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## **FIVE YEARS OF RIAS**

Editors' Picks



## TRANS-RIAS

When RIAS was born six years ago as the *Review of International American Studies*, it identified itself as sort of a fledgling but welcome intellectual cache, a safe place where often controversial debate about the nature of American Studies could continue and develop among like minds, interested in exploring the meaning of ‘international’ in a discipline that had for so long been overshadowed and circumscribed by the country for which the term ‘American’ stood. As an offshoot of the burgeoning International American Studies Association (founded in Bellagio, Italy in 2000), the journal quickly became a clearinghouse for further investigation of issues raised in heady discussions—facilitated by regular international conference calls—among the members of its Executive Council living and working on nearly every continent in the world. With two successful World Congresses behind it (Leiden, Netherlands, 2003 and Ottawa, Canada, 2005), by 2006 the International American Studies Association had established itself as an organization whose alternative approach to the discipline of American Studies provided an internationally recognized forum where contributions to American Studies reaching outside the usual box were not only welcomed, but expected, and offered a previously non-existent means of intellectual and professional legitimization. In the context of the International American Studies Association, American Studies could stretch beyond its own boundaries as a discipline in ways that had to that time either not been possible or not been given much credence in the more traditional context of American Studies Associations at home

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and abroad. Fixing upon the centrality and importance of interaction between disparate American Studies Associations across the world, the International American Studies Association sought to bring to the field a new dimension, a way to get at its object of study from the outside, transcending traditional formulations to view, understand, investigate and even critique the discipline through an international lens meant to destabilize the hegemony of the ever-present problems presented by its seemingly inescapable roots in American exceptionalism and imperialism.

This approach was meticulously outlined in Djelal Kadir's 2003 Presidential Address<sup>1</sup> at the inaugural World Congress of the International American Studies Association; Kadir's bold intervention was perhaps preceded on some fronts by those of Jane C. Desmond and Virginia R. Dominguez,<sup>2</sup> as well as Paul Giles<sup>3</sup> and John Carlos Rowe,<sup>4</sup> and vigorously followed by a variety of perspectives constituting ongoing debate on the issue by such scholars as Amy Kaplan,<sup>5</sup> Donald Pease,<sup>6</sup> Robyn Wiegman<sup>7</sup> and Winfried Fluck,<sup>8</sup> among others. An important new consideration in the debate was brought to the fore in 2004,

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1. See Djelal Kadir, 'Defending America Against Its Devotees', *Comparative American Studies* 2 (2004) 13–34.

2. See Jane C. Desmond and Virginia R. Dominguez, 'Resituating American Studies in a Critical Internationalism'. *American Quarterly* 48:3 (1996) 475–90.

3. See Paul Giles, 'Dislocations: Transatlantic Perspective of Postnational American Studies. Transnationalism in Practice'. *49th Parallel. An Interdisciplinary Journal of North American Studies* 8 (2001).

4. See Winifred Fluck, Donald Pease and John Carlos Rowe, *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies (Re-Mapping the Transnational: A Dartmouth Series in American Studies)*, (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth, 2011); see also: John Carlos Rowe, ed. *Post-Nationalist American Studies*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

5. See Amy Kaplan, 'The Tenacious Grasp of American Exceptionalism'. *Comparative American Studies* 2 (2004) 35–42.

6. See Donald Pease, 'Interview', *Ragazine: The On-Line Magazine of Art, Information and Entertainment* 8.6 (November-December 2012) <<http://ragazine.cc/2011/12/discourse-american-studies>>. (Accessed: November 30, 2012).

7 See Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman, *The Futures of American Studies*. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002).

8. See Winfried Fluck and Thomas Claviez, eds. *Theories of American Culture, Theories of American Studies*. (Tübingen: Narr Verlag 2003).

with Shelley Fischer Fishkin's Presidential Address to the 2004 American Studies Association Conference, in which Fishkin described another way to think about the significance of the international in American Studies, what she identified as the transnational turn. Since 2004, vigorous debate has continued to take place within American Studies on this issue, particularly in terms of how exactly the international should be conceived in seeking to address two fundamental problems: 1) how to conceive of the discipline's unstable object of study, i.e., 'America', which visibly (or invisibly!) encapsulates ideologies of supremacy, imperialism, power and domination even as it seeks to represent the principles of democracy and even as it often violates those principles in the very act of proclaiming them; and 2) while the transnational turn would seem to call for a much-needed internationalization of American Studies, what exactly is the form that such a transformation should take, and how might the discipline find itself re-described in this new articulation? Scholars are agreed that although considerations of the transnational turn have held the discipline in thrall over a period of years, there is as yet still no consensus as to how exactly its implications will redraw the parameters of the field. Debate on this problem seems, rather, to have produced an open-ended smorgasbord of approaches to the issue, all representations of some aspect of the international as it relates to or is imbricated within the field. As Donald Pease points out, although within the nation, 'territory and people are fused...', yet '... in transnational formations, they are disarticulated...' (Pease, 5). What this means, simply, is that if the transnational takes ascendancy, the nation can no longer provide the stable found which cultural meaning may be derived. In the absence of this stable ground, the effort to create meaning finds itself stymied. For Pease, this problem is the result of the transnational turn, which has created a fundamental disruption in a field that, as can already be seen in its nomenclature, would seem to be tied to a geographical territory, without which connection it ceases to lose its specificity and threatens as well to lose much of its significance.

In such a circumstance, how can the study of America be described? Yet it is also important to note that within the transnational turn, this slippage out of a nationally defined context is not

the only destabilization that occurs within the discipline. In this regard, it can be seen also to be plagued by an internally defined slippage that becomes far more problematic. This is the instability contained in the meaning of the word 'America', something that is not immediately recognizable but which comes into stark evidence as soon as it is confronted with the question of the international, a realization abruptly brought to the fore when considered from the vantage point of the transnational turn. In this context, the term 'America' begins to signify in a very complex way that disrupts the normalized fixity of its meaning when such meaning is taken at face value. This is because in the context of the transnational turn, 'America' can no longer be considered simply as itself, becoming instead merely one vector in a broader system of international, political, economic, historical, commercial and social interrelationships not bounded by time, geography, or considerations of state. In this complicated web of interrelationships, American exceptionalism becomes a hegemonic discourse that cannot contain its own contradictions, and these are also suddenly made glaringly and unavoidably manifest as a result. This conspicuous instability then forms the semantic foundation of a continued and increasingly frenzied anxiety in search of meaning that is seen and understood in the seemingly endless proliferation of contradictory contexts and fluid significations within which the transnational configuration can be and has been expressed. It also contributes to the open-endedness of the discipline-wide transformation instigated by the transnational turn in American Studies, and its refusal to settle into any consistently coherent form (See Pease, 'Introduction').

Is American exceptionalism therefore an inescapable corollary of the discipline of American Studies, by virtue of the discipline's object of study? If so, is RIAS itself also inescapably ensconced within this seemingly insidious tradition? Does that tradition cleverly and stealthily color the journal's endeavor, while camouflaging itself with a specious claim to the international? Can RIAS transcend the problem of exceptionalism despite the fact that it is continually inscribed and re-inscribed within the discipline of American Studies, even though it has foregrounded the most problematic issue, that of the international, in its current title? How is RIAS itself

inscribed within the discipline? Does the journal reflect a continuation of long-held assumptions whether overtly or covertly evident, or does it mark a radical shift, an eruption, a sudden dash or hyphen in Americanist understanding, portending a future impossible to define yet surely unencumbered by the baggage of the imperial past mercilessly clinging to the Americanist object of study?

The problematic question, what does the 'American' in 'American Studies' actually mean, and, more importantly, what does it mean in a world that is increasingly global and, as such, international, lies at the center of this difficulty. As a term, 'American' over-determines its own rhetorical signification, simultaneously and automatically trumpeting its existence as an imperial geo-political entity whose powerful singularity is justified by its status as mythical exemplar, and violently stifling all challenges denying its authority as such, especially in the form of those voices which, when raised, evidence its true yet often obscured multiplicity. It is the simultaneity of the reinscription of 'America' as singular geo-political imperium along with the meaning of 'America' as itself in equal relation to its others, as both of these significations are contained in the same term, that renders it problematic, and so subject to critique as an object of study. Approaching the study of 'America' through its internationalization, or a focus on its others in terms of the contributions of the international cadre of Americanist scholars worldwide, is one vector of the effort to de-center the notion of 'America' as exception—another is to place pressure on the term itself using the broad range of contentious critical perspectives available to the contemporary scholar to dismantle its rhetorical power—multicultural, postcolonial, hemispheric, transnational, oceanic. What is the meaning of American Studies in a globalized, inter- or post-national, intersectional, multi-ethnic and multicultural world? How is the meaning of the term 'American' inflected by these multifarious perspectives and how can its larger significance be seen to interact with these different approaches? How does that interaction affect our understanding of the meaning of the term? More specifically, while Pease has argued that a central difficulty of the transnational turn is that in focusing on the significance of the international, it leaves internal, national structures of power intact (See Pease, *Ragazine*), how can/does the *interaction between*

such internationalized perspectives from multiple global cultural locations and the variety of critical apparatuses work together—or be made to work together—in order to lay bare the structures of power and domination forming the foundation of American exceptionalism, so as to alter the surreptitious power that myth can be said to hold over the discipline of American Studies? Most importantly, how can RIAS grapple productively with this problematic?

The purpose of the notion of ‘Trans-RIAS’ put forward in this context is to address this difficulty by considering it as a moment, a possibility of taking RIAS out of its own box in much the same way that American Studies as a discipline has found itself at variance with its own established parameters as it encounters itself again in a new political, historical, economic and social world. ‘Trans-RIAS’ suggests the act of moving the journal beyond itself, placing it in the position of an ongoing becoming of itself, of continually reaching beyond itself and refusing to be fixed in one incarnation. In this, while continuing to foster critical reflection, investigation, exploration and examination of issues, ideas and problems relevant to the international community of American Studies scholars, the journal also provides the possibility of critique—not just of American Studies as it has been conceived in the past and as it is now understood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but even of the journal’s own origins, and of its own sponsor—the International American Studies Association—as well as of itself. Birthdays are a time to simultaneously reflect on and celebrate the past, recognize the present and signal an amazing re-birth carrying both past and present into a new future. In recognition of the sixth anniversary of its creation, then, the notion of ‘trans-RIAS’ seeks to recapture the journal as a dynamic entity, an open door framing myriad intellectual possibilities each configuring and reconfiguring the significance of its past and its present into multiple ways to envisage and re-envisage, imagine and re-imagine its future, as this may be found in its ongoing dialogue with the transformative promise of the international in, through and beyond the discipline of American Studies.

The current issue aims to provide a viable threshold, a place where RIAS and its enthusiastic audience can stop for a moment and take stock before moving through the open door it represents into the endless possibilities that are RIAS’ potential contributions

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to the future transformations of American Studies. Beginning here, then, this number of RIAS reprints a selection of original articles from several of its noteworthy past issues. The articles presented here reflect the varied interests of RIAS over the years, and its efforts to address a wide range of issues relevant to the large, international and interdisciplinary membership of the International American Studies Association. It begins productively with Evelyn Nien-Ming C'ien's 'Serving McAmerica', published in 2006, which reflects on RIAS' ongoing concern with the problem of America and the meaning of 'Americanness'. Nien-Ming C'ien's work argues convincingly for the possibility of understanding the meaning of 'America' and 'American' through the multiple languages by which it is represented, exhorting the discipline of American Studies to acclimate itself to a concept of 'indiscipline', in embracing the chaos of mixed languages. Stephen Shapiro's intriguing essay, 'World-Systeming American Studies', also published in 2006, presents world-systems theory as a way to think about the problems surrounding the question of the international and internationalization as these are presented within the discipline of American Studies. In this essay, Shapiro addresses this problem in terms of postcolonial theory, by discussing its origins in what he calls the 'historical sociology of world-systems analyses', and considering the development of a cultural studies informed by this approach. What is distinctive about Shapiro's argument is that he presents the world-systems approach as a means to think about the problem of difference, which necessarily lies at the heart of a globalized American Studies, in terms of the cultural significance and usefulness of racial, gender and sexual identities in a situation of class conflict. Anita Patterson's 2007 essay, '*Japonisme*: Modernist Style in Afro-Caribbean Literature and the Art of Derek Walcott', picks up on the problem of difference and internationalization in American Studies by exploring the relation between globalization and difference from the perspective of the diffusion of *Japonisme* in modernism, from Europe to the Caribbean. Another perspective on this issue is presented in Karen Richman's '*Simplemente Maria*: Naming Labor, Placing People in the Global Service Economy', a study in cultural anthropology also published in 2007. By examining the way in which people from different cultures are inscribed within Western capital, Richman shows how



this speaks as well across racial and gendered lines to a notion of class conflict. The Winter/Spring 2009 *Security* issue presented a number of very thoughtful and in-depth reflections on 9/11 and its aftermath, and the global effect of this event on American Studies. Amy Kaplan's 'In the Name of Security' offers a straightforward, no holds barred approach to the problems presented with regard to security after 9/11. This essay provides a very compelling elaboration of the etymology of security, using an in-depth explanation of how language is used in this context to introduce an important complexity into the consideration of security and empire particularly in the U.S. American context. In a very daring literary analysis, Catherine Morley explores representations of Homeland Security in literature that examines the effects of constitutionally sanctioned surveillance and preemptive action on the individual. By focusing on the examination of homeland rhetoric in terms of surreal fictions that feel real, Morley provides a fascinating look into the reality of post-traumatic cultural consciousness, and how this may alter our understanding of the 'America' in American Studies. In the Fall/Winter 2009-10 issue, Tace Hedrick's essay, 'Of Indians and Modernity in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*', contrasts postcolonial theory against the essay's own highlighting of modern Mexican thought in this context. More specifically, the essay contrasts the discourses of the modern and the primitive as a means to explicate its discussion of postcoloniality, revealing that this discourse also is not immune to the problems that face other approaches to the meaning of the international in American Studies. Additionally, the essay's effort to recuperate the historical origins of the borderlands by looking at it in the light of Mexican constructions of the idea brings a hemispheric emphasis to its examination of the question of difference. Finally, in 'La Souriquoise en ses plaisirs: Analogie entre la femme sauvage et la Nouvelle-France chez Marc Lescarbot', published in the 2011 *Bodies of Canada* issue, Isabelle Lachance offers both historical and linguistic variety to RIAS' engagement with the hemispheric approach. Written in French and concerning Marc Lescarbot's 17th-century *Histoire de la Nouvelle-France (History of New-France)*, Lachance considers the translation of New World reality into French colonialist propaganda describing the colony

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and its land through a sexualized fantasy in which they are feminized in relation to the figure of La Souriquoise, a female member of what is today called the Micmac Indian tribe. In engaging the significance of this rhetorical transformation from the perspective of pleasure, Lachance reveals both the moral and the political limitations that can accompany the authority of linguistic power and control.

In bringing together these essays, we invite readers to take this opportunity to stop and reflect—on where RIAS began, where it has been, how far it has come, and where it may go in the future. By persisting in its efforts to supply timely, original, quality, peer-reviewed scholarship on topics and issues that are crucial to the ongoing development of the discipline of American Studies and relevant to the intellectual preoccupations of the IASA community (and all beyond it who are interested in that growth), RIAS will continue to reach beyond itself in offering alternative ways to think about the evolving field of American Studies. From small review to full-fledged, peer-reviewed, professional journal and beyond, RIAS has much to celebrate—*ergo* the present Anniversary Issue.

Happy reading!

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