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REORIENTING THE TRANSNATIONAL

Transatlantic, transpacific, and antipodean

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Introduction

Transnationalism as a critical method gained visibility in the 1990s, as a reaction against the tendency of traditional literary histories to offer idealized, essentialist versions of racial or national domains. Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993), one of the earliest and most influential works in this field, deliberately took issue with the propensity of the Black Arts movement in the United States to read radical traditions exclusively in relation to African American politics and argued instead that transatlantic cultural influences had helped crucially to shape black cultural identity, with Gilroy discussing the significance of W. E. B. Du Bois’s time in Germany and the latter part of Richard Wright’s writing career amidst the existentialists in Paris. All of this had the effect of dislocating the imaginary identification of American subjects with their native context, an equation that had for many years propped up the American Studies movement in the United States, whose guiding theoretical premise was based upon the supposedly exceptionalist qualities of the U.S. environment. There was consequently significant tension around the turn of the twenty-first century between American Studies departments or programs whose intellectual rationale was based upon the country’s self-defining mythologies—the open frontier, Tocquevillean notions of democracy, the Civil War, and so on—and a theoretical momentum that was seeking to place such formulations within a broader, more interrogatory framework. Transnational American Studies thus sought to introduce a quizzical, reflexive dimension into the definition of this area studies field, rather than simply taking the assumptions of national conditions for granted.

The deployment of the Atlantic as a symbolic presence within Americanist cultural history is of course an old phenomenon, one that can be traced back through traditional studies of how the Puritan Fathers crossed the Atlantic in the seventeenth century, along with celebrated works by Bernard Bailyn, J. G. A. Pocock, and other scholars on ways in which the ideas of John Locke and other progressive thinkers helped to shape the cultural and political formations of the New World during the Revolutionary era. One new approach practiced by transnationalism as a critical method in the latter part of the twentieth century, however, involved its tendency to represent national states as being in a constant process of flux and renegotiation. Whereas national history that emerged from Victorian times was inflected by Ernest Renan’s conception that the nation represented what Renan in 1882 called a “spiritual
principle,” transnationalism in the 1990s was more strongly influenced by embryonic studies in the sociology of globalization (Renan 1996, 52). Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large* (1996), a work that became widely cited in literary and cultural studies, described ways in which societies in the last decades of the twentieth century were rendered fluid by the constant flow of people, finance, and commodities across national borders. Appadurai’s five categories—ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes—were driven in large part by changes in technology, particularly the widespread dissemination of the Internet in the early 1990s, all of which allowed capital and information to be circulated globally on a more routine basis (Arjun 1996, 33). Indeed, the theoretical dimensions of transnationalism, as that idea became more prominent at the turn of the twenty-first century, were interwoven in manifold ways with the rapid dynamics of technological change within information technology.

This did not mean, however, that the academic focus of transnationalism was only on the contemporary world. All history is necessarily written in reverse, with scholars seeking to reconceptualize the past in the light of preoccupations of their own time, and this new emphasis on mobility across national borders served to re-illuminate aspects of transnational history that had been occluded within more conventional national narratives. There was more attention within the rubric of transnationalism, for example, to Frederick Douglass’s speaking tours of Great Britain, where his radical views were significantly shaped by exposure to Chartist ideas in the late 1840s, and to ways in which Henry Adams’s aesthetic philosophies were impacted by his travels through Japan in 1886 (Giles 2002, 24; Benfey 2003, 109–176). There was also more emphasis on how material infrastructures that did not accord naturally with national formations exerted a significant influence on the cultural politics of different eras, with for example the lack of an International Copyright Act until 1891 meaning that various American authors, from E. D. E. N. Southworth to Mark Twain, strategically sought residence in London in order to safeguard their English royalties, sources of income that would have been at risk had the author not been living in that country. One distinguishing feature of transnationalism is its propensity to make associations between cultural narratives and the material infrastructures underpinning them, and from this perspective the ways in which literary texts circulated between different domains can be understood as a crucial component informing their worldly constitution. Rather than just understanding literary narratives in formal terms, transnationalism also illuminated the production and reception of cultural goods across a broader international axis.

Though Gilroy’s work and concurrent studies of slavery meant that the Atlantic comprised the initial focus of transnationalism, this critical movement eventually extended also across other domains. Indeed, one of its most signal characteristics was how the shape of its cultural input varied depending on which particular geographical area was entering into its formulation in any given scholarly project. There was, for example, some valuable work done in hemispheric studies, with Anna Brickhouse, Kirsten Silva Gruesz, and others discussing ways in which the literature of the United States overlapped and intersected with the cultures of Central and South America. One important aspect here was the language differential, with transnationalism often implying a bilingual capacity, whereby writers would negotiate two or more linguistic fields simultaneously, although various uses of global English or local dialect also tended to render the question of any kind of linguistic purity moot, or at any rate problematic. In the years after World War II, area studies specialists would demand language expertise as a *sine qua non* for the entry of specialists into any particular field—no student of Japanese culture in Europe or the United States would be taken seriously unless he or she was thoroughly immersed in the host language—but within the transnational force field,
where forms of overlap and hybridity between different cultures became much more commonplace, many important academic studies considered ways in which U.S. cultural narratives were creatively misrecognized or appropriated in Asia, and vice versa. William Gibson’s cyberpunk fiction, and the ways in which popular culture from Japan and the United States exerted a mutual influence upon each other, was just one example of this phenomenon (Tatsumi 2006). Hence the key question for transnationalism was not so much cultural identity or autonomy, but how different cultures intersected with one another in complex and sometimes perplexing ways. Mary Louise Pratt’s 1991 essay “Arts of the Contact Zone,” which was reworked for her book Imperial Eyes the following year, was another seminal influence on the theoretical and practical construction of early transnationalism (Pratt 1991, 33–40). Pratt’s focus on specific geographical locations such as Cuba and Florida or San Diego and Tijuana, where different languages and cultures enter into proximity and dialogue, exemplified the renewed interest at this time in multiculturalism that was also manifesting itself in the infamous “canon wars” at Stanford and elsewhere, where academic faculty in English departments argued about whether dead white males should continue to hold sway over the curricular inclusion of women and “minority” writers. Within this fractious context, a new style of immigration novel began to emerge, one characteristically involving not a simple transition from old country to new, but a situation in which protagonists lived at least by proxy in two domains simultaneously. Jessica Hagedorn’s Dogeaters (1990) is set in the Philippines of the 1950s, but it evokes the hybrid nature of this island society, where influences from American popular culture have become all pervasive. As Hagedorn’s heroine Rio grows up to live in the United States, in the midst of all the American popular culture she experienced as a child in a more virtualized fashion, she mediates this overseas past through the voice of a narrator who looks back at her native heritage from a position safely ensconced within the American heartland.

Hagedorn’s model was also replicated in other novels of this time such as Julia Alvarez’s novel How the García Girls Lost their Accents (1991), which concerns a family of sisters emigrating from the Dominican Republic to the Bronx, and it suggests how transnationalism during the early 1990s had a tendency to become domesticated for American purposes. We see this again in subsequent novels by such now institutionally celebrated figures as Gish Jen or Jhumpa Lahiri, where the transposition of an overseas homeland (in their cases China or India) into the host domain becomes a guarantee of traditional American values. Sociologists, however, have often given this transnational impetus a more hard-edged emphasis, with Peggy Levitt, in The Transnational Villagers (2001), offering a case study of how migrants from Miraflores, a town in the Dominican Republic, to Jamaica Plain, a neighbourhood of Boston, participate through cheap flights, phone calls, and Internet connections in the social, political, and economic lives of their homeland and their host society at the same time (Levitt 2001, 23–53). Thus the transnational village, in Levitt’s sense, functions not through spatial proximity but through a material infrastructure of cheap communications technology. There are many uncomfortable political implications of such a development, since to conceive of a nation-state that stretches beyond its traditional geographical boundaries is also to imagine, by a concomitant reverse projection, an American state whose territory is no longer automatically synonymous with the interests of U.S. citizens. Although American celebrations of transnational diversity tended to marginalize such concerns, there were elements of such unsettling alterity in some versions of literary and cultural theory, with Edouard Glissant’s “poetics of relation,” for example, involving an extrapolation of the Caribbean island geography of the Antilles into a “post-territorial agenda,” whose fluidity would imply a broader dissolution of the nation state’s fixed contours (Hallward 1998, 456). In this sense, Glissant...
was attempting to use a specific geographic location to address the state of transnational circulation more generally, and this differentiates his work from what one might call the softer versions of transnationalism, which were generally concerned more to accommodate multiple nationalities within the traditional domestic melting pot of *e pluribus unum*.

The reorientation towards more transpacific forms of transnationalism in the first decade of the twenty-first century was driven in part by geopolitical shifts in power. The National Intelligence Council’s 2020 Project, convened under the chairmanship of Princeton professor of International Relations John Ikenberry which reported to President George W. Bush in 2005, suggested that the sheer size of the population of China and India—forecast by 2020 to be 1.4 billion and 1.3 billion respectively—would ensure their standards of living need not approach Western levels for these countries to become significant economic forces. This would result, suggested the Ikenberry report, in globalization by 2020 becoming linked in the popular mind with a rising Asia, replacing its automatic association at the turn of the twenty-first century with the idea of Americanization. Such awareness of global realignments induced U.S. politicians to place greater emphasis on the Pacific region as a crucial zone for strategic defence and, according to their more optimistic estimates, greater market penetration in relation to commercial trade. Hillary Clinton, visiting Australia as Secretary of State in 2012, called the twenty-first century “the Pacific century,” and President Obama himself told the Australian federal parliament in 2011: “The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay” (quoted in Martin 2012, 1; Hartcher 2012, 9).

Again, there is nothing inherently new about this transpacific aspect to U.S. history. In 2009, indeed, American historian Bruce Cumings argued for greater recognition of “a Pacific dimension that began with the frontier and mid-nineteenth-century relations with East Asia,” with Cumings tracing an alternative genealogy for U.S. history that focussed on the Pacific rather than the Atlantic as the site of the nation’s formative engagements (Cumings 2009, ix). What distinguishes this revisionist approach, however, is its implicit dialectic between contemporary politics and the legacy of the past, something that impels Cumings and other transpacific scholars to reconceptualize the U.S. domain as a series of historical encounters between near and far, rather than regarding the subject as bound inextricably to one specific site of geographical integrity. The twenty-first-century understanding of transpacific relations thus effectively changes the shape of U.S. cultural history, and in 2011 Steven G. Yao suggested how the “Black Atlantic” paradigm that had been ubiquitous over the past twenty years, with its emphasis on the transportation of slaves from Africa through Europe to America, had afforded the Atlantic “a disproportionately prominent and central place” in “efforts to map the terrains of global modernity” on behalf of American Studies (Yao 2011, 132). This new transpacific focus has also brought increased attention to the work of Chinese American authors such as Maxine Hong Kingston and other Asian Americans based primarily on the U.S. West Coast. Expanding this geographical realm still further, the rise of environmental criticism in the first two decades of the twenty-first century has also brought more attention to ways in which the United States and other Western societies relate to the polar regions of the Arctic and Antarctic. Thus area studies in the more traditional sense, which focussed on identifying characteristics of particular domains within clearly defined borders, has gradually been superseded by a more planetary consciousness, which concerns itself more with how any given culture relates to a larger global sphere.

Transnational methodology also involves an awareness of reciprocities, of ways in which different cultural formations mutually impact upon each other through variegated cycles of exchange. In this sense, it carries a different ideological slant from postcolonialism, where the emphasis falls more on where cultures are aligned on a dominant or subordinate political axis.
The circuitous imaginative dimensions of transnational exchange, in other words, often elude the more straightforward mechanisms of political coercion. In his 2010 book *Asia as Method*, Kuan-Hsing Chen described ways in which processes of Americanization had become embedded within everyday social formations in Taiwan, with America having “been so thoroughly integrated into our thoughts and practices that we have lost the ability to critically engage with the issue of U.S. imperialism at all” (Chen 2010, 178). Thus, Chen concluded, “[b]eing anti-American is like opposing ourselves” (Chen 2010, 186). Chen defined “deimperialization” as “theoretically a much wider movement than decolonization,” since it speaks to how political codes get translated into psychological terms, thereby addressing not just how colonization functions bureaucratically but also how it becomes displaced into realms of affect, where an attachment to the coercive object can take on the form of a double bind (Chen 2010, 6). It is one of the characteristics of a transnational agenda to focus not just on hegemonic political structures but on the symbolic and aesthetic forms that sustain them, and this allows scope for the prevalence of structural overdetermination and ambiguity, since such worldly phenomena tend to be shaped always by multiple and often circuitous causes. There has also been some important work on ways in which these transnational pressures have worked their way back into the heart of the U.S. community, with the insecurities that Chen noted among the population of Taiwan also being shared by denizens of Middle America. Institutions of higher education based in the United States have often set out global awareness programs that regard the rest of the world as an annex of their own privileged domain; indeed, laughably enough, the University of California at Berkeley chose in 2014 to establish its “global campus” at Richmond Bay, a mere sixteen miles from San Francisco, with the university’s Chancellor calling it “a transformational model for expansion of our educational and research activities in a global context.” The transnational model, however, probes ways in which national identity has always been a fractured and fractious phenomenon, and this is why it accords readily with the slippages associated with psychoanalysis that critics such as Chen and Homi K. Bhabha have linked to the political domain. Bhabha’s model of national identity as linked to “split subjects” works well with the double impulse of transnationalism, where concepts owe allegiance to at least two centers of gravity simultaneously (Bhabha 1994, 28).

The social and economic realities in a multicentered world are, then, much more complicated than the unipolar American model of globalization would allow. Fredric Jameson, writing specifically in 1986 about the intractable relation between the United States and “third-world literature,” suggested how the “view from the top is epistemologically crippling” (Jameson 1986, 85) and he emphasized the need for a “ceaseless effort to remind the American public of the radical difference of other national situations” (Jameson 1986, 77). However, imminent threats to contemporary American prosperity through outsourcing and the widespread transfer of production capacities overseas, as well as the traumatic event of 9/11 whose effects all depended on the capacity of aliens to penetrate U.S. borders, have made the American public much more aware than they used to be of the fragile boundaries between their own heartland and the wider world (Baudrillard 2002, 403–415). French political theorist Etienne Balibar observed in 2001 how borders are no longer “entirely situated at the outer limit of territories” but are—through international media, finance, and so on—dispersed everywhere within them: “border areas … are not marginal to the constitution of a public sphere but rather are at the center” (Balibar 2004, 1–2). This has also been the conundrum for the United States in a transnational era: the very forms of technological modernity that link the country to a wider world have also become the sources of its vulnerability, as the rest of the world interfaces with the United States to such an extent that it
becomes more difficult to demarcate discrete territorial zones. Transnationalism studies these sites of potential friction without necessarily seeking to impose a priori assumptions upon them, with its key methodological premise being not any given political position per se, but rather ways in which flows of cultural and economic exchange converge or conflict with the established directions and parameters of national interests. Hence there is always something paradoxical about transnational formations, since they work through inverting and transposing the national forms which they themselves epistemologically depend upon.

In this sense, the relational aspects necessarily inherent within an antipodean perspective can be seen as appropriate to this sense of transnationalism as a conjunction of opposing forces. Australian art historian Bernard Smith wrote in his “Antipodean Manifesto” of 1959 of how “[i]t is natural … that we should see and experience nature differently in some degree from the artists of the northern hemisphere” (Smith 1976, vii) and, as Peter Beilharz has observed, Smith’s understanding of the antipodes “as a relation, not a place,” can be understood as commensurate with the dynamics of transnationalism more generally (Beilharz 1997, xiii). Smith himself used the word “trans-national” (in its hyphenated form) as early as 1986, in his foreword to Peter Fuller’s The Australian Scapegoat, where he praised Fuller for being “the first person to grasp the trans-national implications of the Antipodean intervention of 1959” (Beilharz 1997, xiii); and there is a clear intellectual genealogy between Smith’s fascination with what Beilharz has called “peripheral vision, and dual vision” (Beilharz 1997, 99) and the ways in which transnationalism as a critical method subsequently became codified. Many of Smith’s most famous works take delight in juxtaposing apparently disparate categories and in complicating established hierarchies by suggesting ways in which dominant and subordinate impulses become mutually defining, as in his book European Vision and the South Pacific (Smith 1960), which chronicles ways in which Eurocentric traditions of natural order around the time of the Enlightenment were disturbed by the appearance of the South Pacific as a new region within global consciousness. In his recent work on “archipelagic diaspora,” American scholar Brian Russell Roberts projects the idea of an antipodean imaginary in a similar kind of theoretical way, describing for instance “the East Indies, and West Indies, Haiti and Tahiti, Caledonia and New Caledonia” as “antipodal island-spaces” (Roberts 2013, 144), while inferring from this term how “antipodal [is] … a site of unrepresentable distance from the human world, and … a site of emancipatory inversion in relation to that world” (Roberts 2013, 128).

Antipodean transnationalism epistemologically complicates boundaries of time as well as space, since its different formulations of temporal scale disrupt the normative period categories established by Western cultural history. David Armitage has written of Australia as exemplary for the new kind of “transtemporal” history (Armitage 2012, 497), as he put it, since the country’s two distinct temporal horizons—white settlement since 1789, but an Indigenous history going back 40,000 years—serves effectively to foreground the “boundary breaking” experimentation with different scales of time and space that is now coming to characterize mainstream history more generally (Armitage 2013). In their introduction to the 2013 Cambridge History of Australia, Alison Bashford and Stuart McIntyre wrote of how “Australia’s history has unfolded on vastly different scales, temporal and geographical” (Bashford and McIntyre 2013, 1), while Mark McKenna later in the same volume discussed the “profound dislocation” wrought to Australian history, and to its “body politic” more generally, by the recuperation of material legacies from archaeology and Indigenous cultures toward the end of the twentieth century (McKenna 2013, 577). This is commensurate with ways in which recent environmental criticism, often associated with the cultural politics of climate change, has also sought to juxtapose human cultures against more extensive temporal
trajectories. Dipesh Chakrabarty, who described how climate change became for him an “emotional issue” when he was working in Australia, related the “Climate of History” in 2009 to the “Anthropocene,” taking this term from Nobel-winning chemist Paul J. Crutzen’s original deployment of the word in 2000 to designate “the beginning of a new geological era, one in which humans act as a main determinant of the environment of the planet” (Chakrabarty 2009, 209). Chakrabarty subsequently drew on the question of climate change to address how discursive narratives of economics and geology are converging, and hence “the challenge of having to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once” (Chakrabarty 2012, 1). In this way, as Djelal Kadir observed, Chakrabarty conceptually reconfigured a traditional comparative methodology to work toward distinguishing “human agency” by comparing it to that of other kinds of species and “geophysical force” across the planet, thereby seeking to decenter human history by juxtaposing it with more expansive global formations, and this strategy might be said to take the transnational turn one stage further (Kadir 2013, 651).

In a report on the Comparative Literature field in 2014, Ursula K. Heise specifically linked the emerging strand of “multispecies ethnography” in ecocriticism to the work of anthropologists and literary critics such as Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren working from an antipodean perspective (Heise 2019). The key thing here is to recognize how the antipodean becomes not just a geographical but a formal marker, a way of introducing alterity into conventional Western designs by correlating interfaces across spatial or temporal dimensions that have not heretofore been intellectually aligned. Just as Glissant’s “poetics of relation” involve an extrapolation of the Caribbean island geography of the Antilles into a more generalized condition of deterritorialization, so the tropes of the antipodean transnational and transtemporal might be said to restructure the history of world culture more generally across radically different scales, one where inverse perspectives become naturalized and normalized. This again highlights ways in which transnationalism works more as a methodology than as a discrete subject formation, a way of scrutinizing regular markers of time and space rather than presenting itself merely as a reflection of contemporary social realities.

In her 1993 book, published in England as Nations Without Nationalism, Julia Kristeva argued that the function of transnationalism involves stimulating and updating “discussion on the meaning of the ‘national’ today” (Kristeva 1993, 50). Transnationalism characteristically positions itself at a point of intersection—Kristeva talked about “a transnational or international position situated at the crossing of boundaries”—where the ideological infrastructures informing national communities are re-examined from an estranged position, so that their embedded, naturalized assumptions become visible (Kristeva 1993, 15). Spatial vectors typically operate with regularized conceptions of center and periphery, a right way up and a wrong way round, which it might be seen as the antipodean burden figuratively to unravel, and this is where the antipodean can be seen as a theoretical extension of the transnational, in the way it problematizes the construction of stable geographical parameters and epistemological hierarchies. In What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature (2016), Pheng Cheah described incisively how the “normative theory of world literature” (Cheah 2016, 6) is based on an understanding of the world’s spatial and temporal categories as determined by the Northern Hemisphere, which become a structural guarantor of “power and domination” (Cheah 2016, 32), and he looked to “literature of the postcolonial South” (Cheah 2016, 194) as a means of alleviating this critical imbalance. However, such a displacement would merely recapitulate the familiar postcolonial dynamic of hegemony and resistance from an oppositional perspective, seeking to valorize the subordinate factor in this
equation rather than to interrogate the premises of its construction. Whereas Cheah sought to problematize the hegemonic scope and normative temporality of the World Literature project by invoking alternative geographical spaces, a transnational approach would suggest in a more reflexive manner how such global narratives intersect in uncomfortable ways with discrete national spaces, so that imperial centers themselves become susceptible to systemic insecurities rather than simply imposing their political will on others. While there is a clear overlap between the postcolonial and the transnational, there is an equally clear difference of emphasis in their critical trajectories.

On one level, such a theoretical move recapitulates what Paul Gilroy has described as the intervention of “planetarity and cosmopolitics” as a way “of chipping the crust of incorrigibility from the universalist rendering of European particulars,” the mode that would seek blindly to appropriate European vision as a synecdoche for universal knowledge (Gilroy 2010, 622). But, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak noted in taking issue with Gilroy’s terms, “planetarity” in itself is “not a very useful idea,” since “[y]ou cannot be a planetarist geographer” (Spivak 2014, 72). Just as Adelaide-based J. M. Coetzee stated in a 2001 interview that he “would prefer to think more globally, but one can’t write a sort of globally set novel. It has to be somewhere” (Coetzee 2001, n. pag.), so Spivak disavowed an abstract conception of planetarity that would seek implicitly to rise above the perspective of any given “animate collectivity living on a planet” (Spivak 2014, 5). This is the principle of “situatedness,” as Donna J. Haraway describes it, where “location is itself always a complex construction as well as inheritance,” based on the assumption that a human body must incarnate itself somewhere, and must thus necessarily be bound to the partial perspectives associated with one particular place (Haraway 1997, 270). Transnationalism in this sense speaks to the inextricably material conditions of both human life and social life, the ways in which abstract conceptions of globalization, the circulation of media and finance across international spheres, must always encounter an experiential reality that does not necessarily accord with such disembodied designs. This is another reason for understanding the theoretical impetus of transnationalism as involving a paradoxical intervention. Operating in a global environment that tends to privilege a version of the simulacrum tied to various forms of decathexis, transnationalism also pays attention to the more material, recognizable aspects of human life—bodily existence, communal interaction, the genealogical layers of local identification and national affiliation—while examining how these engage uneasily in various forms of transaction with the conditions of global modernity.

Notes
1 Gilroy’s book focuses on Du Bois in Chapter Four and Wright in Chapter Five (see Gilroy 1993).
2 See, for example, Bailyn1967 and Pocock 1975.
3 For a fine analysis of how these kinds of material constraints operated in the mid-19th century, see McGill 2003.
5 “Berkeley Global Campus: A New, Bolder Vision for Richmond Bay,” Berkeley News. October 30, 2014. news.berkeley.edu/2014/10/30/berkeley-global-campus. 9 May 2016. This project was suspended in 2016 due to budget cuts.

Bibliography
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