

Introduction: Testing Times for American Studies

Laurence Raw

In the light of two recent calls for papers received by our office, it seems that American Studies is in a highly transitional state. The first, for a session at MLA 2016 in the “Ecocriticism and Environmental Humanities” division, solicits contributions on “After Transnational American Studies,” with subject-areas covering “transnationality, Americanness, globality, planetarity, empire and/or the anthropocene” (“CFP: After Transnational.”) These categories seem especially intriguing, not so much for what they cover as for what they omit. “Americanness,” is one of those catch-all topics that might admit the kind of inquiries into what the terms “America” and “Americanness” signify in different socio-cultural contexts, but nonetheless places the idea of “America” at the center of any piece. What we are trying to do at the *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* is to decenter such terms, and publish contributions that focus on what individuals in different socio-economic contexts understand by the term. “Empire” might not be very significant for some, especially those who might use “America”-understood as a psychological term – as a means of (re-)negotiating their identities. The *Journal* also refuses to acknowledge any binary opposition between the “local” and the “global”; we are more interested in looking at the symbiotic relationship between the two, and how one informs the other. Hence “globality” does not really concern us. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the call for papers is the issue of the “anthropocene” – a generic term for an epoch that begins when human activities have had a significant impact on the Earth’s ecosystems. This is one of the main aims of ecocriticism; to show how literary texts can have an impact on ecosystems, biodiversity, as well as prompting questions about death and the ends of civilization, memory and archives, the scope and methods of humanistic inquiry, and emotional responses to the “end of nature.” This opens up a significant area of research in American Studies, which hitherto has been ignored; but we also believe that the term should focus on how

the Earth's ecosystems have impacted on human activity as well. Inspired by Darwin, we believe that we should look at how human beings adapt to the environment around them, and whether the concept of the "survival of the fittest" has a political as well as an anthropological and/or ecological meaning. We would welcome any contributions addressing such issues within the framework of American Studies. However, we also believe that such contributions are still transnational; there is no such thing as "After Transnational American Studies," as the concept of transnationality is perpetually subject to negotiation. It is this issue, we believe, that distinguishes the *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* from other American Studies journals, published both inside and outside the United States: we are always looking to explore transnational as well as transcultural issues, while understanding that any conclusions we come to are perpetually subject to redefinition.

The second call for papers we received focused on "Pedagogy: Critical Practices for a Changing World," focusing in particular on the ways in which political and economic pressures are addressed inside as well as outside the classroom: "how do border theory and the work of such theorists as Paolo Freire and Gloria Anzaldúa inform pedagogical practice in the field of American literature, broadly construed? What kinds of counter hegemonies and subaltern literacies emerge in our contemporary pedagogy? Why teach literary texts and why teach literary texts in a national context? In addition, essays addressing the effect of cross-sectoral pedagogy on the discipline might look at how American literature moves beyond the academy into alternative learning spaces through online education or service learning. For instance, how does teaching American literature in prisons across the country address issues of canon in relation to long and broad histories of genocide and incarceration?" ("Special Issue of American Literature.")

This call for papers is rife with statements that we perpetually challenge. We acknowledge no distinction between "mainstream" and "border" theory; we are far more interested in diversity as a basis for construction transcultural perspectives. Nor do we make distinctions between "national" and "international" contexts; American Studies is interpreted differently in any and every institution in which it is practiced. Likewise we are not really preoccupied with "alternative" and "mainstream" learning spaces; as we have suggested in past issues, learning can take place

Introduction: Testing Times for American Studies

at any time and place, and it is our job to reinforce that notion by publishing contributions designed to provoke as well as educate and inspire. The call for papers is rife with the kind of (western formulated) binary oppositions that we believe are ideologically positioned as a means of keeping some ideas – especially concerning “Americanness” on the margins. We explicitly seek to repudiate this notion.

In keeping with our stated aims, this issue contains a variety of contributions, not only looking at how classic American literary texts have been interpreted elsewhere, but also trying to unpick familiar terms such as multiculturalism, and show how they mean different things to different people. Our approach is transmedial as well as transcultural; hence we have some articles on radio and film as well as literature, interspersed with pedagogical reflections that offer new constructions of “critical practice” not covered by the call for papers discussed above.

We are always grateful for any feedback on any of our articles, as well as suggestions as to how we could improve content for future issues. Dialogue is one of the principal means by which we can promote our transcultural values.

Works Cited

“Call for Papers: Special Issue of *American Literature* ‘Pedagogy: Critical Practices for a Changing World.’” *Americanists.psu.edu*. Web. 12 Feb. 2015.

“CFP: After Transnational American Studies” (MLA 2016). *Ecocriticism and Environmental Humanities Discussion Group, MLA.org*. Web. 21 Feb. 2015.