

# FOREWORD

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This special issue aims to seek new ways to read and write across and beyond assumptions about national allegiance through a transnational lens and comparative practice. The four essays and two book reviews in the issue investigate various forms of encountering and competing “locations of culture,” to borrow the term from Homi K. Bhabha, based upon an explicitly inter-relational and interdisciplinary framework. Rethinking questions of national identity, racial politics, material culture, and aesthetic affiliation, the collection presents an exciting array of scholarly conversations engaged in discussions around a number of historical, literary, cultural and technological issues across the Atlantic Ocean. The authors navigate through the seemingly opaque, intricately enmeshed networks of Atlantic exchange and their permeable borders with insight. This wide-ranging presentation displays much of the latest research being conducted in this dynamic and rich field. The thematic diversity, methodological variety and theoretical heterogeneity here exemplify the renewing vigour and creative stimulation in the current criticism of Transatlantic Studies.

The disciplinary divide between literatures in English on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean has been a long-standing practice within modern academic institutions and communities. I can still recall the difficulties I experienced as a postgraduate student in determining whether the focus of my future career should be more “British” or “American.” Later I had the pleasure of attending numerous transatlantic seminars created by Andrew Taylor and Susan Manning, both of whom I had the privilege of working with as my PhD supervisors at the University of Edinburgh. Their scholarship provided me a paradigm to reconsider my own role as a researcher growing up on a Pacific island, experiencing constant existential and political dilemma about split national identities, which are, as Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw might say, “divided by a common language.” I benefitted from transatlantic literary studies in terms of its preoccupation with the crossing of people and objects, and its theoretical focus on the translation and transmission of cultural convention and intellectual heritage. Interdisciplinary by nature, it assisted scholars in rethinking such an existential duality with heightened sensitivity towards complicated historical issues about national division and racial

identity.

Etymologically the Latin prefix *trans-* is a preposition that describes positions or movements of crossing, moving beyond or going through. Its translation in Chinese 跨, alternatively, is used more often as a verb. Its sematic usage is perhaps closer to the English word “straddle,” an act that literally involves the bodily movement of one’s legs in order to make a stride, to cross a boundary, or to straddle the in-between. This special issue demonstrates how this “in-between” space of the Atlantic Ocean is embodied in and intimately linked to the physical and metaphoric movements of people and ideas, subjects and texts. It further looks at how the current Transatlantic Studies informs our understanding of globalization as an entangled and rhizomic network, rife with disruptive forces and unintended consequences.

The concept of the transatlantic draws attention to the ways in which literary scholars can examine and theorise, reframe and question the formulation and assertion of national narratives from transnational and comparative perspectives. As is amply shown in the essays and reviews here, research in transatlantic literary relations involves contextualisation of various local or national paradigms and exploration and exposure of their ideological limitations. While recent literary theories and criticism about transnationalism and cosmopolitanism have been complicated by uncertain political and economic consequences of globalization, the issue’s essays show how the call for a broader, more nuanced and multilayered methodological framework and cultural practice remains imperative.

The four essays here cover the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the late-twentieth century, examining literary works by authors, including Emily Dickinson, Edith Warton, Henry James, E. M. Forster, Lionel Trilling, and William B. Patrick, who, consciously or not, participate in the ongoing transatlantic dialogue of their time from aesthetic and critical angles. The first two essays highlight the possibilities of expanding the scope of Atlantic interchange through their examinations of global literary circulation and production. Stuart Christie’s essay explores the symbiotic literary and personal relationship between E. M. Forster and Lionel Trilling in post-war US and Europe. It sheds light on a picture of how the complex interaction between the transatlantic pair is shaped not just by “language and cultural affinity” but also by “transnational debt and structural interdependence”. Christie convincingly shows how Trilling’s “American Americanist” criticism

looks for intellectual nourishment for his American liberal imagination beyond the US by repackaging, re-exporting and “deterritorializing” Forster’s work for transatlantic readers. Then, Carl Plasa’s essay tackles the invested and vexed historical issue of the Atlantic slave trade by focusing on the overlooked poem “The Slave Ship” by William B. Patrick as a contemporary ekphrastic response to J. M. W. Turner’s well-known painting *The Slave Ship* (1840). Plasa reminds readers that the institution of the transatlantic slave trade belongs to “a part of a white European” as much as “an African diasporic history.”

The third and fourth essays investigate specifically how literary texts in an Atlantic context respond to the technological development of their time. Páraic Finnerty’s essay charts new scholarly territory for transatlantic literary relations by exploring nineteenth-century developments in multimedia representations of Europe that “facilitated virtual travel” and their impacts on the works of Dickinson and her American contemporaries, including Ik Marvel and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Linking the US and Europe together “through virtual tropes,” Finnerty demonstrates how Dickinson’s poems about virtual travel and their associations with “disruptive, erratic, and shifting viewpoints” challenge narratives of “personal, national, or topographical exceptionalism.” Dorothy Butchard’s essay deals with the “fantasies of technological immediacy” by looking at the influence of transatlantic telegraphy on interpersonal communications in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Butchard investigates how the novels by Edith Wharton and Henry James draw on a tension between the promises of telegraphic closeness and the realities of transatlantic telegraphy’s “economic cost and expressive limitations” to reveal “inherent flaws and uncertainties” associated with technological progress in the Atlantic world. In short, the four authors in various intellectual and imaginative ways think transatlantically by reading these literary texts as multifaceted palimpsests of intercultural (or inter-racial) positioning and overlapping, intersection and convergence.

With these four essays’ diverse approaches and fresh topics, this special issue opens up cross-cultural dialogues in which alternative models of reading “across” and “beyond” are allowed to emerge. The two book reviews by Robert Morace and Woody Brown draw further attention to three recent books on transatlantic literary studies and their significance to current American

political discourse. *The Edinburgh Critical Studies in Atlantic Literatures and Cultures* speaks to a consistent scholarly interest in and demand for a broader intercultural perspective. The relevance of these recent research endeavours to contemporary literary issues and the wider social and political contexts illuminates the persistence and resilience of Transatlantic Studies and its necessity in an increasingly parochial political climate in our time.

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Editors