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Forum
American Cultures: The View from the Pacific

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Researching and writing about a specific geographical or national context from afar presents a host of challenges. Source materials, especially for scholars who work with archival collections or who engage in ethnographic methodologies, are severely limited. Less specifically but arguably just as important, scholarship grounded in geographical place often benefits from frequent exposure to that locale. Knowing and immersing oneself intimately in a place's contemporary rhythms, sense of history, cultural landscape, and physical geography are often helpful in creating more textured and nuanced research as well as more closely understanding the concerns of one's subjects.[1]

Perhaps the biggest challenge of distance, though, is at the level of what we might understand as cohort. Americanists based in US universities benefit from being surrounded by colleagues both in their home disciplines and across the humanities and social sciences who also work on the United States. Finding a collaborator to initiate a joint research project, a group to bounce ideas off, or simply a colleague to discuss a field's latest groundbreaking work over lunch is often a challenge for scholars of the US working from outside North America. To be sure, this challenge is one faced by many, if not most, scholars around the world, as Africanists, Latin Americanists, Middle Easternists, and South Asianists know especially well. What makes Americanist research from afar somewhat different from these comparisons is the extent to which the United States itself functions as the metropole in Americanist scholarship, arguably much more so than Peru does for Peruvianist research, Nigeria for Nigerianist scholarship, and so forth.

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[1] The flip side of this – that physical distance can add to perspective – is of course equally true.

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Indeed, for scholars based in the Asia-Pacific region, this challenge is especially acute. Unlike the United Kingdom, Germany, Ireland, and other places where substantial research on the US takes place outside North America, the so-called "tyranny of distance" further complicates matters for scholars. The distance and travel time between Sydney and Melbourne, probably the areas with the highest concentration of Americanist research in the entirety of the Asia-Pacific, is roughly that of London to Berlin. If one is based farther afield – in, say, Perth, Christchurch, Suva, Singapore, Hanoi or Hong Kong – finding oneself in close proximity to scholars with similar interests often takes the better part of a day or even more and a hefty allotment of an annual research allowance, if one is lucky enough even to have one. Indeed, while scholars in Western Europe can take advantage of close distances and relatively cheap train and air travel to create research connections even if they are not as prevalent in their home universities as they are in English-speaking North America, most scholars across the rest of the world have no such luxury.

With these challenges in mind, in 2014 we successfully applied for funding from a University of Sydney Faculty Collaborative Research Scheme (FCRS) and received additional funding from the University's United States Studies Centre (USSC) in order to create a space that would bring scholars together from across the broad region. Our specific aim was to create an ongoing and sustainable research workshop across the humanities and humanistic social sciences that would regularly bring together scholars working in the Asia-Pacific region and other non-US locales who research Americanist topics. Beyond the Asia-Pacific, we explicitly sought out scholars who work on the United States but are not based there. Our logic here was to expand more widely beyond our own region and center the workshop within the global community of Americanists from outside the United States. More generally, we hoped that by providing this formal space, we would foster the kinds of informal collaborations and networks that many of our colleagues in the United States take for granted, albeit often unknowingly.

Sydney is an ideal location for such an endeavor. The University of Sydney itself boasts one of the larger concentrations of Americanists outside North America as well as an institutional home for US research in a strong American studies undergraduate teaching program and the US Studies Centre, a research center concerned with United States issues. Within metropolitan Sydney, the University of New South Wales, Macquarie University, Western Sydney University, the Australian Catholic University, the University of Technology Sydney, and the University of Notre Dame all have scholars in the humanities and humanistic social sciences working on US-based research. Nearby, the University of Wollongong, the University of Newcastle, and the Australian National University are relatively short and cheap journeys for scholars. Finally, Sydney has nonstop connections to the

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entirety of the Asia-Pacific region, taking away at least a small part of the annoyances of travel for far-flung scholars.

The workshop met fortnightly during both academic semesters, totaling thirty-two meetings over the two years of funding. We also convened and co-convened special events including public lectures, roundtables, and academic conferences. The funding we received allowed us to bring scholars from around the world to Australia to present work-in-progress article- or chapter-length papers. Over the course of the two years, scholars from interstate and from Canada, Denmark, France, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and Vietnam came to Sydney to present their works-in-progress. We solicited and accepted work from a wide array of disciplines, including anthropology, art history, architecture, communications, film studies, history, literary studies, political science, and sociology. Their topics spanned historical eras, regions, and methodologies. Our format was a workshop-style seminar. Presenters contextualized their essays in a five- to ten-minute presentation, giving attendees a sense of where the paper fitted within a larger research project and what kinds of feedback would be most helpful. What followed was an eighty- to ninety-minute back-and-forth amongst the presenter and the attendees, of which our average number was around fifteen. Following the workshop, interested workshop attendees joined the presenters and organizers for dinner and drinks, during which many of the workshop conversations continued more informally.

Always at the back of our minds when convening the workshop were a few broad and generalized questions. What, if any, difference does writing and researching the US from abroad make in the kinds of questions we ask and the manner of answers to these questions we give? More specifically, does writing from the Asia-Pacific region bring specific perspectives into our research? If the answer to the latter question was an affirmative, then what are these perspectives and what accounts for them? We hope that the essays that follow give readers a sense of our endeavor as well as of what the context of writing from the Asia-Pacific – looking at the United States eastward, as it were – brings to our scholarship. The essays are diverse in subject matter and methodology. There are considerations and theorizations of American studies as a discipline and teaching program in specific locations in the region, studies of authors and topics profoundly Pacific in their transnationalism, ruminations on the act of studying American culture from afar, and suggestions on the importance of comparison in understanding what is truly specific and what is global in US history and society. Despite their diversity in subject, theme, and methodology, what emerges in the following essays is a broad sense that the place and context in which we pursue our scholarship matters, much more so than is usually understood.

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Institutional concerns – whether those of the Cold War, research funding mechanisms and schemes, or a changing global economy and culture – deeply affect the way scholars understand the United States. Local cultural and historical contexts – from settler colonialism to the experiences of Americans as foreigners – change our perspective on what constitutes "America" and "American Studies." While these observations might seem somewhat self-evident, we would suggest that the context of the Asia-Pacific, its institutional and cultural "tyranny of distance," and its implicit complications of the Atlanticist paradigm of American studies force all of us working and writing on the United States from afar to be more self-reflective about the relationship between physical location and our scholarly research. In the final analysis, this is something that all scholars, not just of the United States but across disciplines and geographic specialties, could better take to heart.

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