



Dis/Connection: Relations, Interactions, Disruptions

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Editorial

Connection and disconnection are the invisible threads weaving through our world, sparking feelings of belonging or unraveling into estrangement. In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, collective experiences of a number of social and political events have demonstrated this dynamic, the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2024 US presidential elections being two prominent examples. As of 2025, shared isolation and collective division are more pronounced and palpable than they have ever been. By exacerbating polarization while simultaneously fostering community-building, instances of dis/connection are particularly evident in extreme situations, whether through disidentification with societal norms or the formation and loss of interpersonal relationships. The US two-party system has long been rooted in political polarization, reinforcing societal divisions. The 2024 presidential election, which saw Donald Trump defeat incumbent Vice President Kamala Harris, has intensified this polarization. Subsequent policy decisions, such as efforts to eliminate birthright citizenship and diversity programs, have further deepened social divisions while fostering greater solidarity within activist communities. Thus, exploring the theme of dis/connection within US culture dominated by a diverse range of issues such as social, cultural, and political disenfranchisement, conspiracy theories, the Global War on Terror, gun policies, reproduction rights, and stances on immigration policies, to name a few, proves to be particularly fruitful.

While the terms connection and disconnection might seem self-explanatory, this special issue recognizes and engages with the complexity of both the definitions of dis/connection and the experiences of dis/connecting. It aims to reflect the intrinsic link between the two terms and their embeddedness within each other. Unlike most antonyms, it is challenging to deem one favorable to the other, as the perspective used to examine these phenomena has a significant impact on the conclusions drawn from them. Disconnecting from social media, for instance, could be seen as a tool for fostering mental well-being, thereby enhancing one's connection with themselves. At the same time, considering that social media platforms serve as communication channels, the very same action could be argued to have a negative impact on one's mental wellness through isolation. This special issue will therefore take up the relevant and complex concept of dis/connection, particularly in its relationship to literature, and explore its different facets through a variety of contributions.



Conceptualizing Dis/Connection

Before examining these specific examples, however, a broader exploration of the concepts of connection and disconnection serves to underline their importance. Connection has been conceptualized in various ways, from psychological studies on human relationships, such as attachment theory and social bonding, to artistic expressions in literature, music, and theatre. Performer, novelist, and poet Kae Tempest’s description of connection is one such conceptualization that we took inspiration from throughout the development of this issue. They describe connection as “the feeling of landing in the present tense. Fully immersed in whatever occupies you, paying close attention to the details of experience. Characterized by an awareness of your minuteness in the scheme of things. A feeling of being absolutely located” (5). Philosopher Alexander Spirkin echoes this understanding when he posits that connection combines temporal and spatial aspects, often occurring organically and beyond intentional control, embodying positive and negative connotations alike (83). This approach suggests that social, political, or technological connections can form both deliberately and unintentionally, shape personal bonds and large-scale movements, and offer the potential to further individual agendas while benefiting communities.

Literature notably possesses unique affordances for addressing dis/connection both in its content and in its relationship with readers; often simplifying complex ideas by personalizing them. Across various literary genres and eras, themes such as *fragmentation* in modernist works, *memory* in trauma literature, and *identity* and *hybridity* in postcolonial literatures mirror conditions of both connection and disconnection. We assert that poetry is particularly well suited to convey the complexity of connection, hence we included a collection of six poems in this issue. As Eilish Dillon suggests, “poetry can help us to connect with complex global realities that people struggle with everywhere” and has the potential to facilitate “self-reflexivity which links the personal and the political, the emotional and the rational and the local and the global” (398). Through its fast public dissemination, concise format, and diverse forms, poetry addresses contemporary societal issues with creative immediacy and facilitates connections during times of adversity.

Much like connection, there is a long tradition of writing about and examining themes closely tied to disconnection. For instance, Edward Said, in his influential 1978 work *Orientalism*, highlights how the process of *othering* fosters a profound disconnection between groups, as it dehumanizes and objectifies those who are categorized as outsiders. From an economic perspective, Karl Marx’s theory of *alienation* echoes themes of disconnection, by arguing that under capitalist systems, workers are estranged from the products of their labor, the labor process itself, their fellow workers, and even their own human essence. Said’s and Marx’s frameworks illuminate the psychological, cultural, and socio-economic dimensions of dis/connection, revealing how power structures and economic systems contribute to the fragmentation of human relationships and identities.



While disconnection was initially linked to the negative effects of modern life, its meaning has evolved in the digital age, where being online has become the norm. Rather than a problem to be fixed, disconnection has come to be seen as a solution to the challenges posed by constant connectivity, including hyperawareness, information overload, and burnout. The term disconnection, today, is thus closely entangled with movements such as “digital detoxing” (Moe and Madsen 1587), which promises relief from the relentless connectivity of the social media age by disconnecting or unplugging. Such initiatives hold the promise of (re)connecting with ourselves and our environments.

Connection and disconnection are then not simply opposing forces but are deeply intertwined. Consciously or unconsciously, groups and individuals navigate the complexities of connection and disconnection in both public and private spheres on an everyday basis. For example, stereotypes and discriminatory practices often lead to antipathy and outright resentment toward minority groups who in turn find strength in intra-communal spaces and non-conforming identity building. For minority groups, it is thus important to argue for “protection against discrimination” as a “distinct, recognizable, delineated” group (Butler 24). The resulting discourse on systemic inequities faced by minority groups—especially in times of crisis—underscores the consequences of being disconnected from societal privileges and norms. Simultaneously, it exhibits how connections forged between individuals and communities can “foster resilience, cultivate political will and effectively challenge discriminatory policies, practices and norms” (Gray II et al. 522), ultimately demonstrating how connection can arise through disconnection.

Aim of this Issue

The twenty-five years since the turn of the new millennium have been characterized by pervasive experiences of alienation manifesting across social and political spheres. Thus, with this issue we intend to contribute to the scholarly exploration of discourses surrounding attempts at dis/connection, focusing on how literature can communicate both feelings of disconnection, for example through exploring the experience of death, as well as affective stories of connection, from familial ties to companionship with animals. We view dis/connection in the context of American cultural and literary studies as a lens through which to consider the self in relation to other people and institutions on an intersectional level. The way connections and disconnections are fostered and expressed both on individual and societal levels can give insights into the preoccupations, anxieties, and values of our cultural moment. This special issue provides a variety of temporal perspectives on dis/connection, exploring topics spanning two hundred years. Hence, each article showcases how instances of dis/connection have evolved while staying central to the human experience throughout history and the development of technological advancements.

In this vein, dis/connection, as our focus in this thematic issue, not only encapsulates the distinct yet interrelated notions of disconnection and connection but also underscores the

inherent interplay and mutual dependency between these two concepts. The issue brings together a collection of critical and creative reflections on American literature and culture, examining the diverse and often paradoxical ways in which the complexities of dis/connection are experienced. We are excited to have been able to curate a range of new scholarship delving into the entangled dynamics of the culture of dis/connection—from the interpersonal to the global, the historical, and the contemporary. As a result, the synergies within this compiled issue provide both a compelling and comprehensive overview and a nuanced examination of the reciprocity between connection and disconnection.

Ties of Dis/Connection

The genres and forms examined in what follows, including poetry, novels, and non-fiction, have different ways of addressing connection and disconnection. This special issue with its contributions on dis- and re-identification in Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* (1980), the bonds between human and animal in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (1851) and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), the manifestation of dis/connection in Emily Dickinson's life and poetry, and the queer experience during pandemics in Jodi Picoult's *Wish You Were Here* (2021), provides a plethora of perspectives on dis/connection, showcasing its versatility. In addition, this issue contains a creative component by including a collection of poems which thematizes dis/connection. The contributions invite readers to consider not merely the ways in which we connect and/or disconnect, but also how this relates to broader systems, movements, and conceptual frameworks.

Disconnecting from and reconnecting with one's body and identity are primary topics in **Alicia Hüls's** article "I did not feel the same as before surgery': How Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* turned Disidentification into Reidentification." By providing a close reading of Audre Lorde's memoir, *The Cancer Journals*, through the lens of José Esteban Muñoz's theory of 'disidentification,' Hüls explores Lorde's navigation of post-mastectomy experiences, analyzing Lorde's journey from feelings of disconnection to a redefined self-identity that resists traditional beauty standards. Drawing on feminist approaches, Hüls demonstrates how Lorde's narrative shifts toward a powerful connection and *reidentification* with her own body and identity, creating space for alternative understandings of femininity, resilience, and self-perception. Instead of simply disidentifying with societal gender norms, Hüls stresses how Lorde defines a new identity for herself which is disconnected from these stereotypes.

We see these narrative shifts taking a different turn, expanding from the individual body to bodies of species in **Burak Sezer's** article "Roped Solidarity: The Aesthetics of Human-Animal Bonding in Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*," which shifts the attention to the dynamics of dis/connection between species. Focusing on the language of ropes and rigging, Sezer shows how these two renowned American works of maritime literature represent complex bonds between humans and non-humans. Through this symbolic framework, the article explores how moments of attachment and separation



between people and animals deepen the themes of interdependence and isolation within American literature.

Irene Lopez Sanchez, in “Exploring Connection in Emily Dickinson’s Poetics,” provides a unique perspective on the concept of disconnection by reframing the myth of Emily Dickinson as a social recluse. She connects Dickinson’s exploration of the ‘Eternal Now’ with Carl Jung’s concept of ‘twin existences’ and Kae Tempest’s insights on ‘present awareness.’ By combining a reading of different historical and contemporary academic perspectives on Dickinson with a reading of her poems and letter fragments through the lens of disconnection, Lopez Sanchez argues that Dickinson’s rejection of conventional standards and her periods of withdrawal allowed for her profound engagement with connection and disconnection, with life and death.

Reframing dis/connection against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, **Anne Stellberger** examines the interplay between the crisis chronotope and dis/connection through a refreshing queer intersectional lens in her article “Queering Dis/Connection within the Pandemic Chronotope in Jodi Picoult’s *Wish You Were Here*.” By employing the concept of the crisis chronotope to analyze the narrative as pandemic literature, this approach illustrates how the interpersonal dis/connections of a crisis can challenge heteronormative spatio-temporal dimensions. In light of the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ways in which individuals engage with digital and physical connections, Stellberger’s article adds a contemporary perspective to this thematic issue.

The distinctive nature of this thematic issue is further enriched by six poems and an artist’s statement by **Hannah V Warren**. Her work addresses what is disjointed and broken as well as the notion of returning. The poems include a sense of place, yet as the artist’s statement informs us, there are multiple places being made sense of, places of origin as well as those explored abroad. Ultimately, connections are not only drawn between the individual and place, but also between the places themselves. By describing how women move between such places, female identity as well as how women are perceived and named are also considered. These are poems to be revisited: upon the second, third, or perhaps the tenth reading, something different in the text stands out to the reader, a new connection to be made.

Despite their diverse foci, the articles in this issue all contribute to the understanding of why, how, and in which contexts connection and disconnection phenomena occur and thus form a nuanced exploration of the subjects. We believe that the issue’s focus on literature lends itself particularly well to an intersectional analysis of past and present preoccupations and anxieties through the lens of dis/connection. With this special issue, we aim to initiate a dialogue on the varied themes that the concepts of connection and disconnection encompass while exploring their implications for American studies, by and large.



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