

Introduction
Transatlanticism: Identities and Exchanges
Ella Dzelzainis and Ruth Livesey

In the autumn of 2008 there was a sudden flurry of media interest in what is – to scholars of nineteenth-century studies at least – one of the best-known representations of the misty allegorical mode of late nineteenth-century British idealism: G.F. Watts's painting *Hope* (1886). This rush to attention was not the result of work finally starting on the restoration of the Watts Gallery in Compton, Surrey, which preserves the artist's works in their original nineteenth-century hang – fitting though this would have been. It took a twenty-first century transatlantic exchange to bring Watts's remarkable painting nearer the front page of broadsheet newspapers in the UK and the US.

The stimulus for all this publicity was the naming of *Hope* as an inspirational text by the then American Presidential candidate, Barack Obama. This politically charged dialogue between British and American visionary ideals – and between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries – reminds us of the complex process of mediation at work in transatlantic encounters and illuminates recent scholarship in transatlantic studies. The articles, discussions and reviews in this issue of **19**, like the timely example of Obama's inspiration, draw to our attention the conversation that flowed back and forth across the Atlantic in the long nineteenth century. It is only in the past decade that transatlantic studies has fully emerged as a distinct field of scholarly research, with graduate programmes and specialist journals dedicated to furthering scholarship that does not merely track the circulation of British and American texts and ideas, but reshapes a broader critical understanding of the political geographies of modernity. The recent publication of *The Atlantic Enlightenment* (reviewed in this issue by Felicity James) stands as a case in point.¹ Contributors to this significant collection of essays such as Paul Giles and Charles Withers conceptualise Enlightenment itself as an Atlantic phenomenon: the notion of a European core of Enlightenment thought that influenced the North American periphery gives way to the dynamic wash of ideas in both directions; ideas shaped definitively by that transatlanticism.

As the guest editors of this issue of **19** we have been very pleased to commission material that explores this concept of a dynamic transatlantic flow of texts, images, and ideas – not just in content but also in form. For example, Kirsten Harris, a PhD student at the University of Sheffield, UK, traces the reception and use of Walt Whitman's poem

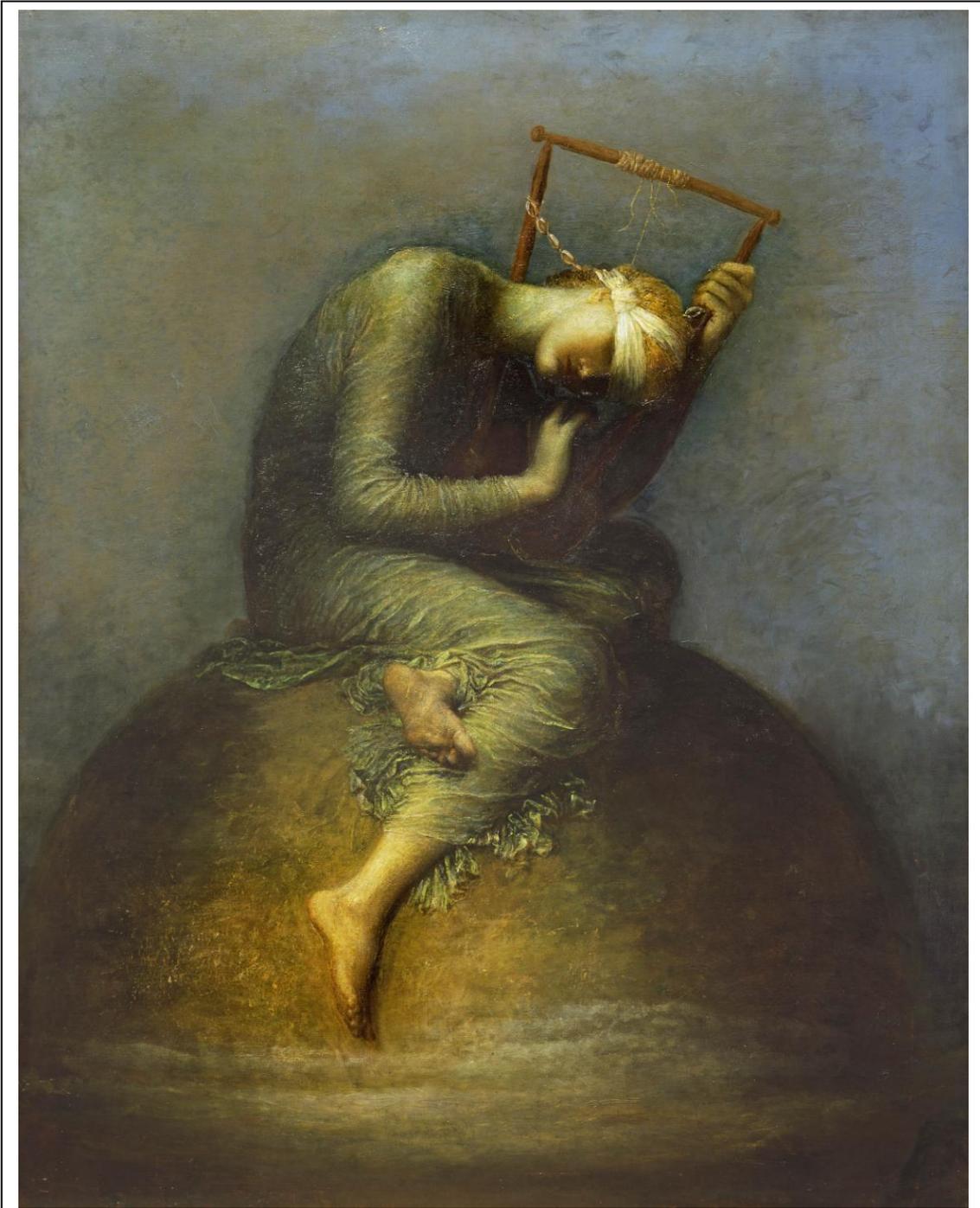


Fig. 1 G.F. Watts, *Hope* (1886), oil on canvas, reproduced by permission of the Tate.

‘Pioneers! O Pioneers’ in the local context of Labour Churches and the Independent Labour Party in the North of England in the later nineteenth century. What read in North America on its publication in 1865 as a manifesto for westwards expansion and the manifest destiny of the American democratic ideal came to be understood as an exhortation for universal comradeship and ethical socialism in Bolton or Leeds in the 1890s. But of course this is only one current in the Atlantic flow of late nineteenth-century

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radical thought, and accordingly Vanessa Steinroetter, editorial assistant for the Walt Whitman archive project at the University of Lincoln-Nebraska, responds to Harris's reading by examining the appropriation of Whitman's work as a clarion call for national regeneration and anti-socialist individualism in early twentieth-century Germany. The meaning of the text, in both cases, derives from its Atlantic identity: America in nineteenth-century Europe is both the hope for collective democracy and the home of rugged, martial individualism. The online format of **19** allows us to invite readers on both sides of the Atlantic – and beyond – to continue this particular transatlantic debate by posting their own response to Whitman, Harris, and Steinroetter.

This process of displacement and resignification recurs in our opening example of Obama's use of Watts's *Hope* – though in this case, the direction of Atlantic flow is altered. As the Presidential campaigns gained momentum in 2008, the attention of the news media was drawn to Obama's repeated allusion to Watts's *Hope*: first in his set of memoirs, *Dreams from my Father* (1995); then in the use of the phrase the 'audacity to hope' in his address to the Democratic Convention in 2006 and in the title of his second set of memoirs, *The Audacity of Hope* (2006).² But from that first reference in his first memoir, the material object of the painting, its origin and its artist are fugitive: the existence of *Hope* for Obama, fittingly enough, given Watts's own numinous belief in the power of the ideal over earthly stuff, is entirely that of a series of translocations and interpretations.

Hope appears in Obama's *Dreams from my Father* as a painting seen by an unnamed pastor (now identified as Dr Frederick Sampson), who then preached a sermon on it at a conference in Richmond, Virginia attended by the radical Chicago cleric, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who in turn made it the central text for a sermon he preached in 1990 to a congregation which included Obama. For his part, Obama quotes large portions of the sermon verbatim as the climactic transitional moment in his narrative, as he leaves his work in Chicago's South Side to take up his place at Harvard Law School:

"The painting depicts a harpist," Reverend Wright explained, "a woman who at first glance appears to be sitting atop a great mountain. Until you take a closer look and see that the woman is bruised and bloodied, dressed in tattered rags, the harp reduced to a single frayed string ... And yet ... that harpist is looking upwards, a few faint notes floating upwards towards the heavens. She dares to hope ... She has the audacity ... to make music ... and praise God ... on the one string ... she has left!" ... And in that single note – hope! – I heard something else; at the foot of that cross, inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with

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the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh ... Those stories – of survival and freedom, and hope – became our story, my story ... Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black; in chronicling our journey, the stories and songs gave us a means to reclaim memories that we didn't need to feel shamed about.³

Hope, then, works like scriptural narrative in Obama's memoir: a liberation text from another place, another time, that is useful and meaningful precisely because of its amenability to both specific local praxis and universalist interpretation. The specific late nineteenth-century British origin of *Hope* itself has no place in this account of the origins of Obama's hope; and why should it?

But thinking through the origin of Watts's painting – the very fact that a work executed in Britain during the mid-1880s remains full of radical political and ethical potency in an American context over a century later – does inflect the history that underpins Obama's narrative and should, we contend, be part of a broader narrative of the Atlantic. Obama's book is, as its title indicates, in part a search for his paternal inheritance; a search that takes him to an Africa scarred, shaped, and (as it seems in frequent examples given in the text) still manipulated by British imperialism and narrowly post-colonial interests. Whilst the middle section of the memoir, 'Chicago', closes with this vision of *Hope*, the next section, 'Kenya', opens with the young Obama on a flight to Johannesburg, seated next to a spotty British student who is bound for a work placement in apartheid-era South Africa with the apparent blessing of the British Government. Tristram Hunt, the most historically acute of the many commentators on Obama's interest in *Hope*, suggested (albeit tongue-in-cheek) that Gordon Brown should send Watts's painting as an inauguration gift to the 44th President of the United States as a remedy for what Hunt perceived to be a current of anti-British feeling in Obama's works resulting from this post-colonial encounter.⁴ In the more modest surroundings of this issue of **19** we would like to suggest that to recall the precise origin of Watts's painting while reading Obama's memoir – to remember that it was produced in the very nation, the very decade, at the heart of the 'scramble for Africa' – offers one small example of the reconfiguration and relayering that results from transatlantic thinking; an approach worked through by our contributors in rich and varied detail in what follows this introduction.

Analysing the uses of *Hope* by the Reverend Wright and by Obama himself results in a narrative of transatlantic circulation and identity formation that goes beyond a simple export-import or exchange relation between nineteenth-century Britain and America. Transatlanticism implies in this case, as it does in the contributions to this issue by Tim **Ella Dzelzainis and Ruth Livesey, Introduction: Transatlanticism: Identities and Exchanges**

Barringer, Kate Flint, Peter Blake and others, a critical framework triangulated by a wider history and theory of colonialism. Tracing relations between nineteenth-century Britain and nineteenth-century America – especially in the middle decades of the century – inevitably invokes Jamaica, Africa, Ireland; a shared political geography of forced migration, slavery and rebellion. Thus Peter Blake traces the shifting transatlantic currents in racial thinking in the middle decades of the nineteenth century by examining the works of the journalist George Augustus Sala (1828-1895). Sala's initial support for the anti-slavery movement in his early career with Dickens gave way to a vehemently pro-Southern stance during the American Civil War. As a special correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph* during this time his reports from America demonstrate the increasing purchase of scientific racism on a wide readership: a readership latterly galvanised into thinking of the aftermath of slavery by the Morant Bay rebellion in Jamaica in 1865 and the subsequent Governor Eyre controversy. Whilst Blake's article provides us with a valuable case study of transatlantic journalism and the shaping of racial thought, Tim Barringer's lead article takes a post-colonial imagining of the Atlantic as the starting point for his investigation of artistic exchanges in the nineteenth century. Barringer's title, 'A White Atlantic?', is of course a serious play on Paul Gilroy's profoundly influential work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). The very notion of a singular 'American Art', Barringer contends, is a retrospective construction, steeped in Hegelian notions of 'abstract national spirit or *Volksgeist* manifesting itself in art' (5). But thinking of America – and nineteenth-century American art – as post-colonial sites shaped without national boundaries refreshes our understanding of artists such as John Singleton Copley or Benjamin West who remain at the centre of narratives of 'American Art'. In the context of what Barringer terms a 'White Atlantic inter-culture' the 'American' artist Thomas Cole's series *The Course of Empire* (which ends with *Desolation* (1836)), for example, can be read as a commentary on the imperial pretensions of the country of his birth and childhood, Britain, rather than the hubris of Jacksonian democracy. Cole's vision of empire and its fate, Barringer suggests, had been inspired by the more concrete example of his return to London in 1829 at the height of the anti-slavery campaign. It is not just that we can see the way in which Cole's series, like Watts's *Hope*, can be appropriated and given new meanings in the exchange across time, space and viewers, but that the Atlantic across which the exchange occurs, as Barringer's article and Obama's memoir make clear, is one shaped definitively by the dynamics of slavery and colonialism.

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Yet, conversely, this transatlantic movement was also the resource for nineteenth-century hopes and dreams. For many observers America remained the place of a multitude of utopian aspirations throughout the century: a home to democracy; the source of a mystic transcendentalism reshaped from the material of European romantic idealism; a space in which to project all manner of longings for an enhanced ethical life in a new world order. The very territorial scale of America offered the possibility of imagining starting over afresh away from crowded industrial Britain. Ted Hovet explores how the potentiality of such vastness was conveyed in popular visual culture in Britain via the (reputedly) three-mile painted canvas of the Mississippi that scrolled before audiences at John Banvard's panorama in 1847. By 1887 the location for such a vision of untrammelled territory had moved westwards but continued to captivate mass British audiences at Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show. Thinking transatlantically, then, could offer a mode of resistance to the conditions of life in Britain in the era of high capitalism, if only through the resource of imagining otherness.

That otherness – in the case of the Wild West Show and elsewhere – was frequently populated by representations of Native Americans. In both Kate Flint's recent book, *The Transatlantic Indian* (reviewed here by Rohan McWilliam), and in her contribution to this issue, the powerful hold of such representations in nineteenth-century popular visual culture emerges as a significant and hitherto neglected theme in cultural studies. The association of American creativity with the romantic notion of noble savagery is one deeply embedded in foundational narratives of American art and literature. Julia Sienkewicz teases out such myths surrounding the artist Benjamin West (1732-1820), the Pennsylvania-born second President of the British Royal Academy of Art. West's biographers ensured his enshrining within a broader narrative of the untutored genius of the New World by strategic invocations of Native Americans: first in the story of West learning of colour pigments from childhood encounters with 'a Party of Indians' and later in his reported exclamation on first seeing the Apollo Belvedere in Rome, 'My God, how like it is to a young Mohawk warrior!'. Yet by dismantling the mythology surrounding these moments Sienkewicz is able to disclose the complexities of a transatlantic intercultural, in which Native Americans, in this case Mohawk diplomats in London, were not the scarce-visible doomed subjects of vague sympathy, but historical actors shaping transatlantic discourse on their own part.

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This issue of **19** is, we hope, an embarkation point for further transatlantic exchanges. Fittingly enough, Vicky Greenaway's reading of James Tissot's *Goodbye, on the Mersey* (1881) is another of the pieces here designed to elicit further commentary and discussion via the facilities of this online journal. We wave off the work of our contributors, like the emigrants in that painting, into future conversations. The rich new readings that can occur from such a change of context and viewer are emphasised in Catherine Roach's review of the exhibition of paintings from the Royal Holloway Art Collection at the Yale Center for British Art in early 2009. Gleaning insights and observations from twenty-first century visitors to the exhibition, Roach emphasises the significant revaluation of these works that becomes possible in the context of a contemporary gallery space, far from the strictly preserved original hang of the collection's usual home in the Picture Gallery at Royal Holloway, University of London. Re-presented abroad in Yale, the collection discloses a transatlantic history of artistic philanthropy and the changing fortunes of taste, rather than remaining the problematic local heritage of a British institution.

Much of the material in this issue grew out of the conference 'The Idea of America in Nineteenth-Century British Culture, 1780-1914' which we organised at the Institute of English Studies in June 2008 with the support of the Centre for Victorian Studies at Royal Holloway and the Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. This issue continues the international conversations started at that event and we hope that the wider transatlantic reach of **19** resulting from its affiliation with the NINES project will enrich current scholarship on the nature of the nineteenth-century (trans)Atlantic intercultural. And yet for all this celebration of intercultural, Isobel Armstrong's viewpoint piece investigates the differences between present day scholarship in nineteenth-century studies in Britain and America and finds palpable national distinctions in our current practice. Armstrong reminds us that despite the constant, instant flow of scholars, articles, emails back and forth across the Atlantic, the uses of history in recent monographs in nineteenth-century cultural and literary studies differ according to national origin. Armstrong's nuanced reading of eight major recent works refuses reductive characterisations of these differences, but invites reflection on the consequences of these varied approaches. In this way it becomes possible to start a transatlantic scholarly exchange that does not merely acknowledge the significance of content, but reflects on cultural distinctions in method and praxis. As an academic community, it

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would appear that – unlike Watts’s *Hope* – we have more than one string to our bow. The contributions to this issue show how the very plurality of identities and exchanges which results from transatlantic difference is at the heart of productive scholarly debate.

Endnotes

¹ Susan Manning and Francis Cogliano, eds., *The Atlantic Enlightenment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

² Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Random House, 1995); Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown, 2006).

³ Obama, *Dreams from my Father*, pp. 268-9.

⁴ Tristram Hunt, ‘The Perfect Gift to Soothe Obama’s British Suspicions’, *Guardian*, 14 January, 2009.