

Reflection on 2013 Hughes/Robbins Transatlantic Seminar
Jay Jay Stroup

Dear Dr. Hughes and Dr. Robbins,

Have you ever noticed that some scholars tend to take on the characteristics of the field they study? I'm only half kidding when I say that almost all the graduate students at TCU studying British literature drink hot tea on a daily basis. As a Master's student, I was attracted to early American literature partially because of the texts and authors (*Charlotte Temple*, where have you been all my life?) but also because of the field's initial status as an underdog, a field that had to defend its right to exist. I have always felt most comfortable on the margins, out of the spotlight and in early American literature and studies, I felt at home.

All throughout the semester, I have found myself trying to pinpoint a defining characteristic of Transatlantic Studies, to see if I "fit" in the field as a scholar but also as a person. While I'm not sure if I've found a definitive answer, I do think Transatlantic Studies is defined by a paradoxical sense of transgressiveness. On the one hand, the current model of Literary Studies is still anchored by division between geography or nation (American Literature; British Literature; Caribbean Literature; Irish Literature, etc.) and time (18th century; 19th century, etc.) as we've discussed in class and in our online posts. Transatlantic Studies demands a disruption of these artificial "structures and strictures...of the field of English studies" (Griffin "On Not Knowing Any Better"). I characterize this disruption as transgressive, an act of rebellion if you will, which I applaud and wish to take part of. But, on the other hand, Transatlantic Studies is really a return to the reading and writing practices of earlier times, in which citizens were in fact transnational or global citizens, as demonstrated by our course readings this semester (Dickens, Stowe, Martineau, Moodie, etc.). So I find myself wondering, can a return to and reassertion of an older tradition really be characterized as transgressive?

This paradoxical sense of transgressiveness reminds me of Margaret Atwood's description of Canadian literature, particularly Susan Strickland Moodie's *Roughing it In the Bush*. According to Atwood, "the alienating and schizophrenic effects of the colonial mentality" permeate the writings of Moodie (*The Journals of Susanna Moodie*). If an entire national literature's defining characteristic can be "schizophrenic" and yet survive and even thrive, then surely Transatlantic Studies can be "paradoxically transgressive" and productive at the same time. There's something deliciously satisfying about using "tradition" to dismantle and then rebuild the "structures and strictures" of Literary Studies so that it more closely resembles the actual reading and writing practices of people past and present. As a person and a scholar, this is the type of rebellion I can throw my wholehearted support behind.

Throughout the semester, we've read a wide range of transatlantic scholarship by scholars studying American, British, Canadian, Caribbean, African American, and bi-racial authors and texts. We've read scholarship on a variety of genres too, from memoirs to letters to poetry to novels to periodicals. Some of the scholarship has been recovering relationships that have been lost or ignored by scholars over time such as Sandra Stanley Holton's work on Elizabeth Cady Stanton and British suffragists. Other scholars such as Erik Simpson and Alison Chapman have filtered their research interests through the dual lenses of Transatlantic Studies and Digital Humanities. What I've learned is that Transatlantic Studies can be applied to any time period, any nation, and any genre as long as you can unearth the connections through research. And now that many (but not all) archives have begun to digitize their holdings, this type of research is no longer limited to traveling scholars with a hefty budget.

Now undergraduates, graduates, professors, and independent scholars can join the fun and engage in research with primary materials. The freedom to apply a transatlantic framework or lens in a way that supports my own research interests of women's manuscript culture and networks of female friendship and affiliation rather than having to give them up is really appealing. While I don't want to speak on behalf of my classmates, I have watched each of them throughout the semester find authors, texts, movements, or issues that they are passionate about and "rediscover" them through a transatlantic framework. Kaleigh appeared delighted that pro-vegetarian and anti-vivisection ideology traveled back and forth across the Atlantic in the 19th century in a variety of genres; Heidi successfully linked America, Britain, and Cuba through Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* by bringing the Cuban novel *Sab* into contact with *Wuthering Heights*; and Ariel grounded her interest in economics through periodical research on the connections between cotton and slavery in America, Britain, and India.

For myself, in the past I've purposely shied away from the American Civil War because I feared it would become a black hole that I would get sucked into and never escape (too much material, too many possibilities!). And before I shifted to beginnings to 1865, I thought I was very clever in choosing early American literature because I had a built-in excuse to only shallowly engage with the Civil War through poets such as Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, for example. However, the teaching materials project changed my perspective on the Civil War; like my classmates, I "rediscovered" a topic I love (rebellion and resistance) through transatlanticism. I still think the Civil War is dangerously attractive, but I feel that my course bites off a manageable chunk through its narrow focus of specific genres and their British reception history while at the same time, giving students the space and freedom to pursue their own interests (purposely paralleling the experience I have had with this transatlantic course). Although I doubt I'll have the opportunity to teach the course as designed while here at TCU, I am hopeful that I'll be able to teach it elsewhere eventually.

The teaching materials project also helped me articulate what type of teacher and scholar I want to be (or think I am right now). In fact, writing the course description and course rationale and context directly influenced the teaching philosophy I am writing for Teaching College Composition with Dr. Charlotte Hogg (I have to give credit to Meta, who pointed out that I positioned myself as a digital humanities scholar very clearly and that I should transfer this confidence and articulation to my teaching philosophy). While I expected this course to spill over into my other literature courses, I was not expecting it to intersect with my role as a freshman composition teacher. I am pleasantly surprised that it did so.

As this semester comes to a close and I have a single semester of coursework left before exams next fall, I have to ask myself: will I become a transatlantic scholar? Will my focus exam list become transatlantic, or my dissertation (or part of it)? Can I juggle the characteristics of an American literature scholar, a digital humanities scholar, and a transatlantic scholar without losing sight of who I am and who I want to be as a scholar, teacher, and person? What is lost or gained by the intersections of these fields and their priorities? Rather than jump to conclusions or try to predict the future, I think I'll take it one day at a time and let my research interests and my strengths as a scholar and teacher dictate how this juggling act will play out.

Sincerely,
Jay Jay Stroup