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WORLDING AMERICA AND TRANSNATIONAL AMERICAN STUDIES

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Introduction

This chapter understands the concept of worlding as a multi-layered practice of analysis for a transnational text-network model that is based on iteration rather than origination. It examines the flows of texts across different languages, cultures, and nations. Literary globalization is not a phenomenon of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Processes of textual travel, mediation, and translation characterize the transatlantic world of colonial South and North America, which have created hybrid interplays and co-agencies between local cultures and multilingual, metropolitan literatures, or what has been called the “literary commons” of the Atlantic world (Bannet 2011, 9). The aim of this chapter is to understand networks of texts, persons, and things in the wider context of the early Americas and their literatures’ multiple transnational ties. It seeks to describe “the nature of these ties (social imaginaries, affective bonds, visions of arts, redescriptions of reality)” and “the techniques of invention, borrowing, dissemination” (Felski 2016, 761) that go along with them. Recent transnational scholarship, comparative literature studies, and the history of the book (cf. Hebel 2012; Shu-mei Shih 2013; Fleming 2016) have demonstrated, however, that the alleged metropolitan textual hegemonies and national trajectories are frequently out of sync with the actual local literatures in the past. As to its critical practice, the chapter emphasizes therefore cross-temporal connections whenever mixed constellations of texts, persons, and things occur. In what follows, this chapter reassesses Transnational American Studies by introducing the concept of worlding as a relational mode of thinking and—in the second part—by rebooting a defunct and moribund assemblage of texts from around the colonial world of the Americas.

Transnational American Studies as relational studies

In their recent collection of essays on American literary studies, Caroline Levander and Robert Levine state that Americanists have moved away from the traditional categorization of genre, period, and author, which has also led to a shift in the object and method of their inquiry. Instead of “a canon to be curated or an archive to be preserved,” they study “a hybrid textual corpus, deploying a wide array of interpretative strategies and methods … to
reconceive what we thought we knew about the study of American literature” (Levander and Levine 2011, 1). Donald Pease summarizes this shift as a move from a national to a global frame for analysis that corresponds to the relationship of the United States to the world in other sectors. While Americanists have traditionally worked with a “limited number of objects that were produced at the intersection of periodization and generic concepts” (Pease 2007, 9), they must now account for the various influences connected with the global movements of capital, people, and culture. Pease and Paul Giles, among other scholars, regard the “theoretical assumptions and methodological procedures that underpinned the Americanist’s production of literary knowledge” as directly connected to the national culture, history, and an “ideological consensus that rendered the United States exceptional” (Pease 2007, 9; Giles 2011, 1–28). American exceptionalism denotes a belief in the uniqueness of the country as the first independent nation, and that its cultural production is closely related to its rise and mission of “Anglo-Globalism” (Arac 2002, 35). This belief was even inherent in the first exploration of the transnational dimension of American culture, as demonstrated by Winfried Fluck in his 2007 article “Theories of American Culture (and the Transnational Turn in American Studies).” Randolph Bourne’s 1916 essay titled “Trans-national America” regards America as spearheading the movement of modernity as a “cosmopolitan enterprise” that includes and adapts European cultural influences. Bourne asserts that “America is coming to be, not a nationality but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors” (Bourne 1916, 96). While Bourne does not attempt to establish a specific and separate American culture, his argument substantiates exceptionalism in placing “America” (i.e., the United States) at the center of the convergence of cultural influences, thus making it unique (Fluck 2007).

To avoid endorsing a national fallacy, Giles and Pease reconceptualize “America” from both a transnational and a localized perspective to make visible the global conditions of cultural production. They relate their analysis of literature and culture in the Americas to the effects of globalization on politics and economy. In its most general sense, transnational means that something extends “beyond national bounds or frontiers,” or involves multiple nations (OED). In order to analyze literature under such a premise, Giles adopts a terminology developed by the French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their psycho-analytical study of capitalism, Anti-Oedipus (1972). According to Deleuze and Guattari, the flows of capitalism are “increasingly deterritorialized” (Giles 2011, 12–13). Using this spatial metaphor to diagnose the geographic extent of cultural flows, Giles couples the deterritorialization of American literature with its reterritorialization, a specific locality in which these flows and influences become visible. Giles links, for instance, South America with the southern United States and shows the global dimension in the literature of the Pacific Northwest, spanning the United States and Canada. Likewise, Pease regards globalization as reaching beyond and below the nation state at the same time. He juxtaposes the flow of capital and labor with activism that is based on local initiatives in each country, but defines its goal transnationally, like the environmentalist parties Oxfam or Amnesty International (Pease 2007, 10).

But if we want to study literature in light of a globalized world order, what categories—besides the larger analytic frameworks launched by a variety of “turns” in current literary and cultural studies (cf. Bieger, Saldívar, and Voelz 2013)—could replace genre, period, and author, all predicated by the nation? Levander and Levine propose “forms, spaces, [and] practices” as key terms, whereas Giles seeks to combine space and time in a geography of American literature. Giles’s spatial and cross-temporal paradigm complements, and is partially based upon, Wai Chee Dimock’s notion of “deep time,” as both scholars connect literary
texts from different periods and backgrounds. All of them seek to emphasize the similarities and cultural connecting points in literature that transgress historical periods and national boundaries and claim that both have outlived their usefulness as critical tools.\(^2\) Instead, scholars have recently focused on the areas that make those crossings traceable. Fluck identifies several fields of research: “cultural hybridities and border discourses … diasporic identities (the Black Atlantic as a counter-movement to modernity) and … transculturations (the Americanization of European culture)” (Fluck, Brandt, and Thaler 2007, 1). In their variety, transnational approaches have often been associated with comparative literature. Gilman and Gruesz reject both approaches as two-way comparisons that continue to center in the United States, while other critics, rather than regarding comparative literature as an approach of its own, consider it only one among many methods of practicing Transnational American Studies (Shu and Pease 2015).

In addition to transnational approaches used to reassess the literary histories of the Americas, the concept of worlding has been recently introduced by a number of scholars (cf. Wilson and Connery 2007). While the term “worlding” originates with the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1996, 59–62), it has been expanded into a critical paradigm for studying American literature in relation to a larger horizon of cultural influences and networks of human and non-human agency (cf. Hayot 2012). Engaging with ontology, the branch of philosophy that considers the nature of being and what makes human existence and reality, Heidegger states that worlding is a basic process that allows humans to make meaning of their circumstances. Instead of pure sense impressions, human beings receive meaning by engaging with the objects surrounding them in an ongoing process. As such, human beings position themselves in the world they inhabit in relationship to their “being-with others” (Hayot 2012, 112)—understood as a becoming and gathering of both humans and non-humans. In contrast to world-systems theory based on a model of contest between center and periphery (cf. Wallerstein 2004), Heidegger’s notion of worlding offers a new field imaginary for Transnational American Studies. While the world-content of transnationalism remains frequently “wedded to the nation as the thing that it is committed to unthink” (Cherniavsky 2015, 65), worlding avoids an ethos of remapping and againstness. Instead, it rather traces relations and conditions of becoming, i.e., the entanglements and connectivity between human and object, producer and produce, use and perception in everyday life (Heidegger 1996, 71–77). Worlding—especially in Heidegger’s later work concerning technology and the environment—describes a “capacity to understand, relate to, care about and concern ourselves with the things in the world around us” (Watts 2011, 45). This relational quality distinguishes worlding from the static construct of world literature. When applied to the study of world literature, Djelal Kadir defines worlding as a critical practice, opposed to “world,” which designates only a geographical entity. Kadir contends that if the “world” of world literature “is a verb, we, who do the worlding arrogate to ourselves not only the verb’s subject agency but the world itself” (Kadir 2004, 7).

To avoid a comparative point of view predicated by a specific standpoint of the observer, Gilman and Gruesz go beyond the transnational turn and argue for a “worlded analysis” that implies three scales: time, space, and language (2011, 230). In practice, many of the approaches to world literature studies have focused on a specific genre—primarily the novel, and tried to demonstrate its development empirically. While Franco Moretti’s studies (2003) of formal variations in the novel transcend national and period boundaries, they level the potential cross-generic networks, such as cultures of reprint or transfer of texts and reading. So while traditional comparativism has often been limited to the novel, it frequently takes one side as the standard of comparison and does not account for other literary networks of production and
consumption (i.e., oral literatures, theater, periodicals, etc.), or the expressive cultures of “minor transnationalism” emerging within colonialism and neocolonialism (Lionnet and Shih 2005). Using Kadir’s analogy of the “drawing-compass” (2004, 2) to circle specific literary genres or national literatures and reveal particular similarities and differences between objects of comparison, Gilman and Gruesz argue that comparative literary studies consider North America “the inevitable center and beginning” (Kadir 2004, 230). A worlding approach, however, would address multiple entanglements and modes of co-agency—persons, texts, things—while constantly shifting its centers. As a result, the United States would lose the “conceptual power that comes with being the center from which a comparison is made” (Gilman and Gruesz 2011, 230). By contrast, a worlding approach uses a larger frame of reference that makes the nation only “one point on the spatial scale … along with region, hemisphere, climactic zone, trade zone, and so on” (Gilman and Gruesz 2011, 229). Like Heidegger, Gilman and Gruesz use the gerund worlding as “a multilayered and dynamic process of analysis” (Gilman and Gruesz 2011, 230). Worlding remains an open activity inviting redescriptions whenever different texts, persons, and things are examined together. As such, any study or collection of texts can only highlight a finite amount of the networks involved in each cultural production and historical situation that are potentially even more complex and layered. Accordingly, “American” literature is not only a product of confluences in the global network of cultural and literary circulation but also a node in it from which these transnational connections can be reconstructed (Levander 2013).

The concept of worlding goes along with recent assumptions made by scholars in the field of transnational comparative literary studies and its move towards “postcritique” (Anker and Felski 2017). Contrary to critique (i.e., poststructuralism, new historicism, Marxism, Feminism), which refers to a specific critical practice seeking to disclose the subversive message hidden in a text, postcritical scholars promote a new “mood” or “attitude” of reading literature together with what Rita Felski calls “relational ontology” (2016, 747). Following assumptions developed by Bruno Latour and actor-network-theory, these critics do not think that what matters are the entities themselves, i.e., the text as (insurgent) object and a critique that wants “to expose hidden ideology, uncover the workings of power, encourage power, and generally contribute to social and political change” (Moi 2017, 175). Opposing critique’s “ethos of negativity” (Felski 2016, 747), a relational ontology unfolds a network of texts and the relationships between them in tandem with human and nonhuman (material) agency. Since persons, things, and texts are associated with one another and evolve together from transnational networks, Felski holds that “it is no longer a matter of looking only at texts; or of explaining those texts by invoking the box of historical-political contexts; but of tracing hybrid and heterogeneous constellations of texts, persons and things” (Felski 2016, 762). In light of postcritique’s relational thinking, worlding describes the entanglements of these constellations within multiple trajectories of mediation rather than evaluating them as expressions of a “total enworldedness” (Hayot 2012, 31) or a world system. The politics of a text are not dictated by the semantic meaning of the printed page and its representation of the world; rather they are welded in the history of diverse transnational webbings and affective co-agencies that transform the printed page into a site that enlaces countless actors and allies that gain meaning via their relations.4

Worlding is therefore distinct from the process of evaluation or critique dear to “advocates of structure” (Latour 2013, 256). Using René Magritte’s painting “The Treachery of Images” (1928/29) that shows a picture of a pipe, Latour asserts that the world does not consist of “minimal pairs” but of extended networks of animated and in-animated actors. He concludes that “neither the pipe nor the pipe in our narrative nor the briar pipe set before the painting...
resides simply in itself, but always in the others that precede and follow” (Latour 2013, 256). Reading the literatures of the early Americas as a multilayered network of co-agencies, attachments and afterlives “surviving centuries of wear and tear” (Felski 2016, 756) requires not only a different model of literary agency but also a need for an altered analytical attitude recognizing different cross-temporal comparisons of transnational connections.

**Transnational connectivity and the early Americas**

Gillman and Gruesz apply their notion on worlding by examining nineteenth-century novels from France and America. This approach is not new to early American studies, as transatlantic communications between Europe and the Americas have been used routinely as a frame of reference to interpret historical, cultural, and literary developments in colonial times as well as in periodicals published from the eighteenth century onwards. Texts traveled and were published, either through networks of scribal publications (handwritten documents), reprints, or persons in Europe or the Americas, and form part of a larger circum-Atlantic literary network (cf. Shapiro). Texts have been subject to a “network of intentions” (Hall 2008, 3), involving intermediaries and cultural brokers like the printers and booksellers who took license to adapt or edit and reprint texts as they saw fit. Next to practical matters such as access to writing and print materials, economic infrastructures and political controversies determined which texts were printed or how they were altered, for example, by a printer removing controversial passages or readers cutting and pasting printed matter to compile new texts such as commonplace books. The boundaries between private and public acts of writing and publishing were fluent. A handwritten manuscript, which was meant to be privately read and distributed, could also exert public influence, as autographs were funneled through literary networks, shared among like-minded correspondents, or ended up in a print-shop often without the author’s knowledge. Handwritten poems such as elegies, for example, were ritual scripts shared among specific religious and civic groups. As such, they shaped emotional life in terms of collective forms of reading and memory. Reconsidering the “uses” of colonial elegies, Jeffrey Hammond concludes that their production, distribution, and reception forces “us … to think of a poem in premodernist terms: as something that does rather than something that is” (Hammond 2000, 8).

Taken all together, these influences make it impossible to analyze literature according to categories such as authorship or originality (cf. Cambers). Instead of re-constructing original texts and their intentions, scholars of transnational print cultures propose a decentralized concept of authorship (cf. Frost and Rix 2010). Moving from work to the network in which public and private, written and oral realms overlap, and in which editors, writers, collectors, readers, and correspondents interact as nodes of redistribution and circulation, any attempts to subsume literary artifacts as building blocks for identity formations become obsolete.

Decentralized concepts of authorship apply to the records of Native American storytelling that have been preserved in the documents of conquerors, priests, and literate Natives, but also in material objects. Present studies and anthologies underscore the fact that histories of American short narration need to be extended far beyond the colonial times to overcome the Western-centrism of even the most advanced transnational approaches. Throughout the Americas, Native peoples have developed elaborate traditions of both oral storytelling and writing systems, or what Friedrich Kittler calls “notation systems” (cf. Kittler 1990). Supporting the notion that narrative is a human universal, practiced in all cultures and times, González Echevarría states that like the Old Testament and Greek mythology in Western tradition, Native short narratives revolved around the origins of the world with the aim to
conceive of and understand their present situation (Echevarría 1997, 4, 6–9). While many of these narratives are part of the oral tradition—stories passed on from generation to generation—some cultures developed systems for recording information. For example, the quipu, a system of strings and knots used by the Incas to record and communicate data, contains both numerical and other information in a writing system that has not yet been fully decoded. As Naomi Lindstrom presumes, the quipu could potentially also entail folktales and poetry as a cultural memory in and through its material form.

Native stories have been recorded by priests, administrators, and other colonial agents, but Stephen Hart describes this process of “transliteration” (Hart 2007, 2) as afflicted by various problems: first, the writers often only imperfectly understood the Native language; second, records that were meant to cover all aspects of the life, culture, and history of ancient civilizations like the Mayas or the Aztecs can only be incomplete; and third, information was inevitably distorted through the transcriber’s perspective, prejudices, and technical limitations. While the *Popol Vuh*, a mid-sixteenth-century record of Guatemalan K’iche’ Maya oral traditions, was transcribed in the early eighteen century by a Spanish priest, many Native narratives that circulated in the mid-Atlantic colonies and Canada were recorded by missionaries such as the Moravians and Jesuits. The material sources in which these native stories could be found differ according to the changing intentions pursued by their publication ranging from informing a European audience (such as missionary reports and travel accounts) to laying the foundation of postcolonial literatures in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin America. Thus, Giles rightfully links the uncertainty of geographical boundaries and the mingling of ethnicities in seventeenth- through early nineteenth-century America to the ongoing cultural, economic, and political globalization starting late in the twentieth century.

In contrast to the network of Protestants on both sides of the Atlantic, the French and Spanish colonies produced different types of texts but used similar strategies of narration. The French possessions in Northern America were military, missionary, and trading outposts. Yet contrary to the other European missionary endeavors that frequently ended in a fight over land for which the Native populations were vilified and decimated, French Jesuits approached their missionary activities with a different attitude: the priests lived among the different tribes in the French domain and sent back to their superiors regular reports in which they described Native life and their missionary endeavors, but also offered personal reflections. Eagerly awaited, these bundles of letters and reports became a prime source for information on the colonies and their inhabitants. While these accounts follow events of individual missionaries and native tribes, they provide a useful background to understand English experiences of migration or captivities. Often stretched out across various letters and longer reports, these accounts illustrate the hybrid and heterogeneous interactions of people, texts, and things that turn these genres into mediators shaping content through an association of formal, material, and affective inscriptions that depend not only on human actors like writers, printers, readers, but also non-human facts, i.e., food, canoes, trade routes, mapping practices, and cosmology.

After their conquest, the Spanish erected a number of Viceroyalties in their South and Central American colonies in response to the expansive Aztec, Inca, and Mayan empires they encountered. Similar to the French, the Spanish explorers, military commanders, administrators, and printers circulated letters, records, and annuals among their superiors in which they dramatized their role in the conquest, but they also included a number of narrative episodes. Their perspectives were countered, however, by racially mixed historians and writers like Garcilaso de la Vega, el Inca (1539–1616), who used the conqueror’s hegemonic practices of print to reassess the Spanish claim of superiority (cf. Bauer and Mazzoti 2009). In
North America, Native tribes were less of a threat to the settlers’ expansion as they participated in shifting political and trade alliances during the frequent border conflicts between the French and British empires. Treaties were one early genre of colonial Native interactions that often contained elaborate passages describing negotiations, living conditions, and tribal customs. While these treaties did not contain narratives, some of their elements have been used in stories or collected as “Indian oratory” in magazines and other later publications and Native American performances like Hanay Geiogamah’s play Foghorn (1973; cf. Scheiding 2015b, 141–143). During the Enlightenment, Native Americans came to represent the perfect harmony between humankind and nature, which resulted in an increasing popularity of Native American representations throughout Europe and North America. The forcible relocation of once numerous tribes and the repression of any Native resistance led to their marginalization, indicated also by the myth of the “vanishing” but “noble Indian” as expressed in nineteenth-century historical novels on both sides of the Atlantic. Other stories portray wise and deeply moral Native characters, such as “Azakia: A Canadian Story” (1765), an original French story translated into German and English, and “Yonora: An American Tale” (1797). At the same time, these tales hint at the pluralities of migrant stories that circulate in both Euro-American and Native American periodicals and whose subtitles indicate different local attachments and emotional ties (Scheiding 2019, forthcoming).

Since the earliest colonial times, millions of Africans were enslaved and brought to the Americas to work in plantations and households as indentured servants. The atrocities of the middle passage as well as the exploitation and cruel treatment by slave owners and traders can be found in narratives, like “Zimeo: A Tale” (1789) and many slave narratives of that time. The Caribbean became a place in which many of these narratives dealt with themes of exploitation, slave rebellion and the maroon communities of fugitive slaves on Jamaica and Haiti (cf. Goudie 2006). Simultaneously, the global movement of abolitionism shows how narratives can be used to a political end, as for instance, in black Caribbean newspapers and their cutting, tailoring, and embellishing of printed matter. As diverse as the readings were, global colonialism witnessed a rise in public participation in the print market, especially through religious pamphlets and the transnational traffic of serialized prints. Newspapers and magazines have relied on a network of correspondents for local stories, opinion pieces, letters, poetry, and tales. Many seasoned writers and editors, but also first-time authors, both female and male, have filled the pages of the magazines with their own stories or the copying of popular foreign stories, mostly published anonymously. Similar to the decentralized authorship of the early Americas, with little regard for author or “ownership,” the exchange, adaptation, and dissemination of textual and visual artefacts in periodicals remind critics of the fluid and participatory culture of the internet age with its swarming aggregates of people, texts and things (Powell 2012, 241; Scheiding 2015a).

**Conclusion**

The relational mode of worlding America encourages Transnational American Studies to engage cross-temporal literary comparisons to study the “swirling confusion of texts, objects, ideas, and images that have weathered the forces of time” (Felski 2016, 756). Worlding immerses in the exchange of ideas, people, and goods across temporal and spatial boundaries, and understands texts as dynamic actors evolving from these movements themselves through translation, affective ties, and countless allies. These relations result in a new understanding of texts not so much as a work that can be ascribed to a particular author, place, and time of publication, but rather as an “archive of operative work” (Derrida 2005, 42) shaped by
human and non-human interactions across time and space. In doing so, this chapter intended to call attention to the heterogeneous textual assemblages that characterize the literatures of the early Americas, which emerged from complex cultural translations and traffic. It asked questions about how migrant texts have been re-classified by editors, readers, and writers for changing audiences, times, and circumstances. “American” literature is less a national creation than a product of multiple co-agencies and interventions. “Willing to risk charges of anachronism in order to trace proximity and connection” between the past and the present (Felski 2016, 756), it remains to be seen whether the concept of worlding moves toward imagining Transnational American Studies in the context of the planet’s connectivity and changes the way we think about agency, materiality, and textuality.

Notes

1 Network refers here to mixed assemblies, interconnections, and co-creations of texts, things, and persons. Caroline Levine emphasizes that “networks are the forms that rupture or defy enclosed totalities and allow us to understand border-crossing circulations and transmissions” (Levine 2015, 117).

2 See Giles’s discussion of nationalism as a construct and Dimock’s argument that periodizations neglect the interrelationship and influence of literary texts beyond their time of production (Giles 2011, 3; Dimock 2001). For a critical evaluation of the concept of global literature see Prendergast (2001) and White (2008).

3 The term has also been used in a slightly different sense by Bruce Robbins. He argues that novels following 9/11 retreat from the world by concentrating on the domestic and internal. Yet as a critical concept, worlding implies the world as the horizon for analysing literary production and circulation rather than a matter of its content.

4 In his anthropomorphology of the moderns, Bruno Latour comprehends the symbolic world of art and fiction in terms of “being-as-other.” As such, “Being-as-other, in fact, alters itself and renews itself; it is never in itself but always in and through others” (Latour 2013, 255). According to Juliet Fleming, literature serves as “an ongoing bringing-forth of the world through a process of living in and through the dynamic organization of its spatial archive” (Fleming 2016, 62). Reflecting on the page as a theatrical scene, Jacques Derrida asserts that “[p]aper is the support not only for marks but for a complex ‘operation’—spatial and temporal; visible, tangible, and often sonorous; active but also passive (something other than an ‘operation,’ then, the becoming-opus or the archive of operative work)” (Fleming 2016, 42).

5 Anthologies of Native American literature have shifted from oral traditions to include Native literacies, see Bross and Wyss (2008). For more information on South American Native traditions, see Echevarría and Foster; for more information on how textual and non-textual literatures interacted in colonial North and South America, see Cohen and Glover (2014).

6 See, for example, Dimock (2009) who argues that a hemispheric approach necessarily reproduces a Western literary perspective and excludes any possible cultural and literary relationships with “Eastern” cultures. The same argument of the predominant Western and modern perspective could be made about scholarship of North American literature that excludes anything predating Western literary tradition and settlement (cf. Scheiding and Seidl 2015).

Bibliography


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