Dislocations: Transatlantic Perspectives on Postnational American Studies

How American Is It?: Transnational Urbanism and the Cultural Politics of Place-Making

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In 1986 as the city of Birmingham's abortive bid to host the Olympic Games was reaching its climax, it promoted an international tagline: 'Birmingham: One of the World's Great Cities'. One advertisement in the series promised: 'Even J.R. [Ewing] would feel at home in Birmingham' and went on

> 'Today a stranger on the streets of Birmingham might easily imagine himself in the heart of Manhattan. Or rubbing shoulders with the oil barons of Dallas. Birmingham today is no stranger to the elegantly soaring pinnacles of business and finance that dominate the skylines of some of the world's great cities.'[i]

Not having lived in Birmingham in the mid-1980s I can't say for sure if there was some hyperbole in this statement but an educated guess suggests there was. Of more interest to me now than the spectacle of J.R. Ewing striding through the Bull Ring (a central shopping area, the name of which probably gives off all the wrong associations to a Texan) is the American imaginary of urban greatness that Birmingham's boosters felt compelled to promote at that time. Today, alas, JR is forgotten as Birmingham boosters push a new tagline: 'Birmingham: The Meeting Place of Europe' – in the terms of this fresh minted imaginary Birmingham is now seeking to be Barcelona or Rotterdam rather than Dallas or New York City.

In the slippage of scales referenced in these city marketing exercises (between the local and the global, the American and the European) resides some suggestive formulations of the relations between the cultural spaces of the local, the national, and the international. In this paper I want to comment on some of the ways in which these spatial scales function in what I will term transnational urbanism and speculate a little about their relevance to a postnational American Studies.

It is now widely argued that to the degree that cities represent the localisation of global forces in their built environments and social fabrics they signal the exhaustion of national modes of citizenship. While affirming the role of cities as 'the strategic arena for the development of citizenship', James Holston and Arjun Appadurai argue that they have displaced the role of the nation state in defining the meaning of membership in society:

> With their concentrations of the nonlocal, the strange, the mixed, and the public, cities engage most palpably the tumult of citizenship. Their crowds catalyze processes which decisively expand and erode the rules, meanings, and practices of citizenship…. But if cities have historically been the locus of such tumult, they experience today an unsettling of national citizenship which promises unprecedented change….cities are challenging, diverging from, and even replacing nations as the important space of citizenship – as the lived space not only of its uncertainties but also of its emergent forms.[ii]

Holston and Appadurai may be a little too eager to celebrate the tumult of city life but they are not wrong to suggest that a growing disjunction 'between national space and its urban centres' has important implications for the reconfiguration of issues of citizenship in contemporary cities. Urgent questions about power, representation and identity emergent from the dislocations of nationhood and citizenship make contemporary urbanism a compelling object of study. As cities come to 'represent the localization of global forces as much as they do the dense articulation of national resources' and subjectivities they become the foci of new dynamics of deterritorialisation that are deconstructing and recomposing both local and national forms of community, culture and sensibility.[iii]

This deterritorialisation announces not only reconfigured issues of citizenship in urban centres, it also signifies the exhaustion of certain paradigms of urban development and the emergence of new ones. Most commonly, in

Anglo-American frameworks, we are told of the exhaustion of the utopian ambitions of the early modernist planners and architects. As Kevin Robins observes: 'The old paradigms, now stretched to their limits, are unable to contain the complexity of urban systems at the beginning of the twenty first century. As the scale of urban systems has exploded, and as they have become increasingly networked into global systems, planning has become more fragmented and piecemeal.'[iv] The effects of processes of globalisation and postmodernisation in transformation of urban space and form have given rise to new coinages to describe the urban present: 'the informational city'; 'the exploded city'; 'the overexposed city'.[v] What these various coinages share is a conviction that 'place-based societies' are being increasingly eroded due to the increasingly dominant emergence of what Manuel Castells famously terms the 'space of flows' – a disembedded global space in which cities compete to function as key operative nodes.[vi] For many, the most compelling new paradigms are those proffered by theorists of postmodernism and of globalisation. Two major metaphors -'the global city' and the 'postmodern city' - have been developed in urban studies to recentre the meanings of urban development.

I have two complaints with these grand metaphors. Firstly, both metaphors valorise the instrumental agency of capital accumulation in urban development at the expense of local factors. The globalist's gaze, as Michael Peter Smith remarks, 'focuses our consciousness disproportionately upon the global economy, reified as a pre-given "thing" … whose developmental logic not only fully explains the development of cities but even determines the subjectivity of their inhabitants, without ever interrogating them about what they are up to.'[vii] Globalisation is a potent metaphor, which promises to explain much about processes of transnational economic and cultural change, but it can mean very little if not connected to local occasions. While there is growing study of how diverse features of globalisation emerge in particular urban locales and representations, there remain some testing questions to be asked about the theorising of globalisation as a universal process. Which leads to me to my second complaint with this theorising – that it rests on the generalising claims of theorists who pay little attention to the locales and national inscriptions of their own theorising.

It is notable that the influential concepts of the 'world city' and the 'global city' have been principally authored by academics in the United States. While debate continues about the analytical utility of the concepts, they are now widely deployed to frame study of selected cities - in the United States the usual suspects are New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and Miami.[viii] This siting and citing of the American city as the privileged locus of globalism and its urban futures is congruous with theorising of postmodern urbanism in the United States, especially as this has variously selected either New York or Los Angeles as the paradigmatic scene of postmodernity. And so, on the one hand, we find Saskia Sassen arguing that New York City is emblematic of the global city as 'a new frontier … charged with the possibility of fundamental transformation in the West.'[ix] On the other hand, Edward Soja argues that Los Angeles is 'the world's most symbolic space of urban decentralization,' the place where the global and the local 'come together' in emblematic new systems of capitalisation.[x] I do not want to denigrate these theorists' insights on the meanings of global and postmodern urbanism - I have learned a good deal from them. However, I pause as I read their sweeping analyses and diagnoses of urbanisation to wonder how and why it was that a select number of academics in a handful of New York and Los Angeles universities came to script the meanings of global urbanism and its postmodern forms. Whatever we grant their many particularised insights on selected cities, the global city theorists, like those who posit postmodernism as a 'cultural dominant', tend to privilege a Western (and much more specifically American) locus and logos, geographically and intellectually centring postmodern globalism.[xi]

In part due to these reservations I prefer to countenance the conceptual utility of 'transnational urbanism' in approaching study of contemporary urbanism in the US and the UK. Transnationalism refers to social processes and relations 'as "anchored in" while also transcending one or more nation-states …. [it] insists on the continuing significance of borders, state policies, and national identities even as these are often transgressed by transnational communication circuits and social practices.'[xii] Transnational urbanism is a cultural metaphor, of course, it shapes and is shaped by the spatial scales - the local, regional, national and global - that overlap in the material and symbolic productions of urban space. One of the ways we can observe the workings of transnational urbanism is through analysis of the cultural politics of place-making. By place-making I refer not only to the development of the built environment but also to the compositions of ethnic, racial and class differences and identifications within specific locales. I understand place-making as an uneven practice of urban politics and development involving competing claims to belonging and citizenship, and the spatial production of variant urban imaginaries.

The ways in which particular urban places are promoted as or otherwise function as transnational spaces is a central focus of a study I have recently begun: a comparative analysis of the cities of Birmingham and Chicago. I was drawn to this analysis in part because these are major immigration gateway cities that have in recent years projected themselves as global cities and I wanted to test some of the hypotheses of globalisation in a transatlantic framework of comparative urban analysis. This involves study of structural symmetries in the processes (and theories) of globalisation and of the ways these are indigenised in the contexts of UK or US cities. A key aim is to examine the micropolitics of places in these cities, where local, national and global relations intersect.

At present I have particular interest in two distinct yet often entwined categories of place-making that illuminate the disjunction between the space of the nation and the space of the city. The first is the city image as constructed by entrepreneurs and city leaders; the second is the urban ethnoscapes, the place-making of predominantly (im)migrant communities in ethnic enclaves. In each instance there are complex interplays of spatial scales - local, national and transnational.

Not surprisingly, the new concentrations of difference and power under effects of globalisation have led to fresh efforts to advertise cities as international spaces. Even as it becomes more difficult to describe a collective experience in urban terms or evoke a shared historical consciousness of the city, narratives, myths and images are daily produced to do exactly this. It is notable that many cities seek to produce a 'city image' with which to advertise in the new global networks (of finance, or tourism). This image is increasingly important in the global marketplace – of course, the identities of cities have always been constituted through a network of relations but global city theorists and managers now encourage us to believe that 'the particularity and identity of cities is about product differentiation; their cultures and traditions are now sustained through the discourses of marketing and advertising'.[xiii] Global cities require the projection of an attractive urban imaginary if they are to be successful in the highly competitive city image campaigns. This urban imaginary invariably makes marked symbolic use of 'culture' and the arts to promote the city image, supports a strategy of prestige ('flagship') projects as the spectacular focus of city centre regeneration, and merits top-down, inward investment schemes. Such place marketing, as many commentators have noted, has promoted a fresh concern with urban spectacle and led to an intensification of aesthetic concerns in consideration of urban forms. This is, as Sharon Zukin points out, 'a common cultural strategy that imposes a new way of seeing landscape: internationalizing it, abstracting a legible image from the service economy, connecting it to consumption rather than production.'[xiv]

Birmingham and Chicago have leaders eager to promote their cities as global cities. For both cities this has been a tricky process, due in no small part to the 'industrial' imagery attached to them in the national cultural geographies of the US and the UK. For Chicago, shaking off its 'rust belt' and 'blue collar' identity has taken massive investment, financial and symbolic. In the 1980s and 1990s Chicago experienced a striking series of changes as it transformed into a postindustrial city focused on consumption and amenities': 'the city's largest industry is no longer slaughtering, or steel production, or even finance. Rather, entertainment has supplanted them all, if we follow city officials who group conventions, tourism, restaurants, theatres and sports and the like under this heading.'[xv] This privileging of culture and consumption in urban redevelopment has been symbolised by the city masterplan that is forwarded by flagship public works projects. The 23 million dollar State Street Renovation project is a signal example – it has attracted over 100 million dollars in private investment for mixed use building – retail, office, hotel and entertainment projects – and lent massive support to the rebirth of Chicago's theatre district. The developers have a clear sense of the spectacular space they are producing, including redesign of pedestrian routes and lighting plans the better to showcase the Loop's architecture and new entertainment facilities. Mayor Richard M. Daley claims to have enhanced the aesthetics of the city more broadly with his support for the 'greening of Chicago', boasting he has planted 500,000 trees and constructed more than thirty miles of landscaped medians throughout the city.

Birmingham has followed American ideas of regeneration and place-marketing since the mid-1980s (though it has blended these, not always smoothly, with European influences in recent years). Urban regeneration plans began to be laid with a significant emphasis on redevelopment of the city centre as a spectacular site of entertainment and business attractions. A key element of this was the International Convention Centre, the biggest conference venue in the UK. Like many such American initiatives it was centred on a 'festival marketplace' scheme, making use of the city's extensive canal system. This idea, Joe Holyoak observes, 'derived from the visit that the planning committee and officers had made to the USA in 1984 to investigate American convention centres, where they had been greatly impressed by the James Rouse developments of Baltimore Harbour and Boston's Faneuil Hall Marketplace'.[xvi] By the end of the 1980s a comprehensive master plan for central city regeneration had been drawn up – what followed has been massive investment in a number of flagship projects, such as Brindley Place, in concert with the 1.5 billion pounds development of the city centre, and the renovation of grand scale buildings and streets established in the late nineteenth century. In line with the master plan the city centre is being rebuilt in terms of 'Quarters', each to be connected by walkways and a necklace of public squares. A key concern is to undo the concretisation of the city that characterised 1960s development and privileged vehicular movement – this revaluing of pedestrianisation is very much a feature of the so-called 'new urbanism' of postmodern planning and design and indicative of a drive to manufacture a sense of urbanity.

The projection of urbanity is important to the imagineering of the new Birmingham

as city leaders seek to sell the central city to knowledge professionals, corporate and government investors, and business tourists (like Chicago, Birmingham does a heavy trade in convention tourism). While this projection appears to naturalise the desires of urban citizenry (just as the need to become a global city seems unquestionable) some have argued that it is highly regulated and divisive as it involves the 'production of new "cultural" spaces in the image of certain fragments of international capital and particular constellations of the

population'.[xvii] The packaged urbanity of these regeneration schemes places a notable emphasis on culture, style, safety, amenities and 'quality of life' – it offers a commodified experience of 'community'.[xviii] As such, it may be indicative of a broader ideological implementation of global urbanism, in which the effort to re-imagine urbanity is a form of postmodern re-enchantment. In Kevin Robins words, it is 'about recovering a lost sense of territorial identity, urban community and public space. It is a kind of return to (mythical) origins'.[xix] The question of *whose* imaginary is being projected and served by city redesign and marketing is an important but currently muted concern, overshadowed by the rhetoric and imagery of regeneration. Of course, such projections of the city as a totality are partial and selective - yet, this boosterism projects a powerful and compelling image of the city's civic future.

At the same time as these city image campaigns of redevelopment are powerfully promoted as agents of civic identity for the city as a whole other transnational processes of place making are occurring in Birmingham and Chicago. I am thinking here in particular of the ethnic enclaves formed by migrant/minority groupings whose claims to belonging and citizenship are not identical with the polished urbanity of city centre regeneration, yet whose practices of place-making entail intricate investments in transnational urbanism. While global theorists often view ethnic enclaves as the province of 'displaced groupings resisting global structures of domination' this perspective barely evaluates the cultural and political dimensions of ethnic place-making.[xx] For example, the Muslim communities in Birmingham relate to religious and cultural networks that are at once local and transnational. This networking is supported by religious institutions and media communications that are truly globalising while in everyday life this transnational network is employed to construct locality and is reflected in the built environment and visual culture of street and neighbourhood life.

This form of transnational urbanism may distinctively differ from that of the city planners and imaginers (and may even be invisible to many urban dwellers) but they are not unconnected. As Jan Lin points out, 'the function of ethnic enclaves in the global city' should include recognition of 'the role that ethnic enterprises have played in reviving industry, warehousing, and retailing districts of the central city'.[xxi] For example, in both Birmingham and Chicago, there is growing presence of Chinese-based investment reflecting the significance of a global ethnic economic network now commonly labelled 'overseas Chinese'. This transnational economic activity is global yet also rooted within Birmingham and Chicago and suggestive of an alternative spatial process of economic activity, of 'globalisation from below'. But it may be a little too neat to categorise the differences between globalisation from above and below, for these transnational processes of place making (and concomitant urban imaginaries) intersect as well as diverge from each other. In both Birmingham and Chicago there have been efforts to promote multiculturalism as a key element of the symbolic economy through, for example, the construction of ethnic quarters and use of public arts. Claims to 'cosmopolitanism' often draw on imagery of ethnically mixed city populations and projections of internal cultural diversity. To be sure, much of this relies on marketing the exotic appeal of symbolic ethnicity – cuisine especially – and multicultural tourist attractions. The revalorisation of ethnic places (such as Chinatowns) also implicates them in broader strategies of transnational accumulation – employed by city boosters to project an image of the multicultural city. Such revalorisation of ethnic difference is suggestive of the pressures to construct symbolic and strategic essentialisms of 'place' at the points where the local and the global intersect. It also suggests urban theorists should be wary of over determining the notion of 'deterritorialization' as a disembodied and dislocated 'space of flows'.

So, what have these thoughts on transnational urbanism and the cultural politics of place-making got to do with (postnational) American Studies? Well, I have already alluded to one point of relevance – the spatial dislocations of transnational urbanism underline the destabilisations of the symbolic order of 'America' as a national imaginary. They draw attention to what Homi Bhabha calls 'the disjunctive, liminal space of national society' that eludes totalisation as it emerges from the volatile realignment of relations between the local, the national and the global.[xxii] In this realignment the central city is a principal (though by no means the only) site of new struggles over representation and identity and of new articulations of national and transnational association.

My second point of relevance – more tenuous and tentative - is this: we (Americanists) should take critical cognisance of the intersections between local, national and transnational processes in the practice of American Studies. I emphasise critical cognisance here as there is a risk we simply pay lip service to the discourses of transnationalism and globalisation to support an idealised scholarship without frontiers, generating knowledge in an intellectual 'space of flows', articulating a view from nowhere. American Studies is and will continue to be mediated by local and national structures (for example, of pedagogical practice and intellectual culture). But the reterritorialisation of American Studies as an international practice offers fresh opportunity to ask: what forms of intellectual place-making are 'we' involved in? what intellectual habitus do we work within and identify with? how does it relate to the imagined community of an internationalised American Studies?

Reterritorialisation presages fresh consideration of our positionality within structures and networks of Americanist scholarship and this involves bringing critical inquiry to the production and dissemination of American Studies, including that of 'postnational American Studies' as a new paradigm. While there are signs

of new geographies of American Studies scholarship emerging the project of dislocating American Studies from its established territorial axis remains fraught with questions of power and knowledge as these are shaped by space and place. The metaphor of flows is misleading as an indicator of how critical knowledge about America is assembled, authorised and communicated in and beyond the United States. If American Studies is being geographically decentred there is still much evidence that it remains intellectually centred in the United States – evidence of this could be easily supplied if we looked at how intellectual capital, the positionality of authorship and institutionalisation of knowledge are woven in the production (and consumption) of American Studies theorising. This, too, is part of the intellectual politics of place-making.

I don't want to end on a cynical note, however. More positively, I conclude that the spatial dislocations of cultural production and reception (including academic production and reception) is opening up new spaces for conducting research, new opportunities for transdisciplinary work, and new possibilities of intellectual affiliation. Despite some of my reservations about the over-determination of deterritorialisation in some currents of contemporary theorising I believe that to envision our intellectual locales as sites of transnational American Studies is a task for present and future American Studies research and practice. Such a project is neither totalising nor heroic (in the sense that its practitioners should be intellectually tooled to articulate the myriad perspectives and disciplinary procedures commensurate to their object of study). Rather, it should take account of the 'intellectual regionalism' that already exists, recognise the need to collaborate with related disciplines (likely experiencing their own paradigm dramas), and work to put local, national and global dimensions of American Studies into dialogue with one another.[xxiii]

For UK-based Americanists, the already evident interest in 'transnational' and 'transatlantic' models of academic inquiry may prove to be productive ways of contributing to this project. In some ways, if I may stretch the already crude analogy lurking in the background of this paper, we face a similar task to that of the city of Birmingham as it seeks to reposition itself in relation to the currents of global and transnational capital – if we are to do more than market ourselves in the style of American or European developments we need to revalue our own locales and intellectual place-making, the better to understand our place in the emergent cultural geographies of American Studies.

Endnotes

[i] Stephen V. Ward, *Selling Places: The Marketing and Promotion of Towns and Cities 1850-2000* (London: Spon, 1998), 213.

[ii] James Holston and Arjun Appadurai, 'Cities and Citizenship,' *Public Culture* 8 (1996), 188-89.

[iii] Holston and Appadurai, 'Cities and Citizenship,' 189.

[iv] Kevin Robins, 'Prisoners of the City: Whatever Could a Postmodern City Be?', in *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location*, ed. Erica Carter, James Donald and Judith Squires (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1994), 316.

[v] Robins, 'Prisoners of the City,' 318.

[vi] Manuel Castells, *The Informational City* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 348.

[vii] Michael Peter Smith, *Transnational Urbanism: Locating Globalization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 6.

[viii] These cities have all been studied as physically extended metropoles which have become central 'nodes' in global networks. Among common features of such studies are attention to the following: accelerated patterns of deindustrialization and growth of service-based urban economies; new patterns of decentralization and recentralization, with the movement of people and offices to suburban areas offset by economic and cultural redevelopment of core neighborhoods; the influx of immigrants, mostly from sources in South East Asia and Latin America, which have made these cities more conspicuously 'minority-majority' cities; and the regeneration of the culture industries of city cores under the influence of an unregulated global capitalism with new technological forms of mobility.

[ix] Saskia Sassen, 'Analytical Borderlands: Race, Gender and Representation in the New City,' in *Re-Presenting the City: Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the Twenty First Century Metropolis*, ed. Anthony King (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 197.

[x] Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 190-221.

[xi] See Frederick Buell, *National Culture and the New Global System* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

[xii] Smith, *Transnational Urbanism*, 3.

[xiii] Robins, 'Prisoners of the City', 306.

[xiv] Sharon Zukin, 'Space and Symbols in an Age of Decline,' in *Re-Presenting the City*, 45.

[xv] Terry Nichols Clark, 'Introduction: Trees and Real Violins: Building Post-Industrial Chicago' (unpublished paper), 4.

[xvi] Joe Holyoak, 'City Edge - Before Brindleyplace,' in *Brindleyplace: A Model for Urban Regeneration*, ed. Ian Latham and Mark Swenarton (London: Right Angle, 1999), 18.

[xvii] Nick Henry and Adrian Passmore, 'Rethinking "Global" City Centres: The Example of Birmingham,' *Soundings* 4 (1999), 62.

[xviii] Frank Webster, 'Re-inventing Place: Birmingham as an Information City?' (unpublished paper), 8.

[xix] Robins, 'Prisoners of the City,' 321.

[xx] Smith, *Transnational Urbanism*, 15.

[xxi] Jan Lin, 'Globalization and the Revalorizing of Ethnic Places in Immigration Gateway Cities,' *Urban Affairs Review* 34, no.2 (November 1998), 314.

[xxii] Homi Bhabha, 'Dissemination: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,' in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 312.

[xxiii] John Carlos Rowe identifies a 'new intellectual regionalism' at work in the US, one that is inflected by other new regionalisms – of capital, ethnicity, and cultural affiliation – and argues that efforts to reconstitute American Studies must be responsive to such formations. John Carlos Rowe, 'Post-Nationalism, Globalism and the New American Studies,' *Cultural Critique* 40 (1998), 20-21.