the South than in other regions. In surveys, southerners are more likely to oppose gay rights and describe homosexuality as sinful than respondents from any other section of the United States,"¹ yet on the other hand he points out the achievements of members of southern LGBT communities. This is supported by Sharon A. Sharp who remarks:

1 John Howard, "Gays," in *Gender*, ed. Nancy Bercau and Ted Ownby, vol. 13 of *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 122.

Finally, the increasingly public presence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people and the growth of the Religious Right movement opposing that public role has contributed to a new frankness in the discussion of sexuality in the contemporary South. A lesbian/gay rights movement is nation-wide, but with distinctive southern dimensions. Queer studies scholars examine the historical and cultural role of LGBT people who have lived within a regional context dominated by evangelical religion, racial obsessions, and gender dichotomies. A considerable body of scholarship and memoirs demonstrates the long role of LGBT people in the region and their distinctive place within the national LGBT community.²

It thus comes as no great surprise that at the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s, when female and ethnic coming-of-age novels flourished,³ and American literature was filled with coming-of-age/coming-out novels with gay teenagers successfully establishing their gay identity,⁴ southern literature produced two novels in which teenage boys find death rather than gay pride: Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) and Jim Grimsley's *Dream Boy* (1995).

The death of the protagonist in gay fiction was certainly not a new phenomenon at that time. After World War II, there was even an assumption that a gay novel should end in a tragic way, a supposition that had a marked effect on many authors. In 1974 Gore Vidal commented on this expectation and his own agency regarding his novel *The City and the Pillar*: "Twenty years ago it was thought that I had written a tragic ending because the publishers felt that the public would not accept a happy resolution for my tale of Sodom, my Romeo and his Mercutio. But this wasn't true."⁵ In addition to Vidal's work, one of the protagonists dies also at the end of James Barr's *Quatrefoil* (1950), and in many other gay novels. Regardless of the possible pressures from publishers or expectations of the public in the past, by the 1980s and 1990s the death of the protagonist in gay novels should be seen solely as the decision of the authors and their artistic intentions. In contrast to the above mentioned early examples, which were written strictly in the realistic tradition, Kenan and Grimsley's novels are far more complex in their literary technique. The present article explores the two works in wider literary contexts.

Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* is set in the mid-1980s in the imaginary city of Tims Creek, North Carolina. The protagonist is the gifted sixteen-year-old Horace Cross, who is after the death of his parents being brought up by his grandfather. Horace is an excellent student, yet unable to bear the burden of his homosexuality in the unfriendly community. He confides to his cousin James Malachai Greene, the local Baptist preacher and school principal. As his feelings are not merely a phase and the prayers recommended by Jimmy do not help, Horace goes on to study magic and decides to change himself into a bird in order to be free. The conversion fails and Horace is possessed by a demon who instead takes him on a phantasmagoric tour of his memories

- 2 Sharon A. Sharp, "Sexuality," in *Gender*, ed. Nancy Bercaw and Ted Ownby, vol. 13 of *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 262.
- 3 For more on the history and theory of the genre of the coming-of-age novel (or the Bildungsroman), see Šárka Bubíková, "The Literary Image of Man in the Process of Becoming: Variations of the Bildungsroman Genre in English and American Literature," *American and British Studies Annual* 4 (2011): 116–30.
- 4 Czech readers will find more information about the literary context in Roman Trušník, *Podoby amerického homosexuálního románu po roce 1945* [Faces of the American Gay Novel after 1945] (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2011).
- 5 Gore Vidal, "The Art of Fiction L: Gore Vidal," interview by Gerald Clarke, *The Paris Review* Fall 1974, repr. in *Conversations with Gore Vidal*, ed. Richard Peabody and Lucinda Ebersole (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 39. My italics.

and fears. In the morning, after the torturous night and the unsuccessful transformation, Horace shoots himself in front of his cousin.

Jim Grimsley's *Dream Boy* is set in North Carolina as well. Nathan moves to a local community with his parents. The family has been moving around for some time and it is gradually revealed that the reason is that Nathan is being sexually abused by his alcoholic father. Nathan gets closer to Roy, an older boy from the neighborhood from whose parents Nathan's family rent the house. An intimate relationship develops between the boys, even though in the beginning Roy is shocked by Nathan's technical proficiency in sex, achieved during his paternal abuse. However, Nathan soon has to hide from his father again in order to avoid more abuse, and Roy starts to understand the situation and helps Nathan avoid his father. Moreover, Roy is gradually introducing Nathan to his friends, Burke and Randy. During a hunting trip the boys decide to explore a dilapidated mansion at a former plantation. In the darkness the drunk Burke catches Roy and Nathan engaging in sex; he departs but returns later, raping Nathan and crushing his skull with a chair. At the end, Nathan gets up, goes to the campsite and then to the church, in which he finds the crying Roy – the boys then leave together. However, these last scenes are but a dream going through Nathan's dying brain.

While both novels are distinctly southern, their authors write from different social positions. Randall Kenan as an African American author explores the issues of race in addition to sexual difference, while Jim Grimsley, who comes from a poor white family, emphasizes the role of class. Moreover, the southern roots of the novels do not always help: Grimsley, who has always emphasized that his place of origin – not only the geographical setting in North Carolina but even more so his social position of "white trash" – has had a formative role on him. While he considers it helpful to be from the South, as southern literature gets talked about,⁶ he has also remarked that it took him three books to appear, as a southerner, on the pages of the *New York Times Book Review*, while the "gay thing was not a problem."⁷ Still, the southernness of the two novels penetrates both novels, which contain all the elements Fred Hobson considers "central in the most notable southern fiction of the first three-quarters of [the twentieth] century," i.e., "place, family, community, religion, and the past."⁸

As mentioned above, both novels take place in North Carolina and in both of them the setting is key. Tims Creek in Kenan's novel reappears in the author's collection of short stories, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* (1992), as do some of the characters from *A Visitation of Spirits*. This creates a large terrain much in the vein of William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Grimsley's novel takes place within a single community. However, the family has moved around and for a short period of time they lived also in Tims Creek.⁹ As Tims Creek, North Carolina, is a fictional place created by Kenan, this passing reference to the town can be taken as Grimsley's bow to him.

Family features as an important theme in both novels, even though the authors' approaches differ. Kenan portrays an intricate network of several generations of an extended family, with numerous grievances buried and half-buried, and many family members conspicuously missing, being replaced by surrogate parents and grandparents

6 See Richard Canning, "Jim Grimsley," interview with Jim Grimsley, in *Hear Us Out: Conversations with Gay Novelists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 121.

7 Canning, "Jim Grimsley," 136.

8 Fred C. Hobson, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 8.

9 See Jim Grimsley, *Dream Boy* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1995), 53.

both for James and Horace. In Grimsley, the scope is much narrower and is focused on a single dysfunctional family.

Community is important in both novels, although in significantly different ways. While Grimsley's novel is a characteristic study of a newcomer to a relatively small community, in Kenan's novel the community itself is interconnected with the history of the family, which stood at the birth of the town and its emergence out of a maroon (runaway slave) society. For the family as a whole, it was indeed a rags-to-riches story, as it became fairly well-to-do, though prosperity has not brought happiness to all of its members.

This clearly overlaps with the fourth feature on Hobson's list – the importance of the past. Both novels frequently refer to the history of former slave states, either in depicting the birth of the community in Kenan's novel, or as part of the setting (the former plantation and the dilapidated mansion) in Grimsley's.

Religion is omnipresent in both novels. One of the narrators of Kenan's novel is James Greene, a preacher. Grimsley's novel starts and ends in a church and contains many references to religion throughout; even Nathan's abusive father is a fervent churchgoer.

In addition to the common elements of southern fiction listed by Hobson, the two novels are rich in other characteristics frequently associated with southern literature, such as violence. Moreover, both novels abound in features that can readily be associated with the term "Gothic." The term has been in vogue among reviewers and critics (mostly not southern) for some time and remains popular among readers, who, with little knowledge of its theoretical background, often associate the term primarily with 18th-century novels set in castles in the Middle Ages such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Yet this understanding of the Gothic is typically European. David Punter and Glennis Byron, on the other hand, point out that the American tradition, starting with Charles Brockden Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe "emphasize[s] the psychological."¹⁰ In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M. H. Abrams offers a definition that describes the preoccupations of the American Gothic:

The term "Gothic" has also been extended to a type of fiction which lacks the exotic setting of the earlier romances, but develops a brooding atmosphere of gloom and terror, represents events that are uncanny or macabre or melodramatically violent, and often deals with aberrant psychological states.¹¹

This extension perfectly describes the situation of both the novels being considered here: the imaginary journey of Horace through a mix of his memories and images that create terror in readers as well as the key events in Grimsley's *Dream Boy* which take place in a haunted mansion on a former plantation leave no doubt that both novels deserve to be called Gothic.

Paulina Palmer in her study *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic* (2012) includes both novels in her analysis (the study actually opens with a discussion of *A Visitation of Spirits*), devoting attention both to how Kenan mixes "fantasy and realism, the unfamiliar and the familiar"¹² as well as to Grimsley's use of place and space: "Grimsley and Kenan, employing a rural setting, rework tales of the haunting of the American countryside by the spectral traces of the brutalities of slavery and the acts

10 David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 123.

11 M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed. (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999). 137. Original italics.

12 Pauline Palmer, *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press), 156.

of genocide perpetrated on the indigenous population."¹³ Most importantly, she also connects the Gothic and the uncanny to the coming-out novels of the 1970s and 1980s:

The debates relating to the coming-out novel and identity politics [...] are relevant [...] since they have influenced queer fiction, generating in the 1990s the production of a new, intellectually complex version of the genre. Writers contributing to it interrogate the psychological and sociopolitical significance of the act of coming out and take a fresh look at the phenomenon of the closet.¹⁴

The two novels can be included in such an innovative stream of gay fiction.¹⁵ On the other hand, the fact that the works have been referred to as coming-out novels must be taken as yet more evidence of the persistence of this literary theme. The Gothic elements provide a convenient envelope for stories of two young men coming to terms with their homosexuality or, we should say in this context, their queerness. The social circumstances of the protagonists' coming-of-age, including the pressures of the outside world, are clearly discernable in the story; the Gothic atmosphere corresponds to the psychological state of the protagonists.

Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* can indeed be read as a conventional coming-out novel, i.e., a text portraying the protagonist's coming to terms with his sexuality. However, this constitutes just one story line in a work with a complex narrative structure, especially in terms of the ordering of events in the narrative discourse. Readers experience Horace's story from two main sources: first, from his own memories during the last night he was possessed by a demon, and through other characters, especially the other protagonist, James Malachai Greene.

For readers who do not necessarily believe in the existence of demons, two possible rational explanations of Horace's last journey are readily available: first, the demon may be a result of a chemically-induced hallucinatory state caused by the aviary transformation potion, which among other ingredients included as a substitute for the body of a baby the body of a kitten which had been burned on a pyre.¹⁶ Second, the demons may be the result of Horace's madness which developed after he was rejected by society, a state which led to his attempted metamorphosis.

As Paulina Palmer points out, Horace was originally a reasonable individual, and only after he was turned down by the rational world did he turn towards the irrational/the uncanny.¹⁷ Almost a year before his death in June 1983, Horace confided to his cousin James that he was a homosexual. Rather than any advice or assistance, he received a it's-just-a-phase rant and a recommendation to pray. Christian prayers did not help and thus Horace turned towards the occult, which led to his death in April of the following year.

The influence of social forces and the lack of acceptance can be seen during Horace's possession by a demon, when in a series of flashbacks episodes from the past

13 Palmer, *The Queer Uncanny*, 21.

14 See Palmer, *The Queer Uncanny*, 27–28.

15 The stream is, of course, not exclusively male gay, as can be seen, e.g., in the lesbian novels of Sarah Waters, and especially her Neo-Victorian romance *Affinity* (1999) where she combines a coming-out narrative with a ghost story set predominantly in the dark world of a London female prison. See Michaela Weiss, "Prison as a Queer Space in Sarah Waters's *Affinity*," in *From Theory to Practice 2013*, ed. Roman Trušník, Gregory Jason Bell, and Katarína Nemčoková (Zlín: Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíně, 2014), forthcoming.

16 See Randall Kenan, *A Visitation of Spirits* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 21.

17 See Palmer, *The Queer Uncanny*, 1.

appear before him, ranging from his first relationship with Gideon, another boy from his class, his attempts to overcome “the phase” by his overzealous involvement in all possible school clubs including athletic teams, his relationships with actors during a local play production, his coming home with an earring on a Thanksgiving Day and the reaction of his grandfather, and many other formative events.

While Kenan’s work can without doubt be called a coming-out novel, as its protagonist is overtly trying to cope with his sexual orientation, in Grimsley’s book Nathan’s search for a gay identity is much more covert, thus the wider term coming-of-age novel seems more appropriate. Nathan’s growing up seems not to be significantly marked by his struggle with sexual identity – even in the opening scene in the church when his father “is thinking about salvation and hellfire and the taste of whiskey,” and his mother “is thinking about the body of Christ and the wings of angels,” Nathan unabashedly “thinks about the body of the son of the farmer who owns the house Nathan’s parents rented three weeks ago.”¹⁸ A relationship with another boy of his age constitutes no problem for Nathan, but he suffers greatly from his abuse by his father.

Conversely, Monica Michlin places Grimsley’s novel into the coming-out tradition because she believes that at its heart lies one question: “how can a victim of homosexual incest develop a happy gay identity?”¹⁹ According to her, “Nathan ... must dissociate past and present when having sex” with Roy.²⁰ She goes on to quote the way this is conveyed in the novel itself: “The trick is to gain access to the knowledge he has stored inside, without remembering how it got there.”²¹

Michlin also analyzes one mechanism of how the literature of abuse works:

LGBT authors’ subversion of the “normality” of the abusive heterosexual family is obvious – it is most often translated in fiction as the child’s living in a gothic fairy tale or never-ending nightmare in which the monstrous parent is all-powerful. [...] The literature of abuse emphasizes the reality of the monstrous heterosexual parent and uses the literary figure of the “ogre” not as a mask, but to avoid pornography and to tap into the childhood fears that readers who have not been abused carry within them (we can, as we read, feel the terror we had of witches, ogres, and other bogeymen, rising within us).²²

She goes on to quote at length a scene from the novel “in which the kitchen turns to the place where Nathan is food to his ogre-father.”²³ This figure of monster/ogre provides another typical Gothic image, even if in the British rather than American understanding of the term.

On the other hand, Pauline Palmer focuses on the setting of the novel and she finds many more links to the traditional concept of the Gothic, such as the fathers’ abusive treatment of children, mostly daughters, or the contrast between tyrannical and benevolent father figures that appear in the eighteenth-century Gothic fiction.²⁴ Nathan’s home and his abusive father as well as the former slave-owners’ house provide further examples of haunted places, so typical for Gothic novels.

18 Grimsley, *Dream Boy*, 1–2.

19 Monica Michlin, “The Abused Child as Subversive Theme in LGBT Fiction,” in *Dissidences et Identités Plurielles*, ed. Jean-Paul Rocchi (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 2008), 269.

20 Michlin, “The Abused Child,” 3.

21 Grimsley, *Dream Boy*, 74.

22 Michlin, “The Abused Child,” 266–67.

23 Michlin, “The Abused Child,” 267. For the scene, see Grimsley, *Dream Boy*, 104.

24 See Palmer, *The Queer Uncanny*, 112–13.

The death of the protagonists is perhaps the most noticeable feature that makes the two novels so different from the majority of coming-out novels of the period. However, in spite of the similarities, such as the dark, Gothic atmosphere in both novels, the deaths of the protagonists are caused by different circumstances. Indeed, both teenagers are victims of external forces, but while Nathan is eventually killed by a hateful fellow student, Horace kills himself after being driven to suicide by the unfriendly environment.

Last but not least, both novels present a welcome departure from other coming-out novels by their ambiguity. Unlike the mainstream coming-out novels of the period, the two works being considered here present key events in rather a murky way. As noted above, the very nature of the demon in Kenan's novel is not clear and is subject to many possible interpretations. Moreover, the complexity of the story is amplified by a non-chronological presentation of the events to readers, as the portrayal of Horace's last night is interleaved with the narration of other events which either preceded it or followed it. This works to highlight the complex structure of relationships between the characters.²⁵

In Grimsley, on the other hand, the ambiguity comes at the end of the novel, after Nathan's skull is crushed by Burke. The nature of the injury suggests that Nathan would hardly be able to get up, go out, and even appear at his own funeral (or is it Roy's wedding?) and run away. Moreover, the shortening of chapters following the one in which the attack is described adds to the impression of time passing more quickly, which suggests that all these events are only a dream flickering through Nathan's mind as he dies. The idea that Nathan was actually killed is shared by other scholars, including Monica Michlin.²⁶ On the other hand, Pauline Palmer is much more reserved in her interpretation: she notes that Burke "brutally rapes Nathan, knocking him unconscious," but believes that "recovering consciousness, Nathan makes his way haltingly back to town, on the outskirts encountering Roy who is out looking for him."²⁷ She also takes the boys' decision to run away at the face value rather than as Nathan's dream,²⁸ which only confirms multiple interpretations of the story are possible.

To sum it up, due to their complexity as well as ambiguities both novels present a remarkable shift from older and simpler coming-out novels. By their protagonists finding their death during the course of the story, the two books explored here challenge the convention of happy endings of the majority of coming-out novels. Nevertheless the two works do reify a certain deterministic influence of the society on young men coping with their difference.

At the same time, both novels are deeply rooted in the tradition of southern literature, as they explore the preoccupations of community, family, religion, as well as violence. Moreover, they make extensive use of Gothic elements, another feature often ascribed to a large portion of the literature of the region. Thus, the novels can be taken as yet more proof of the admirable ability of southern literature to portray the human condition faithfully, even if painfully.

25 Interestingly, Monica Michlin also points out that "breaking the chronological linearity symbolic of 'progress'" is one of the techniques in which "LGBT novels on the abused child tend to sabotage the frame of the Bildungsroman." Michlin, "The Abused Child," 268.

26 See Michlin, "The Abused Child," 269.

27 Palmer, *The Queer Uncanny*, 115

28 See Palmer, *The Queer Uncanny*, 116.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7th ed. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999.
- Bubíková, Šárka. "The Literary Image of Man in the Process of Becoming: Variations of the Bildungsroman Genre in English and American Literature." *American and British Studies Annual* 4 (2011): 116–30.
- Canning, Richard. "Jim Grimsley." Interview with Jim Grimsley. In *Hear Us Out: Conversations with Gay Novelists*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 115–44.
- Grimsley, Jim. *Dream Boy*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1995.
- Hobson, Fred C. *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991.
- Howard, John. "Gays." In *Gender*, edited by Nancy Bercau and Ted Ownby, 122–26. Vol. 13 of *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, edited by Charles Reagan Wilson. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.
- Kenan, Randall. *A Visitation of Spirits*. New York: Grove Press, 1989.
- Michlin, Monica. "The Abused Child as Subversive Theme in LGBT Fiction." In *Dissidences et Identités Plurielles*, edited by Jean-Paul Rocchi, 265–85. Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 2008.
- Palmer, Paulina. *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012.
- Punter, David, and Glennis Byron. *The Gothic*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004.
- Sharp, Sharon A. "Sexuality." In *Gender*, edited by Nancy Bercau and Ted Ownby, 257–63. Vol. 13 of *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, edited by Charles Reagan Wilson. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.
- Trušník, Roman. *Podoby amerického homosexuálního románu po roce 1945* [Faces of the American Gay Novel after 1945]. Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2011.
- Vidal, Gore. "The Art of Fiction L: Gore Vidal." Interview by Gerald Clarke. *The Paris Review* Fall 1974. Reprint, *Conversations with Gore Vidal*, ed. Richard Peabody and Lucinda Ebersole, 36–59. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.
- Weiss, Michaela. "Prison as a Queer Space in Sarah Waters's *Affinity*." In *From Theory to Practice 2013*, edited by Roman Trušník, Gregory Jason Bell, and Katarína Nemčoková. Zlín: Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíně, 2014. Forthcoming.

Roman Trušník is Assistant Professor in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, Tomas Bata University in Zlín, Czech Republic. His research focuses on American gay literature after 1945. He is the author of *Podoby homosexuálního románu po roce 1945* (Faces of the American Gay Novel after 1945, 2011) and he co-edited *Cult Fiction & Cult Film: Multiple Perspectives* (2008; with Marcel Arbeit), and four volumes of conference proceedings. He is the founder and series editor of the *Zlín Proceedings in Humanities* book series, the managing editor of the *Moravian Journal of Literature and Film*, and the current Treasurer of the Czech and Slovak Association for American Studies.