US Centre Summer Research Grant

Recipient name: Joss Harrison

Project title: Between Home and Abroad: Performances of Gender, Race, and Class in American Travel Writing, 1865-1875

Summary of project:

The late nineteenth century was a period of intensifying transnationalism, in which many Americans gained an unprecedented degree of access to the wider world. My PhD project uses travel narratives from the decade immediately following the U.S. Civil War to shine a light on changing societal expectations about gender, race, and class at home during this period. Existing scholarship that seeks to bring together cultural and transnational developments in the nineteenth century United States has largely overlooked this period in favour of more dramatic moments of American territorial expansion and overseas engagement, such as the mid-century era of Manifest Destiny and the late-century turn to overseas imperialism. By focusing on the personal writings of ordinary Americans, this project seeks to demonstrate the ways in which travellers' intimate observations about foreign societies reflected transforming cultural ideals at home, as well as the ways in which these ideals shaped emerging patterns of American global engagement, at a critical juncture in the postbellum United States.

The Phelan US Centre Summer Research Grant has served a crucial role in both widening and deepening the primary source base that I have at my disposal for my PhD project. During the first year of my PhD, I had to rely exclusively on digitised primary source material, preventing me from being able to offer a holistic insight into the different ways in which travelling Americans engaged with the wider world in the post-Civil War period. During this time, I drew up a list of different forms of late nineteenth-century transnational engagement that I wanted to investigate, once I had access to physical archives, and began to identify possible case studies that would enable me to do so. This research trip gave me the opportunity to go and collect the documents that I will need to write those case studies. It is no overstatement to say that the grant has transformed my project. I now have a wide-ranging, diverse, and exciting range of primary source material to draw upon, covering Americans of different gender, class, and racial backgrounds, and representing various forms of global travel.

I used the grant to fund an ambitious archival research trip to the United States, spanning almost three weeks, four states, and over twelve different institutions, in June to July 2026. I thought of these institutions in terms of three distinct (though sometimes overlapping) categories:

General interest archives: New York Public Library, Schlesinger Library (Harvard University), Tufts University Library (Boston), Boston Public Library, Pennsylvania Historical Society (Philadelphia)

I used these archives to widen my primary source base beyond the specific traveller case studies that I had already identified for the project. At these archives, I took around two thousand pictures of a range of travel narratives, letters, and reports, meaning that I will no longer be constrained by the limitations of what I can find and access remotely. In the coming months, I will be working my way through these new sources to identify which might offer promising case studies, and which might serve my project in other ways.

Biographical archives: Presbyterian Historical Society (Philadelphia), New England Historical Genealogical Society (Boston), University of California, Santa Barbara Special Collections, Boston Athenaeum

These were the archives that I used to *deepen* my primary source base. By accessing the family papers and genealogical records at these archives, I was able to collect information that will enable me to reconstruct the personal biographies of the traveller case studies whom I had already identified during the first year of my PhD. To understand the cultural and historical significance of their writings and observations, it is crucial to understand their backgrounds: their socio-economic statuses, their family and personal relationships, their vocational aspirations, their personalities. These archives will enable me to situate my travellers firmly in their specific historical contexts.

At the Presbyterian Historical Society, I was able to collect crucial background information on Harriet Noyes and Rachel Johnson, missionaries who travelled to China

and India, respectively, during the period that I am interested in. This will help me to understand their motivations for travelling and the social contexts from which they emerged.

At the Boston Athenaeum and UC Santa Barbara Library, I was also able to collect valuable biographical information about a little-known member of the Thayer Expedition (1865), Thomas Wren Ward, and – in particular – to gain insights into how his relationship with his father might have shaped his decision to travel to Brazil. This will supplement information that I collected from the Houghton Library about William James, a much better-known participant in the expedition.

Textural archives: Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston), Huntington Library (Los Angeles)

The underlying phenomenon that links all of my case studies together is the United States' intensifying integration into transnational networks of trade, commerce, travel, and exchange in the second half of the nineteenth century. This was not a natural or automatic phenomenon, but one that relied on specific technological developments.

These archives provided me with useful information about how, in practice, my travellers moved about in the wold. I categorise them as 'textural' because although this information is not, strictly speaking, necessary for my analysis, I hope to weave it through my thesis in order to show how my case studies embody the important contemporary trend of American transnationalism. For example, I was able to collect information about the specific vessels they travelled on; the passengers they travelled with; and the techniques that they relied upon to communicate with home. It is this contextual information, I hope, that will allow my thesis to tell a unified story rather than a series of individual case studies. It will also enable me to put a human face on the abstract phenomenon of transnationalism.

An archival research trip of this length and scope would have been unthinkable without the generosity of the Phelan United States Centre. The grant supported me to travel to and within the United States and sustained me throughout my three-week trip. As a result of the primary sources that I collected at these institutions, I enter the second year of my PhD with all the material that I need to start writing in earnest.

But aside from the wide-ranging academic benefits of the trip, I must also mention the impact that this grant has had on me personally. This archival adventure helped to reconnect me with American culture in all of its uniqueness, diversity and, yes, strangeness. A PhD is a long and grinding journey. Moments of disillusionment are common. There were many times during my first year when I had to question whether what I was doing *really* mattered. And yet, I returned from this archival research trip feeling rejuvenated and re-energised, having rediscovered the very reasons why I am so very fortunate to have been given this opportunity to devote my life to reading, learning and – I hope – informing others. This grant has given me a crucial platform going into the second year of my PhD – it is now on me to make sure that I make the most of it.