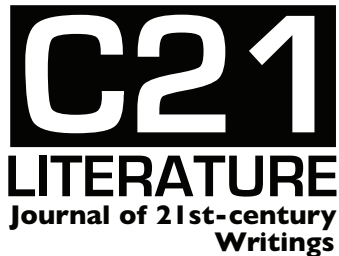




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Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

Rachel Greenwald Smith, ed. *American Literature in Transition, 2000–2010*. Cambridge University Press, 2017

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Cambridge's *American Literature in Transition* series offers an overview of each decade in American literary history from the 1910s onward, with the stated intention of capturing its 'dynamic energies and ongoing change'. Even without this framework, however, it would be difficult to disagree with an approach that takes the 2000s – a decade that saw 9/11 and its subsequent conflicts, Hurricane Katrina, Obama, the iPhone, and the global financial crisis – as a period defined by transition and upheaval.

This volume takes the unusual approach of considering the decade from 2000 to 2010 – more usually folded into analyses of 21st-century literature or the contested category of the 'contemporary' – as a distinct literary period. Rather than attempting a chronological overview, the book approaches its subject through several (inevitably overlapping) thematic strands that, as Emily Hyde and Sarah Wasserman have noted elsewhere, define 'contemporary' literature as much by the critical framework used as by the properties of texts themselves (3). As such, it provides a rich survey not only of the emerging canons of the decade, but also of the dominant critical methods working upon and defining contemporary literature.

The first sections, entitled 'Formal Transitions' and 'The Return of Authenticity', contain productive areas of intersection as efforts to mediate between personal experience, historical shifts, and literary tradition are shown to lead to shifts in the formal dynamics of literary texts. Andrew Hoberek and Kate Marshall both focus on

the prevalence of what Smith calls 'hybridity as a formal strategy' (5), with 'literary' authors embracing genre elements and the 'New Wave Fabulism' of 'postgenre' science fiction (83) demonstrating the breakdown of traditional literary boundaries. Adam Kelly tackles the prevalence of 'Formally Conventional Fiction', asking us to reckon with the fact that many of the decade's more ambitious writers not only embrace accessibility and 'communicative stability' (47) but treat the legacy of the avant-garde with heightened scepticism.

Lee Konstantinou's examination of 'Neorealism' also focuses on attempts to move beyond postmodernist aesthetics. Like Kelly and Hoberek, he notes the suspicion that 'critique has now been folded back into postmodern commodity production, circulation, and consumption' (114), with the result that 'novelty' (in Kelly's words) 'now seems less a challenge to capitalist hegemony than its very motor' (51). Indeed, in a collection that serves as a useful companion piece to this volume, *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* (2017), Smith and Mitchum Huehls identify the turn of the millennium as the moment at which neoliberalism's market rationality becomes thoroughly absorbed into culture (8–9), generating a palpable pressure upon authors who feel themselves increasingly implicated in commercial structures.

This pressure can be seen to intersect with changing millennial conceptions of identity. Elda María Román describes the transnational and intersectional expansion of representations of ethnic identity alongside an awareness of the commodification of authenticity (24). T. Jackie Cuevas describes a similar expansion in both the audience for and purview of queer literature during these years, with an increasingly transhistorical perspective suggesting 'a queer inclination to looking backward' (42–43). The 'memoir boom' that flourished either side of the millennium, Daniel Worden suggests, might be seen as a way of making visible the tensions surrounding notions of authenticity and identification (126).

Mitchum Huehls examines the range of attempts to write historical fiction after postmodernism, suggesting that in the absence of 'a strong sense of the past', authors are seeking new ways to 'produce historicity' (148). Georgiana Banita considers the literary responses to 9/11 (focusing, as do most of the contributors here, on

the novel), ultimately finding them wanting: she detects, primarily, a 'place-holding tentativeness' evincing a pervasive anxiety over whether writing is 'still possible and worth doing' (162).

The third section, 'Digital Revolutions', charts the challenges to traditional models of literature posed by 'The Information Age'. Lindsay Thomas traces the 'symbiotic relationship between literature and information technologies' in works by Foer and Ullman (182), while Brian Kim Stefans reflects on the new forms of literacy generated by electronic literature. Scott Selisker discusses the centrality of the 'network' as an organising concept in 21st-century fiction, suggesting that it might offer innovative ways of describing contemporary power relations.

In 'Transnational Currents', the collection explores the increased post-9/11 global awareness in US literature, uncovering the links between abstract transnational movements and their material consequences and the realisation that – as Annie McClanahan puts it in her essay on financialization – global commerce might represent 'the extension rather than the end of imperial hegemony' (241). Emilio Sauri illustrates the difficulty of imagining a 'global system' in fiction while remaining attentive to the material inequalities that structure it (267). Timothy Melley, meanwhile, traces the literary effects of the 'new security paradigm' of the War on Terror (277), showing how writers such as Mohsin Hamid devise narratives designed to inculcate more critical reading practices (286).

The fifth part of the collection tracks literature's increasing spatial and temporal expansion into the planetary scale of global climate change and the 'deep time' of geology. Matthew Schneider-Mayerson traces the emergence of 'climate change fiction', a genre that combines the expanded global scale of much post-9/11 fiction with an explicit engagement with global environmental politics (309). Janet Fiskio and Sophia Bamert examine the development of new ecocritical perspectives during the decade, while Jonathan Skinner charts the influence of an expanded environmental awareness on 21st-century poetics.

The final section surveys institutional shifts during a decade marked by rapid change in the media landscape. Evan Kindley charts the rise of journals and explosion of literary blogs in the mid-2000s, ending with a survey of the 'new internet

little magazines' that extended the work of bloggers within 'semiprofessional' (and often semi-academic) publishing hubs (357). Loren Glass turns to Amazon, a company whose scale and digital base has transformed literary production and distribution, suggesting that aspects of US fiction now 'mirror the increasingly global scale and scope of the companies that publish and distribute it' (367). Finally, Eric Bennett's provocative essay on creative writing accuses contemporary fiction of having reduced its horizons in a 'collapse to the personal' that, in its valorization of what Mark McGurl has identified as the characteristic 'reflexivity' of the Program Era writer (31), generates only a 'hyperconscious individualism' (382).

Taken as a whole, this book's attempt to view the recent past from a 'position of estrangement' (13) pays off in satisfying ways – the collection reads like a communal potted history of the literary present even as many of the trends and micro-canon it describes are receding rapidly from view. Its essays constitute an impressive selection of close-range literary histories that add up to a substantial collection of perspectives on 21st-century US literature.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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