



# SUBSUMING “AMERICA” TO THE “GLOBAL”

A Response to Markha Valenta’s  
“Abandoning America the Better to Save America”

Markha Valenta’s passionate and wide-ranging essay raises several thorny issues that would require a much more elaborate response than the one I can offer here. Her title, at least to my ear, sounds nicely ambivalent. It could easily be the title of an article meant to criticize—as many have done—the “transnational turn” as a move to make American Studies legitimate and more palatable in a globalized world. However, though fully aware of the complications entailed in any internationalization of American Studies, she by no means wishes to abandon this project. Indeed, Valenta wants to sustain and expand the scope of transnational American Studies in order to reach a genuine decentering of the US. She cites the example of how discussions of Trump’s victory have tended to see it almost exclusively “as a sign of US social and political crisis,” without paying enough attention to “the global socio-economic, political and indentarian dynamics undergirding Trump’s success and the international crises/crises this marks.” The problem, in her view, is that even the most astute proponents of international/transnational American Studies—scholars like Djelal Kadir, Amy Kaplan, Brian T. Edwards, Shelley Fisher Fiskins, Donald Pease, and others, whose work she incisively comments upon—seem always to circle back to the US at the end of their analyses, as if they were unable to truly “abandon America.”<sup>1</sup> In what seems to me the key

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1. I should add that while often used interchangeably, the terms “international” and “transnational” in some scholars’ eyes (see for example Kadir) designate different theoretical constructions.

passage of her argument, she laments that “when American Studies goes international, the focus remains on the ways in which the gaze from elsewhere is directed at America. The fact that this gaze at America is one of many gazes directed both within and abroad—in relation to one another—that is, that a gaze is embedded in a tapestry of gazes, *including ones directed elsewhere than at America*, is insufficiently incorporated.” The only way to truly provincialize (my term) the US, therefore, “would be to approach the question of the subject, object and method of American Studies from an explicitly pluralist, democratic sensibility that subsumes ‘America’ to the ‘global’ and to global projects for just pluralist relations.”

Before I say something about the critical perspective she advocates at this juncture in her reasoning, let me express a minor, though perhaps not irrelevant reservation. I am all for understanding current politics, culture, and literature in a more “global” context, and I do agree that the nation has become in several ways an insufficient analytical category, but I am also worried that subsuming “America” to the “global” may also end up having results far from the ones Valenta, I believe, wishes to achieve. Let’s take Trump’s election. Sure, Trump must be understood as the product of global conservative and populist socio-political dynamics, but I know of no other democratic country in which a candidate gathering over two million votes *less* than his opponent would be able to *win* an election. This is something that must be related to the exceptional (I use the word in its “neutral,” etymological sense) conditions of an antiquated political system about which not enough Americans seem to feel uncomfortable. This is an “exceptionalism,” with a small “e,” that we can cannot afford to ignore, or so I think. The way presidential elections are run in the US, the obstacles many voters must face for casting their ballot, the racial discrimination that prevents millions from voting, not to mention the “exceptional” numbers of those who cannot vote because they are in jail, are to my eyes all signs of a country with a very serious democratic deficit that is in several ways unequalled in comparable (and many non-comparable) countries. So, yes, let’s subsume “America” to the “global,” but let’s not for-

get what makes "America" in several ways unique, often in very negative ways.

In her effort to undermine the US-centric imaginary of current transnational American Studies, Valenta resorts to the very suggestive image of a "tapestry of gazes" directed at the US but also *elsewhere*. Again, I agree, and I would like to believe that my strictures on the US political system are in large part the effect of looking at the US with "Italian" eyes (which of course is not to say all Italians would agree with me). However, as the "tapestry of gazes" grows larger and aims at a global reach, one wonders *who* would be able to apprehend it in all its wealth of colors and texture? Isn't that "tapestry" another name for the unreachable totality of world relations, another name—that is—for a form of global knowledge that very few scholars, no matter how learned, polyglot, and incredibly smart, would be able to envision, let alone master? It is one thing to have a theoretical knowledge that one's gaze is just one of many, and quite another to be able to relate that gaze in relation to an infinity of others. Valenta singles out the Edwards and Gaonkar anthology *Globalizing American Studies* as a valuable, though in the end only partially successful attempt to construct a truly globalizing perspective. Yet, much as I, too, admire many of the essays in the collection, I cannot help but notice that *all* the contributors to the volume hail from major *US* universities. Moreover, in at least one case—admittedly the only case where I can claim some real expertise—we are offered a textbook exemplification of "overreach leading to superficiality" (as Valenta summarizes one of Heinz Ickstadt's reservations concerning transnational studies). In Wai-chee Dimock's reading of Niven and Pournelle's *Inferno*, Benito Mussolini emerges as the proponent of an "alternative" view of World War Two, which, however, can only be the Fascist view. Dimock seems to buy into the revisionist theories of the controversial (to say the least!) Italian historian Renzo De Felice, but her footnotes suggest that she may have read only English-language reports on De Felice's work, published in US journals, and she fails to mention a single Italian-language source. Perhaps only some form of concerted team work could approach something like a "tapestry of gazes"—provided, of course, that such team work were encouraged by academic institutions.

As she ably discusses various theorists of international/transnational American Studies, Valenta rightly notes that what drives their critiques of “America,” Exceptionalism, and imperialism, “is an implicit ideal of a world not organized by the violence, exclusion and expropriation” and yet, “what that ideal, that alternative actually might be, however, is not named as such.” She proposes “egalitarian pluralism” as a suitable candidate for that ideal, though perhaps, as we struggle to find an “Archimedean point [...] from which to push and critique,” we need more than a concept—we also need a *practice*. Her discussion of BDS is an interesting and helpful one, but BDS is far from being a mass movement comparable to the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 60’s and 70’s. I do not wish to fault Valenta for not being more specific about the ideal she advocates, especially given the relative brevity of her essay, and I should add that I have no doubts whatsoever that I share the basic ethical values underpinning her notion of egalitarian pluralism. However, I do wonder why the word “socialism” never appears once in her argument, just as I wonder, more generally, about the virtual erasure of the Cold War in most discussions of international American Studies. I raise these twin points because it seems to me that some reflection on a time when there was an “outside” to America is long overdue. I hope it is understood that I feel no nostalgia for the days of the Soviet empire, but it is a fact that social democracies flourished also under the political and ideological pressure of what lied “outside” the so-called “free world.” Horrible as those days may have been for the people who lived behind the Iron curtain, those were also the times when in Western Europe the welfare state was built, with health care and education finally made available to millions of people who had been excluded from the benefits of economic growth. Whatever one might think of Bernie Sanders, and of his “socialist” identity, he has the merit of having at least brought back to everyone’s attention that “ideals” need also be rooted in social models. Can there be an “egalitarian pluralism” without a socialist restructuring of the economy? Shouldn’t we first reconsider critically the past, before facing the challenges of the present and planning for the future? How can literary and cultural stud-

ies help us do that? Markha Valenta's thoughtful intervention is to me a pressing and welcome invitation to keep asking these questions.

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