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After the American Century

1 Polemic: When did American Studies die?

We have entered a period of time within which the modes of reading established by American Studies are no longer tenable for understanding twenty-first century literary and cultural production in its historical context. As the meanings attached to the United States in the world shift toward widespread distrust of American imperial intentions, and the U.S. economy enters a putative “autumn” as the global economic crisis persists, the prevailing American Studies methodology – itself developed during the ascension of American military, economic and cultural power – proves itself to be exhausted. In order to elaborate these ambitious claims, I will approach them from outside the usual terrain of American Studies, for it is American Studies I am trying to escape. I suggest that it is from “outside” American Studies that we may derive a clearer perspective on its limitations, and thereby attempt to reconfigure it.

In the last section of this essay, I discuss two aspects of the so-called Arab spring: first, the patterns of understanding the phenomenon of the Cairo January 25 movement as expressed in mainstream American media, as well as government and private sector initiatives for harnessing the power of social networking media. The limits of understanding evident in such responses to change in the Arab world reflect on the end of the American century profoundly. Then, surveying other research I have done on recent works of Arabic-language fiction, I argue that the circulation of American and other global cultural forms demands a more nuanced approach to reading new literary production than has been available. Though Egyptian politics and cultural production are outside the purview of American Studies or Americanist literary scholarship, of course, or should be, they may be put in conversation with what I have elsewhere called a cosmopolitan approach to “globalized American Studies.” Egyptian fiction of the twenty-first century, and indeed American fiction of the twenty-first century, is misread if it is understood using the vernacular tradition of American Studies methodology, within which it must appear merely derivative or *useful* to understanding present political realities. Instead, attention to circulation allows a more supple method to understanding the relationship of globalization to literary production, and a useful opening to revivifying American Studies methodology in the autumn

of the American century. Finally, it reflects back on the heroic but fictional tale about the role of social media in the Middle East and offers a contrapuntal account of how circulation of American forms operates.

2 Autumn of America

In their contribution to the 2011 collection *Business as usual: The Roots of the Global Financial Meltdown*, Beverly Silver and the late Giovanni Arrighi propose that the 2008 financial meltdown is “one of the latest indicators” that we are in the midst of the “‘autumn’ of U.S. world hegemony.”¹ Rehearsing and extending the argument of Arrighi’s now classic *The Long Twentieth Century*, and expanding on the thesis of French historian Fernand Braudel, Silver and Arrighi argue that four major periods of “systemwide financial expansion” have taken place within the history of capitalism, each of them repeating a common pattern while innovating on its predecessor. The “system” referred to in that phrase is the world system, an approach to understanding global historical change that offers an avenue into a difficult set of debates in American Studies; or perhaps a bypass – a way around those debates.

For Silver and Arrighi, Braudel’s identification of the massive financial expansions that took place in 1) the Italian city states and the Republic of Genoa from the fifteenth century to the early seventeenth centuries; 2) Holland from the late sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries; and 3) the United Kingdom, from the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries, should be complemented by an analysis of the fourth expansion of global capitalism beginning in the late nineteenth century, with the United States as the new center. In the third period of expansion, the United Kingdom was both a “fully developed national state” and one with a “world-encompassing commercial and territorial empire that gave its ruling groups and its capitalist class an unprecedented command over the world’s human and natural resources.”² With a global empire, the British did not need to rely on foreign powers for protection, as the Italian states had in their period of ascendancy during the Renaissance, and so the British internalized their own *protection* costs. As an industrial center, the British also produced their own manufactured goods, which Silver and Arrighi argue was central to the “profitability of [their] commercial activities,” and thus internalized their *production* costs. During the British period, the expansion of the financial system therefore went yet further than it had under their Dutch and Italian forebears.

As British industrial capitalism waned, the United States emerged with a different set of arrangements. Instead of a colonial empire of the British model, the United States was, in Silver and Arrighi’s words, a “continental

¹ Beverly J. Silver and Giovanni Arrighi, “The End of the Long Twentieth Century,” in *Business as usual: The Roots of the Global Financial Meltdown*, eds. Craig Calhoun and Georgi Derluguian (New York: Social Science Research Council and NYU Press, 2011), 55.

² *Ibid.* 61.

military-industrial complex with the power to provide effective protection for itself and its allies and to make credible threats of economic strangulation or military annihilation toward its enemies." Thus, the power, size, insularity and "natural wealth" of the United States could internalize both protection and production costs, as had the British. The innovation, however, was the formation of "vertically integrated multinational corporations" which allowed the American capitalist class to internalize what the authors call the "transaction costs" of capital expansion: "to *internalize the markets* on which the self-expansion of its capital depended."³

The American century, from the perspective of worlds-systems analysis, is therefore a cycle of accumulation in which the multinational corporation takes the place of Britain's global, colonial empire, but not in the same way. It innovates on the British model, and has much in common with the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – which they call a "highly profitable empire of commercial outposts"⁴ – more so in some ways than the British empire with its extensive colonial holdings. Silver and Arrighi point out that as each of these cycles of accumulation ran its course, as expansion of the financial system reached its limit, a period of financialization set in: the autumn of each cycle. They point to Marx's *Capital*, Vol. 1, wherein Marx himself noted a pattern "whereby expansions of the financial system ... played a key role in the transfer of surplus capital from declining to rising geographical centers of capitalist trade and production"⁵: Venice "in her decadence" (quoting Marx) lent massive sums to Holland; Holland, in its late period, lent huge sums to England; and England had already been giving large amounts of credit to the United States as Marx was writing *Capital*. The autumn of each financial expansion is the spring for another system.

Worlds-systems analysis is not without its problems or its critics, of course, particularly from the field of history. For students of literary and cultural studies, the putative theoretical shortcomings are less important than the apparent disconnection from our work: reading the analyses of great systemic shifts, the escalation of one cycle of accumulation and diminution of another, one hardly feels that the analysis of individual texts or authors matter to the grand pattern. Perhaps we might understand social movements and protest – decolonization and the civil rights movement, or globalization and the anti-globalization protests, and the literary and film texts that document them, from African American literary texts of the 1940s and 50s to the literatures of various global diasporas, for example – in a different light if we see them in terms of the waxing and waning of massive cycles and systems, but it is not immediately apparent how. Still, we need a foothold, some sort of stable ground from which to reexamine the "state" of American Studies, and this may provide a surprisingly useful one. For in the long and animated discussion of the limits and persistence of American exceptionalism – and the

³ Ibid. 62; emphasis added.

⁴ Ibid. 60.

⁵ Ibid. 59.

recent resurgence of claims for American exceptionalism in public discourse, particularly on the American right and center-right – it is clear that there is an anxiety about the financial meltdown and a process of coming to terms with the exuberance of the 1990s and the various economic bubbles that closed the last century. Arrighi, in a long essay called “Hegemony Unraveling,” published in two parts in the *New Left Review* in 2005, noted the contradictory aspects of the apparent revival of the U.S. economy in the 1990s: the escalation of U.S. foreign debt “without precedent in world history” and the “emergence of a new U.S. imperial project,” namely the Project for the New American Century. He asks “whether and how the New American Century project and its adoption by the Bush administration relate to the turbulence of the global political economy since 1970.” Arrighi thus connects the Project for the New American Century, and its “adoption as official U.S. policy,”⁶ not only with a domestic response by conservatives to the perceived moral profligacy of the 1990s under the Clinton administration, but, here following his colleague David Harvey, he also regards it as “an attempt to maintain the hegemonic position of the U.S. under the conditions of unprecedented global economic integration created by endless capital accumulation at the end of the twentieth century.”⁷

Arrighi makes a compelling case that we understand the Project for the New American Century in terms of the unraveling of U.S. global hegemony, an anxious awareness that the conditions of the so-called American century were now in their autumn. (In this he differs from Harvey, who points to the Project as a key example of “the New Imperialism.”⁸) Still, we may adapt these lessons and bring them into the realm of American Studies and its own unraveling academic hegemony, by shifting the focus to the patterns of knowing – the changing context for literary and cultural production – that were also emerging in the 1990s and have now been established as our current episteme.

In other words, when the anxious discourse in the 1990s about the “end of history” and loss of moral center was disrupted by the cataclysmic events of September 11, 2001, and the announcement of a “War on Terror” that lasted through the two terms of the George W. Bush administration, the neo-imperialism of the Project for the New American Century and the critique it occasioned from American Studies also served as a distraction from a changed episteme. What was occluded was the way in which the new ways of knowing that the digital revolution had opened up (global village, global cultural economy, collapsing of borders, states of diaspora, etc.) were marking the transition from one way of inhabiting the world within the long American century into yet another. This awareness ran ahead of the patterns those of us in American Studies had developed for understanding the interplay of text and politics, of representation and history, a methodology which had of

⁶ Giovanni Arrighi, “Hegemony Unraveling – I,” *New Left Review* 32 (2005): 26.

⁷ *Ibid.* 30.

⁸ See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003).

course emerged during the height of American ascendancy, even as it was refined and debated through the long cold war. For it was the early cold war, as intellectuals and public critics alike came to terms with the downgrading of British global power, now obvious at the end of World War II, that American Studies as a discipline – or interdiscipline – was consolidated and codified. If there is something accurate about Arrighi's claim that the autumn of a cycle of accumulation is perceivable in the move to financialization (which has been the case for the United States since 1973 and the expiration of the Bretton Woods agreement, one reasonable date for the starting point for the age of globalization), I propose by analogue that the excessive disciplinary anxiety that took over American Studies in the late 1980s and 1990s may also suggest its autumn.

In the extended introduction to our edited collection *Globalizing American Studies*, Dilip Gaonkar and I ask whether the disciplinary anxieties of American Studies, which have been present from the start of the field's consolidation, are more debilitating than productive.⁹ We distinguish between *founding narratives* (those canonical works in the field to which so many have turned for methodological guidance even after their arguments have been superseded) and *crisis narratives* (often found in introductions, prefaces, afterwords, commentaries, etc., many of which have become central in the bibliography of the field), and note the presence of disciplinary anxiety in both types of narratives. We suggest that in American Studies scholarship there is frequently a reflexive process of self-marking and self-constitution around five major categories: the objects, methods, theoretical commitments, tradition, and political engagements of the field. The disciplinary anxiety of American Studies – in both founding and crisis narratives – has as much to do with the heavy burden of politics framing the field as it does with scholars' responses to intellectual trends and discoveries outside the more limited purview of American Studies. We go on to call attention to the "fragments" of America – of meanings attached to "America" as much as to "America" as an agent of capitalist modernity – and note that when Americans or American products (both cultural and commercial) travel abroad, they are taken up and reinterpreted in new contexts.

This leads to our proposing a distinction between what we call a *vernacular* tradition of American Studies and a *cosmopolitan* one, wherein the latter may allow for an approach to the study of American objects and ideas "divested of the exceptionalist intellectual tradition."¹⁰ Such an approach means different things for different scholars. Sometimes it requires a comparative or multi-sited perspective on "Americanist" questions, researching in archives and languages traditionally considered outside the purview of

⁹ Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "Introduction: Globalizing American Studies," *Globalizing American Studies*, eds. Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010), 7.

¹⁰ I am drawing here, and through the rest of this paragraph, from Brian T. Edwards, "Fragments of America: Response to Marius Jucan," *American, British and Canadian Studies* (Journal of the Academic Anglophone Society of Romania) 14 (2010): 96-103.

American Studies.¹¹ Scholars outside “American Studies” proper – whatever their base of operation – may too help us understand better the fragments of America (ideas, images, cultural products) as they enter into and alter local debates about culture, politics, and society. But these conversations have not been adequately attended to within the vernacular tradition of American Studies – nor even, until quite recently and still too little, by those committed to a critique of the exceptionalist basis of American Studies.

Following my discussion of Arrighi above, I might therefore go yet further, if a bit exuberantly, to say that in the early period of American Studies, the 1940s and 1950s, as American Studies scholars internalized the protection costs and the production costs of our ways of understanding the social – via close readings of deeply contextualized texts – American Studies mirrored the American cycle of accumulation itself. The multinational corporations so key to the American century were similar to American Studies, and vice versa, in that they were blind to the ways in which the markets they were exploiting – and in the case of American Studies, the texts and contexts they were grappling with – had their own particularities and did not buy American goods silently. They internalized the markets on which their self-expansion depended, to adopt Arrighi’s phrase about multinational corporations. It was not always easy to read or to even perceive the discrepancies; American Studies was by and large monolingual, and as it waned, it exposed the problems and logics of exceptionalism, without shifting the frame or externalizing the object of study or moving outside its borders, language(s) and archives, except in spatialized ways. Thus hemispheric approaches, an obsession with borders, etc., have offered us important lessons and opened up key new archives, but are also stubbornly spatial and centrifugal in their attempt to reconfigure the field.

The title of this essay – “After the American Century” – is a provocation, both for American Studies as a discipline and more generally. As I use the term, the “American Century” is more than a temporal demarcation for the twentieth century. It is an *episteme*, a way of understanding the present during a period of massive expansion, one we can now see beyond.

Thus I am trying to open up a methodology by which to read the text or the situation that is able to account for its placement – and its movement – in an expanding or contracting system. In so doing, I borrow the phrase “American Century” from its key proponent, Henry Luce, to suggest that “the American Century” names not simply a unit of time, or a geospatial term for marking the political and economic dominance of the United States, but a way of understanding the role of American culture in the world, during a period when new technologies and media played a major role in circulating American cultural products as commodities. That those circulating objects of American culture were, of course, more than commodities, and that they moved off their prescribed or anticipated pathways will offer the occasion to

¹¹ The contributions to *Globalizing American Studies* follow this impulse in diverse, multi-disciplinary ways.

wonder whether we are indeed in the autumn of the American century, and what such an awareness may mean to literary and cultural analysis. Attention to the circulation of American cultural objects in the “autumn” of the American century also permits, I argue, an opportunity to move beyond the logic that has animated American Studies as a disciplinary formation – and as a method – including in the late period of critique (the sustained attention to the limits of the exceptionalist thesis).

At the time of this writing (May–June 2011), as the French debate the conjunction of the American judicial system and our media-saturated obsession with celebrity suspects – Dominique Strauss-Kahn – they both distinguish their own legal system from the American one and find themselves fascinated by scenes and locations they know from popular American police programs such as *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. And as the conspiracy theories abound in the Middle East and North Africa about the public assassination of Osama bin Laden, first made known by a Pakistani user of Twitter, the old mythology of the U.S. as the destination of the “American dream” or the arbiter of justice is tempered for many by a more recent sense of America as imperial. How do these critical reflections on American culture, emerging from outside but intersecting with American cultural forms (the TV drama, the Twitter tweet) impact the ways in which scholars of American culture and society disrupt their own methodology?

We have heard the claim that 9/11 “changed everything,” and yet this demarcation of a historical rupture should be resisted within American Studies as it belatedly attends to other ways of perceiving and knowing “America” from the putative outside. Thus by my title “After the American Century” I do not mean to suggest that it is only in the twenty-first century that such critical outside perspectives become valid or visible. Indeed, the claim that “everything changed” in September 2001 has served as a rhetoric by which to reinscribe those “American Century” ways of perceiving, managing, and unwittingly rejecting the “post-American world,” to use Fareed Zakaria’s phrase (Zakaria reinscribes the vernacular perspective on America even while seemingly rejecting it).¹²

We know the nefarious ways to which the administration of President George W. Bush deployed that marker of historical rupture in order to authorize itself to go back to older concerns that had little to do with the events of 9/11, from Baghdad to the borderlands of the American Southwest. The “state of exception,” in Donald Pease’s deconstruction of President Bush’s declaration of the so-called “War on Terror,” becomes Bush’s disavowal of the very exceptionalist thesis – this, however, clears the space, in Pease’s analysis, for a yet more confident reassertion of American Empire.¹³ And in another realm of public discourse, as observers witnessed the rise of TV commentator-cum-

¹² See our reading of Zakaria’s *The Post-American World* in Edwards and Gaonkar, 18–25.

¹³ See Donald E. Pease, “American Studies after American Exceptionalism? Toward a Comparative Analysis of Imperial State Exceptionalisms,” in Edwards and Gaonkar, eds., *Globalizing American Studies*, 47–83.

university founder Glenn Beck reeducate a media public about American history, and how to interpret it, we cultural and literary historians recognized that some part of the American Studies playbook had been cut and pasted into Beck University's mission statement:

Offered exclusively to Insider Extreme subscribers, Beck University is a unique academic experience bringing together experts in the fields of religion, American history and economics. Through captivating lectures and interactive online discussions, these experts will explore the concepts of Faith, Hope and Charity and show you how they influence America's past, her present and most importantly her future.¹⁴

While this mission statement was roundly mocked in American media, the ways in which "Beck University" appropriated American Studies approaches to history, religion, and economics – the Parrington model of unity within diversity here, apparently, reappearing as pastiche – might give us pause. It underlines the urgency for American Studies scholars to identify what I called above the vernacular tradition of American Studies scholarship and to *provincialize* it.

If we do not provincialize such a perspective, the "world" comes under erasure. At the 2010 annual meeting of the American Studies Association, Alan Nadel assembled a fine panel, with the participation of Winfried Fluck and Donatella Izzo, which offered a rhetorical approach to this problem and demonstrated a way out of it.¹⁵ Entitled "How in the World Do We know 9/11 Changed Everything?" Nadel suggested, in a rhetorically rich manner, the stakes of the problem and the ways in which the "world" is occluded by vernacularist approaches. By invoking that American colloquialism "how in the world?", Nadel suggested that there was a constitutive gap between the knowledge that conservative forces in the U.S. would have you believe is common sensical (namely, that of course 9/11 changed everything), and that which might threaten such common sense – a breaking of the habits, of the habitus, by looking outside "in the world," signaled by and performed in the important contributions of Fluck and Izzo to the panel. But the American auditor does not hear the contingency of the phrase "in the world" at first, because the idiomatic, colloquial phrase "how in the world" in its very familiarity apparently shelters the American auditor from the distressing idea that "the world" might not know America in the same way as he or she does.

Nadel's turn of phrase is reminiscent of Paul De Man's famous reading of Archie Bunker's response to Edith Bunker's question about how to lace his shoes – "What's the difference?" – by which De Man argued that the meaning of Archie's response was not contained in its grammar. De Man writes: "What's the difference?" did not ask for difference but meant instead 'I don't give a damn what the difference is' ... [G]rammar allows us to ask the question, but the sentence by means of which we ask it may deny the very pos-

¹⁴ "Announcing Beck University," July 6, 2010, <http://www.glennbeck.com/content/articles/article/198/42502/>.

¹⁵ Some of what follows incorporates my formal comment on the panel.

sibility of asking." De Man further explains his distinction between "grammar" and "rhetoric" as follows: "Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration."¹⁶ Nadel's "How in the World" starts to suggest, similarly, that "the world" might help us know whether or not 9/11 changed everything, but it also suggested the ways in which such a critical, "outside" perspective was framed by a vernacularist grammar. There is some notable and important anxiety embedded, therefore, in Nadel's use of the phrase "How in the world?" and its suggestion of the referential aberration of rhetoric.

It is this crisis that was illuminated brilliantly in Nadel's own paper and those by Fluck and Izzo,¹⁷ which together allow us to reopen a question not only of the state of emergency or state of exception of the post-9/11 moment, about which the scholars from three diverse national locations were ambivalent as marker of the rupture. But also about the state of emergency, to reference the work of Russ Castronovo and Susan Gillman, of American Studies itself.¹⁸ That emergency, I argue, revolves precisely around the occlusion of "the world" in American Studies, including in its so-called transnational turn. Fluck and Izzo offered powerful readings of what I will call the "fragmentary" aspects of America in circulation in the era of globalization, that is since 1973, and also the pointed reminder that a reading of American culture and politics from outside necessarily throws the American idiom – the vernacular of America, which I will extend to the vernacular tradition of American Studies – into question.

Alan Nadel's own virtuoso reading of the *9/11 Commission Report* as pastiche suggests the ways the rhetorical devices of popular history and suspense fiction put "the world" under erasure. In Nadel's account, it is the *Report's* author Philip Zelinkow's corrupt account of the history of Islam, the meaning of the work of Sayyid el Qutb, and the impoverished and a-economic account of Osama bin Laden himself that are fogged over. Thus via Nadel's critical performance, and his own exposé of the unreliability of the narrator of the *9/11 Commission Report* (and the stakes of the report within the career of a powerful but shady author), we may expose the fracture points in that rhetoric. If we go back to the lessons of Nadel's own earlier work on the cold war national narratives, his crucial book *Containment Culture*, we see how what he then called the "straight story" now returns, and with a much more anxious referent than it did when its goal was to contain those leaky politics and threatening sexualities of the cold war period.¹⁹ Here, 9/11 did

¹⁶ Paul De Man, "Semiology and Rhetoric," *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), 10.

¹⁷ Alan Nadel, "'Temperate and Nearly Cloudless': The 9/11 Commission Report as Postmodern Pastiche," American Studies Association, San Antonio, TX, November 19, 2010. Izzo's paper appears in revised form in this collection.

¹⁸ Russ Castronovo and Susan Gillman, eds., *States of Emergency: The Object of American Studies* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2009).

¹⁹ Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995).

not change anything at all, except that the “unity of purpose” that the “nation demands” must now be seen as pastiche, and was by 2001 always already devoid of the possibility that a nation could demand any such unity at all.

Following Nadel’s presentation at the American Studies Association, though taking a different tack, Winfried Fluck implored American Studies – and the New Americanists, in particular – to pay less attention to what he calls the “trauma narrative” and more to the “crisis narrative.” Gleaned from his perspective in Berlin, the four narratives of America in circulation allow us to comprehend an America disaggregated from its own American exceptionalism. America becomes known by its fragments, whether in Berlin as represented by Fluck’s account, or in Donatella Izzo’s brilliant account of the ways in which American politics, and American liberalism itself, can be reappropriated by Italy’s far right. It is precisely this perspective that “How in the World” raises and that “How in the world” powerfully suggests is constantly under threat of erasure.

After the American century, then, may be synonymous with after American Studies. In this provocation, and my snarky opening sentence – when did American Studies die? – I am referring to Gayatri C. Spivak’s important critique of comparative literature, *Death of a Discipline*, and not only as analogue. In her important book, Spivak summons a comparative approach to a comparative literature she proclaims dead. That approach is comparative in disciplinary terms – bringing together the tactics of close reading and the regional knowledge of area studies – toward what Spivak calls *teleopoesis*.²⁰ This strategy too proves useful to imagining American Studies after the American century, or American Studies after its death.

3 The Arab Spring

I would like to shift from polemic to example, and to move outside American Studies in order to elaborate my methodological argument.

Three months ago, in March, I returned to Cairo for the fifth time in two and a half years. During the past few years, I have been engaged in two overlapping projects: the first, tracking and sometimes participating in the development of American Studies itself in Egypt. I wrote about this in an essay called “American Studies in Motion,” which appears as the final chapter of *Globalizing American Studies*. There I argue that as Egyptian Americanists re-examine American literature, cultural production, and history for their own ends, they necessarily take a localized and presentist position on the American archive. This is productive both for Egyptian American Studies (and Iranian and Indian American Studies, my other key examples, which all do it differently) and an important disruption for U.S.-based discussions of the limits of the field. My second project during this time has been to follow the

²⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003).

work of an exceptionally interesting group of young writers based in Cairo – novelists, essayists, dialect poets, and comic artists, all of whom publish in Arabic, and whom I will refer to briefly here.

These two projects seem to have come together this past winter and spring, as the Egyptian revolution – or what might more accurately be called the January 25 movement – highlighted the complicated ways in which American patronage and American innovation have affected the Egyptian cultural landscape, and the diverse ways in which young Egyptians reflect back on U.S. political hegemony in its autumn and American cultural production. In the case of American cultural products, we must include not only the usual suspects – novels, films, music, etc. – but also cultural forms, the most prominent of which emerge from the realm of the digital: social networking software and the various logics and cultural products it has inspired.

In what follows, I survey these preliminary findings through an overview of how attention to Egyptian cultural production – which has developed an innovative way to incorporate American cultural forms – may allow us to develop an understanding of *circulation* that provides a more useful reading strategy, a comparative approach to reading texts of the twenty-first century that engage or intersect with American forms in motion. From this, I hope to show the limits of how many Americans understood and misunderstood what was happening in Egypt earlier this year, for it was precisely around the question of *circulation* and the technologies of the digital age that this misunderstanding or misanalysis proliferated. This is where American cultural forms and global politics intersect, and where American Studies in its vernacular tradition becomes a trap we must escape.

As I have pursued a larger project on the global flow of American culture and its forms, I have been particularly drawn to new Egyptian writing of the 2000s.²¹ I have been traveling to Cairo to try to understand literary creativity within *zahma*, a word from the Egyptian dialect of Arabic that translates as traffic, as blockage, and one I have used as a metaphor for the social and political blockage of Egypt in the first decade of this century. Formally, much new Egyptian literature seems to refract circulation-based capitalism in startlingly original ways: it borrows from global forms and language (the graphic novel, serious comic, the vocabulary and spelling of TXT messaging, as recalibrated in Arabic). But at the same time, as I recount in the longer essay from which this is drawn, the strongest texts express a young Egyptian consciousness, one that is mediated by the technologies of globalization and global culture yet is simultaneously local – which in this case means “national” or Egyptian – and as a result remains difficult to translate into an American idiom. As with Egyptian American Studies, this is as it should be.

The difficulty in translating the work of these young Egyptian writers is not only the old question of how to render their Arabic writing in English,

²¹ Much of what follows is drawn or adapted from Brian T. Edwards, “*Tahrir: Ends of Circulation*,” *Public Culture* 23.3 (2011), forthcoming.

though there too is a bit of a problem. In “*Tahrir: Ends of Circulation*,” I provide an example:

In the summer of 2009, when I suggested to the Cairo dialect poet and young literary essayist Omar Taher that I might translate for American publication the opening chapter of his influential *Shaklaha Baset* – a work several young Cairo-based writers had told me was so important to their work – he told me it would be impossible to translate; no one outside of Egypt would understand it, loaded with references to both transnational cultural products and un fungible local Egyptian ones. (I did so, anyway, and included it in the ‘Cairo Portfolio’ I edited for *A Public Space* in the fall 2009, heavily annotated, killing the humor in the process.²²)

Creativity such as this may end in Egyptian fiction – it may not be able to circulate beyond it – yet it surely has an end: it has been useful, even productive, in creating a new Egyptian reading public.

The problem of translation also exposes a limit in U.S. literary studies patterns for reading the movement of American and other global cultural production into new contexts, and an important part of my case about the autumn of American Studies. The reach of American forms into Egyptian literature and cultural production (prominent examples are the language of text messaging and the form and layout of comic books) might seem to signal the elasticity of American culture, but such would be a mistake. Egyptian literature would, should we misunderstand it merely as a locus for the expansion of American cultural forms, be understood as derivative, secondary, and not worthy of more than secondary attention. In other words, as such putatively American forms make their way into Egyptian fiction, it is not a question of influence, that pernicious old pattern for reading the movement of one literature into another, or of a simple lesson about the enlarged meanings of the original text derived from the surprising readings of a new public (an idea that Azar Nafisi’s treacherous *Reading Lolita in Tehran* popularized). Rather if we attend to the ways in which the movement of an American form – abstracted, condensed, stripped of its former contextualized meaning – opens up a new set of meanings, how it jumps publics in a way that does not reflect on the original public from which it has traveled, we may move beyond the anachronism of the American Studies vernacular tradition as we inhabit and attempt to understand the twenty-first century. We might derive what Dilip Gaonkar and I called a cosmopolitan approach wherein “America” is understood as a node, as an agent of capitalist modernity, and as I suggested at the beginning of this essay, wherein American hegemony is in its autumn, ceding to a new set of arrangements or new cycle of accumulation.

Consider, then, how the Egyptian revolution was understood in the mainstream American media, the ways in which the otherwise clear refusal of American hegemony, both political and cultural, was negotiated. The role of the Internet and of social networking media in the January 25 movement

²² Brian T. Edwards, “Cairo 2010: After Kefaya,” *A Public Space* 9 (2009), 127–132. The portfolio (127–175) included work by Mansoura Ez Eldin, Mohamed El Fakhrany, Muhammad Aladdin, Ahmed Alaidy, Magdy El Shafee, Omar Taher, Khalid Kassab, and Ibrahim El Batout.

was referred to frequently in American accounts. Yet I have resisted putting the Internet in such a privileged or authorial position in understanding what happened in Cairo and elsewhere in Egypt in the winter of 2011. Doing so, it seems to me, becomes a way to give credit to the West for creating and developing a technology that lead to a new cultural form (indeed a new form of cultural production): social networking and a new genre of productive texts that might flow from it. In "Tahrir: Ends of Circulation," I give an account that is relevant to the case I am making here:

In the several months prior to the Tahrir uprisings, mainstream American publications such as *Foreign Affairs*, the *New Yorker*, and the *New York Times Magazine* had variously discussed and debated the role of social networking media in effecting change, and reported on efforts within the U.S. State Department to try to harness the power of these media. The winter and spring revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa seemed to confirm this technocentric understanding.

The conversation reminded me of early cold war discussions of media, and of Daniel Lerner's massive 1958 book, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*, in particular. Lerner, who drew on extensive Middle East field research (only some of it done by himself), traced the ways in which both "the grocer and the chief," in his famous excerpt published in *Harper's* under that title in 1955, responded to the arrival of the forms and technologies of modernity. As Middle East historian James Gelvin put it in 2004, Lerner thought democracy and prosperity would come to the region 'if only everyone in the region could broaden their horizons with a transistor radio.'²³ Lerner's reduction of a complex region to its inhabitants' response to modern communication technologies is echoed in much of the current discussion of the role of social networking media.

Not to account for the role of the digital age, and of social media, however, would be wrong too. As Tunisian youth sparked their own revolution in December 2010 to January 2011, leading to the flight of longtime autocrat, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, their Egyptian peers watched on satellite TV, live Internet streams, and followed via Facebook groups and tweets from Tunisia. One young Egyptian writer told me that he and his generation were 'jealous' of Tunisia in the first weeks of January. And what had seemed impossible to many in Egypt just a few months prior - despite oppositional movements and stillborn protests earlier in the decade, such as the Kefaya movement of 2004 and 2005 - took flight in Egypt with a speed and energy that even those who came to Tahrir Square on January 25 did not expect. ...

When the Internet was shut off by an anxious regime on January 27, it did not kill the movement. Instead, the sense of being cut off from their sources of information led many back out to the street, and especially to Tahrir. With the Internet down, several told me, there was nowhere else to go but outdoors. ...

In the U.S. media, however, social networking media and digital technologies were championed as pivotal. This extended the interpretation that had been used to explain the so-called Green Movement in Iran in 2009, when American commentators highlighted the use of Twitter and cell-phone videos published on Facebook by young Iranians protesting the legitimacy of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory in the June 2009 presidential election. In February 2011, writing about Cairo, the *New York Times* ran a story on its front page about an

²³ James Gelvin, "Globalization, Religion and the State in the Middle East: The Current Crisis in Historical Perspective," *Global Development Studies* 3.3-4 (2003/2004): 1-22.

Egyptian who named his newborn daughter 'Facebook,' to celebrate the role of the site in the new revolution. Another front-page story lionized Google's Egyptian chief, Wael Ghonim, and his authorial role in staging the revolution via Facebook groups.

Of course, the technologies of the digital revolution did play a role in the series of uprisings that spread from Tunisia to Egypt, and then quickly around the Arab world. The digital circulation of images, rhetoric, and advice across the region was a significant factor, and apparently a novel one in linking movements in diverse locations with a rapidity and intimacy that had not been present – or had not been as available to so many – in previous global contexts.

By telling the story this way, American commentators had found a way to negotiate the more uncomfortable message coming from Tahrir Square: that the massive support the U.S. government had given the Mubarak regime, and indeed the Tunisian President Ben Ali's regime, put the United States on the side of the opponents of change. Thus when Hillary Clinton visited Cairo while I was there in March, the January 25 youth refused to meet with her, a story that barely registered in American media. The carry-over of cold war political calculus in supporting the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes – that they were steadfast partners in the so-called "War on Terror" – was more than obvious to young Egyptians as precisely that: the anachronism of extending a twentieth century geopolitical logic into the twenty-first, the erroneous assumption that it was not the autumn of American hegemony. Thus by telling the story of the January 25 movement as one created by a Google chief, or as only possible because of Facebook and Twitter, the American media and its hungry public could manage the contradictions that were perhaps too painful to acknowledge.

By taking recourse to a reading practice that emphasizes circulation – one that sees America as a key node, but not the only one, in a global network of nodes (and Cairo would surely be another such node, albeit a more minor one) – the hope is that we can escape the persistent logics of the twentieth century, the logics of the American century wherein circulation only went in one direction. That this logic was so influential in circumscribing American Studies itself – to be clear, American Studies in its vernacular tradition, not the emergent cosmopolitan tradition that was there in a minor form but overlooked – is a reason to reject it, to admit its death, and embrace that which comes after.

This discussion of recent events in Egypt should be, as I remarked at the outset, "outside" of American Studies, particularly if we heed the reasonable critique of the transnational turn in American Studies: that it mirrors the very expansionist impulse of the American Imperium it would seek to resist. Yet the autumn of the American century, and the autumn of American Studies, overlap with the digital age and the accompanying episteme within which the circulation of abstracted American (and other global) forms is a major part of the cultural landscape of places like Egypt and also the United States. In both Egypt and the United States, the ways of knowing "after the

American century" are not merely ones in which the United States as political entity and American culture and cultural forms are understood in the context of the waning of global hegemony, but also are known through a variety of digital technologies that abstract and fragment space and time. Thus, by bringing an account of recent Egyptian politics and cultural production into a discussion about American Studies, rather than suggest that American Studies is the appropriate framework for understanding contemporary Egypt, I mean to suggest the reverse: that a nuanced account of contemporary Egyptian recalibrations of American cultural production – precisely where they are most difficult to translate back into American Studies – may productively disrupt American Studies in its own autumn. The so-called Arab Spring offers potent lessons about the future of "American Studies" after its death.

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