"Strangers to Themselves": Identity Construction Among American Studies Students in Hungary

Thomas A. Williams

Abstract: This small-scale study proceeds from Bruner (1987) and Fougère (2008) in using semi-structured interviews to elicit self-narratives from six American Studies majors at two universities in Hungary. It also explores these self-narratives to ascertain (aspects of) the students' constantly constructed identities. This is done with the understanding that identity is produced by linguistic and other semiotic practices instead of originated from them and therefore is first and foremost a socio-cultural phenomenon rather than an internal, psychological one (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). Given that language affiliation is key to identity (Simon 2004), in addition to their identities as American Studies students, the study also investigates their identities as English speakers. But what is identity? It can broadly be defined as "the social positioning of self and other" (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 586). Thus, how do these students position themselves and others? What aspects of their identity have drawn them to engage with American Studies? How have U.S. social, cultural, political, and economic phenomena – or their understanding of these phenomena – affected their sense of what it means to be an American Studies student? To what extent do their American Studies courses and the university more broadly act as a heterotopia (Foucault 1986), or third space, which enables individuals to redefine themselves through new experiences in that context? Indeed, to what extent do they develop intercultural personhood and become strangers to themselves (Kristeva 1988)?

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Keywords: identity, narrative inquiry, American Studies, semi-structured interviews, language affiliation

AMERICANA – E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary, Vol. XX1., No. 1., 2025
ISSN 1787-4637

DOI: 10.14232/americana.2025.1.84-97

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1. Introduction

We all like a good story. In fact, story-telling has played a central role in the work of psychoanalysts, historians, sociologists, ethnographers, and other scholars for decades. Applied linguists have also come to see the power of narrative in developing a fuller understanding of the individual experience of foreign language learners and teachers and how they view themselves, i.e., their changing identity, in their respective endeavors. Indeed, narratives make it possible to (1) monitor change and development in our participants in time and space, (2) explore their experience outside the classroom or laboratory, and (3) take the researcher into their world (Benson 2021). This is key because our present identity is not an abrupt and inexplicable event; it is the sensible outcome of a life story (Gergen 1994). It is in this vein that this small-scale study explores the life narratives of six students of American Studies in Hungary.

The research thus aims to determine how these participants construct their identities as English speakers and as American Studies majors. It is structured as follows. After this brief introduction, it introduces the concepts of narrative inquiry and identity, describes the research design, presents the data thematically and discusses it, and leaves the reader with some closing thoughts.

2. Theoretical and empirical background

The paper is centered on two key concepts: (1) a research paradigm known as narrative inquiry and (2) identity, a phenomenon, like agency and power, which is frequently at the heart of narrative research. I will present each of these in turn.

2.1. Narrative inquiry

According to Barkhuizen (2015), narrative inquiry is a way of doing research that focuses on stories we tell about our lives. Just as sociologist Harvey Sacks (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson 1974) saw that social actions are achieved through conversation and that conversation is thus an essential aspect of social organization, not merely a means of communication, so too are the life narratives we tell indicative of who we are, who we have become, and who we are becoming as individuals as part of the world around us. As Bruner (1987) sees it, the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that direct our self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure our perceptual experience, to organize our memory, and to segment and construct the events in our lives – and thus we become the autobiographical narratives through which we tell our lives. Therefore, for Bruner (1987: 13), not only do our self-narratives imitate our experiences; our experiences also imitate our narratives as we begin to relate to our world differently in response to how we have constructed our narratives. In short, "narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative" (Bruner 1987: 13).

In examining spontaneous narratives among African Americans and documenting their lexical, grammatical, and discoursal richness and consistency, William Labov (Labov 1972; Labov & Waletzky 1967) identified six basic elements or clauses that made up these narratives: (1) abstract: How does it begin?; (2) orientation: Who/what does it involve, and when/where?; (3) complicating action: Then what happened?; (4) resolution: What finally happened?; (5) evaluation: So what?; and (6) coda: What does it all mean? While some narratives may not include every element, this framework shows the structure and linguistic features of storytelling,

whether tragic, comical, or simply inspiring. Bruner (1987) has built on this model in his work on the construction of identity through self-narrative. Fougère (2008) has also examined a range of aspects of identity formation in recently graduated business administration students working abroad.

2.2. Identity

An intuitive yet elusive concept, identity can be defined as a person's or group's sense of self; it can refer to both characteristics that distinguish an individual from others and those that make them recognizable as a member of a group (Spencer-Oatey 2008). Indeed, identity is constructed through overlapping aspects of relationships between self and others, being in part intentional, habitual, or unconscious (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). Language affiliation is certainly key to identity (Simon 2004), and even language learners can be seen as developing a particular identity (Early & Norton 2012). Ultimately, identities can best be understood as being continually constructed through interactions, and it is especially fascinating to study them in intercultural contexts, where people often reflect more about them.

3. Methodology

In this section, I will briefly report on the four parts of the research methodology: the context, participants, procedure, and research questions.

3.1. Context

The context of the study is the University of Szeged in southeastern Hungary. This institution of higher education consists of 2500 instructors and researchers and a student body of 24,000, including nearly 5000 international students from over 130 countries (University of Szeged 2025), thus making it a large university, as defined by the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER). It is situated in the third largest city in Hungary with a population of approximately 157,000 (2023 estimate) (Szeged (Hungary) population 2025).

3.2. Participants

Gathered through convenience sampling, the participants in this small-scale study comprise six Hungarian students of American Studies, four males and two females, aged 22–25, with five of them enrolled at the University of Szeged and the remaining one at a comparable large, provincial university (i.e., one outside the capital), the University of Pécs. I would note that, admittedly, the gender breakdown may not seem representative of students of English at Hungarian universities on the face of it. However, a data analysis by Julianna Kecskés (personal communication) of all English majors registered at the University of Szeged in the Neptun system in September of each of the five years from 2019 to 2023 has found a far higher proportion of males in American Studies (0.754) compared to English Studies (0.366) at the BA level and an even higher proportion (1.625 vs. 0.394) – in fact, a somewhat higher number of males outright (13 males vs. 8 females) – in the American Studies MA program compared to the English Studies MA program for that period (see Table 1). Although it would be interesting to analyze the reasons for this trend, such an undertaking would transcend the limits of this study.

Table 1. Number of English and American Studies students at the University of Szeged broken down by gender (2019–2023)

	Males	Females	Proportion
BA			
English Studies	90	246	0.366
American Studies	52	69	0.754
MA			
English Studies	13	33	0.394
American Studies	13	8	1.625

3.3. Procedure

I conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, each 30–50 minutes in length, in spring 2024. In an effort to elicit the richest and fullest self-narrative possible, I sought to ensure (1) an optimum rapport between the participants and myself and (2) a relaxed and comfortable interview setting. (With two exceptions, where distance necessitated a video conference, all of the interviews were held by mutual agreement at a café frequented by students and teachers.) As for our rapport, I had taught them, acted as their thesis advisor, and/or come to know them well through mutual acquaintances. Duff (2008) observes a qualitative change in the various life narratives she has elicited from a participant as his trust in her grew over time, and thus I believe I have managed to achieve this same goal. The interviews were conducted in English, as that has been the language of our respective student–teacher relationships inside and outside the classroom (see the Appendix for further details about the interview procedure).

The interviews were audiotaped by mutual agreement using the voice recording feature on the researcher's cell phone. The audio files were then transcribed online with Restream, post-edited, and manually coded. A thematic analysis was subsequently conducted (Holliday 2015) for relevant recurring themes. This was followed by Facebook messages for clarification and "member checking," where I reviewed my interpretations of the data with the participants in an effort to ensure trustworthiness (Barton & Hamilton 1998).

3.4. Research questions

I sought to find answers to the following two research questions:

(1) How do these participants construct their identities as English speakers?
(2) As American Studies majors?

4. Results and discussion

As narrative inquiry uses stories not only as (1) data and as (2) an analytical tool, but also as (3) reporting practice (Ghanbar, Cinaglia, Randez, & De Costa 2024), I will first share all the participants' data as a cohesive narrative for the greatest clarity of context. Then, based on a thematic analysis (Holliday 2015), I will report on selected data broken down into three emerging themes – imagining America, jumping hurdles, and a critical stance – and proceed to a discussion of the data as it pertains to each of these themes.

4.1. Participant short bios

In this section, I will present the six participants' short bios in succession such that their discreet life stories form a larger, interconnected whole. The participants' names have been anonymized (via fictional names), with their bios presented in random order.

4.1.1. Balázs, 25, second-year MA student

Balázs's path to American Studies began early with an unusual childhood fascination with macabre illustrations of skeletons and executions in books, from which he had been forbidden by his concerned parents, making him even more captivated by the macabre. As a young child, he loved folk tales, both Hungarian (Benedek Elek) and German (the Brothers Grimm). Later, while he reluctantly read the canonical Romantic and Realist fiction assigned in school, he became an avid reader of fantasy, science fiction, and horror in his free time as well as superhero comics and manga. He especially came to love the tendency in American horror writing to produce an atmosphere that aids the reader in perceiving frightening events as truly horrific. Having been good at English since the third grade, he became particularly motivated to develop his proficiency by reading Japanese and American horror fiction in English. This led to his study of American horror writers Stephen King and H. P. Lovecraft and his Master's thesis on Thomas Ligotti. He has never been to North America but would love to see natural landmarks, such as

the Grand Canyon and Niagara Falls, but not big cities like New York and Chicago because they cause him anxiety. (Bio 1)

4.1.2. Ákos, 25, first-year MA student

Like Balázs, Ákos started learning English at an early age. He recalls that both his parents encouraged it. He notes, "Yeah, my-my parents knew that … it's-it's beneficial to learn English even though they tried and-and failed because … the system … wasn't … perfect …. So, yeah, my parents knew that it would be beneficial, and I guess they were right." Ákos would listen to classic rock with his father, concentrating on the English lyrics, and later play computer games and watch sci-fi movies in English – all of which seemed to propel him toward American themes. He joined the scouts because of an American film with a Life Scout in the main role (*Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade* (1989)). Still active as a leader in scouting now, he has noted a tension between its underlying conservatism and his own progressive views and will make a point to address an issue (such as homophobia) when it arises. He is planning to write his Master's thesis on the conflict between capitalism and environmentalism in the film *Avatar* (2009). For his Bachelor's thesis, he compared depictions of African-American characters in the films *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) and *Shaft* (2019). He worked in maintenance at a summer camp in the U.S. and enjoyed it – although he was shocked at what he experienced as the ease with which Americans produce waste. In contrast to Balázs's anticipated dread of New York, Ákos enjoyed visiting the city with his parents that summer. However, he was taken aback by further signs of waste there in the form of garbage bags piled high along the streets. He was also struck by the lack of sidewalks for pedestrians in the suburbs of New Jersey. (Bio 2)

4.1.3. Réka, 22, third-year BA student

Raised in Hungary with a Hungarian mother and an American father and having spent most of her summers in the U.S., Réka sees the Hungarian town she grew up in as her "primary home," suggesting there may be at least one other "home" for her. She was brought up bilingual, developed a natural interest in language and language learning, and therefore chose English as her major with a concentration in American Studies, since she was more familiar with U.S. culture. She conducted a comparative study of young adults' perceived language use in the U.S. and Hungary for her thesis. She will now take a gap year to do volunteer work abroad – a plan that strikes her as more American than Hungarian. Similarly, she sees community-mindedness and a readiness to compromise and solve problems as characteristically American. Next, she plans to complete a Master's program in linguistics, also abroad. She has found that she has greater success simply chatting and getting to know people in English than in Hungarian owing in part to her varied experiences in that regard in Hungary and the U.S. As she puts it, "I think it's language-based for me." Her American Studies courses have helped her to develop a greater openness to the world and to see America and indeed the world more critically, for example, in learning about the U.S. role in Vietnam. (Bio 3)

4.1.4. Zsuzsa, 22, third-year BA student

Having grown up in a small city in northeastern Hungary, Zsusza was drawn to American Studies through social media content and the sense that American Studies courses would be "more modern" and "fresh." She has liked English for a long time and read a lot in the language as of the fifth grade. She also made use of the language to watch anime and, like Balázs, read manga. Fascinated by everyday phenomena in the U.S. – and somewhat similarly to Réka – she wrote her BA thesis on how Americans perceive small talk. She would like to visit the U.S. but not live there, since the thought of needing a car to go to most places there is alien to her, a concern that echoes Ákos's surprise at the lack of sidewalks in suburban New Jersey. She feels her American Studies experience has benefited her in part because her seminars have encouraged her to assert herself in discussions and in part because her English proficiency has greatly improved. Indeed, she

notes her English is stronger than that of her colleagues at the foreign-owned bank where she works, where this is the language most used. (Bio 4)

4.1.5. Zsolt, 23, first-year MA student

English was always Zsolt's favorite subject in school because of how effectively he felt it was taught. He was especially drawn to American culture. He read classics in English early on, such as *Around the World in Eighty Days* and the Harry Potter books. American Studies courses have struck him as "more diverse and more colorful" than those in English Studies – much like the U.S. He has been keenly interested in central figures in U.S. history, such as Thomas Jefferson, and he has found that learning theory in his courses has aided him in "viewing … society … and culture from multiple perspectives." He has also gained a great deal from coming to know international students in the program. While he has never visited the U.S., he is curious about major U.S. urban centers, such as Chicago and New York. Similarly to Balázs, he is writing his thesis on Stephen King and trauma studies. He wants to go into teaching – perhaps just privately. (Bio 5)

4.1.6. Előd, 23, third-year BA student

Előd grew up in the Vajdaság/Vojvodina region of Serbia. Similarly to Balázs and Ákos, he learned English from an early age (the first grade) and planned to go to a military academy in Budapest but was unable to do so because of his eyesight. He then chose American Studies because he preferred American English pronunciation and was more interested in U.S. culture, particularly in U.S. military operations. Importantly, he has always done sports (for example, kayaking and boxing) and sees a link between the discipline and challenge of sports and those of the military, which he primarily associates with the U.S. In addition to primary school, he also took English classes at a language school, where his instructor told him about his experiences in the U.S. As with Ákos, playing multi-player games also spurred Előd on to develop his English. Now he helps his parents with their own English lessons. Like Zsolt, he would like to visit New York City, but he is also interested in seeing the Grand Canyon and Texas – Texas being a place which appeals to him in particular for producing a large number of Navy Seals. While he has been to the U.K. twice, he finds the U.S. more appealing perhaps because it is more distant geographically and therefore more of a challenge to reach. He shares his fascination with the U.S. from afar with both Balázs and Zsolt. Also like Zsolt, Előd has found it important to get to know the international students in his studies. He now plans to do a Master's in Human Resources. (Bio 6)

4.2. Participant excerpts

As noted above, three themes emerged from a thematic analysis of the participants' self-narratives: (1) imagining America, (2) jumping hurdles, and (3) a critical stance. I will cover each of these in turn.

4.2.1. Imagining America

If we accept that traditions can be invented (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) and that nations and other kinds of communities are imagined (Anderson 1983), then it stands to reason that members of a community of practice (CofP) (Wenger 1998), such as chefs, migrant workers, and defense attorneys, construct (elements of) their own individual and collective identity. In this case, it appears that this group of American Studies majors envisions America (its geography, culture, etc.) in their own particular ways as part of their own ongoing project of shaping their identity. For example, Zsolt, like so many of his peers who have never been able to visit the country they are studying, paints a picture of major U.S. cities and their functioning:

> "I really want to visit Chicago just because of the surrounding and the-the buildings, I think of them-and Manhattan, as the heart of the world. And yeah, just to experience how it feels

> to live in a place where so many people live and-and so many cultures, so many minorities work together, live together, speak with each other." (Excerpt 1)

For him, Manhattan is more than an urban hub. It is "the heart of the world." Similarly, he wonders at U.S. cities for what he sees as the social cohesion of their culturally and ethnically diverse inhabitants, who manage to "work together, live together, speak with each other." While Zsolt certainly displays evidence of a critical capacity (see Excerpt 9 below), this quote suggests an idealistic understanding. Similarly, Ákos, who has been to the U.S., recounts his early encounters with American tropes through computer games:

> "I played a game, I think it was called Rebel Galaxy. … The soundtrack was really this Blues and-and … the southern vibes of rock and roll music and-and I was like, yeah, I really like this. So I-I started to look around more, and-and a lot of games used these Americana themes to, you know, play on this idea that, yeah, you had-it's a frontier and you-and you have to cut out your own living." (Excerpt 2)

Like Zsolt's optimistic view of American cities, Ákos appears enthusiastic about a romanticized portrayal of a quintessentially American frontier (have there *never* been similar frontiers elsewhere?) complete with a uniquely American soundtrack (though the Blues and rock and roll are actually rooted in West African musical traditions). This is the frontier myth, a powerful narrative in U.S. culture that sentimentalizes the westward push and depicts the frontier as a place of limitless opportunity and freedom (cf. Turner 1920). This idealized story stresses individualism, adventure, and the mastery of civilization over nature, thus helping to forge a national identity that celebrates these traits, ignoring the consequences of this enterprise to both the Native Americans and the natural environment.

In contrast, Bálazs suggests a darker, more cautious impression of American settings:

> "I really liked the-the atmosphere of the desert in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. … Yeah. And also then I watched *The Hills Have Eyes* … by Wes Craven. Again, it was in the-the … grand desert area. … And again the-the suburban areas then were just alien and, well, … it's like a volcano that erupts. So I guess it-it looks wonderful from a certain distance, but-but, yeah, you wouldn't really want to be there." (Excerpt 3)

Consistent with Bálazs's interest in horror fiction, these settings are powerful and fascinating – but only "from a certain distance." They offer a fitting backdrop to a fictional world. Indeed, the films themselves and many comparable works of fiction, as Bálazs sees it, could only have been produced in the U.S., not only because of their American settings and themes, but also because of an American tradition of creating a market for pulp fiction that made it possible for writers like H. P. Lovecraft to publish and for comparable films to be produced.

The various themes noted by these students – Chicago, Manhattan, an ethnolinguistically diverse society, the Blues, rock and roll, the frontier, the desert, and the suburbs – point, via the students' respective imaginations, to America. They are indices, or signs, that refer to some element within the same context; for example, smoke indexes fire and clouds index rain (Peirce 1932 [1897]). All of the elements mentioned by the participants point to (part(s) of) America: the places, the people, and the culture.

While indices such as Chicago and Manhattan clearly refer to the U.S., even less particularly American indices, such as the desert and the suburbs, can be understood as such. Indeed, Előd referred to the appealing challenge of America's geographic distance from Hungary. This distance – and thus the range of differences between the two countries – only reinforces these indices for these students. After all, while there are many Hungarians who live in suburban communities, scenes of American suburbs, with the abundance of shopping centers and strip malls, the necessity of cars for mobility, and the frequent lack of sidewalks, as noted by Ákos, unambiguously index the U.S. Similarly, while there are numerous deserts in the world,

America's desertscapes likely stand out, for example, the Mojave Desert, as characterized by the Joshua tree, and the Great Basin Desert, as marked by the sagebrush, and therefore clearly index America.

The concept of a schema (Augustinos & Walker 1995; Ringland & Duce 1988) may also be helpful in this regard. A schema is a mental structure in which a person's knowledge of the world is organized for use in cognition and communication. Thus, if a neighbor makes mention of her house or her car, we will instantly conjure a clear picture of one or the other in our minds. Cross-culturally, however, this becomes interesting because either of those words might inspire very different mental images depending on which culture the hearer (or speaker) is from. Thus, while other countries may be characterized by ethnolinguistically diverse societies, America's (like those of the others) is distinct. Having studied American society, Zsolt is therefore likely to have had a specifically American schema in mind when he referenced a place where "so many cultures, so many minorities work together, live together, speak with each other."

4.2.2. Jumping hurdles

Each of the participants recounted experiences of jumping hurdles, that is, observing obstacles in their respective paths and managing to overcome them – obstacles tied to their personal development or to being a learner of English or student of American Studies. When Ákos first entered his English BA program, he noted the contrast between his own experience of having learned English through various media to that of others who had enjoyed the opportunity to live abroad:

> "When I got into university, everyone was talking, like, yeah, I have, you know, relatives living in Britain or-or in Australia. And I was like, yeah, I played a lot of video games and-and watched a lot of films in English. So yeah. And that-that was kind of what—I never really met another person who spoke English on the same level as me who didn't really have a, you know, an English-speaking environment." (Excerpt 4)

Here, Ákos recalls a stark, unanticipated contrast between himself and some of the other English majors with light-hearted self-deprecation. He has been exposed to a not uncommon phenomenon among incoming students in higher education: an encounter with classmates from unfamiliar walks of life who seem to take certain advantages for granted. More to the point, as in any community, there is a tendency among English majors to differentiate themselves and others with regard to socio-economic status and the opportunities it may or may not afford them. Foreign travel, especially travel to an Anglophone country, is a particular indicator of status for English majors (Dombi 2011). Exacerbating these differences, particularly at Hungarian institutions of higher education outside the capital, is the factor of first-generation students, especially from small towns and villages, with all the attendant inequalities (Bocsi 2020).

Ákos also looks back to his early shock in lower primary school at having to learn a point of English grammar by rote, having relished learning English extramurally and thus naturalistically up to that point:

> "I-I remember struggling with English right at the-at primary school.... I was ... a ... fourth-grader. ... And I was like crying because I had to learn all the three different forms of the irregular verbs and-and ... it felt like torture. And I remember my sister ... trying to explain this to me. But then-then I just realized that it cannot be explained like at that-at that level. Like it had to be learned." (Excerpt 5)

In Excerpt 4 above, we see the transition in Ákos's narrative from feeling alone and apart ("everyone was talking," i.e., all the others) to reassessing his situation and thus resolving the inner conflict ("I never really met another person who spoke English on the same level as me," i.e., but now I have and accept the fact). In Excerpt 5 above, a younger Ákos was "struggling with

English" and "crying" because learning the three principal parts of irregular verbs seemed utterly senseless and "felt like torture," but then he resigned himself to the fact that "it just had to be learned." Thus, we see two examples of a complicating action ("Then what happened?") lead to a resolution ("What finally happened?") (Labov 1972; Labov & Waletzky 1967).

Further, like many learners of English, Előd has passed through various stages of relating to the language:

> "After I passed the exam, … I started to be more confident in speaking and everything. So the-the exam was the fever that helped me…. And after that I started to like it [English] more and to-and to read more and to study as well more because before that studying English was something that I must do…. But later I really got into it … and liked it more." (Excerpt 6)

Előd recounts a shift within himself from lacking the confidence to speak to proving to himself that he in fact knows the language by passing a key language exam ("the-the exam was the fever that helped me"). He is thus motivated to continue feeding his English and, in the process, prompted to change his attitude to learning the language from seeing it as "something I must do" to an undertaking that he eventually "really got into … and liked … more."

In investing himself so fully in learning English, I would suggest that Előd has achieved what Kramsch (2006: 251) calls *symbolic competence*, according to which "language learners are not just communicators and problem solvers, but whole persons with hearts, bodies, and minds, with memories, fantasies, loyalties, identities." Indeed, Előd brings his own subjectivity to bear in his use of English: as described in his bio in the previous section (Bio 6), he continually develops his own proficiency, he aids his parents in developing theirs, he establishes and manages rapport with international students, and he nurtures his deep fascination with America.

Finally, Zsuzsa describes her own personal shift:

> "I definitely noticed that I'm more sure about myself, and I also voice my opinion more clearly. So, for example, engaging in debates are-are … easier for me. … I always considered myself a very introvert person and I think studying American Studies … and the-the different aspects of it … It definitely changed me in some ways." (Excerpt 7)

As also noted in her bio previously (Bio 4), Zsuzsa sees her American Studies experience in particular has having nudged her to assert her views in exchanges with others. It has also helped her gain confidence not only personally but also professionally, not least of all because of her English proficiency. Indeed, humanities seminars promote constructive stance-taking in presentations ("I think/argue/believe") and in discussions ("I strongly (dis)agree") (Kashiha 2021), an ability that transfers to a range of other contexts, including (but certainly not limited to) the workplace.

Geographical metaphors can also shed light on these participants' experiences. In Ákos's comparison between his own English learning experience and that of "everyone" around him who has managed to travel to the English-speaking world, he suggests an initial lack of belonging. Thus, the dichotomy of insideness–outsideness plays a role. When we have spent some time *inside* a physical place (for example, the university building(s) in which students go to seminars or share a coffee with friends), we may well feel we belong there. As Relph (1976) views it, the essence of a place is linked to the experience of an "inside" that is distinct from an "outside." To him, "to be inside a place is to identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger is this identity with the place" (Relph 1976: 49).

Similarly, Tuan's (1977) distinction between place and space may help to elucidate Előd's and Zsuzsa's respective experience. According to Tuan (1977: 3), "place is security, space is freedom; we are attached to the one and long for the other." When we are at home, we breathe a sigh of relief because it is familiar and we are safe: this is place. When we are out in the world,

we are free, we are challenged, and thus we grow: this is space. Előd left the familiarity of his small town in Vajdaság/Vojvodina (Serbia) and his dry, pedantic, dutiful way of learning English for tests and, having come to a university setting, came to see the language as his link to a world of knowledge and fascinating strangers. Likewise, Zsuzsa moved beyond her safe introversion in the northeastern Hungarian city in which she grew up and learned to trust her opinions and her ability to defend them in a new space – first the university and now her English-medium workplace.

4.2.3. Critical stance

Dumitru (2019) refers to creating meaning as the link between creative thinking and critical thinking and as a criterial quality of a critical thinker. She points out that the humanities – and cultural studies in particular – provide an environment that promotes critical thinking and facilitates the production of meaning (Dumitru 2019). American Studies programs can thus be seen as a site for fostering the critical creation of meaning among its students. The following excerpts thus illustrate the participants' critical stance.

Having grown up in and with two cultures, those of Hungary and America, Réka compares a range of societal and cultural differences between them. For example, as mentioned in Réka's short bio above (Bio 3), she contrasts the sense of community service she perceives as characteristic of the US to the relative lack of it today in Hungary. She goes on to analyze the situation diachronically:

> "Yeah. Although, like, I think in the past Hungarians were more open to help each other, especially in smaller villages. I've heard how somebody would get married and then the community would build them a house and … I think, in the past, we were more community-based." (Excerpt 8)

Similarly, in contrast to his enthusiastic description of diverse American cities (in Excerpt 1 above), Zsolt has come to see the neoliberal political and economic system that has become ever more firmly entrenched in the U.S. over the decades as completely destructive:

> "I'm not really um fond of this capitalist social and economic functioning because it only leads to hierarchies and, really, like in every single part of society. And they just-it tears up the whole country, basically." (Excerpt 9)

Moreover, in considering what her undergraduate experience has provided her, Réka points to an increased openness to the world and a greater critical capacity (see Bio 3). For instance, she is given pause to compare the educational ideology she was exposed to in high school to that of her college studies:

> "Yeah. And just thinking about things in general, letting us think about things which, I don't know.... In high school, they just told us what we need to know. … And we never really thought about things. 'What do you think about this or that?' Or 'Why do you think that is?' Yeah." (Excerpt 10)

In this excerpt, Réka is referring to her shift from an educational ideology of classical humanism in high school ("they just told us what we need to know") to one of progressivism in college ("letting us think about things") – and indeed to the contrast between the two ideologies. According to White (1988), classical humanism is defined as the handing down of an esteemed cultural and intellectual heritage (for example, an orthodox understanding of canonical literature and grand narratives of politics and economics in history), while progressivism is centered on (1) problem-posing education and the learner as decision-maker, (2) reflecting and acting on the world to change it, and (3) stimulating new ideas, opinions, and perceptions – not simply exchanging them.

Likewise, when discussing what his American Studies courses have provided him, Balázs points to a similar distinction:

> "I would also say that that the-the appreciation of … this postmodern approach that that, you know, denies this classical idea of the literary canon strongly influenced my idea of-of valuable literature, and, as I'm a person heavily invested in literature, I think that this idea is an important part of the way how I see not only literature, but also art in general. So yes, and-and I think this-this, I guess maybe this is an American attitude towards art, I don't know, this-this-this postmodern approach, I would say." (Excerpt 11)

Here, Balázs specifies a postmodern understanding of literature and art more generally as a specifically American project (though scholars of French intellectuals such as Jacques Derrida would certainly point out their seminal contribution to the development of postmodernism as well). As postmodernism focuses on "revealing the cultural constructions we designate as truth and opening up a variety of repressed other histories of modernity" (Palmer 2014 n.p.), it clearly falls within the progressivist paradigm. Hence, Réka and Balázs have not simply come away from their college studies with a breadth and depth of knowledge but with a fundamentally altered epistemological stance as well.

Thus, we have seen Réka examining her Hungarian culture with a balanced yet critical perspective, Zsolt offering his own social critique of American culture, and both Réka and Balázs showing a profound awareness of how they process and relate to knowledge. Fougère (2008) has argued that a sense of competence and role fulfilment indicates belonging (Fougère 2008). First, knowing and criticizing suggest competence. After all, a convincing criticism of a novel or a social practice, say, must be founded on (at least sufficient) knowledge of that novel or social practice. Second, the role of a humanities student/graduate is arguably to critically analyze the world, specifically societal structures and problems, with the aim of producing knowledge, questioning norms, and proposing solutions. Thus, these participants' critical stance would clearly suggest competence and role fulfilment and thus belonging. Belonging, in turn, suggests identity (Fougère 2008), in this case, the (nascent) identity of a young, English-speaking, city-dwelling, university-educated, European professional (cf. Williams 2024).

Finally, descriptions of identity must be based on the pragmatic and metapragmatic manifestations of speakers' utterances. It is essential to concentrate on speakers' own understandings of their identity as they endeavor to ascertain *who they are (more or less) similar to*. Thus, identity is often conceptualized as sameness. (Indeed, the English word *identity* derives from the Late Latin *identitas*, which is formed from the Latin *idem*, meaning "the same.") However, an individual's perception of a shared identity often requires a sense of *alterity* – the Other (Bucholtz & Hall 2004). For example, in Réka's discussion of community spirit, she places Hungarians and Americans on a scale of less-to-more community-mindedness, identifying rather with Americans (since she plans to take a gap year and do volunteer work). *Not* being the Other reinforces her identification with the one. Interestingly, she also juxtaposes a past Hungarian society, which she sees as more characteristically community-minded, and a present-day one, where this attitude is less common. This relative lack of community-mindedness may not be an attribute of Hungarian identity which she wishes to highlight, but she is nonetheless a member of this ethnolinguistic group – even if she may see herself as an exception in this case. Other examples of alterity include Réka's past classical humanist way of learning and knowing from high school versus her current progressivist understanding of education as well as Balázs's past classical understanding of approaching canonized literature in contrast to the postmodern paradigm that he relates to now.

5. Conclusion

This small-scale, qualitative study of six American Studies majors in Hungary has aimed to provide a rich description of their experience of ongoing identity construction without any

suggestion of generalizability to other contexts. Still, there is some comparability in their experiences and with those of others this researcher has taught. Member-checking with the participants has also confirmed that the interpretations in this paper comport with their understandings.

The paths each of the students have taken have been intriguing to track. Balázs has moved from an early preoccupation with the macabre to a passion for American horror fiction. Ákos began with a love of English learned naturalistically through American games and popular music and has developed a nuanced knowledge of socially aware American films. Réka grew up bilingual and bicultural and came to understand both cultures in more critical depth. Zsusza enjoyed English at school, came to see its utility in nurturing her growing interest in American and Japanese popular culture, and has now found her voice in both Hungarian and English. Zsolt was attracted to English early on because of how effectively he felt it was taught in school, developed a love for British and American literature, and revels now in seeing culture(s) "from multiple perspectives." Finally, Előd made a shift from seeing English – like sports and the military – as a matter of challenge and self-discipline to making the language an integral part of himself.

Thus, we see the classroom both in the more concrete sense of a site for seminars and lectures and in the metaphorical sense of a learning environment (i.e., building corridors, instructors' offices, university cafés, etc.) acting as Foucault's (1986) heterotopia. Soja (1989: 14) refers to heterotopias, "heterogeneous relational spaces," or third spaces, which provide individuals with an opportunity to redefine themselves through new experiences in that context. According to Kristeva (1988), in such settings, some revert to an originary identity and tie themselves more strongly to home, but others liberate themselves from the founding myth of cultural identity to develop intercultural personhood and become strangers to themselves. This is what Bhabha (1994) described as the hybridity of culture, and this indeed appears to be what these participants have managed to achieve.

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Appendix. Interview guide

Following Fougère (2008), I asked each of the participants a broad question about each of the three areas of identity I was interested in: that of (1) someone who had grown up in a Hungarian ethnolinguistic environment (i.e., Hungary or Vajdaság/Vojvodina); (2) an English speaker; and (3) a student of American Studies.

After warm-up questions on a range of topics, e.g., courses of mine they had attended, the kind of pastries they like, and what their thesis was about, I elicited background information, such as their age and home town, and then proceeded with the first broad question: "I want to ask you just to speak as much as you can, freely, whatever comes to mind, about your experience of learning growing up in Hungary//Vajdaság/Vojvodina."

Beyond the three broad questions tied to the three areas noted above, I also asked incidental questions for clarification, to round out the narrative, or to prompt a resumption of the narrative when it had stopped. These include the following:

- What do you think the link is between your interest in sports and the military?
- Of the two countries you've spent a lot of time in, which one would you call home?
- To what extent do you think the personal changes you've undergone are simply a matter of getting older as opposed to being prompted by American Studies courses?
- Do you think you would have been as fascinated by the macabre had your parents not forbidden it at an early age?
- How have you negotiated between your own admittedly progressive views and the relatively conservative mindset of the scout movement that you're a part of?

The key was to promote the participants' self-narratives with as few interruptions as possible.