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## Introduction

Elsa Devienne

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# Introduction

Elsa Devienne

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- 1 This roundtable finds its origins quite innocuously in a search for keywords. Not too long ago, I was given the opportunity to teach a session on American environmental humanities as part of our first-year “Introduction to American Studies” class at Northumbria University (United Kingdom). Looking for inspiration, I delved into some of the field’s popular textbooks and readers. In many other teaching contexts before, I had used the excellent *American Studies: A User’s Guide* (2017) by Philip Deloria and Alexander Olson and I started my quest with this volume, using the Google Books search engine to find keywords such as “environment” or “climate” in the text. To my surprise, I came up empty-handed. I then turned to Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean’s *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture* (1997)—another key textbook often chosen by colleagues—and I was similarly struck by how little space, if any, was dedicated to environmental and climate issues. Aside from very brief commentaries on the deterministic discourses that associated some regions of the United States and their specific climates with certain personality traits, the environment was nowhere to be seen. This inattention to climate and, more broadly, environmental issues, as Philip Deloria notes in this roundtable, is partly linked to the specific challenges that the field was facing in the 2000s and 2010s—in particular the long-standing, but increasingly pressing need to bring Ethnic and American Studies together. Rebuilding the field with African American and Indigenous Studies “at the center” may well have temporarily sidelined other important issues, including the climate crisis (Washington). Or maybe, as I argue below, this was a gestational phase for what is currently brewing in American Studies: a formidable explosion of scholarship and revolutionary praxis that centers creative survival in the midst of climate apocalypse and multipronged attacks on democracy, human rights, and equitable economic systems.
- 2 Let me first expand on my introductory remark. The textbooks and readers I consulted were representative of the field as a whole. Up until fairly recently, the climate emergency, and more broadly the environmental and ecological crises, were marginal to the debates animating American Studies. Research publications, textbooks, and university curriculums reflected this lack of engagement. “One might not know,” noted

Matthew Schneider-Mayerson in 2015, “that we are in the midst of an unprecedented global crisis [...] from reading *American Quarterly*” (530). Similarly, in her contribution to the volume *Teaching Climate Change in the Humanities* published a year later, American Studies scholar Julie Sze still felt compelled to “confess” that she had not taught climate change in the classroom due to the fact that it “has not been a core topic in American Studies” (184).

- 3 From the vantage point of late 2022, these comments ring less true. Special issues positioned at the intersection of American Studies and the environmental humanities have recently proliferated, covering topics such as “Energy Pasts and Futures in American Studies” (*American Quarterly*, 2020) and “Global Black Ecologies” (*Environment and Society*, 2022), or embracing a broader perspective, as in the double issue entitled “Our Shared Planet: The Environment Issue” published in *American Studies* (2021). As I write this introduction, the journal *USAbroad: Journal of American History and Politics* is circulating a call for authors for a 2024 issue on “The United States in the Anthropocene.” In addition, as the need to prepare a new generation of students to “metaphorically danc[e] through this current apocalypse” (Imarisha 17) and imagine resilient societies has become more pressing, American Studies scholars have also started publishing pedagogy roundtables and editing volumes centering the climate crisis (Quinn et al.; Rosenthal and Molesky). Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, the 2022 annual meeting of the American Studies Association held in New Orleans placed itself firmly in the age of the “Anthropocene,” with a call for papers in the spoken word tradition using lyrics from well-known songs (“the roof is on fire”; “it’s hot in here”) as a metaphor for both the warming temperatures caused by the burning of fossil fuels and the disintegration of American democracy and the fragile protections guaranteeing the full civil rights and equality of African Americans and other historically marginalized groups.
- 4 This collection of essays takes inspiration from and builds on this flurry of new writings and efforts to center climate and environmental justice within the field of American Studies. Originally presented in the form of a virtual roundtable at the 2022 annual conference of the British Association of American Studies, it joins this chorus of voices in sending a “Code Red” warning to American Studies as a field, echoing the stark words used by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres to describe the August 2021 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report—a “Code Red for humanity.” It may have been the case that American Studies was slow to fully embrace the climate crisis and the environmental humanities, but now that the floodgates have opened, the field is bound to change rapidly and in profound ways. American Studies scholars and educators should take heed of that change urgently.
- 5 As others have said before, the field is ideally placed to propose a critical rethinking of human-nature relationships. Not only does American Studies have “a powerful tradition of environmental and ecological thought,” but its interdisciplinary and transnational outlooks work best to fathom the complexity of environmental phenomena acting on multiple scales (Deloria xiv). Even more important is the fact that it can skip the “mainstream environmentalism” phase that has gripped many other fields upon joining the environmental humanities conversation. What I mean by that is that for many fields—history, politics, literary criticism, architecture, etc.—the environmental turn has often yielded works focusing too narrowly on what white, middle-class people living in industrialized nations consider to be “environmental

problems.” Everything else, the many world-ending environmental crises suffered by marginalized people before the first Earth Day in 1970 supposedly brought “ecological awareness” to the (white, middle-class) masses, has tended to fall to the wayside (Montrie 7). This has meant that standard narratives which lack engagement with environmental justice issues were left unchallenged for too long. Having rebuilt itself around Ethnic and African American Studies, the field of American Studies is unlikely to fall into the common traps set up in concepts like “the Anthropocene,” which has been pointedly criticized for treating “human beings as an undifferentiated whole” and obscuring the longer history of imperialism and capitalist exploitation that transformed world-ecology and fueled the climate crisis (Vergès). At the very least, any American Studies scholars tempted to make blanket statements about “humanity” and its role in climate change, how to “save the planet,” or how “postwar affluence” represented a “golden age,” will have a vast literature at their disposal to remind them of the problematic implications that comes with them (Price; Devienne).

- 6 This roundtable is thus meant to send a message to American Studies academics: the field is currently experiencing a major shift, with environmental and climate justice increasingly playing a central role in the research agenda. We all should welcome and embrace this shift and, even more importantly, use it to adapt our curriculums for a generation eager “to learn more about egalitarian, circular and alternative economic and cultural paradigms” (Quinn et al. 1248). The following contributions come from scholars at different stages of their career and working in different disciplines and national contexts (specifically in the United States and/or the United Kingdom), but they all address this challenge by positioning themselves at the intersection of historiographical (and, for some, personal) reflections on the field of American Studies, research, and pedagogy. In weaving in these three threads, they open up fascinating conversations about how one influences the others, and vice versa.
- 7 For readers of *Transatlantica* working in English departments, which is usually where “American Studies” are taught in countries outside of the United States and the United Kingdom, this roundtable provides ideas, provocations, and references to “decarbonize” the traditional US history and literature surveys. Rebecca Macklin’s essay, for one, shows how recent efforts to decolonize the Anthropocene discourse can transform the way we teach American literature in universities. In her own course on “Imagining Environmental Injustice,” students engage critically and creatively with works (by American and non-American authors) that reveal the destructive environmental legacies of imperialism, but also convey alternative ways of relating to nature. In his contribution, Philip Deloria responds with generosity and a deep knowledge of the field’s history to the question I asked him at the roundtable: how would he revisit his *User’s Guide* to account for the environmental and climate crises? In doing so, he suggests new climate-conscious directions for the field stemming from its rich past and from a more systematic engagement with Indigenous Studies. Debra J. Rosenthal and Jason Molesky boldly propose to metaphorically “retrofit” the field of American Studies to tackle the climate crisis. This can mean various things, from “re-reading the canon with an eye toward carbon emission,” to collaborating with climate sciences colleagues and engaging the public with vibrant imaginaries of a climate-just future. But, as they note, none of this is possible if our students do not have a basic understanding of the physical phenomena behind climate change. And, as several of the contributors note, none of this will ring true to students if we continue to rely on carbon-intensive research and professional practices encouraging us to jet around the

world and exhaust ourselves pursuing citations and the ever-elusive grants. To Julie Sze, whose pioneering work on US environmental justice has had far-reaching influence, the recent move of environmental justice “from the margins to the center of the field of American Studies” is not only an essential correction, but a welcome merging of the “two hats” she has worn throughout her career. In her classroom, the point is not to expose students to tales of “declension and apocalypse,” but to learn about the historical conditions that weaved together environmental, social, and political injustices and, from that knowledge, find ways to “cultivate non-naïve radical hope.” Concluding with this inspiring and fiery essay, the roundtable calls on academics who feel connected, in one way or another, with American Studies to engage with this new, irrepressible wave coming over the field, and to use what they learn to transform their classrooms from places of despair into sites of both anger and hope.

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