YOGITA GOYAL

Introduction: The Transnational Turn

> America's history, her aspirations, her peculiar triumphs, her even more peculiar defeats, and her position in the world – yesterday and today – are all so profoundly and stubbornly unique that the very word "America" remains a new, almost completely undefined and extremely controversial proper noun. No one in the world seems to know exactly what it describes, not even we motley millions who call ourselves Americans.
>
> James Baldwin[1]

Over the last three decades, it has become commonplace to declare a transnational turn in American literary studies. While the publication of a volume like this one may be seen as a sign that the often-declared turn has finally arrived at its destination, any survey of the state of the field of American literary studies would belie such an assumption. It may well be true that neither the analysis of US empire nor the study of American writers in the world would require special pleading today, and yet little seems settled about the scope, method, or value of transnationalism. Even the title "transnational American literature" raises more questions (and likely more hackles) than it resolves.[2] Does "American" include just the United States or does it refer to the vaster Americas as a hemispheric, regional formation, with complex links to Asia, Africa, and elsewhere? Similarly, does "transnational" refer to non-US writing, replacing the category of Third World literature, or does it function as a euphemism for minority, ethnic, or multicultural US literature? Moreover, if the key motivation behind transnational study is to decenter the nation, does not the very notion of transnational American emerge as an oxymoron? For many, such a title will inevitably signal the exact intellectual provincialism it is designed to displace, reverting to a familiar exceptionalism. For others, the term usefully contains the history of that very violence,

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Ray Ryan for suggesting I edit this volume, and all the contributors for their hard work. I would also like to thank Jordan Wingate for research assistance and for helping compile the chronology and further reading.

and stages the many contradictions and productive ambiguities limned by James Baldwin in the epigraph that opened this chapter.

Similarly, it is not immediately clear where a genealogy of transnationalism should begin. One possible beginning would be the founding of the nation in 1776, but that date would immediately need to yield to earlier moments – to 1492, for instance, which itself must necessarily be displaced as origin. Another would take us to the Cold War origins of Area Studies, while yet another might focus on the social movements of the 1960s that led to widespread transformation of society, not least the demands and agitation of students that led to the founding of black studies and ethnic studies departments. Moreover, some academic fields have always been transnational, and recent work might simply be seen as offering new wine in old bottles. While Paul Jay is right in noting that "since the rise of critical theory in the 1970s, nothing has reshaped literary and cultural studies more than its embrace of transnationalism," a fair amount of confusion persists regarding what going beyond the borders of the nation-state as an object of analysis does to the study of American literature.[3] Clearly, it is difficult to assign a beginning or end to transnationalism, a factor evident in the lengthy yet incomplete chronology that opens this volume. While it matters where we begin or which genealogy we trace – Cold War, slavery, left internationalism, empire, genocide, settler colonialism – little consensus may be said to exist on the subject.

Why then a volume on transnational American literature, when skeptics and dissenters would question both title and genealogy, and perhaps even more significantly when there already exist numerous manifestos for and against transnationalism?[4] For me, the urgency comes from the fact that critics of the transnational turn have not succeeded in outlining a satisfactory alternative. While few would deny the phenomenal impact of the transnational turn on every aspect of American literary criticism, it is equally true that few other things have been more debated or seen as suspect. This combination results in polemical disavowals of the transnational on the one hand and ongoing manifestos for the need for the transnational on the other. Implicit in all such dialogues is the notion that a better transnationalism is possible, and I confess that I too am guilty of this charge. For those who complain that transnational American studies reinforces American exceptionalism, surely a return to national canons or isolationist doctrines is not feasible or desirable. Similarly, it seems difficult to argue for ignoring the ways in which the globe has always been connected, and perhaps even more so today, through networks of power, commerce, culture, and resistance. Critics of the transnational thus rarely champion the nation, arguing instead for various ways of making transnational analysis better. Even if transnational American seems redundant

or an oxymoron, alternately too celebratory of a crossroads of cultures or too dystopian in its attack on US empire, surely the need for ongoing analyses of the histories that have brought us here and paths to a better future lie in engaging with what Baldwin terms the meaning of America itself, to understand which he had to leave the United States but also to return to it.

In *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin describes his realization that his time in Europe was ending and that he needed to return to the very home he fled from because even though "the world was enormous and [he] could go anywhere in it [he] chose," to truly understand himself, he had to return to "the fury of the color problem."[5] In France, he realized that he was "as American as any Texas G.I.," finding a kinship with white Americans that he would never have been able to achieve in the United States, not least in their common distance from Europe.[6] At the same time, Baldwin's discovery of what being American means also comes via an encounter with Africans whose migrations signal another history – that of France's colonies. In "Encounter on the Seine" Baldwin explains the alienation of the African American in Paris by way of contrasting his relation to Europe to that of the "African Negro" from one of France's colonies: "They face each other, the Negro and the African, over a gulf of three hundred years – an alienation too vast to be conquered in an evening's good will, too heavy and too double-edged to be ever to be trapped in speech. This alienation causes the Negro to recognize that he is a hybrid," leading to a further realization of his connection to his homeland – which turns out to be America, not Africa. Baldwin concludes, "[I]n this need to establish himself in relation to his past he is most American, this depthless alienation from oneself and one's people is, in sum, the American experience."[7]

The complexity of Baldwin's internationalism is beyond the scope of this introduction, and has already been probed in scholarly accounts of his relation to Turkey, Africa, France, the Caribbean, and Britain.[8] The diverse geographies of black internationalism and the integral role of travel and migration in the constitution of the self are now familiar and uncontroversial concepts for students of American literature. In other words, few would dispute the relevance of Turkey as a haven, to take one example, to Baldwin's thinking. What raises concern, I think, is the seeming prescriptiveness that often accompanies transnationalist manifestos. That is to say, such approaches do not just emphasize the unexpected troubling of any familiar model of self and other through a mapping of transnational routes; they insist that we cannot understand a figure like Baldwin – his search for freedom, his theory of love, his experience of race, his exploration of sexuality, his encounter with whiteness – without engaging with what his various global encounters meant to him.

If many accounts of the transnational turn are guilty of such prescription, it is worth recalling that it is likely a sense of political urgency that frames such language. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease's landmark volume, *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, turns to 1950s American Studies and 1980s diplomatic history to clarify its intent to combat Cold War understandings of US imperialism and its ongoing disavowal in Iraq.[9] Many accounts of the transnational also derive their sense of urgency from the "War on Terror" declared by the United States in 2001 in response to the 9/11 attacks and ongoing military incursions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The work of the New Americanists that has been central to studies of nation and empire since the 1990s was also deeply invested in connecting the study of race, ethnicity, class, and nation to social movements involved in struggles for enfranchisement and social justice.[10] Much of this work was new historicist in method, and intent on rebutting a national identity rooted in exceptionalist notions and racist, militarist, and imperialist habits. As Winfried Fluck put it, "[T]ransnationalism promises a regeneration of the field and its long overdue liberation from what Amy Kaplan has called the tenacious grasp of American exceptionalism."[11] More recently, in *Formations of United States Colonialism*, Ayosha Goldstein explains how the United States "do not comprehensively delineate an inside and outside of the nation-state," but rather a "volatile assemblage" of unincorporated territories, state governments, indigenous nations, military bases, and export-processing zones. To attend to these shifting configurations of power is to fully understand what Goldstein terms "the colonial present."[12]

Still, given the fact that we now have more than two decades of scholarship to build on, perhaps a homogenizing approach to such political exigencies is no longer necessary. This volume, accordingly, does not promote a single approach to the transnational. Some contributors are skeptical of its value, others assume its relevance, while still others create new itineraries in relation to period or theme without making a case for or against transnationalism. In the midst of the robust debates around the subject in the last few years, what has often been missing is an account of literary method, in part because the political concerns outlined earlier have been so pressing. But precisely because recent years have seen increasing calls for closing the book on the task of ideological demystification or symptomatic reading, more complex and textured accounts of the relation between what Fluck has called aesthetic versus political transnationalism have become necessary.[13] Rather than viewing the charge of the field as either resisting or celebrating globalization, unveiling latent truths about militarism and empire or simply describing their historical formation, or moving away from such concerns toward surface or data, it is more helpful to reach for a suppler

analysis of history and literature, to map itineraries that neither follow the reach of capital or the military nor ignore it. Similarly, rather than lumping together all transnational approaches as variations on the theme of American exceptionalism (including those who say it is never possible to do so, those who do not even wish to try, and those who view it as a self-congratulatory gesture alone), my hope is that the variety of methods outlined in the essays here will help stretch the boundaries of existing approaches and make visible new forms of connection and difference. While this may seem like a plea for a middle ground – between aesthetic and political transnationalism, or the study of the world versus that of the home – I'm actually suggesting something else: not quite Hawthorne's neutral territory, but perhaps another ground or another world, maybe an ocean or two, and spaces in between.

It is further conceivable to look back at the last three decades and claim that transnational frames have now become normative rather than insurgent in American literary studies, and yet the task of explaining "where we stand" today remains vital.[14] Ongoing efforts to relate the study of debt and neoliberalism to empire and militarism, the housing crisis to terror, reparations to the refugee crisis all offer possible openings. Recent developments in the analysis of settler colonialism, indigeneity, and sovereignty, cross-racial and cross-ethnic comparative work looking for the "intimacies of four continents" and the solidarities developed among African American and Palestinian activists, all suggest new ways of mapping the globe.[15] Even as the charge of understanding US empire continues to require vigilance, this volume also tracks other kinds of possibilities opened up by the transnational turn – cosmopolitan travels, linguistic encounters, oceanic adventures, freedom dreams, and paranoid linkages.

Accordingly, the chapters that follow offer a comprehensive account of the scope, impact, and critical possibilities of the transnational turn, situating the study of American literature in relation to ethnic, postcolonial, hemispheric, and global studies. Drawing on a wide array of interpretive methods, this volume's essays index the dynamism of the field, offering conceptual tools for understanding the current state of scholarship, but also suggesting new directions of growth. Rather than promoting a single transnational method, the various chapters provide state-of-the-field analyses contextualizing and demonstrating the implications of their topics for scholars of US literary and cultural studies at large. Each chapter includes close readings and textual case studies of the particular phenomena on which it centers, offering refreshing new analyses of such authors as Gloria Anzaldúa, Bartolomé de Las Casas, W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, William Faulkner, Sesshu Foster, Margaret Fuller, Amitav Ghosh, Jessica Hagedorn,

Laila Halaby, Mohsin Hamid, Joy Harjo, Henry James, Gayl Jones, Mohja Kahf, Rachel Kushner, Ben Lerner, Paule Marshall, José Martí, Claude McKay, Herman Melville, Pedro Mir, Frank Norris, Ruth Ozeki, Mark Twain, Karen Russell, Luis Alberto Urrea, Walt Whitman, Malcolm X, and Karen Tei Yamashita. Contributors also reckon with important critiques and engage the potentially transformative impact of transnationalism in American literary studies.

Since the 1960s, social movements such as civil rights, feminism, the antiwar movement, and other social justice crusades have transformed literary canons, placing gender and sexuality as well as race and ethnicity at the center of the study of culture and replacing exceptionalist visions of American innocence with an analysis of imperial actions that link the United States with other European powers. More recently, hemispheric, transatlantic, and postcolonial frames have reshaped literary studies, bridging boundaries that have long confined cultural inquiry within narrow frameworks of nation, ethnicity, or language. Highlighting American literature's encounter with (as well as integration into and circulation through) the rest of the world and exploring the construction of the foreign and the domestic; global and local identities; and questions of translation, multilingualism, and worldliness, the essays in this volume probe the ramifications of the transnational turn in all its complexity. How does one distinguish transnationalism from past and present discourses of internationalism, cosmopolitanism, and globalization? How does transnationalism intersect with global capitalism and neoliberalism? What kinds of innovations in form and poetics does a transnational frame enable? How does a focus on empire and migration reframe the study of ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, region, and class? What are the reading practices of a research methodology for transnational American literary studies?

It is sometimes said that transnationalism can mean all things to all people. At its worst, a transnational frame elides historical differences and local specificity in the name of easy comparisons and a promotion of hybridity. Some forms of transnational study may reiterate exceptionalist legacies that link Americanization to progress and modernity and suggest the inevitability of US domination of the world, keeping the canonical text at the center with a few ethnic exceptions that prove the rule. At its best, however, a transnational approach can unsettle nationalist myths of cultural purity, reveal through comparison the interconnectedness of various parts of the world and peoples, and offer an analysis of past and present imperialisms. It can help map the increasing awareness and cross-cultural dialogue of the Information Age, where the diffusion of cultural forms through immigration and the spread of capital and commodities is ubiquitous and dazzling in both speed and reach. No longer viewing literature as the expression of a national

essence, transnational approaches radically reformulate the basic object and scope of literary analysis in and about the United States. Moving beyond the usual impasse of America as empire or colony, exception or exemplar, the transnational turn offers a valuable occasion for examination and critique. Because transnational frames do not argue for the demise of nations, but for a rethinking of them, they can help counteract triumphalist discourses of globalization. Rather than simply resorting to a premature celebration of a postnational or globalized world, transnationalism becomes the occasion for the questioning of nation and alternative formations to the nation – like world systems and world literature – by emphasizing flows and migration but also revealing the synergy of cultural and economic aspects of such histories.

Reading for transnationalism in American literature often denotes interpretations of canonical texts through new frameworks of migration, empire, and globalization. It also offers a useful rubric for comparative ethnic studies, enabling reading across varieties of ethnic literature in a cross-cultural fashion rather than pairing ethnic texts with Anglo-American ones in a binary of majority/minority. Recent shifts in geographical scale offer new frameworks of Black Atlantic, Hemispheric, Asian-Pacific, and Transnational Indigenous Studies. Perhaps most clearly, transnationalism serves as a replacement for the outdated category of multicultural literature, and as an acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of the United States with the rest of the world through circuits of capital and culture.

Recent reformulations of American Studies have argued that the goal of such work is not to export and champion an arrogant nationalism but to understand the meanings of "America" and American culture in all their complexity. To do so, it is crucial to interrogate borders within and outside the nation, rather than reinforce them as naturalized or inviolate. Such moves are part of the transnationalist emphasis on seeing the United States as part of a world system in which multidirectional flows of capital, commodities, people, and ideas restructure national traditions, throwing into question political, geographical, and epistemological boundaries and bringing into view crossroads and contact zones. Comparative studies of race, slavery, terrorism, indigeneity, and citizenship reveal phenomena thought of as natural to be constructed and contingent, themselves shaped through intertwined histories that can no longer be read in insular fashion. Instead of seeing transnationalism as something wholly new, the chapters in this volume draw from fields like ethnic studies and black studies, which were transnational from their very inception. Rather than assigning an automatic politics, the essays show that there is nothing intrinsically radical or complicit about a transnational turn and instead present it as an occasion for examination and critique.

Shape of the Field

Part I of this volume takes up the conceptual meaning of key terms such as nation, empire, travel, translation, and aesthetics. This part also explicates the historical and institutional contexts of transnationalism, delving into its relation to Postcolonial Studies and World Literature, both of which have been areas of lively debate.

Shelley Fisher Fishkin ruminates on her groundbreaking 2004 presidential address to the American Studies Association that declared the transnational turn in American literature to reflect on how the paradigm shift since then has reshaped our thinking of nation and empire. She argues that examining the cultural work of American texts that travel across the world and are translated, adapted, and otherwise appropriated makes us rethink any automatic understanding of hegemony or counter-hegemony. Similarly, authors who travel find themselves transformed by the cultures they encounter. Fishkin offers a comprehensive survey of the rich literature on transnational American scholarship generated over the last decade, ranging widely over such canonical US writers as Walt Whitman and Mark Twain, as well as global ones like the Dominican poet Pedro Mir and the Iraqi poet Saadi Youseff.

In recent years, Goethe's term *Weltliteratur* has undergone a revival, and the category of World Literature has come to assume a prominent role in discussion about comparative work. Chapter 2 examines American literature in relation to frames of World Literature, in dialogue with such models of critical regionalism as nation, globe, and planet. Wai Chee Dimock has emphasized a planetary perspective and interdependencies between the local and the distant, linking Asian, Caribbean, and American texts through "deep time." Here, she expands on this notion to ponder the possibilities of a networked world literature and a crowd-sourced literary field, tracing a low-level affect and a watered-down tragedy in C.L.R. James's reinvention of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* from the perspective of mariners, renegades, and castaways. In Amitav Ghosh's hands in the Ibis trilogy, a true lingua franca emerges in his Indian Ocean English, neither simply pidgin nor a debased language, but a joyful mixture that relies on improvisation rather than purity.

My consideration of the vexed relation between postcolonial and American literary studies explores the internal colony thesis popular in the 1960s, tracing it to the efforts of W.E.B. Du Bois to imagine the struggles of African Americans for racial justice with larger global struggles for decolonization and labor rights. Considering the difficulties inherent in theorizing such antiracist and anti-imperial solidarities, I offer a genealogy of postcolonial

studies by tracing the variable vectors signified by the term – a body of literature, a set of theories, and a critical method of inquiry. Exploring the distances traveled in Teju Cole's 2011 novel, *Open City*, I analyze the weight of historical trauma alongside the lure of cosmopolitanism in contemporary postcolonial literature, as well as the instability inherent in the very rubric of the postcolonial.

It is often assumed that attention to the seemingly political topic of transnationalism must mean disregarding formal and aesthetic questions in literary analysis. However, questions of form are central to the study of American literature and transnationalism, opening up new avenues for exploring the migration and reinvention of genres, revealing previously thought national forms to be more contaminated or plural in origin. Russ Castronovo approaches these concerns by tracing the often fraught and contingent relation between transnational commerce and transnational aesthetics, between a world market and world literature. While notions of transnational aesthetics can provide a check on the presumed singularity of national culture, they also navigate the prospect of the universal within and against the realities of commodity culture, leading to a blurring of the lines of a global economy and a global aesthetic. Frank Norris, for example, imagines an American literature pushing so far westward that it arrives in the East, thus completing a circle free of any conflicts or rough edges.

Literary Histories

Part II offers new interpretations of canonical American literature in three distinct historical periods through new frameworks of migration, empire, and globalization. For many scholars, transnationalism is useful as a rubric, since it is not limited to a particular time period (in contrast to globalization, for instance, which usually refers to the last few decades) and enables a considerable historical span from early American writing to modern and contemporary literature.

Although transnationalism may be new to academic currency, it nevertheless names a deeply rooted historical phenomenon, one multiply represented in American literature, especially in the nineteenth century, as debates over expansionism, immigration, citizenship, and imperialism shaped literary landscapes. In reading nineteenth-century American literature, Johannes Voelz cautions scholars about current critical investments that cannot help structure our relation to the past. Considering the Transcendentalist interest in cosmopolitanism and romantic conceptions of world literature, Voelz shows how literary fields develop in relation to social and political movements but are not reducible to them. What

emerges in this map of the nineteenth-century literary landscape is the paradox of searching for transnational public spheres or a politics of resistance while grappling with the ambiguous relation between imperialism and transnationalism, as well as a worry that the two cannot always be separated.

Themes of exile and expatriation have always been central to the study of modernism. Transnational approaches expand on these themes to explore how modernist writers imagine and represent other worlds in relation to their own, thus broadening the modernist archive in temporal and spatial terms. Jessica Berman finds transnationalism useful for understanding the complex social and textual interconnections of modernisms across the world as well as for offering an optic through which we understand modernism's reckoning with the frame of the nation. Refusing to prioritize actual travel alone, Berman shows how even a figure like William Faulkner, famous for his regional focus, benefits from being resituated alongside black US writers like Toni Morrison and Latin American writers like Mario Vargas Llosa. Emphasizing the cosmopolitan travels of Henry James and Gertrude Stein beside the more oppositional vagabondage of Claude McKay, Berman applauds the ability of transnational frames to displace the nationalist binaries that have constituted the study of modernism, dividing international and vernacular modernisms or cosmopolitan and fugitive forms of travel.

For David James, new fictions of transnationalism help rethink received notions of postmodernism as well as its still-evolving relation to notions of the contemporary. Focusing on formal techniques often associated with postmodernism – including self-reflexivity, metafiction, collage, and multiperspectivalism – James shows how such writers as Karen Tei Yamashita, Ruth Ozeki, and Jessica Hagedorn are able to navigate the competing pulls of local particularity and global encounters. Refusing to equate transnationalism with cosmopolitanism alone, James finds critiques of neo-imperialism and commercialism in an array of recent fiction, not least in their formal innovations. Learning to represent worldliness in all its complexity remains both an object and a challenge for contemporary writing and criticism.

Critical Geographies

Part III considers recent shifts in geographical scale and the corresponding new frames of Black Atlantic, Borderlands, Hemispheric, Asian-Pacific, and Transnational Indigenous Studies. As Paul Gilroy urges in *The Black Atlantic*, a national frame must be replaced by a transnational one to understand the flow of black culture, people, and commodities across and between national boundaries, in oceanic spaces, and beyond fixed notions of cultural