

After Transnational American Studies

An MLA 2016 Roundtable

Roundtable Description

Americanists are approaching an impasse regarding the transnational turn. In the last fifteen years, the geopolitical frames of reference in American studies have shifted from the nation to heuristics such as hemispheric, Atlantic, circum-Caribbean, borderlands, and transpacific. This scholarly seismic shift inaugurated two journals, *Comparative American Studies* (2009) and the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* (2003), while scholars including Anna Brickhouse, Susan Gillman, Kirsten Silva Gruesz, Caroline Levander, Robert Levine, and others, have remapped the contours of the field of American literary studies. Yet in the past few years, scholars have noted the pitfalls of the transnational turn: that it risks reproducing or even heightening myths of U.S. exceptionalism (Hickman), that it remains plagued by a persistent monolingualism (Elliot, Cohn/Guterl), that it can function as a mode of intellectual imperialism (Blum, McClennen), and that its increasingly macro view distorts the scale and scope of transnational American studies.

Recent MLA sessions have endeavored to “unmap” or nuance the field, focusing on specific periods (“Unmapping Transnationalism in Nineteenth-Century America” (2015) or methodologies (“American Literature in 3D: Space, Time Language” (2014)). This roundtable considers the intellectual alternatives and futures that arise from these very debates. More specifically, it considers what the transnational turn in American studies can offer to seemingly distinct scholarly conversations such as those about climate, ecology, global circulation, and planetary consciousness. How can the lessons of transnational American studies inform and sharpen these other frameworks?

Posing both pitfalls and possibilities, our roundtable suggests potential pathways through,

within and beyond the transnational. Participants from various ranks and institutions, with different relationships to the field, will present 6-8 minute provocations—brief, speculative, “post-transnational” case studies. The roundtable begins with a broader assessment of the field (Seglie and Goode) and then proceeds through a series of scalar and conceptual shifts that forcefully dislodge the “American” from transnational American studies—from region (Sweeney) to globe (Herrero-Puertas) to planet (Hickman) to climate (Eckstein). Bringing together the implications and significance of the roundtable, our respondent will comment on all of the above at its end (Gillman).

Opening the panel, AnaMaria Seglie and Abby Goode introduce some of the methodological and institutional borders that inhibit and direct the practice of American studies. Erin Sweeney shows the benefits of shifting from a nation/transnation paradigm to one of region/environment, highlighting the ecological and material “afterlife” of Spanish colonialism, in two linked souths: Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Palmetto Leaves* (1873) and Helen Hunt Jackson’s *Ramona* (1884). Moving from the regional to the global, Manuel Herrero-Puertas examines how people with physical disabilities circulate around the globe in Kevin Michael Connolly’s *Double Take: A Memoir* (2009). He asks us: What changes about our theorizations of global consciousness once we reconsider them through the lenses of disability? Jared Hickman moves from the global to the planetary and proposes a “cosmic history of the Americas.” He explores how early American encounters transformed the history of the planet, as geological studies trace the onset of the Anthropocene to the European discovery of the Americas. Barbara Eckstein makes a final shift to the hyper-macro scale of climate crisis discourse, and the disaster rhetoric that so often accompanies it. As an alternative to this rhetoric, she reads the nonhuman noises of sound poet Angela Rawlings as a liberation from human cognition, introducing nonhuman values that exist apart from the transnational turn. Finally, Susan Gillman, a leader and established voice in hemispheric and transnational American studies, will respond to these provocations, and offer some conclusions about the state and future of the field.

Exploring multiple scalar possibilities that extend and depart from transnational American studies, this roundtable considers not only the limitations, but also the lifespan of the field—the extent to which it can mutate and shift to address increasingly new and pressing scholarly questions. In so doing, it launches a conversation about the future of transnational American studies that will animate scholars for years to come.