

Borders and Ethno-Nationalism: The State of/in Americanist Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century

BrANCA: The British Association of Nineteenth Century Americanists seeks proposals to its biannual symposium, which will take place December 12-13, 2025 at Université Paris Cité, France, and virtually.

BrANCA is meeting abroad. Gathering outside the UK for the first time since BrANCA's founding is an invitation to ponder collectively what it means to be a nineteenth-century Americanist today, in a world of resurgent borders and identities; a world where what we may have too hastily taken for granted—fluid ontologies, veer ecologies, democratic futurities, queer unmoorings—suddenly seem obsolete or utopic anew.

Sadly, nineteenth-century Americanists are experiencing déjà-vu—as if the dark side of the nineteenth-century US has returned as a gruesome farce or a tragedy in the making—travel bans, border closings, institutional xenophobia, systemic racism and ethno-nationalism abound. Eight years after the Exeter symposium, we are asking: is there still a “not yet” of the nineteenth-century? Is the nineteenth century still teeming with “utopian futurities that did not, but might yet, come to pass,” temporal, spatial, literary alternatives to the linear, “empty time” associated with the rise of US nationalism and imperialism? When we, researchers, teachers, citizens, go “back” today to the nineteenth-century US literary culture, what do we find there? Which nineteenth century, which literature do we want to pass on to our students?

In the past twenty years, the development of transnational, transatlantic, hemispheric, diasporic, planetary, frameworks have questioned national-analytic categories and the old (?) paradigm of American exceptionalism, and showed that US literary culture was imbricated in a cultural and economic world system. In addition, the ongoing environmental crisis and the persistent fear of new pandemics have made repeatedly clear the limitations of national borders and the inadequacy of national solutions to global and planetary challenges. At the same time, as Ralph Bauer has argued in regard to early American literature, “one of the ironies of this declaration of independence from the proto-nationalist ‘origins’ model ... has been that early American literature has once again become British” (Bauer, 2010) and more broadly anglo-centric. It may be time to “unseat the fiction of American literature’s monolingual and Anglocentric root” (Gruesz) and unsettle the borders of “American” literature anew by considering, for example, its relation with other languages—the French, German, Italian, Greek, Spanish, Yiddish, Chinese, Arabic, Indigenous languages of immigrants—and other literatures and cultures—not as the other of American literature and culture but as an internal difference therein. What if we moved from a transnational to a translational perspective on US literature? What if we considered translated US literature—read across Europe in the nineteenth-century as part of US literature *per se*? The forms and genres themselves that we find in US literature—even those we have been taught to identify as “native” (the captivity narrative, the “slave” narrative)—have a global history that, if examined, uncover the hybrid, unstable, nature of American texts. The echoes of the nineteenth century that resonate today may indeed recall the repugnant “unguarded gates” and “strange tongues” of Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s infamous poem (1892), or Henry James’s nativist rant against “the grossness of alienism” (1907), but Emma Lazarus’s “golden door” (1883) should not be forgotten too soon.

From the “founding” era to the Progressive Age and beyond, from the drafting of the American constitution to the Anti-Immigration laws of the late nineteenth century and beyond, this

symposium will reexamine the state of/in Americanist studies, and “the making of Americans” and of “American” literature and literary culture with, across, and beyond borders.

Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- politics of aesthetics
- politics of translation; foreign voices and “strange talks”
- radical cultures, radical futures
- utopias, dystopias
- apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic fiction/film/series
- world systems, world ecologies
- energy humanities, Anthropocene
- health humanities
- ethnic literature; immigrant and refugee literature
- gender, race, intersectionality
- (the hatred of) democracy
- histories of capitalism
- the afterlives of slavery
- critical state studies
- alternative pedagogies; alternative syllabi

As part of the Symposium, we will hold a **plenary roundtable** on Saturday 13 December, during which European and UK Nineteenth-Century Americanists will share their thoughts about the current state of play of 19th-century American literary studies in the UK and Europe.

Michael Boyden (U of Fribourg) will give a keynote on Friday 12 December.

We invite individual paper or group proposals on U.S. literary culture during the long nineteenth century (comparative approaches are welcome). Please submit abstracts of no more than 200 words for 15 to 20 min-papers and 100-word bios to **BrANCAinPARIS@gmail.com** by September 15. You will receive notification of acceptance by October 15.

Registration costs 25€ for salaried faculty and is free for all others

For further information, please check our website: <https://branca-2025.weebly.com/>