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Dislocations: Transatlantic Perspectives on Postnational American Studies

Transnationalism in Practice

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I want to consider the practice of transnationalism as an academic methodology, focussing in particular upon the institutional problems that it highlights and the specific situations within which it might intervene. One question which is often raised is how, if at all, transnationalism in its contemporary theoretical incarnation should be seen as different from the various moves to internationalize the study of literature and culture that have taken place at various times from the eighteenth century onwards. It is, of course, true that transnationalism involves distinct connections with various Enlightenment projects that were intent upon redescribing relations between the universal and the particular. In her 1993 book, published in English as *Nations Without Nationalism*, Julia Kristeva advocates a contemporary version of transnationalism through an invocation of Montesquieu's "esprit général," which she distinguishes from the idealization of *Volksgeist*, the spirit of the people, that become established in the nineteenth century through the romantic narratives of race and nation adduced by Herder and Hegel.

In this sense, as Kristeva goes on to argue, the function of transnationalism involves stimulating and updating "discussion on the meaning of the 'national' today" (50). As a formal method of inquiry, transnationalism serves to reveal the parameters of national formations and thus to hollow out their pressing, peremptory claims to legitimacy. Accordingly, it differs from the older critical styles of Comparative Literature, very popular in the age of Goethe and then again in the American academy of the 1950s, which were predicated ultimately upon the notion of simply transcending national cultures, cultures which it viewed as parochial and intellectually irrelevant. Transnationalism, by contrast, positions itself at a point of intersection—Kristeva talks about "a transnational or international position situated at the crossing of boundaries" (15)—where the coercive aspects of imagined communities are turned back on themselves, reversed or mirrored, so that their covert presuppositions and ideological inflections become apparent. Ulf Hannerz has similarly written of how "there is a certain irony in the tendency of the term 'transnational' to draw attention to what it negates—that is, to the continued significance of the national" (6); but such irony should be seen not merely as a casual phenomenon, but as part of that structural paradox through which the national and the transnational are uncomfortably interwoven with each other.

Using national cultures against each other in this way functions as a kind of materialist version of deconstruction, whereby each cultural formation reveals the blindspots or limitations of the other. Clearly there are some affiliations here with the idea of a "contact zone," as Mary Louise Pratt has described it, where "peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (6). The geographical border between Mexico and the United States, for instance, might be seen in Pratt's terms as a liminal space where the cultural values of particular countries and judicial territories mutually converge and diverge. There are also important links here with the wider theoretical agendas of postcolonialism, within whose rubric particular texts necessarily manifest traces of their position within dominant or subservient cultures. But transnationalism in theory, with its talk around issues of hybridity and multiculturalism, can easily become an excessively abstract or even predictable exercise; by contrast, transnationalism considered in relation to social or aesthetic practice can focus on where particular tensions emerge, and on the implications of those jagged edges, those structural paradoxes or incoherences, for an understanding—or, as Lacan would prefer, a misrecognition—of local situations.

In aesthetic terms, this transnational impetus has much in common with the minimalist approach adopted by latter-day Foucauldian critics such as Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, who have written brilliantly about what they call "the renunciation of art's authority" in a writer like Samuel Beckett, or the painter Mark Rothko, or the film-maker Alain Resnais (2). Bersani and Dutoit welcome in these artists their denial of

what they call the "epistemologically or morally superior nature of art" (3), their categorical refusal to produce texts intent upon trying to organize the space within which they are disseminated, and their radical displacement of "stabilized and bounded being" (8). Beckett, Rothko and Resnais are very particular kinds of artist, of course, but Bersani and Dutoit draw upon them to make a more general point about the always intensely problematic relationship between ethics and aesthetics: "Rothko's painting," they write, "makes present the ambiguity of all framing projects" (105), while Beckett's work divests English of its privileged relation to the past and to all of the accoutrements of cultural tradition. It is no surprise that Bersani works institutionally out of a contemporary comparative perspective: as a specialist in French literature, he has written in *The Culture of Redemption* a powerful critique of Melville, looking at the way *Moby-Dick* systematically resists the conventional impulse towards forms of analogical accommodation with narratives of America. From this vantage point transnationalism (although Bersani doesn't use this term specifically) betokens a form of asceticism, an emptying out of those plentiful moral agendas that have accumulated around the hypercanonized texts and the national narratives associated with any given domain.

Bersani accordingly positions himself in opposition to the idea of trying to preserve the classics of Western civilization through the rigid petrification of "great books" syllabuses on university curricula, seeing such traditions as plagued by highly simplistic and implicitly authoritarian assumptions about the ethical values of literary works. Whether such assumptions might be conservative, liberal or radical is hardly the point here; this question concerns more the tautology of response, the well-known proclivity of educators simply to read back into any given texts the controlling metanarrative with which they started. By now, of course, we are all familiar enough with political arguments about the nature of literary and philosophical canons, but one of the historical problems about the construction of American Studies within a British context, in particular, is that it has tended simply to replicate the formation of these traditional canons from another perspective. Rather than using American Studies to interrogate and hollow out the whole question of professional and cultural hierarchies, various university courses in Britain and the rest of Europe have sought to establish parallel structures based around the same nationalist paradigm.

The historical evolution of this pedagogical paradigm is described in the Autumn 2000 issue of the *European English Messenger* by Heinz Ickstadt, Professor of American Studies at the Kennedy Institute in Berlin and a former President of the European Association for American Studies. Ickstadt's article is subtitled "Can English (and American) Studies be Globalized?," and his theme is the impact of globalization upon traditional ways of organizing academic material in national terms. He traces the institutional situation of American Literature from the 1950s and early 1960s, when it generally held a minor status within English departments, through to the late 1960s and 1970s, when American Studies often succeeded in breaking away and establishing itself as an interdisciplinary unit or autonomous department committed to the academic study of American national culture as a synchronic whole. "Without undue exaggeration," writes Ickstadt, "one can say that during the seventies in places like West Berlin, 'conservative' English departments and 'progressive' American Studies departments held each other mutually in contempt" (19). But contempt is, of course, a great energizer, and also a way of defining oneself as well as one's enemy. As Ickstadt goes on to observe, many American Studies programmes today are uncomfortable with the impact of globalization and the so-called "transnational turn" precisely because such developments would seem to undermine what he calls "the homogeneity of the field, the solidity and coherence of knowledge and competences transmitted" (21). Americanists who had spent the last twenty-five years congratulating themselves that they weren't so moribund as to teach the old English Literature canon of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Wordsworth now found that the boot was on the other foot. As the conceptual demarcations of national boundaries came increasingly to be placed under erasure, their own investment in a particular mode of academic competence, ironically based no less stringently than their English Literature enemies upon the imaginary coherence of a national tradition, came to seem more like shadow than substance.

The most common strategic response to these potential traumas has been, predictably enough, replenishment. Gerald Graff has written about what he calls the typical "add on" method in university English departments, whereby the answer to developments in the field of literary theory is to hire a theorist, for feminism simply to hire a feminist, and so on, so that the institution "gets to congratulate itself for its up-to-dateness and tolerance" without having had significantly to change its general patterns of organization (250). This practice of benevolent incorporation fits well with the academic development of the area studies model, whose system has primarily involved the attempt to, as it were, fill things up: to encompass an identifiable bounded space, whether a nation, a region, or a city; to read, in a gesture of essentialist nostalgia, a particular country's "thought and culture" alongside its canonical literature and history; to add into the mix film, music, or popular culture, so that lowbrow and highbrow would come together in a potent academic brew; or, most recently in relation to American Studies, to combine English with Spanish and other languages "from diverse linguistic and cultural traditions," as the phrase goes

(Castillo and Schweitzer xvi), in the always forlorn (but never quite abandoned) effort to come closer to the heart of America. Some of the new anthologies of American literature are remarkable not just for their heftiness but for their implicit faith that such heft might, in itself, more accurately represent the true American experience. Like the Victorian novel piling up what Henry James called its "treasure-house of details" in a vain attempt to approximate a condition of transparent, encyclopaedic realism (48), the new Americanist textbook would have us believe that these agreeable enough agendas of diversity and multiculturalism might in themselves come to represent a replenished, more complete version of American Studies, where the negative polarities of exclusion are annealed and the multiple languages of America brought, either sentimentally or dialogically, into accord.

It is important to emphasize this point: transnational American Studies, as I understand it, involves not a filling up of partitioned spaces, but rather an emptying them out; not so much a recuperation of buried material, but rather the deformation or dematerialization of cultural hierarchies and systems of authority that already obtain. Transnationalism in this sense is more of a Foucauldian exercise involving the renegotiation and redescription of power, not just the supplementation of power by parallel but fundamentally equivalent discourses of race, gender and ethnicity. Indeed, speaking of power, there is in fact no easier way of appreciating the assimilation of area studies within the existing academic hierarchies than to observe its comfortable accommodation with the state bureaucracies that currently finance and control higher education in the United Kingdom. If a self-regarding contempt for the supposed anachronisms of English as a subject provided the initial impetus for American Studies programmes in the 1970s, as Ickstadt suggested, what greased their wheels in the 1990s was, above all, money. In what might be described as its comfortable middle age, American Studies in this country consolidated itself by accumulating substantial income from state agencies like HEFCE and the QAA, from RAE and TQA exercises, a cycle whose success was paradoxically assured by the way American Studies continued vigorously to protest its own embattled, minority status.

My purpose here is neither cynically to decry these institutional successes, nor idealistically to suggest that academic programmes might somehow exist outside a bureaucratic or financial system. It is, rather, to highlight how, over the past few years, American Studies in Britain has actually become thoroughly complicit with these mechanisms, so that now the administrative and theoretical pressures in the subject are pulling in quite opposite directions. The institutional momentum is towards pedagogical coherence (witness the so-called subject "benchmarking" exercises) and the shoring up of moral authority, authority not necessarily of the old "great books" kind, but certainly based around a set of values associated with the idea of this subject being a worthwhile investment by the state. In that sense, of course, "value" carries an economic as well as an ethical valence. Conversely, the most significant theoretical moves in this field are being directed more towards the problematization of territorial and administrative boundaries, the displacement of national frontiers and of the naturalized teleologies that go along with them. Jonathan Culler remarked several years ago that "American Studies has not had the influence on other disciplines that one might expect and has produced an interdisciplinary subfield rather than a reorganization of knowledge" (8), and one reason for this, I would suggest, is that it has tended to take its boundaries too much for granted and to focus upon objects which might be conventionally defined as "American," rather than considering how the permeability of those boundaries might affect the construction of other areas and other disciplines.

There is an interesting essay on this latter process of "trans-Americanization," as he calls it, by Rob Wilson, in the September 2000 issue of *American Literature*. Wilson talks here specifically about the relationship of the United States to Japan and the Orient during the nineteenth century, and his article points out some of the ways in which standardized conceptions of East and West began to change places within American discourse of this time, with important repercussions for the representation of Oriental thought in the work of Whitman, Thoreau, and other writers. I cite Wilson's essay partly because it reinforces the obvious enough point that this kind of transnationalism is not a phenomenon confined to the interaction between British and American culture. If, however, it can justifiably be said that transnationalism involves an interrogation of the circulations of power, then the historical legacy of Britain as the former colonial proprietor of what is now the United States should open up all kinds of questions about the legacies of such imperial domination: the issue of who controls whom, who seeks to escape from whose jurisdiction, the whole nexus of authority and emancipation. Back in 1778, in his "Tracts on Civil Liberty, the War with America, and the Debts and Finances of the Kingdom," the Welsh political philosopher Richard Price observed that the British war with America made no sense at all in terms of economic logic and was fuelled more by what he called the British aristocracy's "spirit of domination" and their "lust of power" (46-47); and it is an analysis of those kinds of power relationships, rather than any futile search for integral forms of identity, which underwrites the emerging field of transnational American Studies. Barbara Fields and others have written about the persistent, sometimes manic, attempts during the nineteenth century to categorize scientifically the phenomenon of race, whether through biology,

physiognomy, phrenology, or other medical schemes which would no doubt seem to us today as hopelessly quaint as the old practices of purging or leeching. Yet while we may have relinquished belief in the scientific definition of race, we seem often to cling to a positivistic belief in the viability of the nation as an appropriate conceptual matrix for intellectual enquiry. Perhaps such faith owes less to rational enquiry than to the coercive logic of the educational bureaucracies, with their vested interest in preserving the order and propriety of the areas they subsidize, but it is also inflected by a deeply romanticized image of the nation as a site of immanent rather than merely projected significance, whose meaning we might ultimately grasp if only we could give ourselves access to enough of its linguistic and cultural riches.

Here again transnationalism can be linked valuably with forms of praxis, because its theory of displacement illuminates important ways in which the affiliation between the subject and its location is always an affective, imaginary phenomenon. Just as the nineteenth-century scientists attempted to map a theory of identity onto what they saw as the objective reality of race, so practitioners of American Studies in the late twentieth century tried time and time again to validate individual objects by mapping them onto their understandings of America as a "whole." Transnationalism, however, concerns itself not so much with these points of supposed identification but with the process of mapping itself, and it can perform particularly valuable work within nativist contexts, demystifying the naturalized affiliations between subject and object which are often reproduced less self-consciously within domestic environments. I remember attending a couple of meetings of the Pacific Northwest American Studies Association a few years ago, where some speakers cast their relationship to the environment chiefly in experiential or ontological terms. Yet to say that I am a Westerner because I feel myself to be a Westerner may be an important statement from the perspective of individual psychology, but its status as an objective fact is conceptually flimsy because, as Wilson and others have pointed out, the American "West" as such does not exist, not as a political, nor as a historical, nor as a geographical entity. Any demarcations of the "West" which we may choose to make are purely contingent and arbitrary. Consequently, the links we make between subject and object in relation to region or place tend to be merely emotive, with location becoming displaced into the more diffuse realms of reception theory: the imagined construction of the West as a Zen paradise, or the empty land of a John Ford film, may have a distinct purchase upon the imagination, but ultimately it has no more intellectual credibility than the travel poster which simulates it. Location, in other words, might be said to provide a discursive rationale for imaginary identifications, but it can no more be extended into a coherent theory for area studies than the nineteenth-century phrenologists could extend their observations of bumps on the head into a theory of race. This is not, of course, simply to occlude social or economic determinants, but it is to deny that they can be explicated merely in local or regional terms. The politics of the West is not synonymous with politics in the West, and the same thing is true on a larger scale in relation to the United States more generally.

One useful point about transnationalism, then, is that it can empty out the power relations that lurk ominously within these kinds of imaginary identification, interrupting the self-perpetuating circuit which tries simply to appropriate the authenticity of the land to underwrite certain forms of social authority or aesthetic closure. In this sense, transnationalism in practice can perform what might be described as a traditional scholarly function: the austere desublimation of worldly ceremony, the negative theology of spatial and rhetorical dislocation.

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