

## Whither Early American Literature?: Assessing an Area of Study

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### 【摘要】

本文評估「早期美國文學」這個領域。晚近批評家將這個領域的起點追溯到一四九二年，也從地理及(或)語言的觀點擴充研究材料。英文不是唯一的語言，英屬殖民地以外的地區也含括在研究領域內。

文中追溯兩個發展方向：英屬美洲文學(或跨大西洋研究方法)及殖民時期美洲文學(或西半球研究方法)，並主張晚近學者重視早期美國文學政治作用的走向，讓這個領域充滿新的活力。

### 【關鍵詞】

早期美國文學、英屬美洲文學、殖民時期美洲文學、跨大西洋研究方法、西半球研究方法

### 【Abstract】

This paper proposes to assess recent scholarship on an area of study formerly termed “early American literature.” The justification of the existence of early American literature is usually considered to lie in its implicit impact upon future “genuinely creative” writers. Recently, however, critics have been reconfiguring this field. Dating the beginning of this field to the arrival of Columbus in the New World in 1492, they also expand the materials to be investigated in terms of geography and/or language: English is not necessarily the only legitimate language, and regions other than the British colonies that became the future United States are also included. In my paper I trace two major developments in this reconfiguration: Literature of British America (or the transatlantic approach) and Literatures of Colonial America

(or the hemispheric approach), and I argue that recent scholars' stress on the political functions of early American literature invigorates this field.

**【Keywords】**

Early American Literature, Literature of British America, Literatures of Colonial America, transatlantic approach, hemispheric approach

**I.**

This paper proposes to assess recent scholarship on an area of study formerly termed “early American literature.” Early American literature is usually considered a field of barren soil, with little to cultivate and still less to harvest. The justification of its existence lies in scholars’ interest in it for its historical value or in its implicit impact upon future “genuinely creative” writers. To put it another way, it is “only the prehistory to ‘real’ American literature” (Gould 308). Recently, however, critics have been reconfiguring this field. Dating the beginning of this field all the way back to the arrival of Columbus in the New World in 1492—instead of the Pilgrims’ settlement in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1620—these critics also expand the materials to be investigated in terms of geography and/or language: English is not necessarily the only legitimate language, and regions other than the British colonies that became the future United States are also included.

In this reconfiguration, a vast array of issues are raised, investigated, and problematized. Starting with each word in the description of the field, early American scholars are asking questions that have long been taken for granted. The literariness of early American writing has always been a controversial issue. It is now disputed whether the aesthetic quality should be the sole criterion in judging the value of early American writing. The term “American,” as Sacvan Bercovitch points out, has become “increasingly controversial in our time” (100). Emory Elliott poses a similar question about “American”: When used in “American literature,” does it simply refer to the United States as a political entity or could it also be “perceived as including Canadian, Mexican, and Caribbean literature as well as that produced in the U.S.” (“New” 615)? “Early” also carries subtle implications. As William Spengemann argues, the word “posits a historical relation, at once chronological and organic, between the texts so designated and American literature proper, which comes later and, presumably, constitutes a more advanced stage in the development of that entity” (*New World* 1). “Early” could thus connote crudeness or inferiority in quality. Calling into question each of the words in the title as a point of departure, early Americanists also challenge the privileging of New England as the focus of the field, the thesis of the “Puritan origins” of the American self, and the notion of American exceptionalism—“the claim that American society and the nation itself are

‘exceptions’ to the historical rules that guide other national histories” (Rhodes 899).

I trace two major developments in this reconfiguration in my paper: Literature of British America (or the transatlantic approach) and Literatures of Colonial America (or the hemispheric approach).<sup>1</sup> Taken together, these two approaches aim at nothing short of a complete overhaul, indeed a revolution, in the field of early American studies. Weary of the “proto-nationalist” approach in which they perpetually have to explain how the literature of the thirteen colonies was the “origins” of American national literary history, these early American scholars have blazed a trail for traditionalists in this field.

In my paper, I concentrate on two objectives of this reconfiguration: the reexamination of the uses or functions of literature and the transnational turn of early American literary studies. I suggest that these two objectives, upon close scrutiny, are very much enmeshed in each other, and I argue that early American literary studies is more and more oriented toward its social and political roles. In their attempt to expand the definition of literature, early Americanists also expand its functions. Literature does not serve aesthetic ends only; it also aims for social and political critiques. The transnational approaches have their political implications too. Starting with a view to decentering Puritan New England studies, the transnational approaches proceed to dislodge the thirteen colonies as the only legitimate object of study for early Americanists. In addition to its purpose of dismantling the myth of U.S. exceptionalism, the new wave of the transnational studies, especially the hemispheric studies, is also a gesture toward acknowledging Spanish Americans’ growing ascendancy in demographic and political power from the late twentieth century on. As we march into the twentieth-first century, early American scholars are consciously raising the question of what literature can and should do under new social and political circumstances, and, in doing so, they give early American literary studies new momentum.

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<sup>1</sup> Although generally accepted as two different approaches, the demarcation between the transatlantic approach and the hemispheric approach is not rigorously defined. Materials and methodologies employed by scholars of these two approaches *could* be overlapping.

## **II.**

The earliest history of American literature came out in 1829: Samuel Knapp's *Lectures on American Literature*. That same year also witnessed the publication of an anthology of American literature: Samuel Kettle's *Specimens of American Poetry*. In their prefaces, both Knapp and Kettle warned their readers not to expect any superior aesthetic qualities of those early writers. Kettle, for instance, advised his readers to shift their attention from recognized literary value to the texts' expression of national character: "What though our early literature cannot boast of a Dante or a Chaucer, it can furnish such testimonials of talent and mental cultivation as are highly creditable to the country" (qtd. in Spengemann, *New World* 3). Almost fifty years later when Moses Coit Tyler published his *History of American Literature* (1878)—which had long been acclaimed for its author's seriousness, dedication, and fine scholarship—he likewise observed: "Undoubtedly literature for its own sake was not much thought of, or lived for, in those days" (qtd. in Hayes 10), implying that early American texts should not be judged by their aesthetic or literary qualities.

For such critics of early American literature, therefore, the only reason to study those early American texts is that they anticipate the "truly literary" and "truly American" masterpieces of the nineteenth century. To establish the "Americanness" of the Romantic writers, to convince zealous nationalists of the "autochthonousness" of American literature, some sort of "origin" or "ancestry" must be discovered or invented, however humble this origin might be. This kind of retrospectivism, according to William Spengemann, arises from the "Anglo-Saxon myth of America's historical mission" (*Mirror* 17), in which a few dozens of British subjects' settlement in Plymouth, Massachusetts, is retrospectively interpreted as the *inevitable* outcome of the Pilgrims' mission in the New World, or the "manifest destiny of Anglo-Saxon progress." As Carla Mulford and David Shields observe, however, recent scholars have viewed New England in a way markedly different from the way that had dominated U.S. literary inquiry during the mid-twentieth century (11). They contend: "No longer is the inquiry reflecting a single, somehow mystically (and mythically) unified narration of the English founding in New England. It is instead taking up the rich complexities that have always been available to us, but disregarded, in the story of the interrelationships between those indigenous to the Americas and the Europeans,

Africans, and others who came to live among them” (11). Modern scholars have recognized that the “Puritan origins” theory in U.S. literary history has placed colonial New England in a privileged position at the expense of other peoples and cultures, especially African and native peoples.

The “Puritan origins” thesis derives much of its impetus, by way of Perry Miller, from Sacvan Bercovitch’s *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975).<sup>2</sup> As a literary-cultural analysis of the structures of expression and feeling that compose the writing of Puritan New England, the publication of Bercovitch’s book corresponded with the arrival of *Early American Literature* as the premier site for American Puritan scholarship. Its interpretation of the origins in New England Puritanism of a distinctive mode of expression and belief that form and shape the “American” identity established Bercovitch as the foremost scholar in Puritan studies and early American literature (Weber 378-79). Recently, however, scholars begin to accuse Bercovitch and early American literature as a field of this narrow regional mapping. Matt Cohen, for instance, observes that the field’s obsessive focus on New England is “one of the bottlenecks in the intellectual flow between early American literary history and the rest of literary studies” (308). Sarah Rivett denounces Bercovitch’s “Puritan origins” thesis as exceptionalist: “Yet the question of origins—specifically Puritan origins—and their influence on the emergence of nation and nationalism is a difficult and unpopular line of inquiry for an area of study suspicious of reifying an exceptionalist narrative” (391). Bercovitch’s notion of the “American” self has also come under attack. In his 1977 review of the book, Alan Trachtenberg commented: “It is hard to locate a clear and distinct critical position toward the self-aggrandizing and often tyrannizing phenomenon [the American self]” (474). In place of Bercovitch’s imperial “American” self, Sandra Gustafson proposes the cosmopolitan origins of the American self. To attain this goal, she suggests employing different approaches and perspectives (transatlantic, multilingual, hemispheric, comparativist) to probe into the writings of variegated authors: Anglo-American, French or German, African-American, indigenous, or women authors. All these critics disapprove of

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<sup>2</sup> For the achievement of *Puritan Origins* and its reassessment, refer to the Forum on the book in *Early American Literature* 47.2 (2012). The Forum was occasioned by Yale University Press’s reissue of the book in 2012.

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Bercovitch's "Puritan origins" thesis and notion of the "American" self and, by extension, 70s' early American scholarship based on Bercovitch's theses.

In fact, early American literature is not the only field under scrutiny in the late-twentieth-century revisionist movement. American studies as an institution has been coming under scrutiny. In her 1998 presidential address to the American Studies Association, Janice Radway urged members not to use *America* as a default term for the United States. Drawing on the scholarship of a host of eminent critics, Radway argued that their work raised the question of "how American national identity has been produced precisely in opposition to, and therefore in relationship with, that which it excludes or subordinates. [Their] work has begun to show that American nationalism is neither autonomously defined—which is to say, exceptional—nor is it internally homogenous" (10). She even suggested changing the name of the association to the Association for the Study of the United States or the Inter-American Studies Association (18, 20). Likewise, Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor question the "unexamined equation of American [Studies] with United States Studies." They argue that the classic texts or canon of American literature are drawn up to "perpetuate an image of the United States as 'different': enclosed, self-contained, isolated from cultural and intellectual currents emanating from the Old World" (1). These attacks on American studies or American literature apply equally well to early American literature. Underneath American nationalism is U.S. exceptionalism, which sees the U.S. as essentially different from other nations.

To redirect the notion of the progress of Anglo-Saxon culture, therefore, some scholars propose to revamp the field. To be sure, there are still disagreements about how this is to be done. Some proceed with discretion and approach this field in a more or less traditional way. Emory Elliott's *The Cambridge Introduction to Early American Literature* (2002) is a case in point. Beginning with "Brave New World" (Chap. 1), this book discusses the "dream of a Christian utopia" (Chap. 3), "The Jeremiad" (Chap. 6), and concludes with "Toward the Formation of a United States." The titles of these chapters clearly indicate that Elliott still works with the models set up by Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch, and the trajectory of his narrative is still an onward march toward the Anglo-Saxon myth. Elliott states, in the "Preface," that "anthologies of American literature today no longer begin with the landing of the

Pilgrims in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620,” and that “The purpose of the first chapter of this book is to provide a concise overview of the long and complex history of Europe and the Americas of which the English Puritans were a small part when they set sail for America in 1620” (vii). That being said, he still insists on making *The Cambridge Introduction* “tell the story of the literature of the New England Puritans” (vii) and thus perpetuates the myth of the Puritan origins. Kevin Hayes’s *The Oxford Handbook of Early American Literature* (2008), comprised of twenty-six critical introductions to various authors and subjects, attempts to expand the canon by the inclusion of the often-neglected Colonial South, different literary genres, and different topics—scientific discourse, print and manuscript culture, newspapers and magazines, early American libraries, or the place of natural history in early American literature. Hayes stresses the importance of “an inextricable link between the land and the intellectual activity that occurs there, a link that is essential for understanding early American literature” (16). The general direction of Hayes’s book, however, remains much the same as that of Elliot’s. Their revamping belongs to those “relatively straightforward acts of revision” (Rogers 301). The *Cambridge Introduction* and the *Oxford Handbook* define (or confine) this field in terms of *both* language and geography—English and the British colonies that constitute the future United States. This kind of approach is still teleological; it still implies that the existence or meaning of early American literature depends on its relation to later “truly literary” and “truly American” masterpieces of the nineteenth century. Other critics tend to divorce early American studies from this relation.

Well before the publication of *The Oxford Handbook of Early American Literature*, J. A. Leo Lemay, “the field’s most vocal and stalwart ambassador” (Mulford 696), had been expanding the canon of early American literature, establishing Southern studies and eighteenth-century studies. His *Men of Letters in Colonial Maryland* (1972), for example, introduced many little-known colonial Southern writers, and his *Calendar of American Poetry in the Colonial Newspapers and Magazines* (1972) is also a useful research tool.<sup>3</sup> William C. Spengemann goes

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<sup>3</sup> For an account of Lemay’s scholarship in advancing colonial American literature, see Kevin Hayes, *The Oxford Handbook of Early American Literature*, 14-15; and Carla Mulford, “J. A. Leo Lemay (1935-2008), Ambassador of Early American Literary Studies,” especially pp. 694-96.



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a step further and proposes to replace early American literature with the Literature of British America in his book *A Mirror for Americanists: Reflections on the Idea of American Literature* (1989). His book attempts to revise the conception of American literature in general, but I will concentrate on his discussions pertaining to early American literature. Spengemann begins by exhorting that we “abandon our habit of equating America with places that are now part of the United States” (21-22). He then proceeds to revise the conception of early American literature. First, he suggests that we take “the discovery rather than the first British settlements as our starting point” (22).<sup>4</sup> His next suggestion is to expand the range of literary forms and conventions by “admitting to our studies the development of French, Spanish, and Portuguese literatures in the New World” (22). The purpose is to “remov[e] the British colonies from the United States and restor[e] them to the world in which they actually existed” (22). Finally, he proposes to construe literature as all forms of written expression. This final move would lead to the inclusion of “all New World writings, whatever their language, form, or degree of artistry” (23) into the domain of early American literature. Spengemann, therefore, redefines early American literature in terms of language and geography. English is no longer the only legitimate language, and regions such as French, Spanish, and Portuguese Americas are also included. The domain of literature is also greatly expanded. His project at this point is bold and ambitious, and it resembles that of hemispheric studies scholars.

In his later book—*A New World of Words: Redefining Early American Literature* (1994)—Spengemann suggests using the first appearance of “America” in the English language as the starting point of early American literature. He observes: “If Early American Literature could be seen not as the least American, least literary phase of American literary history but as an important phase in the evolution of the language that conditions all of our literary and historical judgments, the subject might undergo a renaissance” (“Preface” x). Taking the discovery of the New World as the single most important event in the history of the English language, rivaled only by the Norman Conquest in 1066, he suggests that we explore how this “linguistic discovery changed the whole world of English words,” how “the efforts of writers on the

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<sup>4</sup> Many people would, of course, take the use of the word *discovery* to task since North American Indians had inhabited the Americas long before European explorers “discovered” the so-called New World.

frontier to make the language say ‘America’ flowed back to the stylistic capital, London, in the form of letters, reports, dispatches, and, before long, printed books” (46, 47). This time Spengemann defines early American literature only in terms of language, and his approach becomes a transatlantic one.

In these two books Spengemann propounds revisions of some of the old concepts about early American literature. The first is a rethinking of the definition of literature. Critics often lodge their complaints against early American literature; for them early American writing is “either not very literary or not very good. When it isn’t utilitarian or didactic, it is merely derivative, which is to say un-American” (Spengemann, *Mirror* 28). To counteract the belletristic-aesthetic idea of literature, accordingly, Spengemann suggests redefining it as “any piece of writing that employs literary techniques and, consequently, will respond to literary analysis” (30). The value of an early American text will then depend on literary scholars’ ability to “say interesting things about it.” Next, in using the “discovery” of the New World or the first use of the word *America* as the starting point, Spengemann situates early American literature in an entirely different political and cultural context. The approach is no longer teleological, reiterating the old, familiar tale of the myth of the Anglo-Saxon march. The inclusion of other European colonies and their literatures in the first book, moreover, add to geographical and linguistic diversities. The investigation of the New World writing in such a heretofore unfamiliar context promises to yield intriguing results. His motivation to revise the concept of early American literature derives from his dissatisfaction with the “same provincial (not to say racist) notion that the progress of Anglo-Saxon culture forms the armature of New World history” (*Mirror* 17). Furthermore, he laments the diminution of available materials in early American literature and the narrowing of materials pertinent to the study of American literature in general, both of which diminish the returns of literary scholarship (19-20).

Spengemann’s projects point a new direction to early American studies. Nevertheless, he is not without his critics; his second book especially incurs criticism. In his second book, Spengemann suggests that we treat early American literature “as an important phase in the evolution of the [English] language” (x). “Early” as an indicator of this period comes to mean “an especially important moment in the development of modern English, the point where the language takes up in earnest the

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task of, literally, coming to terms with America” (49). “America” ceases to refer to a nation but, instead, comes to indicate “any selection and arrangement of English words attributable to the writer’s efforts to take hold of ‘America’” (49). In Spengemann’s new strategy, according to Leonard Tennenhouse, early American literature “encompasses virtually everything written in English during the colonial period” (363), and it creates a huge controversy. For one thing, his project in the second book is transformed into a transatlantic approach, and in this approach English, again, becomes the only language of concern. Milton’s *Paradise Lost* or Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* becomes an “American” text and is mentioned in the same breath with John Smith’s *True Relation* or Franklin’s *Autobiography* in Spengemann’s second book. This approach, according to critic David Rogers, is a conciliatory, “neo-traditionalist” position although it also creates controversy of “the most useful—and radical—kind” (302). Tennenhouse also contends that by reducing literature to language on which the “pressure” of America has been brought to bear, Spengemann creates “a reversible model of Americanness”: “On the basis of his model, there is just as much reason to say that English letters incorporate that writing whose language shows the influence of a colonial vocabulary, references, figures of speech, as it is to include *Paradise Lost* and *Northanger Abbey* among the works of Early American Literature” (368). Critic Ralph Bauer is also suspicious about the critical projects of Spengemann and other early Americanists in Spengemann’s camp. In his review of eight books on “The Literature of ‘British America,’” Bauer reminds us that Spengemann’s projects run the risk of regressing to the nation-based paradigm (“Literature” 818-19).<sup>5</sup> In their endeavor to revolutionize this field, Spengemann and other scholars of the Literature of British America have declared their independence from the bonds of American national literary history, but one of the ironies of this independence is that “early American literature has once

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<sup>5</sup> Bauer reviewed the following books which employ the transatlantic approach: Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters* (2005); Michelle Burnham, *Folded Selves* (2007); Joseph Conforti, *Saints and Strangers* (2005); Sean Goudie, *Creole America* (2006); Robert Olwell and Alan Tully, *Cultures and Identities in Colonial British America* (2006); Thomas Scanlan, *Colonial Writing and the New World, 1583-1671* (2006); Kim Sloan, *A New World: England’s First View of America* (2007); and Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Importance of Feeling English* (2007).

again become British” (818). In addition to these criticisms, Spengemann’s constant omission or failure to include Native Americans’ literature and culture is particularly disconcerting. A multilingual or multiracial history of colonial America is suspect without taking into account Native American culture. As Caroline Levander argues, the emergence of the Western America required “the erasure or subordination of indigenous populations”; therefore, the “recovery of [their] occluded and contested histories remains a crucial project” (“Hemispheric” 439). Although Spengemann mentions in passing the relevance of Native American culture in early American scholarship, he does not seriously address the issue of the silencing of Native American voice.

Another new approach to early American literature—Literatures of Colonial America—resembles Spengemann’s earlier project. Dating the beginning of this field to the arrival of Columbus in the New World in 1492, this approach also expands the materials to be investigated. In terms of language, all the languages of the European settlers in the New World are included, plus the languages of Native Americans. In terms of geography, regions other than the British colonies receive considerably more emphasis. In their Preface to *The Literatures of Colonial America: An Anthology* (2001), Susan Castillo and Ivy Schweitzer alert readers that colonial New England no longer occupies the center of attention: “we have sought to include works from other parts of North America, such as New France, New Spain, New Netherland, the Chesapeake and West Indies, and other areas of the Americas” (xvii). Texts by women and writers of color are liberally sampled. In the *Anthology*, Castillo and Schweitzer highlight indigenous voices, “bring other colonial outposts into focus against the purely academic dominance of New England,” and offer glimpses of colonial voices which are “characterized by a growing awareness of racial and gender identities” (xvii-xviii). What they call literature, as stated in their subsequent book *A Companion to the Literatures of Colonial America* (2005), comprises “oral and written forms, popular and elite modes, privately written and publicly printed artifacts, histories, treaties, and *belles lettres*” (2). In this respect, they find much common ground with Spengemann.

The turn of the twentieth-first century witnessed the publication of a few important anthologies of colonial America: Giles Gunn, *Early American Writing* (1994); Myra Jehlen and Michael Warner, *The English Literatures of America*,

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1500-1800 (1997); J. A. Leo Lemay, *An Early American Reader* (2000); Susan Castillo and Ivy Schweitzer, *The Literatures of Colonial America: An Anthology* (2001); and Carla Mulford, Angela Vietto, and Amy E. Winans, *Early American Writings* (2002).<sup>6</sup> Although the editors of these anthologies all strive to meet the criteria of recent scholarship, the results vary greatly according to each book's conception and design. Of these five anthologies, Lemay's *An Early American Reader* is the most limited in scope and range. The book is comprised of four main chapters—"The American Dream," "Religious Traditions in Early America," "Nature in the New World," and "The American Revolution," with two other chapters on the indigenous and the African peoples ("The Indian and the Frontier" and "Slavery and the Black") wedged in between. Lemay's conservative enterprise is perhaps not surprising, considering the fact that the book is compiled for and published by the United States Department of State. Gunn's *Early American Writing* promises to be different at first. Opening with two "Prefigurations"—"Native American Mythology" and "The Literature of Imagination and Discovery," however, Gunn soon follows the beaten path in the remainder of the book, with just one section on "Native American Literature in the Colonial Period" as a token gesture to the native people. Hence, these two anthologies belong in the traditionalist category. Although Jehlen and Warner's *The English Literatures of America* is chronologically structured, starting with "The Globe at 1500" and concluding with "Poetry: The Eighteenth Century," it also takes pains to do some other kinds of organizing. Some chapters focus on regions, others on genres, and still others on the contexts of discourse. The editors state that the anthology is a guide to the written culture of the complex Anglophone world of the Atlantic rim. It includes "texts by explorers, creole settlers, the peoples they subjugated, and Englishmen who viewed the Americas only from the banks of the Thames" (xvii). *The English Literatures of America*, therefore, takes a transatlantic approach to this field.

In contrast, Mulford, Vietto, and Winans's *Early American Writings* and Castillo

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Schell and Werner Sollors's *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* and Andrew Delbanco's *Writing New England: An Anthology from the Puritans to the Present* include a substantial portion of selections from early American writing. Their selections, however, extend far beyond the early American period.

and Schweitzer's *The Literatures of Colonial America* are much more ambitious. The emergence or formation of the United States is no longer the central story, or, if it is, it takes a more circuitous route. Both cover a wide range of materials from pre-Columbia period, through the era of colonization of the Americas, to the Revolutionary and early national period. Both include materials representing cultures indigenous to the Americas as well as writings from Spanish, French, Portuguese, German, Swedish, and African sources during the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries. *Early American Writings*, however, declares that it "attempts to convey the cultural richness and cultural complexities of the Atlantic world" (xvii). Consequently, this anthology still stays on the transatlantic side although its narratives about the European encounters are no longer confined to the English people. Castillo and Schweitzer's anthology is, therefore, the only one that is truly hemispheric. Their differences notwithstanding, the result of the last two anthologies, as Sarah Rivett puts it on another occasion, is "a more archivally innovative, culturally rich, and geographically diverse set of texts and areas of study" (393). The two anthologies "read across national borders" and "explode the category of 'American' as a surrogate for 'English-speaking'" (Gura 309, 308). Their idea of restructuring the field, especially Castillo and Schweitzer's, came, in part, from Carolyn Porter's provocative essay. In 1994, Carolyn Porter published "What We Know That We Don't Know: Remapping American Literary Studies." In this influential essay, Porter challenges any Americanists that do not question the most fundamental assumption of American studies: that "the nation itself is the basic unit of, and frame for, analysis" (470). For Porter, this nation-based paradigm is built on a belief of "an idealized cultural nationalism," but that belief is "now set in relief by its own failures" (470). Consequently, Porter proposes "a quadruple set of relations between (1) Europe and Latin America; (2) Latin America and North America; (3) North America and Europe; and (4) Africa and both Americas" (510). Situated within such a larger frame, "'America,' both geopolitically and historically, would become at once internally fissured and externally relativized" (510). Castillo and Schweitzer's anthology is a direct response to Porter's, as well as to Radway's, challenge.

Hemispheric American studies is, of course, not confined to the study of early American literature. It encompasses American literature from the colonial period up

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to the present day, and its aim is to dislodge “the U.S. as a central or normative paradigm” (Bauer, “Early” 220) or to declare “independence from the nation-state” (Bost 236). With such aims in mind, Caroline Levander and Robert Levine edited a special issue for *American Literary History* in 2006. In the Introduction, Levander and Levine, after invoking Porter’s call for an “enhanced hemispheric—indeed trans-hemispheric—literary and cultural study,” ask: “What happens to U.S. and Americas literary and cultural studies if we recognize the asymmetry and interdependency of nation-state development throughout the hemisphere?” (400-01). Instead of a U.S.-centered system, they suggest “doing literary and cultural history from the vantage point of a polycentric hemisphere with no dominant center” (401). Likewise, in the Introduction of the published book—*Hemispheric American Studies*—they assert that one of the large goals of the collection of essays is “to chart new literary and cultural geographies by decentering the U.S. nation and excavating the intricate and complex politics, histories, and discourses of spatial encounter that occur throughout the hemisphere but tend to be obscured in U.S. nation-based inquiries” (3). Again, in “Hemispheric American Studies,” Levander suggests that American studies opens up “when ‘America’ is understood not as a synonym for an isolated United States but as a network of cultural influences that have extended across the hemisphere from the period of colonization to the present” (442).

Although hemispheric American studies promises much, it is, after all, not a cure-all. Some lingering doubts persist from earlier American studies. As Ralph Bauer has pointed out, the “new” hemispheric American studies has also raised “difficult disciplinary, institutional, political, and methodological questions” (“Hemispheric” 235). For one thing, the research agendas of the hemispheric American studies tend to overlap with those of other disciplines, such as Latin American studies or comparative literature. Moreover, whereas most literary scholarship in inter-American studies has usually been comparative in methodology and based in comparative literature or Latin American programs, hemispheric American studies is usually based in English or American studies departments; it is, therefore, primarily focused on the United States, albeit in a hemispheric context (Bauer, “Hemispheric” 235). As a result, this approach has raised some doubts on political grounds. Some critics are quick to point out that this might be a United

States imperialist or neocolonialist agenda. In response to Janice Radway's presidential address, Sophia McClennen, a scholar of Latin American studies, questions: "What would an inter-American studies housed in English and History departments in the United States and taught by monolingual faculty be, if not an example of U.S. intellectual expansionism?" (qtd. in Bauer, "Hemispheric" 237). Sophia McClennen is not the only one that voices concerns about hemispheric American studies. Paul Giles also expresses his uneasiness about this approach: "One obvious pitfall of hemispheric studies . . . is the prospect of simply replacing nationalist essentialism predicated upon state autonomy with a geographical essentialism predicated on physical contiguity" (649). Finally, when *Early American Literature* and *American Literary History* published the special joint issue of "Projecting Early American Literary Studies" in which hemispheric American studies is a principal focus, one of the stated goals is to promote academic exchange and dialogue between scholars of early American literature and their colleagues of later periods. The editors believe that the neglect of the work of early American scholars by the larger community of Americanists is "an omission that the profession suffered at its peril" (Gustafson and Hutner 249). It remains to be seen to what extent this goal can be achieved.

### III.

When Spengemann, "in 1981 our prophet crying in the wilderness" as Philip Gura calls him (608), initiates his project of reconfiguring (early) American literature, he specifically asks Americanists to carefully consider the question: what is American literature? He believes many scholars have been taking the Americanness of American literary masterpieces for granted and, in evaluating these works, evade the main question: what is American? Ironically, in proposing to replace early American literature with the Literature of British America, colonial American writing becomes part of English literature and loses its Americanness altogether. Scholars of hemispheric American studies take exception to American exceptionalism. In their reconfiguration, this new field takes into its domain all the Americas (North, Central, and South), as well as their adjacent islands—Bermuda, Barbados and St. Kitts, the Leeward Islands, and so on. In the process of this redefinition, the question of nationality or citizenship evaporates in the air. The question of the Americanness of



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early American literature, however, becomes murkier or more controversial. The issue gets even more complicated when academia meets the public. As Sarah Rivett argues, “[w]e celebrate a history of plural pasts, contested beginnings, and multivocal encounters, because this is a more honest and appealing way to tell the story. But outside of the academy, we also live in a world that does not grasp the subtly [sic] of our theoretical interventions” (392). Is debunking American exceptionalism necessarily antithetical to defining the American self or identity? This will continue to be a vexing problem for (early) Americanists. Nonetheless, one thing is clear: early American studies in the new century is inextricably tangled up with politics.

Spengemann redefines literature as any writing that will respond to literary analysis and asserts that the value of a piece of writing depends on scholars’ ability to “say interesting things about it.” In so doing, he opens up possibilities for early American writing. It is now commonly accepted that aesthetic quality is not the sole or most important criterion in valorizing early American writing. In *A Companion to the Literatures of Colonial America*, Susan Castillo and Ivy Schweitzer state that “[w]hat we loosely call ‘literature,’ encompassing oral and written forms, popular and elite modes, privately written and publicly printed artifacts, histories, treaties, and *belles lettres*, expresses a wide range of ‘literacies’ and encompasses the sometimes parallel, sometimes incongruous and discontinuous experiences of pre-contact, colonial and American subjects” (2). As a result of the expansion of the definition of literature, available materials for the study of early American literature build up to a stupendous degree, and the range of colonial American writing is much more diversified. As David Shields, editor of *Early American Literature* from 1999 to 2008, put it in *EAL*’s call for papers: “*EAL* invites work treating Native American traditional expressions, colonial Ibero-American literature from North America, colonial American Francophone writings, Dutch colonial, and German American colonial literature as well as writing in English from British America and the U.S.” The magnitude of this proposed new field is such that anyone who intends to enter it will have to be retrained. For one thing, no one can be expected to master all the colonial European languages in the Americas, plus the languages of native people. Resorting to translations cannot be an ideal option. These thorny issues aside, the inclusion of variegated kinds or genres of materials into the domain of literature has

its political significance too.

Literature in its expanded sense is not merely a faculty for aesthetic appreciation or a form of social knowledge or behavior; in the process of the redefinition, the function of literature undergoes transformations. Literary studies, as Russell Reising contends, “has been moving in the direction of social and ideological criticism” ((6). Literature begins to take on political purposes. Winfried Fluck makes a similar point in “From Aesthetics to Political Criticism” when he attempts to provide an overview to recent theories of the early American novel. After commenting on the “infancy” thesis, in which colonial novels are said to be in its infancy phase of the American novel and literary form is believed to provide a test of maturity, Fluck points to the recent shift in the way the early American novel is valorized: literary form is now believed to be a “manifestation of politics.” Citing Cathy Davidson’s *Revolution and the Word* (1986) and her other essays on early American novels as exemplar of the “new revisionist literary history,” he observes: “In consequence of the shift to politics, the primary question is now whether the early American novel is liberating or not, or, more specifically, whether it is subversive or complicit. For Davidson, the early American novel gives a voice to marginalized groups and thus functions as a form of political empowerment” (238). Fluck believes that professionally the new political readings have solved the problem of legitimizing the study of the early American novel (245). Early American novels need no longer apologize for their putative deficiency or inferiority. The function of political empowerment invests early American novels with a new life and a new cultural significance.

How much can be achieved in Spengemann’s proposed reconfiguration about (early) American literature? Russell Reising, one of Spengemann’s critics, has reservations: “Nor do I think, as Spengemann seems to, that a definition of American literature is possible (or desirable) if we only break through the geographical, cultural, and national provincialism limiting many theories of American literature” (7). But even he concedes that the reconceptualization is instrumental in facilitating changes: “a more comprehensible view of American literature probably will not generate a theory of American literature, but it can at least demonstrate the inadequacies of various readings which deny the heterogeneity of American writing in the name of some theory or tradition” (31). With a view to expanding the field and effecting

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changes in critical methodologies, the transatlantic approach and the hemispheric approach are transnational approaches that address, among others, the issue of U.S. exceptionalism. As Evan Rhodes states, “[a]rguably no moment in the history of American studies has been so shaped by an anti-exceptionalist position as its current transnational turn” (900). Would transnational studies, however, be able to deter U.S. exceptionalism from ever resurrecting itself again? Probably not. Donald Pease has astutely observed that “American exceptionalism has become a primal scene that must be continually reenacted in contemporary geopolitics to shore up some sense that the United States is an internally and internationally coherent body” (qtd. in Rhodes 902). American studies was a post-Second World War product, aiming to stabilize and disseminate American values and ways of living, and it has increasingly become a “tool of cultural imperialism in the Cold War era” (Manning and Taylor 1). With its decline of global power in the twenty-first century, it is almost certain that the United States will reenact exceptionalism in some form or shape. This is, however, not to suggest that all the efforts in the transnational (early) American studies will be of little avail. This just serves as a reminder that in no way should we entertain the naïveté that a transatlantic or hemispheric turn in (early) American studies will cure Americanists of their headaches once and for all.

American studies as an institution faces various challenges in the twenty-first century, one of which comes from new immigrants. As U.S. public schools are increasingly composed of newly-arrived, non-English immigrants, Nina Baym reminds us, it is imperative “to configure American literature to serve the aims of American public education” (459). Moreover, as Spanish-speaking citizens and African Americans are growing to be the two largest U.S. populations in the near future, defining American literature in terms of multilingual, multiracial, and multicultural origins becomes not only necessary but also urgent. Discovering a national character in the Puritan origins will have to yield to the cosmopolitan origins of the American self for educational and political purposes.

When Emory Elliott began to edit *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), he intended to have the new literary history perform similar functions as Nina Baym had in mind. He pointed out that the goals for this new literary history are “political as well as educational” (“Politics” 269). After mentioning that

one chapter in the book will treat feminist, gay, and minority political writings as literary forms of public discourse, he adds: “Another way in which literary history is political is in the ways it can contribute to the formation of the political views and cultural assumptions of its readers” (271). The same can be said about the editing of anthologies or the publishing of a collection of essays like *A Companion to the Literatures of Colonial America*. If the world outside of the academy cannot grasp the subtlety of theoretical interventions, if American exceptionalism is certain to be reenacted in one way or another, it is perhaps all the more reason to reshape political views by dislodging the public from their complacent assumptions of the Puritan origins of the national character or the Anglo-Saxon myth of America’s historical mission.

In their Introduction to “Projecting Early American Literary Studies,” Sandra Gustafson and Gordon Hutner comment that early American literature is “a discipline where we have seen our shared archive so thoroughly exploded that we are mainly working with the tatters of what once presented itself so naively as a coherent field” (249). With a renewed awareness and redoubled efforts, early Americanists seek to redress the inadequacies in earlier scholarship of this field. In this new critical undertaking they have expanded the world of Puritan New England and transformed it into a multiethnic, multilingual colonial world, with a history of nearly three hundred years. The result of their efforts is “a new kind of early American studies that reads beyond the U.S. nation and change [sic] the field’s object of study” (Gura 305-06). They hope that this “new field” will inspire or redirect academic energy in the study of American literature in general and early American literature in particular.

Nevertheless, each new literary enterprise has served some purposes and posed some new problems. Evan Rhodes points out in his essay that the transnational turn in American studies has a “pyrrhic quality” to it; he asks the question: “how does one *do* American studies without ‘America’ as the object of study?” (900; original emphasis). Rhodes’s question is not one that confronts academia only. The U.S. State Department, for instance, would probably balk at funding an institution that does American studies without “America” as its object of study. Besides, how would the U.S. public, especially the whites, respond to the notion of the cosmopolitan origins of the American self? These are sensitive political questions, and there are no quick and easy answers. As early American studies is more and

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more dedicated to its social and political functions, these are the kinds of questions that it can ill afford to evade, but the heated and lively exchange of ideas between the different camps of early Americanists these days decidedly galvanizes this field.

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