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*English Studies in Romania*

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## Contents

### **Introduction**

SUMAN GUPTA and ANA-KARINA SCHNEIDER 5

### **English Studies in Romania**

9

*English Studies at “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași*

DUMITRU DOROBĂȚ 10

*English Studies in Romanian Higher Education: A Brief Diachronic View*

MIHAELA IRIMIA 26

*Possibilities for Further Research: Response to Mihaela Irimia*

DAVID JOHNSON 39

*English Studies Curricula and Romanian Anthologies of English Literature*

ADINA CIUGUREANU 43

*The Cultures of English: Anglophone Sensibility, Regional Confluences and the Romanian Difference*

ADRIANA NEAGU 59

*On Reconfiguring American Studies: Seeking Holistic Perspectives in Times of Crisis*

MARIUS JUCAN 76

*American Studies Today: Traversing Middle Grounds. Response to Marius Jucan*

MADELEINE DANOVA 91

*Fragments of America: Response to Marius Jucan*

BRIAN T. EDWARDS 96

<i>Literary Translation: Between Mediation and Interpretation</i> ANA-KARINA SCHNEIDER	104
<i>On Accessibility and Affordability of English Studies in Romania</i> SILVIA FLOREA	119
<i>Widening Participation and the Recession: Response to Silvia Florea</i> SIMON EDWARDS	143
<i>Conceptualising Classroom Observations for a Project on Higher Education English Studies in Non-Anglophone Contexts</i> SUMAN GUPTA	151
<b>Reviews</b>	168
<i>William Chapman Sharpe, New York Nocturne: The City after Dark in Literature, Painting and Photography</i> ADRIANA NEAGU	169
<i>Gavin Jones, American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945</i> ADRIANA NEAGU	172
<i>Janet Wilson, Cristina Şandru and Sarah Lawson Welsh, eds., Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium</i> ANAMARIA ENESCU	175
<b>Book Announcement</b>	177
<b>Notes on Contributors</b>	179
<b>Call for Papers</b>	183
<b>Call for Membership</b>	186

## ***Introduction***

*Dominant accounts of English Studies – incorporating the study of language and of literature and culture – in English-speaking contexts currently present a marked slippage within its formation. It is widely recognised that the English language is now close to being a global lingua franca, and a great deal of scholarly attention has been given to World Englishes, second language acquisition of English in different contexts, and the global politics of English...*

## Fragments of America: Response to Marius Jucan

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### **Abstract**

In response to Marius Jucan's contribution to this issue, this paper presents a differing account of the much-discussed crisis of American Studies. Particular note is taken of the effects of sociocultural globalization on the discipline, and of directions in the field which have emerged recently inside the United States and in other contexts.

**Keywords:** American Studies, sociocultural globalization, American Century, vernacular tradition, cosmopolitan tradition

Marius Jucan's speculations on the impulse to reconfigure American Studies – prevalent within many U.S.-based discussions of the state of the field – present the opportunity to stage what is implicit through most of his essay, and made explicit in its final section: a dialogue across oceans and across generations about what might remain as this interdisciplinary field struggles to remain relevant in “times of crisis.” Jucan enumerates what he sees as some of the key elements of this crisis: a worldwide economic crisis; the still unfolding dynamics of the end of the Cold War (which resonate differently, as he notes, in nations formerly under the influence of the Soviet Union); the cultural consequences of the “war on terrorism”; and the apparent resurgence of religion globally, what he calls “a profound process of de-secularization.” These extra-academic concerns notwithstanding, Jucan is also reacting to crisis as expressed in the latest round of academic analyses of the state of American Studies. This discussion – which has been especially vocal within the U.S. itself – has gone international. Thus at such venues as the International American Studies Association (founded in 2000 and meeting biennially since 2003), or at events such as the trio of conferences at the

American University of Beirut on American Studies in the Middle East (held in December 2005, January 2008, and January 2010), both traveling U.S.-based scholars and international Americanists have ruminated publicly about what is to be done with a field that originated in the early years of the Cold War and apparently carries with it many assumptions about America's unique role in the world from those days.

It would occupy much of the space of my response to quibble with Jucan's assessment of just what the crises of the present might be, but we might note in his outline a notable absent strain: the sociocultural consequences of globalization, most particularly the intersection of the digital revolution with the rapidly accelerated flows of individuals, finances and images in the past two or three decades. This occlusion comes as a surprise, since the author lists "globalization" as one of his essay's keywords (since globalization is not discussed in his essay, we may guess that by this reference to globalization he is referring to the present economic crisis). Still, the sociocultural aspects of globalization are related to some of the newest developments in the field – perhaps as yet under-recognized – and have allowed for discussion, sometimes virtual and sometimes physical, among Americanists from diverse settings and academic backgrounds.

Thus, as Jucan discusses Americanists' attempt to "recapture their lost prestige" and the "intellectual nostalgia for the avant-garde," and later, when he speculates on reconfiguring the role of the intellectual in "consumerist times," many Americanists may be struck by the disconnect of this nostalgic portrait from the daily life of students and faculty in the university, wherever they happen to teach. The impact of digital technologies (from the Internet, to cell phone technology, to the social networking and information glut that have arrived on our campuses and sometimes in our very classrooms) has had a profound impact, and not necessarily a nostalgia-inducing one, on the educational apparatus. For scholars in less economically advantaged nations, scholarship and information from around the world is more easily retrieved with the digital revolution, and what used to be the purview of only the most elite international Americanists – the funded research trip abroad to gather scholarly materials – is in many cases achieved at the corner cybercafé or in the library. For Americanists all over, the struggle is in how to filter through the avalanche of information, and the related challenge of an exponentially increasing archive for American Studies work, particularly when the

traditional boundaries that once delimited the field are redrawn or reconsidered. Perhaps more influentially, academic attention to the social and cultural impact of demographic shifts in the U.S. and elsewhere (the cultural flows or ethnoscape of globalization, to borrow Arjun Appadurai's word<sup>i</sup>) has produced the newest in a series of challenges to earlier presumptions of American Studies: the field of diaspora studies challenges the older conceptualization of "immigration" (and America as one multi-ethnic nation comprised of many) by recognizing, at its most potent, that America is not always a final destination for migrating subject, but more often a node in a variety of global circulatory matrices.

Jucan puts his cards on the table rather early when he notes that what he calls a *utopian impulse* has his vote over a 'realist' appraisal of the present. At root in the current set of discussions, he sees the retroactive reorganization of the field motivated by present concerns. Jucan is critical of a *faux* politics of utopianism among those who, from the vantage of presentist political concerns, would reorganize the field itself: "cultivating utopianism in order to spark changes cannot conceal a propensity for conformism." And this conformism, he argues, "is found in the tendency to employ terms like 'reconfiguring' or 'reinventing'." His major question is what is to be done with the 'tradition' of American Studies – can it "recover from attempts at the reconfiguring of American Studies?"

When it comes to America's national mythology, Jucan is a bit of a utopian himself. From his own experience of living and teaching in Eastern Europe, only allowed to travel abroad after the late 1990s, Jucan finds that America, contra its internal critics, "still provided the world with unsurpassed templates for progress, modernization and democratization." Jucan admits his regional bias on this score. Such a bias undergirds his statement that the major goal of reconfiguring American Studies might address the "need to revisit the foundations of liberal democracy in times when American power and its symbolism have reached a critical and much criticized status." Thus, he finds that "recent theoretical reckonings in American Studies tend to borrow too visibly from leftist ideology." Jucan sees a collusion of such leftist ideology and the American culture wars of the 1980s and beyond: "politically correct judgments which assert the equal merit of all cultures, and which seek to promote cultures regarded as having been repressed, cannot really establish equality meaningfully amidst such

dissimilating and even diverging traditions.” Rather, Jucan hopes that American Studies might reenergize its “discourse about culture” and find “the yet unexplored possibilities that lie in re-assembling the severed strata of the imaginary of America.”

His argument, then, is that the only innovation offered by those who would reconfigure American Studies comes from “criticizing and deconstructing the symbolism of America,” and that such scholars are too caught up in disassembling the “universalist formulations” of American exceptionalism. This is what he calls the presentism and “self-subverting political determinism” of the trends in the field he is out to critique.

While there are points when I find myself agreeing with some of Jucan’s passing remarks about the obsessive critique of the exceptionalism at the heart of the American Studies enterprise, I have a sharply different account of what might be done with American Studies as it moves beyond its present crises.

To say so requires identifying the crisis differently, of course. We are at a different historical crossroads than the one Jucan names, with a corresponding different impetus for American Studies. It is not that American Studies needs to revisit and recuperate its own tradition at a moment when U.S. foreign policy and American culture are under widespread foreign criticism. Rather a different episteme has arrived, signaled by my reference to globalization above, though American Studies has been particularly slow to recognize it.

We have arrived at the end of the American Century, the end of a historical moment that has particularly profound consequences for American Studies, since it was from within this moment – and guided by its assumptions and its prevailing logic – that what I’ll call the vernacular tradition of American Studies was created and consolidated. The American Century – named and defined most powerfully by Henry Luce in a 1941 *Life* magazine editorial by the same name<sup>ii</sup> – was not merely a period of chronological time, but more importantly an episteme within which Americanist scholars, policy makers, and American cultural producers alike made assumptions about the direction of American culture and its consumption, flowing outward to spread its democratic word. To say so is not to enter yet another critique of the exceptionalism at the heart of the field, but rather to suggest that we should recognize that we have already

moved beyond a formulation, and an episteme, within which the obsession with American exceptionalism might still hold sway.

Sociocultural studies of the impact of globalization have helped many scholars in the West – though too few of them in American Studies – finally to recognize what many in the world have already known and experienced: namely, that the vision of America as a unique point of reference for democracy, culture, and national identification is a fading one, and no longer relevant (if it ever fully was) for the experiences of many people around the world. The United States is still of course a major global player, in political, economic, and cultural arenas – perhaps the most significant such player. But the multiple and crossing circulatory matrices and global cultures of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – and the multiple exceptionalisms of places like India, Iran, China, Egypt, Russia, etc. – make the discussion of “expanding” American Studies (whether in those that Jucan is implicitly critiquing, such as those who would look toward “hemispheric” formulations, or in Jucan’s own sense of recapturing the American liberal experiment and expanding it to a “multi-ethnic” understanding of America) seem defunct or detached from the lived realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Fareed Zakaria’s 2008 best-seller *The Post-American World* would seem an ally in making such a point. Zakaria, however, in his descriptive analysis of the “rise of the rest,” is himself caught in an American Century paradigm. Even those nations which Zakaria sees overwhelming American supremacy – China and India are preeminent in his account – are understood as inverted versions of America, beating America at its own game: “The irony is that the rise of the rest is a consequence of American ideas and actions.”<sup>iii</sup> Zakaria finds it impossible to imagine that an American voice could just be one among many, one that could as easily not be heard or not resonate in certain parts of the world. It seems impossible for Zakaria to recognize a world within which the American voice does not echo back.<sup>iv</sup>

What would it mean to leave behind the discussion of how to escape the exceptionalism at the heart of the American Studies enterprise? As Jucan knows, there are many potent critiques that historicize the ways in which ideologies of exceptionalism undergird the field itself. The most potent strand, perhaps, was initiated by the major 1993 collection *Cultures of United States Imperialism*; such critiques have become a cottage industry in themselves.<sup>v</sup> But rather than write off these critiques as leftist or unwittingly

conformist, we might instead recall that American Studies itself was never as solid an enterprise as Jucan would have us believe. Despite his sense that there is a tradition of American Studies that precedes these epistemological crises about the field, Jucan participates in and extends one of the core patterns of American Studies itself – its own anxiety about its way of producing and analyzing knowledge of ‘America.’ From the very start, and throughout its institutional history, American Studies has been anxious about its own method and its object domain. The annual presidential addresses of the American Studies Association, the major association of the field in the U.S. founded in 1950, were frequently marked by such ‘disciplinary anxieties’ as the interdisciplinary field grappled with one intellectual development after another (e.g., the recognition of African American history and literature as worthy of scholarly research; second wave feminist theory; the arrival of post-structuralist literary theory in English Departments; the multicultural explosion in the 1980s and 1990s; and, most recently, the acknowledgement of diaspora as a category of experience that would undercut the earlier focus on immigration/emigration).

Dilip Gaonkar and I have recently argued that American Studies after the close of the American Century must proceed differently. In our extended introduction to the edited collection *Globalizing American Studies*,<sup>vi</sup> we call attention to the fragments of America – America as agent of capitalist modernity – as Americans or images or products of America travel across diverse pathways and are taken up, employed, or reinterpreted in new contexts. In so doing, we name two major strands in the American Studies bibliography – a vernacular tradition and a cosmopolitan one – in order to distinguish between approaches that would deny discordant perspectives on American culture and history from afar, and those which might accept them. The vernacular tradition is undoubtedly the stronger one, and has over the decades grappled with challenges to its own method by pulling into its orbit precisely those scholarly approaches that might challenge the exceptionalist impulse in the vernacular tradition (what Vernon Parrington, often named as a founder of the field, codified as the ability to organize, fuse, and weave together material from surprising or overlooked arenas or archives into a powerful argument or reading<sup>vii</sup>).

But what Gaonkar and I call the cosmopolitan tradition allows for an approach to the study of American objects and ideas – including those that

Jucan is interested in, such as American models of democracy – divested of the exceptionalist intellectual tradition. 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 American Studies.<sup>viii</sup> At other times, scholars outside ‘American Studies’ proper – whatever their base of operation – help us to understand better the fragments of America (ideas, images, cultural products) as they enter into and alter local debates about culture, politics, and society. This, I would suggest modestly, is precisely what Jucan is in the end staging in his own approach to the field of American Studies, despite his impulse to write off of the recent tradition of critique, which might in the end be an ally.

The development and experience of American Studies abroad is one of those fragments, and it is in the final section of Jucan’s essay that a different possibility emerges. As an Americanist who has been observing and participating in the development of American Studies in various parts of North Africa and the Middle East over the past decade or so, I am struck by Jucan’s reflections on the case of American Studies in Romania, notably different from what has been the recent history of the field in the Muslim-majority Middle East, where a sharper critique and suspicion of American political designs is prevalent. There is however one aspect in Jucan’s account that is notably similar: the fact that present concerns and the recent history of Romania have their own profound effect on the way in which American Studies as a field is discussed and debated, and the basis on which Jucan argues for a ‘top-down’ approach to reinstalling his own preferred version of the field. As I have argued in my account of the recent development of American Studies in Tehran, outside the U.S. present concerns are particularly notable in American Studies formations (just as Jucan complains that they negatively influence the field in the U.S.).<sup>ix</sup> This is just as it should be.

Mine is not, to be clear, an argument for the expansion of American Studies as it is practiced by vernacularists in the United States – and not what I mean by “Globalizing American Studies” at all. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that American Studies, like America itself, can move as a fragment, disaggregated from its own history and the vernacular tradition of American Studies. And that this is the future of a field in need of one.

**Notes:**

<sup>i</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>ii</sup> Henry Luce, *The American Century* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1941).

<sup>iii</sup> Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), p. 48.

<sup>iv</sup> For an extended critique of Zakaria along these lines, see Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "Introduction: Globalizing American Studies," in *Globalizing American Studies*, ed. Edwards and Gaonkar (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), forthcoming.

<sup>v</sup> Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993). See also Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

<sup>vi</sup> Edwards and Gaonkar, "Introduction: Globalizing American Studies," op. cit.

<sup>vii</sup> Vernon Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927).

<sup>viii</sup> See Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922-1963* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), on African American writers and intellectual and their encounter with the Soviet Union, which employed Russian language archives and archival research in Moscow; Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), which took seriously Paris and Marseilles, as well as French language cultural production, in its analysis of African American internationalism; and Brian T. Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), which employed Arabic language sources and Moroccan literary criticism in its analysis of American Orientalism in North Africa. See also the contributions to *Globalizing American Studies*, op. cit., which follow this impulse in diverse, multi-disciplinary ways.

<sup>ix</sup> See Brian T. Edwards, "American Studies in Tehran," *Public Culture* 19.3 (2007): 415-24; and Brian T. Edwards, "American Studies in Motion: Tehran, Hyderabad, Cairo," in *Globalizing American Studies*, op. cit.