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The Transnationalism of American Culture

Literature, Film, and Music

Edited by
Rocío G. Davis



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The Transnationalism of American Culture

This book studies the transnational nature of American cultural production, specifically literature, film, and music, examining how these serve as ways of perceiving the United States and American culture. The volume's engagement with the reality of transnationalism focuses on material examples that allow for an exploration of concrete manifestations of this phenomenon and trace its development within and outside the United States. Contributors consider the ways in which artifacts or manifestations of American culture have traveled and what has happened to the texts in the process, inviting readers to examine the nature of the transnational turn by highlighting the cultural products that represent and produce it. Emphasis on literature, film, and music allows for nuanced perspectives on the way a global phenomenon is enacted in American texts within the U.S., also illustrating the commodification of American culture as these texts travel. The volume therefore serves as a coherent examination of the critical and creative repercussions of transnationalism, and, by juxtaposing a discussion of creativity with critical paradigms, unveils how transnationalism has become one of the constitutive modes of cultural production in the twenty-first century.

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Introduction

Perspectives on Transnational American Cultures

Rocío G. Davis

Transnational American culture is a process mapped by scholars who examine the multilayered contexts of cultural production in and beyond the United States. It involves examining the ways U.S. cultural production has been reimagined as a result of political and social movements in the twentieth century, how it has traveled and been received outside the country, as well as how globalization has shaped American sensibilities and artifacts. Taking as a point of departure Shelley Fisher Fishkin's mapping of the "transnational turn" in American Studies, this volume engages the creative practice of "the multidirectional flows of people, ideas, and goods and the social, political, linguistic, cultural, and economic crossroads generated in the process."¹ It illustrates how cultures circulate through particular products—primarily literature, film, and music—and become emblems of evolving ways of perceiving the United States and its cultures from within and outside the country. Indeed, Fishkin adds, these "crossroads might just as easily be outside the geographical and political boundaries of the United States as inside them," as well as contingent or constructed, complicating our ways of reading these shifting realities. Fishkin's groundbreaking 2004 presidential address to the American Studies Association gave the transnational turn strong institutional impetus, encouraging numerous scholars to continue exploring the possibilities of an increasingly cross-cultural approach to literary and cultural production and enact perceptive incursions into the layers of transnational meaning within texts.

This introductory essay will limn some of the major paradigms of the transnational, to locate current practices, particularly with regard to literary and cultural production, as will be illustrated in the chapters in the volume. Thinking through the prism of the transnational requires us to reexamine and reconfigure the political and theoretical frames we use to discuss texts produced in the United States and/or consider the ways "American" themes, motifs, or styles have influenced cultural production beyond the country's borders. In the last twenty or so years alone, numerous critics have formulated avenues to reading American transnationalism, from broad perspectives to more directed engagements with literature and culture.² Winfried Fluck, Paul Giles, Paul Gilroy, Paul Jay, Donald E. Pease,

John Carlos Rowe, and Robyn Wiegman, among others, have analyzed the parameters of what we might call the “transnational,” offering definitions and setting the stage for productive negotiations with this complex reality.³ Most broadly, as a way of thinking of the relationships within and between nations and cultures, “transnational” has been used, firstly, to refer to scholarship that foregrounds comparative approaches between the different “Americas,” the United States and Europe, unveiling the limits of the nation as a dominant critical parameter. Secondly, it attends to American studies done by scholars from outside the United States, engaging their perspectives and including their voices in conversations about culture. Thirdly, others approach it as a methodology arising from theoretical attention to critical paradigms such as multiculturalism, ethnicity, imperialism, postcoloniality, cosmopolitanism, or hemispheric studies.⁴ The “transnational” has also played diverse roles at different moments—from a topic to an approach, a theory or an interpretive frame, a quality inherent to culture or the result of increasingly fluid migratory or commercial flows and globalization, a characteristic of the nation-state or a form of identity.

I celebrate the term’s dynamism and methodological innovations, in particular, as a corrective to an obsession with the national in both creative and critical practice, but want to stress its potential as an analytic or methodology, one that denaturalizes the forms of social, cultural, and political organization implied by the nation-state. Examining some of these frames allows me to locate this volume within a dynamic conversation and outline its contribution to the discussion: a reading of creative practices through a transcultural methodology.

From its broadest perspective, we can think of the transnational as an invitation to rethink the local and the global and how categories are modified when delinked from earlier static configurations. Sanjeev Khagram and Peggy Levitt explain that transnational studies includes the productive option of reading “what are assumed to be bounded and bordered social units [. . .] as transnationally constituted, embedded, and influenced social arenas that interact with one another” that reconfigure the world as consisting of “multiple sets of dynamically overlapping and interacting transnational social fields that create and shape seemingly bordered and bounded structures, actors, and processes.”⁵ Using a supranational or comparative approach, transnational American studies therefore involves disentangling disciplinary subject matter from the limits of a border-oriented frame as well as engaging in a methodological practice that acknowledges the global nature of American cultural production. This doubled movement thus challenges the dominance of the border as an epistemological category—or reveals the boundaries to be imaginary, fluid, or unstable—as it proposes that, from its conception, U.S. cultural production aims to transcend the national. Paul Giles refers to this when he argues that the “transnational” might be understood as positioning the United States “global networks of exchange.”⁶ As he explains, transnationalism “positions itself at a point of

intersection [. . .] where the coercive aspects of imagined communities are turned back on themselves, reversed or mirrored, so that their covert pre-suppositions and ideological inflections become apparent.”⁷ Moreover, we use the term within American literary studies to refer, simultaneously, to the rethinking of literary and cultural paradigms as a result of multiculturalism and diaspora/border studies, and to the reconfiguration of American cultural products as they circulate globally.

The strength of the transnational turn might be seen as a result of several critical paradigmatic shifts in the later part of the twentieth century. Chief among them were the rejection of the notion of American exceptionalism in the 1980s and attention to the paradigms of ethnic studies, feminism, and other minority studies.⁸ These new perspectives led scholars not only to widen the geographical axes of their inquiry but increasingly foreground palimpsestic itineraries of migration, social and political histories, and the contingencies of identity formation.⁹ Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshawar Gaonkar’s introduction to their 2010 edited volume *Globalizing American Studies* takes a tripartite combination as its point of departure for insights on transnationalism: “American studies-American exceptionalism-American Century” which, they explain “has served until now as an enabling interpretive matrix that has been able to contain a variety of contradictions, generated both internally by academic inquiry and externally by changing historical conditions.”¹⁰ Juxtaposing what they call the “*vernacular strand*” in American studies, which highlights the “metaphoric unity of America,” with the “*cosmopolitan strand*,” which “metonymically focuses on the differential placement of America abroad,” they argue in favor of a dialogical methodology.¹¹ This implies a more holistic awareness of the problems of sustained introspection that denied the limitations of a monologic approach to society and culture. Thus, U.S. cultural production should be read as reacting as much as acting, subject to modification even as it influences work in other locations, and thus requiring multivalent modes of criticism to unpack its layers of meaning.

Taking into account that renewed epistemological approaches generally materialize as both an intellectual paradigm and within the context of institutional setting, it is fascinating to observe how acknowledgement of the possibilities of the transnational became scholarly currency. Edwards and Gaonkar ironically note how “every major historical or epistemological crisis sooner or later produces two sets of discursive responses—an ASA presidential address at the annual gathering and an anthology with an introductory statement.”¹² Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s lecture mentioned at the start of this essay was among several American Studies Association presidential lectures that explicitly engaged the transnational (or carried the notion as a subtext), published in issues of *American Quarterly*. Though Edwards and Gaonkar read these institutional interventions as a form of “crisis management,” the lectures actually became generative strategies that addressed, even directed, academic research agendas and community activism. The

lectures are both descriptive—acknowledging what is arguably the most significant and productive reimagining of the field since its inception—and prescriptive—subliminally or not, pointing to critical directions. Thus, Amy Kaplan’s 2003 lecture, “Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today,” invited scholars to recast debates about the notion of an American empire in transnational, historical, and comparative contexts;¹³ Fishkin’s 2004 lecture unequivocally mapped the “transnational turn”; and Karen Halttunen’s focus on space in 2005 implicitly acknowledged the valency of the transnational in its reimagining of the ways we read “place” in our globalized world.¹⁴ Emory Elliott’s 2006 ASA presidential address not only directly interrogated the notion of the transnational in American studies, but offered a useful historical contextualization of the ways critical and scholarly attention to diversity in the United States in recent decades has shaped transnational American studies.¹⁵ In later years, ASA presidents Vicki Ruiz and Philip Deloria used the transnational as a methodology to explore the intersection of race within the service industries and restaurants or in the context of a discussion of America as intersection and crossroad, respectively.¹⁶ Significantly, the issues of *American Quarterly* that publish these addresses include responses by leading scholars in the field, allowing for complex nuancing of the ways this notion and process is articulated.¹⁷

Given its current incontestable protagonism as an intellectual paradigm, we should explore how a transnational methodology allows us to break the conventionally accepted discursive paradigms of American writing and scholarship on American literary and cultural production. This frame of literary studies stems from a complex interplay of forces, which include the development of social and political movements that impacted on the work within the academy, sustained critical attention to difference, as well as new technologies of communication, multilingualism, and reality of fluid physical movement and intellectual exchange between countries.¹⁸ As Paul Jay clarifies, “the transnational turn in literary studies began in earnest when the study of minority, multicultural, and postcolonial literatures began to intersect with work done under the auspices of the emerging study of globalization.”¹⁹ This is a transformative process, as the texts also alter the character of their context as they engage the modern intersections of experiences, languages, cultures, and their resulting identities. From Jay’s perspective, therefore, transnationalism as a methodology “deploys theoretical, critical, and imaginative thinking in order to lay bare debilitating histories and imagine new, contemporary relationships and structures of power in an age in which the magnitude of change seems nearly overwhelming.”²⁰ Thus, he explains, writers such as Junot Diaz and Zadie Smith “trouble received national narratives, not by erasing them, but by resuscitating them within a broader, more complicated geographical and historical context dominated by a back-and-forth model of migration.”²¹ So, a transnational methodology would decenter, rather than invalidate, the nation as the defining template for analysis or understanding. Appraising literature, music, and film

using this methodology would require us to read the interface of difference in cultural signs and codes of signification within a discursive space that acknowledges the constructedness of national categories. Specifically, in the context of literature, a transnational dynamic would encourage us to formulate or envision connections between the United States and the world in terms of “more complex, analogical processes of convergence and divergence.”²² This formulation limns the ways a methodology might be framed and sustained in an international context, in local or global settings, but incorporating perspectives beyond the national.

A perspective toward transnational American studies that supports this project’s aims is that of a “relational geography,” as Sheila Hones and Julia Leyda explain in their article, “Geographies of American Studies,” which examines current academic knowledge production related to space-producing practices in American studies, aiming to “render visible a taken- for-granted scholarly geography predicated on bordered national identities that enables the Americanist tendency to conflate subject matter with practice, a conflation that renders the U.S. academy the domestic ‘home’ of the discipline. This geography facilitates the division of the world of American studies into two halves, separating U.S.-based (domestic) practice from American studies as practiced everywhere else (foreign).”²³ To challenge this U.S.-centered perspective, they “propose a conceptual shift away from a territorial geography and toward a relational geography, which is to say, a shift away from the practice of viewing space as a kind of container, within which Americanists act and across the distances of which they relate to each other, and toward the idea that it is the acting and the relating that literally produce the space.”²⁴ The relational geography matrix, as a methodology, would therefore make national location or frame only one of the factors that constitutes the transnational American paradigm, privileging the intersecting network that results from multiple and multidirectional cross-influence of cultural production. A transnational perspective on American literary studies would therefore acknowledge numerous practices and trajectories of cultural production, as it deploys these practices in its approach. As Hones and Leyda argue, a relational geography “would enable a productive understanding of global American studies as a network of interactions. This is not a geography that erases or invalidates local or national specificity, but one that allows other specificities to become visible.”²⁵

In the last three decades, perspectives on the transnational have shaped American literary studies in crucial ways, as several critics have pointed out. Caroline Levander and Robert Levine’s *Hemispheric American Studies* (2008), for example, reexamines the national frame for organizing American studies through the transnational paradigm. They acknowledge that this prism “complicates questions of the nation, and thus raises rather than resolves interpretive problems. [It] can be regarded as a heuristic rather than a content- or theory-driven method; it allows for discovery of new

configurations rather than confirmation of what we already know.”²⁶ Yet, to conceive of transnationalism as a new phenomenon would be naïve, as American writers have attended to postnational concerns since the beginning, as Colleen Glenney Boggs argues in her introduction to *Transnationalism and American Literature*.²⁷ By focusing on linguistic plurality, she reveals how problematic the use of the nation as an analytical unit has been, emphasizing the blurred boundaries between what we consider the national and transnational. In his recent survey of the transnational character of American literature, Paul Giles posits that “the nationalist phase of American literature and culture extended from 1865 until about 1981 and that the current transnational phase actually has more in common with writing from the periods on either side of the War of Independence, when national boundaries were much more inchoate and unsettled.”²⁸ Since 1981, with the election of Ronald Reagan as president, he believes, the country “has entered what we might call a transnational era, one more centered around the necessarily reciprocal position of the U.S. within global networks of exchange.”²⁹ In Winfried Fluck’s words, “the good thing about transnational American studies is that it allows us to look at the United States no longer in an insular way but in terms of international embeddedness,” which, though not necessarily a sign of progress in itself, serves as a viable paradigm for a continuing examination of transnationalism’s operations.³⁰

These scholars’ theoretical perspectives on the transnational support their continuing engagement with its practice. The chapters in this volume, performing close readings of literature, film, and music, for example, deploy a transnational methodology in their examination of the relationships between creative production and social, political, and intellectual context. Moreover, looking beyond established disciplinary or national borders, we attend to flows and reciprocal intertextuality. The blurring of boundaries occurs on many levels, as these chapters unveil American culture’s inherent cosmopolitan structure, the global dimensions of texts about the United States and the implications of the manner of American texts’ (and, by extension, American or U.S.-based scholars’ theories) reception and assimilation into other nations as a catalyst for some of their cultural productions. This approach to American cultural production and its theorization seeks to avoid the pitfalls of an assumed compartmentalization by stressing the connections—overt or hidden—among a variety of texts separated by time or geography.

Acknowledging that transnationalism is, more than a subject, a critical methodology deployed by social actors in movement who are creators, receivers, and scholars of culture, the chapters in this volume deploy that methodology to engage the multiple possibilities of American texts and their international reach. This volume locates American transnationalism in the shifts in contexts, structures, metaphors, and motifs of contemporary American literature, film, and music. Even now, John Michael reminds us, we must “remember that, since their beginnings, literary studies have

retained as one of their main ends the elaboration of the rich and engaged complexities of aesthetic effect, and that these constitute the meanings of the objects we analyze,” even as we attend to multiple social and political concerns.³¹ As Khagram and Levitt posit, the task of transnational studies is to “uncover, analyze and conceptualize similarities, differences, and interactions among trans-societal and trans-organizational realities, including the ways in which they shape bordered and bounded phenomena and dynamics across time and space.”³² Thus, the work enacted in the field of literary and cultural studies in this volume contributes to our understanding of how culture reflects and refracts the possibilities of this methodology.

More specifically, the volume aims to evince how international scholarship on American cultural production deploys and expands the notion of the “transnational turn,” exploring the forms this criticism takes, including renewed attention to the physical or metaphorical reality of borders, the reinvention of American themes, motifs, or styles in other national literatures, unraveling the cross-cultural references and meanings in texts, and attending to the cultural implications of global mobility, among others. Importantly, the chapters in this volume unveil the transnational dimensions already inherent in the cultural products they analyze. This volume is framed by Fishkin’s recent analysis of the ways the transnational has shaped current international perspectives on American literary and cultural studies in the years since her germinal lecture. In the opening chapter, she maps the development in the field over the last few years, emphasizing the ways the transnational has become central to the field of American studies. Her metacritical survey argues that this scholarship has coalesced around four interconnected approaches: (1) broadening the frame, integrating U.S. history and literature into broader historical contexts and comparative frameworks and integrating multiple national histories and literatures with one another more fully; (2) work that explores the cross-fertilization of cultures, particularly the ways in which literature and popular culture from different locations influence and shape each other; (3) discussions of previously neglected transnational dimensions of canonical figures not generally viewed in transnational contexts before; and (4) renewed attention to travel and migration that includes thinking about how texts travel and what we learn about different cultures in the process. The chapters in the volume underscore these approaches and are organized according to these categories, to illustrate the ways this criticism is enacted and to continue to expand the manners of perceiving American cultural products and their effects within a broader context.

At the risk of unduly circumscribing how transnational methodologies function (a danger inherent to any volume that engages a topic as broad as transnational American studies), this collection nonetheless contributes to the field by drawing the reader’s attention to the *practice* of criticism on literature and cultural production. The chapters thus illuminate the critical, as opposed to the merely theoretical, enactment of this methodology,

attesting to the effectiveness and productivity of the transnational as a subject and a frame. They substantiate the theoretical dialogue through close readings of canonical or less popular texts, foregrounding the practices of reading and, by extension, teaching. Moreover, by incorporating multilayered perspectives into its critical domain, this volume expands and nuances the transnational process.

Part I, "Broadening the Frame," examines Fishkin's first category, which emphasizes comparative approaches as it draws from multiple histories and literatures. Jopi Nyman's "Transnational Spaces and Black American Identities in Caryl Phillips's *Dancing in the Dark*" examines the representation of American, European, and African transnational spaces in Phillips's 2005 novel, which focuses on the character and career of the Caribbean-born U.S. vaudeville/blackface artist Bert Williams. Nyman argues that the novel is not a mere biography of its protagonist and his role in the cultural history of black American theatre in the early twentieth century. Rather, read in the contexts of transnational mobility and the black diaspora, the novel's representations of history, performances of identity, and intertextual elements contribute to a revaluation of the black presence in transnational spaces. Next, Silvia Schultersmandl analyzes memory as transnational practice in Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, by attending to its potential as a vehicle for cultural survival within America, even as it permits the novel's protagonist to distance herself from her colonized motherland. Through her representation of a paradoxical relationship between memory and amnesia, Kincaid's novel epitomizes the interconnectedness between American and Antiguan transnational realities as experienced by the protagonist. This part concludes with Pin-chia Feng's discussion of criticism against Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, censured for promoting neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies, as well as for commodifying literary "taste." She assesses the transformation the Western classics described in the memoir undergo as they "travel" to Nafisi's Islamic Republic of Iran and how Western readers respond to these translations when they are represented in the American context. Most importantly, the author inserts non-Western readers into this circuit of transnational and transcultural exchanges to explore possible connections between this charged case and the multiple crises associated with English studies in the Asian context.

Part II, "The Cross-Fertilization of Culture" focuses on Fishkin's second category, which pinpoints work that explores the cross-fertilization of cultures and the reciprocal influences between literature and culture from different locations. The three chapters in this part examine the exportation of American popular film and music: James Stone's review of the early twentieth-century British film industry's love affair with Hollywood, through the film star Jessie Matthews's career, discloses British ambivalence toward its transatlantic rival as it tried to compete with it by, paradoxically, imitating its forms and ultimately rejecting it. Ioana Luca's chapter on Romanian popular music examines the proliferation of images and narratives of America

in post-1989 songs. She proposes a reading of the way the United States has been reconfigured in the last twenty years from a country that has a marginal position within Europe and the EU, and yet plays a central role in the U.S. foreign policy, showing how and why the postcommunist context provides us with a pivotal conceptualizing of transnational American culture. Finally, Monika Mueller's "Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan Revisited: Musical 'Authenticity' and Transnational Adaptations of Country and Folk Music," deals with what happens to "quintessentially American" country and folk music when it is transposed to Europe and translated into German.

Part III, "Exploring Transnational Dimensions of Canonical Writing," takes a look at the third category proposed, which involves the exploration of previously neglected transnational dimensions of canonical figures or texts. Reading Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama*, Alison Lutton makes a case for considering the novel's protagonist, Victor Ward, an emblem of disjunctive fin-de-20th-siècle American subjectivity made transnational. By tracking his literal and figurative movements away from the United States, and relating these to the underlying narrative of imperialism embodied by the politically conservative figure of his father, she considers how and to what ends Victor presents a new and varied kind of transnational identity, ultimately raising the possibility for further investigation of this type of displaced nationalism. Bairbre Walsh's chapter on Claude McKay's fiction emphasizes this writer's transnational philosophy, as it echoes his peripatetic, Atlantic traversing lifestyle. This perspective is central to an understanding of the express desire in his fiction to transcend the limiting boundaries of nationalism, and to suitably redefine black identity in the wake of global African dislocation. Drawing on theoretical perspectives on the transnational, the chapter suggests that the transatlantic migrancy of McKay's life furnishes a diasporic populous with the opportunity to situate group affiliation beyond the boundaries of any bordered loci. This part concludes with a chapter by Samir Dayal on food scenes in contemporary South Asian films, such as Gurinder Chadha's *What's Cooking*, as contact zones. Specifically, he asks whether food-related scenes in films can function meaningfully as an alternative public sphere, when the actual public sphere disenables or becomes dysfunctional for multicultural and transnational contact or exchange, and therefore are inadequate for civic life.

The three chapters in Part IV, "Narratives of Travel and Migration" call our attention to narratives about travel and migration, reading them in more multilayered ways to tease out their implications for transnational understanding. Taking her cue from de Certeau's concept of spatial practices, Ana M^a Manzanás addresses the intersection of trajectories in the Atlantic Ocean as forms of transnationalism by focusing on Junot Díaz's story "Aguantando" and Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*, showing how contemporary crossings revisit previous spatial practices as well as other forms of mobility. Monica Chiu's discussion of "spheres of influence" in Jean Kwok's best-selling *Girl in Translation*, promotes as it undermines