



INTERNATIONAL AMERICAN STUDIES AND THE QUESTION OF WORLD LITERATURE

An Introduction

Since its inception, International American Studies (IAS) had to define itself against the larger backdrop of global or world studies. However, as Paul Giles notes in his contribution to this special issue of *RIAS* marking the 10th anniversary of the journal and devoted to “International American Studies and the Question of World literature,” “World Literature in its current institutional manifestation is a much more recent phenomenon” than IAS, and may have “accumulated academic prestige more rapidly and securely than International American Studies has so far managed.”¹ Whatever their different temporal and institutional trajectories, however, both IAS and World literature may be seen as efforts to come to terms with the momentous historical, political, social, and technological changes of the past few decades. Put simply, both can be considered attempts to fashion new epistemological tools better suited to making sense of a globalized world, so that, no matter how (relatively?) different their objects of study might be, a set of theoretical concerns would appear to be shared by both fields. Both students of IAS and World Literature, for example, need to venture beyond the traditional categories of the nation and of national cultures, by coming to terms with the social, historical, and lin-

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1. This issue of *RIAS* brings together revised versions of the papers and responses originally delivered at the IASA Symposium on “International American Studies and the question of World literature,” held at the Sapienza University of Rome on April 14–15, 2016.

guistic complexities that such a move entails. Both have to do so in a way that “opens” one’s field and yet preserves its *raison d’être*, especially at a time when the humanities are under attack and the defense of academic positions and credentials—all calls for “interdisciplinarity” notwithstanding—is of paramount importance. Both need to rethink the parameters of their disciplinary specializations, that is, without pulling the institutional rugs from under their feet—a precarious balancing act which, in the age of the corporate university, with its rage for classifying, evaluating, and ranking, is far from easy to perform.

These are only a few of the many problems faced by theorists and practitioners of both IAS and World Literature. So far, however, comparative discussions of these two fields have been rare. This may be surprising in light of the fact that—to quote from Giles’ essay again—“some of the same academic personnel have been instrumental in the development of both movements.” Perhaps, as Giles suggests, this has something to do with the need for each field to first define itself against its obvious “others”: US American Studies in the case of IAS, and Comparative Literature in that of World Literature. Whatever the case might be, the time has come to question disciplinary boundaries not necessarily to erase them altogether, but to redraw them as we struggle to come to terms with a changing world where cultural and literary studies cannot simply remain what they were decades ago. This issue of *RIAS* has been imagined as a small, yet hopefully stimulating initial step in the direction of a larger debate that is likely to continue for years to come, as the humanities try to redefine their role in an academic environment increasingly subject to neoliberal doxa.

In the opening essay of this volume, Paul Giles considers some of the ways in which work done over the last ten-fifteen years in these two fields may be brought into some kind of productive and fruitful tension. The overarching question that both fields need to struggle with turns out to be, unsurprisingly, that of the local and the global. This question is important not only for IAS, which usually try to connect some feature of the history, culture, or politics of the Americas with what lies, more or less, “outside,” but also for World Literature in so far as the “world” is always a world constructed from a particular local and/or lin-

guistic standpoint. This is a point that Cristina Giorcelli repeatedly underscores in her response to Giles, especially when she insists that “a language, any language—as any good translator knows—entails a way of seeing and understanding, and it thus proclaims its *difference*: a difference that refuses to be reduced to a sort of universal essentialism.”

The problem of sameness and difference is of course one of the ways in which the question of the relation between local and global may be translated, and it is a problem very much debated in theories of globalization, which share with IAS a preoccupation with thinking the world as a whole while still preserving an “outside.” As Ulfried Reichardt shows in the essay that follows Giles’s, any meaningful discussion of this, and other thorny issues facing the two movements, must perforce entail a reconsideration of whatever theoretical tools we have to make sense of the new world we live in. His is a veritable tour de force through the very terms we rely on as we try to think and feel beyond the nation. His critical map of the various ways in which keywords such as “world,” “literature,” and “globalization” are being redefined, does not, however, aim at reaching some overarching synthesis. On the contrary, according to Reichardt, “We have to accept the many worlds within the one world as a shifting and contested field of overlapping and clashing views on the world.” To this end, he argues that one of the tasks of current “world literature” (he refers to Dave Eggers’ *The Circle*, in particular) is to investigate those technological and specifically digital innovations that hail from the US “but reach every place on the globe, strongly influencing the ways in which the world is understood.”

In her response to Reichardt, Marina Camboni calls attention to what she sees as a red thread that runs through his argument, “connecting German idealism and US culture via transcendentalist philosophy [...]. The word ‘kosmos,’ in his text, links the German Alexander Von Humboldt to Walt Whitman’s ‘A Passage to India’ and to an image of the world as a unity produced by communication and transportation technology.” While appreciating the effort to construct a meaningful and synthetic picture of the world that animates Reichardt’s intervention, Camboni fears that any reduc-

tion of the world to a “cognitive pattern” will come only at great cost—the cost of losing sight of the agents of globalization.

All reductions—and there is no theory, no philosophy, no cognition without some form of “reductionism”—come at some cost, but perhaps today we feel this to be a particularly vexing problem because the proverbial crisis of “master narratives” is matched by an unprecedented and truly gargantuan availability of all sorts of data. We know that any kind of universalizing or totalizing is problematic but, at the same time, we also know that without some form of what Fred Jameson famously described as “cognitive mapping,” we could not even step out of our doors, both factually and metaphorically. In a sense, however, we may take heart in the realization that this is a problem we confront not only as we try to make sense of our present, but also as we struggle to reconstruct—to resort to an old-fashioned key word of the Americanists’ repertoire—a “usable past.”

This is one of the lessons to be drawn from Cristina Luli’s wide-ranging discussion of Atlantic Studies but, in her case, it is the problem of the archive that takes center stage—or, better, of both the archive and the *missing* archive, as recent studies of the trans-, circum-, and cis-Atlantic have highlighted. As Luli reminds us, it is a ghostly trace—“the (missing) Journal of the First Voyage” of Christopher Columbus—that “grounds the epistemology of a New World archive and of (an imagined) America as punctuated by elisions, absences, and erasures.” These gaps that ask to be read, configure “the documentary and the spectral; the bodies of natives and native environments and their disappearance; the European, universalist history of the modern, (white) Atlantic, and the post-postcolonial resistance of the black (trans) Atlantic; *the Archival* (the scripted, inscribed) and its conditions of exteriority, that is, *the vanished*.” Seen from Luli’s viewpoint, the question of the relation between IAS and World literature may be recast as one in which both the “solid” (land-based, inscribed) and the “liquid” (sea-based, submerged) “foundations” of the modern world must be made visible and interrogated. Literature remains for Luli of paramount importance in this critical, philosophical, and narrative enterprise. Far from being marginal, literature is in Luli’s view “the best technology we have [...] because it thrives in the difference between

the saying and the said of any deposition by punctuating texts with repressions, erasures, and other unresolved elements.”

In his response to luli, Ugo Rubeo underlines the pivotal role that Jacques Derrida’s “Archive Fear. A Freudian Impression” plays in her argumentation. As he puts with admirable clarity, the challenge for contemporary researchers is, “how to envision and manage an entity [...] like the archive [...] originally intended as a closed, orderly, system, while it appears evident that its very renewal, and ultimately its survival, depend upon its being open to external, largely disorderly influences.” Rubeo sees luli’s solution in her suggestion that we construct “a counterarchive intended to challenge the silence provoked by white Western amnesia and reticence.” In this counterarchive, performative statements and imaginative narrations would play a role equal to those of historical documents. Rubeo adds *Benito Cereno* to the texts discussed by luli, as Melville’s story not only mentions Babo’s silence and the manipulation of the trial’s documents, but also provides “a dramatic *mise en scène* of that very process of erasure of possible counter-memories perpetrated by the Atlantic colonial tradition.”

The new Atlantic Studies, by way of its insistence on the disappearance of bodies, languages, and cultures during the middle passage, which nevertheless persist as traces in folk knowledge and rituals, powerfully reminds us of the “unknown past” that marks the beginning of both “America” and the modern world, and therefore of World literature as well. Moreover, with their focus on a “liquid modernity” different from the one described in Zygmunt Bauman’s work, Atlantic Studies can be imagined as part of a larger Oceanic Studies, whose importance to global and world literature studies is self-evident. As Patricia Yeager put it in the opening essay of a 2010 special issue of *PMLA*, “We have grown myopic about the role that seas and oceans play in creating ordinary histories and culture” (524). As we look for an alternative to land- and nation-based epistemologies, it should be useful to keep in mind that “we are mostly made of water: not geo- but aquacentric,” and that, “Earth’s commerce still depends on oceans. Ninety percent of the world’s goods (most of what we eat or type on or wear) still travels in container ships” (523).

The circulation of both goods, people, and ideas is of crucial significance also in Mena Mitrano's provocative reading of "Italian Theory as American Studies." Her focus, too, is trans-Atlantic, but the object of her observations is explicitly theory as both concept and practice. Of course, as Edward Said observed more than thirty years ago, "Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel," and all theory is in a sense "traveling theory" (226). "Italian theory" is no different, and indeed the name itself betrays its traveling origin in so much as, as Mitrano writes, it "is a name given within an Anglophone context (Italian Theory is called by its English name even in Italy)." Like "French Theory," also "Italian Theory" is in a significant way an American theory as well. Therefore, the question arises regarding its place within American Studies, especially at a time when, by redrawing its boundaries, American Studies turns into IAS. The point, of course, is not to assign a national identity to theory but, on the contrary, to realize once again the fact "that the act of recognition hinges on misrecognition amounts to a lot more than a subjective failure in the field practitioner; it constitutes the very condition of illumination."

The "diasporic logic" that Mitrano invokes in reference to the work of Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito, may help us in moving beyond what may be described as one of the constitutive frictions of American Studies. The discipline has been trying hard to reconceive itself as a "hybrid borderland" and yet it has also been constantly engaged—as Carlo Martinez emphasizes in his response to Mitrano's essay—in a "somewhat obsessive retelling of its own story." "Italian Theory"—as Donald Pease has acknowledged in a recent essay on which Mitrano has much to say—has played a key role in complicating not only the conceptual map but the genealogy itself of American Studies. One need only think of the role played by such diverse thinkers as Gramsci and Agamben in the emergence of the New Americanists. Even though "Italian Theory" has always been in some sense an American filiation, it can also become a tool to subvert Americanness. One is reminded here that also one of the key texts of the (old) Americanist discourse was indebted to a (different kind of) "Italian Theory." F.O. Matthiessen was explicit about having drawn inspiration for his *American Renaissance* from Francesco de Sanctis's *Storia della letteratura*

italiana, and confessed a special debt to Benedetto Croce's own understanding of form in the *Storia*. What Mitrano identifies as a series of "interdependent moments of deterritorialization" may therefore be older than one would at first imagine.

All the contributions I have sketched so far focus on knowledge-production—on how we go about building paradigms that would help us take a hold of the slippery universe we inhabit. Djelal Kadir's essay would seem to strike a different note as its explicit focus is on "agnotology," though, as we shall see in a moment, understanding how knowledge is occluded may be equally crucial in making sense of our current world. "Agnotology," Kadir explains, is, "literally, the science of ignorance." The concept, he insists, "is there to remind us that what is not known becomes just as important, if not more crucial than what is known. [...] [T]he doxa of imperial epistemology rests on what must be kept from being known, on what perforce must be ignored. Hegemony's understanding of the potential of ignorance, in other words, makes the production, management, and sanctioning of ignorance of paramount importance." One of the several merits of Kadir's intervention is to highlight how "willful ignorance" turns into a "political project." In his essay he calls attention, in particular, to those instances in which "the convergence of imperial impulse, willful ignorance, and world literature" translates into "a fateful triangle that becomes illustrative of the fate of dissent and also serves as precedent-setting template for wars of choice as instrument of capital and the securing of competing vested interests, economic and territorial, all behind the ideological screen of national consolidation."

The Trump quotation ("I love the poorly educated! They are the smartest people, the most loyal people") Kadir has chosen as epigraph was already there in April 2016, when he delivered an earlier draft of his essay. In his response to Kadir, Manuel Broncano has understandably chosen to update his original comments also in light of the new conditions brought about by the election of Trump to the US presidency. He duly underlines how current populist discourse enshrines "ignorance as the apex of happiness," but he also reminds us that the alarming resurgence of Know-Nothingness in the US (and elsewhere) stigmatized by Kadir,

is tempered by the persistence of a rich tradition of “resistance and contestation.” Broncano, as his references to Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and Roger Williams attest, insists that from the early days of colonial America there were important voices opposing the spread of ignorance as a tool of Empire. This is not to say we should feel any better about the contemporary situation in the US, as his evocation of the nightmarish world of George Orwell implies.

Urgent political concerns also animate the final essay of this issue of *RIAS*. The title of Markha Valenta’s contribution (“Abandoning America the Better to Save America”) has a nicely ambivalent ring to it. It could easily work for an article meant to criticize—as many have done—the “transnational turn” as a move to make American Studies legitimate and more palatable in a globalized world. However, though fully aware of the complications entailed in any internationalization of American Studies, she by no means wishes to abandon this project. Indeed, Valenta actually wants to sustain and expand the scope of transnational American Studies (whose recent history she ably traces) in order to reach a genuine decentering of the US. In her view, the problem is that “when American Studies goes international, the focus remains on the ways in which the gaze from elsewhere is directed at America. The fact that this gaze at America is one of many gazes directed both within and abroad—in relation to one another—that is, that a gaze is embedded in a tapestry of gazes, *including ones directed elsewhere than at America*, is insufficiently incorporated.” The only way to truly provincialize (my term) the US, therefore, “would be to approach the question of the subject, object and method of American Studies from an explicitly pluralist, democratic sensibility that subsumes ‘America’ to the ‘global’ and to global projects for just pluralist relations.”

Valenta’s essay raises a number of thorny issues that would merit a very long discussion. In my response to her rich piece, I limit my focus to two. The “tapestry of gazes” is a very evocative image, but one wonders *who* would be able to apprehend it in all its wealth of colors and texture? Isn’t that “tapestry” another name for the unreachable totality of world relations, another name—that is—for a form of global knowledge that very few scholars, no matter how learned, polyglot, and incredibly smart, would be

able to envision, let alone master? It is one thing to have a theoretical knowledge that one's gaze is just one of many, and quite another to be able to relate that gaze in relation to an infinity of others. Another problem I mention in my response concerns the concept of "egalitarian pluralism" that Valenta proposes as the ideal around which a soundly democratic American Studies should rebuild itself. I am not faulting Valenta for not being more specific about the concept, given the relative brevity of her essay, and I am sure that I would wholeheartedly subscribe to the ethical imperatives underpinning it. However, I do wonder why the word "socialism" never appears once in her argument, just as I wonder, more generally, about the virtual erasure of the Cold War in most discussions of international American Studies.

In more than one way, Valenta's essay—even though it does not engage explicitly the question of World Literature—circles back to some of the questions raised in the early essays of this issue. To the extent that we were to subsume 'America' to the 'global' wouldn't we be subsuming American Studies to World Literature studies? Is it feasible? Is it desirable? What intellectual and political risks would we run into by pursuing this strategy? Most importantly, from which global movements for "just pluralist relations" should we take inspiration? These questions will be with us for a long time, and *RIAS* will continue to address them.

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