

Stephanie Palmer's contribution to the JAS roundtable on Hester Blum, ed. *Turns of Event: Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies in Motion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016)

Why is American literary studies always noisily reconsidering its own boundaries, categories, and methodologies? Is it because of an insecurity about its viability? Or is this continual revision a welcome calisthenics, a sign of intellectual and political health? I was drawn to American literary studies because I believed the latter, but the person who raised this question at an autumn 2015 BrANCA reading group thought the former. This exchange crystallises one distinction between American literary study as it is practiced in many countries and British life. Which better expresses strength and vitality: open discussion about how one's field has turned over time or confidence about that field's permanence and longevity? 'Confidence' is a keyword of the National Student Survey. One of the module descriptions for an introduction to nineteenth-century American literature on the BrANCA website explains that the module raises students' 'confidence' about American history, but should modules teach 'confidence' or knowledge? Aren't British university students confident enough about their opinions of the United States? Shouldn't lecturers rather be dampening that confidence by teaching students (and others) to read, read, and reread, in a recursive process in which more evidence means asking new questions in the expectation of obtaining new answers?

Given this context in which longevity and seemingly unreflective confidence are seen as signs of strength it was with concern that I approached the Hester Blum, edited volume *Turns of Event*. Hester Blum's Introduction, though, anticipated the concerned reader. 'Rehearsing the specific contours and trajectories of the various turns the field has made in recent years is not our primary aim,' Blum writes, partially because contributors realise that

‘[t]he critic and student alike . . . might be rendered dizzy’ (2). The essay collection is good at discussing new approaches while nevertheless treating them as provisional strategies likely to shift and evolve over time.

Meredith McGill’s essay ‘Literary History, Book History, and Media Studies’ makes valuable points about the conceptual work and inter-disciplinary skirmishes for funding and clout that are changing how scholars think about the distinction between ‘text’ and ‘book.’ Until recently, ‘the overwhelmingly historically minded discipline of literary studies has forged a loose alliance with the interdisciplinary field of book history, in part by splitting the object of study into “text” and “book,”’ the text, referring to all aspects of signification, and the book, an object that transmits ideas and culture through material means, that exemplifies ‘how social relations are mediated by culture’ (25-27). This concept of a ‘book’ helped historians in cultural and intellectual history ‘rescue’ their subfield from its ‘diminishment’ by the *Annales* school historians, who ‘privileged collective “mentalities” over individual thinkers’ (27). The rise of digital media has undermined this division of intellectual labour and made it necessary for book history to redefine its relation to media studies, for both media studies departments and English departments to examine ‘the politics, economics, technology, [and] infrastructure’ of both ‘high’ print culture and ‘low’ popular cultural forms (24). In the process, McGill argues that the ‘text’ and ‘book’ distinction might be dissolved:

‘[f]or all their demystifying, anti-idealist rhetoric, book historians are often looking through and not at the book. In these modes of analysis, a text’s structure, its negotiations with genre, its thematic preoccupations and figures of address are invoked only insofar as they are impinged on from without. (p. 32)

Other scholars have made similar complaints about book history's unwillingness to see the aesthetic aspects of a book as one of the root causes of that book's cultural work.<sup>1</sup> It's tantalising to feel this shift in one's own work and in that of other scholars giving conference papers and publishing in less prominent venues and comforting (if a bit annoying) to see it articulated here by such a leading scholar.

Half of the book is dedicated to the spatializing and expansive turns of transnationalism, hemispheric, and oceanic studies. Of the essays in this half of the volume, Sean X. Goudie's 'The Caribbean Turn in C19 American Literary Studies' is the most critical of American literary study's recent tendency to expand its geographical and cultural reach beyond the borders of the current United States:

Yet even as scholars turn more and more toward the Caribbean, or more precisely toward Caribbean presences in the making of nineteenth-century American literature, they have often done so in unidirectional ways. Indeed, much scholarship produced in nineteenth-century American literary studies from the 1990s to the present time, richly provocative and important as it is, might best be characterized as making a Caribbean 'half turn.' By Caribbean 'half turn,' I mean to suggest how scholars and critics, in treating Caribbean presences in works authored by U.S. authors, turn to the Caribbean according to a North-South trajectory to spy out influence without ever relocating themselves according to a South-North directionality, a reality that reflects their and their field's institutional location, hierarchies of assumption, and investments. (p. 135)

This criticism is well founded; it is not enough to trace the Caribbean presence in the novels of James Weldon Johnson or Zora Neale Hurston without inquiring about the authors, texts,

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<sup>1</sup> Brian S. McGrath makes this point very clearly in 'Are Literary Studies Any Good as History?' [Review of Amy Blair, *Reading Up: Middle-Class Readers and the Culture of Success in the Early Twentieth Century United States* and Andrew J. Lawson, *Downwardly Mobile: the Changing Force of American Realism*] *Henry James Review* 34.3 (2013), p. 296-304.

and contexts of a South-North trajectory, such as Goudie's example of Louis S. Meikkle, a U.S.-trained medical professional who migrated from Jamaica and wrote about West Indian labourers working on the Panama Canal. Certainly the Caribbean and hemispheric turns has given me, an Americanist, permission to inquire why Elizabeth Stuart Phelps sent the errant husband in her novel *Confessions of a Wife* (1902) to a consulship in Uruguay. Rather than seek to 'expand' American literary studies, Goudie encourages scholars to consider both the American turn to the Caribbean and the Caribbean turn to America. This seems like an enormously valuable intellectual move for rethinking not just the Caribbean turn but the transatlantic and transpacific turns as well, even though I wonder whether the kind of work Goudie proposes would be classed in my U.K.-based English subject team as 'American literary study' or 'postcolonialism,' with all the ramifications for teaching and REF narratives (though thankfully not knowledge itself) that those classifications imply.

Most of the essays in this volume actively eschew the language of conflict -- except for Goudie, and for McGill, who refers to a 'loose alliance' (23), a 'mutual non-aggression pact' (24), and 'the common ground staked out' (24) between disciplines. Yet the conflicts over canon expansion seem worthy of resurrecting after reading this volume. Women and minorities did not 'light out for the territory' in the same ways as men, and the character of the whole tradition changed in light of their work, as should discussions of trends in how we study American literature. In this volume, references to Melville and Hawthorne are plentiful, but of pre-1900 American women writers, there are only the briefest of references to Harriet Beecher Stowe, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Susanna Rowson, Elizabeth Cochran Seaman (author of *Nellie Bly's Book*), and Elizabeth W. Champney (an author of young adult fiction). Yet the dissolving of the distinction between 'text' and 'book' that McGill proposes would not look or feel the same if it were not for the long, slow work of scholars expanding the

national canon to account for both new cultural work and new aesthetics. Perhaps I should just sit back and express confidence in my own field's longevity and permanence.