



WORLD LITERATURE AND INTERNATIONAL AMERICAN STUDIES

Convergence, Divergence, and Contest

The question of World Literature and its relation to the formation of International American Studies is a complex and interesting topic, one that touches on many institutional and intellectual aspects of these overlapping fields. The internationalization of American Studies in a broad theoretical sense can be said to have started in earnest in the 1990s: Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, which proposed a transatlantic matrix for African American culture, was published in 1993, and the first World Congress of the International American Studies Association itself took place in the Netherlands in 2003, after several years of prior planning. However, World Literature in its current institutional manifestation is a much more recent phenomenon—David Damrosch's *What Is World Literature?* was published in 2003—and though some of the same academic personnel have been instrumental in the development of both movements (notably Djelal Kadir and Theo d'Haen, who both co-edited the 2011 *Routledge Companion to World Literature*), my general sense is that World Literature as a subject has accumulated academic prestige more rapidly and securely than International American Studies has so far managed. In terms of academic politics, there are, I think, some fairly obvious reasons why this should have been the case. Damrosch's definition of World Literature as that which "gains in translation" has ensured that World Literature has been invested primarily in literature in English, with the global Anglophone sphere facilitating the publication of anthologies and thereby incorporating all other languages within its global

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remit (288). Those who have opposed the World Literature movement, notably Emily Apter in her 2013 book *Against World Literature: On The Politics of Untranslatability*, have invoked linguistic difference as what Apter called “a deflationary gesture toward the expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literary endeavors” (3), and she talked here of trying to wean World Literature out of its Anglophone comfort zone towards a broader recognition of cultural difference.

But departments of Comparative Literature, priding themselves as they have traditionally done on an intimate knowledge of specific languages, have fared relatively poorly in the academy over the past fifty years, and given their marginal status they do not carry so much heft in terms of university finance or governance. If the institutional opponent of World Literature has been the weak political unit of Comparative Literature, the perennial antagonist of International American Studies has been the nationalistic fervor associated with the American Studies movement in the United States, a far more powerful opponent in terms of government sponsorship, diplomatic underpinnings, and, perhaps most importantly of all, the thoroughly naturalized romanticism that has made the articulation of an American Studies heritage a condition of professional identity for scholars working within the United States. I recall being at the American Studies Association (ASA) meeting in San Francisco some years ago, and participating with the late lamented Guenter Lenz in a panel discussing international frameworks for the subject. We were challenged by a member of the audience who said the only reason he joined the ASA in the first place was in the interests of furthering social progress and embodying his particular version of the American Dream, and he could not understand what we as outsiders hoped to “get out of it,” as he put it, if we did not share a similar sense of engagement. This is the same kind of cultural insiderism that used to be associated fifty years ago with the Institute for Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto, where the guiding principle was that by subscribing to the medieval field, you were implicitly supporting as a true believer the idea of medieval values or a reconstituted medieval synthesis. The notion that it might be possible to analyze the United States as one nation

among others within a complex material sphere, contemplating it in a comparatively neutral way in relation to the ideological vectors sustaining and crisscrossing it, is an approach deeply offensive to those for whom American exceptionalism, in either overt or sublimated forms, provides the intellectual template that underwrites their subject's *raison d'être*.

It is certainly not my intention here to devalue the important contributions made by World Literature to the formation of literary studies according to an enlarged planetary scale. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen has commented shrewdly on how it is "difficult at present to give convincing arguments as to why anybody should be interested in studying the literature of just one nation" (1), although he argued how World Literature "will always be a world literature as seen from a particular place" and will therefore be involved always in an implicit dialectic between local and global. Franco Moretti has of course also done important work to shift the axis of analysis from microcosmic text to macrocosmic superstructure, in his observation that "the literature around us now is unmistakably a planetary system" (54). One potential hazard of World Literature, though, as outlined by Pheng Cheah in his recent important book *What Is a World?*, is that it reproduces the Hegelian philosophy of world history, which anchored worldly events to an explicitly teleological understanding of time purporting to overcome temporal finitude. A "normative theory of world literature is based on an understanding of the world as a temporal category," argued Cheah: "The world is a normative temporal category, and not the spatial whole made by globalization [...] Transnational literary relations are relations of power and domination [...] [not an] enchanted and peaceful world of pure aesthetic creation" (6, 16, 32). In Cheah's eyes, Goethe's old idea of *Weltliteratur*, World Literature, as encompassing a universal spirit is thus recapitulated in Hegel's notion of *Bildung* as "the imposition [aufgeprägt] of a universal quality upon a given content" (63). This, I would suggest, is one of the reasons for the institutional success of World Literature, which speaks to a universalist design through which the material conditions of national formations are simply transcended.

In this sense, I would argue that there are closer parallels than some contemporary theorists would like to acknowledge between

World Literature in the twenty-first century and Comparative Literature in the 1950s, which sought, under the aegis of Erich Auerbach and René Wellek, simply to rise above the fractious political divisions that had resulted in the Second World War. By contrast, the intellectual genealogy of International American Studies, I would suggest, can be traced back not to Hegel but to Marx, not so much the Marxist conception of economic infrastructure, but rather the kind of geographical materialism propounded by David Harvey, which has sought specifically to position what he calls the “new imperialism” of the United States on the empirical contours of a world map. For Harvey, the United States is a country, not an idea; it is a material phenomenon, not an abstraction derived inductively from idealist formations, or from what Jacques Derrida might have called the specter of exceptionalism. Much of the most revealing work in International American Studies over recent years has come from comparative theorists such as Harry Harootunian, who contrasted temporal formations in Japan in the middle of the twentieth century with those coming out of the United States. Such sentiments of missionary zeal, often generated explicitly by the American Studies movement in the wake of World War II, were designed to show Japanese culture how it was intrinsically belated and anachronistic. This kind of missionary American Studies always sought to compare Japanese time to the models of liberal progress associated with North American time, so that the Japanese came to feel themselves to be living in two time zones simultaneously:

the assessment of modernity [...] often slipped into an adversarial assault against the West, especially the United States—pejoratively known as ‘Americanism’—that led to waging intellectual war with history in order to resist being assimilated by it. Specifically, this struggle against history meant fending off the progressive segmentation of time and the swift succession of events that threatened to undermine any chance for stabilizing daily life. But the struggle also sought to stem the confusion caused by the splitting that resulted from mapping the historical experience of the West onto Japan. (Harootunian 46)

Kuan-Hsing Chen, in his book *Asia as Method*, similarly described how America in the second half of the twentieth century had succeeded in colonizing the collective unconscious of Taiwan to such

an extent that to oppose America appeared to involve engaging in a similar process of psychological “splitting” and disorientation: “Being anti-American is like opposing ourselves, and to love Taiwan is to love America. This is why we cannot oppose US imperialist intervention” (186). Both Harootunian and Chen thus analyzed how the United States in the second half of the twentieth century came to colonize Asia not so much politically or economically but in relation to a deeply embedded cultural imaginary.

Such analytical demystifications are very different in kind from the special issue of *American Quarterly* in 2015 on “Pacific Currents,” which struck me as obscurantist in the way it approached the whole world from the perspective of Hawaii—the guest editors were from the University of Hawaii at Manoa—and idealized oceanic formations and Indigenous cultures, while entirely overlooking three centuries of colonial in-fighting in the Pacific region (Lyons and Tengan 545–74). Indeed, from reading this special issue, one would have thought that the whole historical legacy of British and German imperialism in the South Pacific, and the entire national formations of Australia and New Zealand, simply did not exist. Colonialism has often represented a blind-spot in the construction of American Studies, in part because Americanists have not wanted to engage with a situation in which their privileged nation might be seen as politically subjugated, in part because the utopian and Manichaeic tendencies that currently galvanize this subject formation tend to be uncomfortable with what colonial scholars Malini Johar Schueller and Edward Watts have aptly described as the “messy beginnings” of American national consciousness. The project of Schueller and Watts argued “that the early cultural history of the United States is best understood in the context of extra-national historical and cultural models,” thus questioning “the very idea of a consolidated originary vision of both a centralized national identity and a singular oppositional resistance” (6). It is far easier to idealize Native American or Indigenous cultures, to abhor all settler colonialism as inherently evil, than to consider in a more complex fashion how colonial power, national identity and native resistance were all interwoven with one another in complicated and multidirectional ways. Lisa Lowe’s recent book *The Intimacy of Four Continents*, which I think is very interesting for the way

it aligns nineteenth-century novels with a variety of global trade routes and interconnections, nevertheless seems to me to relapse ultimately into a unidirectional focus, within which the traditional American ambition of global hegemony is simply turned on its head, so that Chinese coolies and African laborers appear as no more than the counterparts to British imperial and American capitalist power. This is simply to reconstitute the premise of American empire from an inverted position, rather than acknowledging how US assumptions of global transparency and planetary communication were constantly being thwarted and interrupted by complicated local affairs. To appropriate American Studies as a vehicle for the liberation of Pacific Island cultures, in other words, is to impose an inappropriately Manichaeic model of liberation and damnation in a geographical context where, as the Australian-born anthropologist Nicholas Thomas and others have observed, the binary oppositions of Messianic freedom do not readily apply.¹

I recently contributed an essay on “Globalization” to a Cambridge critical anthology on American Literature of the 1990s, and re-reading some of those novels by exponents of multiculturalism at that time—Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters*, Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*—it was chastening to realize how dated many of these narratives now appear. All of these fictional works, narrated by female protagonists, tell stories of immigration and accommodation within the broad matrix of US culture, with their clear message being that American literature should be seen as made up of multinational strands. Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* tracks the progress of its heroine from the Hindu constraints of a small Indian village to Elsa County, Iowa, with the central protagonist priding herself on her capacity for change and Jasmine’s openness to personal “transformation” being linked explicitly to the American frontier myth: “Adventure, risk, comfortably in transformation; the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows” (240). Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters*, published in 1990, is set in the Philippines of the 1950s, and it evokes the hybrid nature of this particular island society, where influences from American popular culture

1. For the argument that Edward Said’s model of orientalist subjugation is “not helpful for the Pacific,” see Thomas 17.

have become all-pervasive. But the heroine Rio grows up to live in the United States, in the midst of all the American popular culture she experienced as a child only by proxy, and the format of this genre involves the mediation of a distant, overseas past through the voice of a narrator who looks back at her native heritage from a position safely ensconced within the American heartland.

This is globalization within an almost entirely domesticated compass, the stuff of contemporary university programs in global awareness, where extraneous values are folded comfortably into traditional American pedagogical investments in liberal diversity. In 1997, Slavoj Žižek aligned “multiculturalism” with what he called “the cultural logic of multinational capitalism,” one in which “Western cultural imperialism [...] treats *each* local culture the way the colonizer treats colonized peoples—as ‘natives’ whose mores are to be carefully studied and respected,” with Žižek going on to describe “multiculturalism” as “a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism,” a “racism with a distance” (44). Again, I do not want simply to dismiss American writing of the 1990s which was exploring, even if in an inchoate manner, the embryonic appearance of a global imaginary, and in particular Bob Shacochis’s novel *Swimming in the Volcano*, published in 1993 but set sixteen years earlier on the fictional Caribbean island of St. Catherine, seems to me a splendid imaginative account of the uncomfortable American transition from a national to a global imaginary, with all of the psychological processes of destabilization that go along with such a process of deterritorialization. But that American literary idiom of the 1990s is now beginning to appear as a historical phenomenon, rather like the Beat novels of the 1950s or the Dust-bowl novels of the 1930s, and it is important to recognize how American texts of this era were circumscribed by both historical and geographical markers.

Such twentieth-century styles are, I suspect, radically different in kind from the more innovative work that will probably be done in international American studies over the next generation or two. I could imagine, for instance, a revisionist account of American literature written by a scholar in China that would hold in abeyance all the traditional US formulas of liberal progress and choose to focus instead on issues of class conflict, environmental politics

and colonial power struggles going back to the Revolutionary eras in both America and China. Most US academic transactions with Asia still have an old-fashioned missionary status, with famous scholars flying out from Ivy League institutions to spread the good news about US advances in scholarship, but in the more carefully calibrated and globally nuanced world of the twenty-first century, there will be more scope for reciprocity and for the decentering of US hegemony by intellectual vectors from elsewhere. In his 2014 novel *The Bone Clocks*, English author David Mitchell (a great favorite of Fredric Jameson, incidentally) has a scene set in Shanghai in the near future, 2018, where the narrator remarks: “When I was a boy the USA was synonymous with modernity: now it’s here [...] Shanghai’s aura is the color of money and power, its e-mails can shut down factories in Detroit, denude Australia of its iron ore, strip Zimbabwe of its rhino horn, pump the Dow Jones full of either steroids or financial sewage.”¹⁷ In his essay “From Marco Polo to Leibniz,” Umberto Eco suggested that interactions between different cultures can take the form of conquest, cultural pillage, or exchange, along with the various power politics associated with them, and though much globalization emerging from the United States has characteristically involved what I would call a form of soft colonialism, where the overseas culture is suffered to exist only as the extension of an assumed US hegemony, it is likely in future that a greater interpenetration of cultural alterity—working from the outside in, as well as from the inside out—will help crucially to reshape the American global imaginary (53–76). Reflecting the current constellation of academic interests, Robert Young commented recently on how “the world has come to globalize the United States,” but international American studies will have come to intellectual maturity when the United States is more cognizant of its position within a complex global world (as quoted in Apter 40).

All of these ambitions represent arduous, long-term goals, and they are not likely to be accomplished overnight, or indeed within the timespan of a single generation. World Literature, as I have suggested, has been successful as an academic subject in part because its underlying assumptions have fitted so comfortably with a Hegelian rhetoric of spiritual progress that can be traced back as far

as Goethe. International American Studies, on the other hand, has from the beginning run into obstacles of all kinds, from the vested interests of existing national associations to the financial influence of diplomatic agencies, to the exceptionalist instincts of scholars wedded to certain forms of identity politics. But if progress has been slow, it has also, I would argue, been sure. One of the reasons Barack Obama has been so unpopular during his second presidential term is because he has been trying to reconcile the American public's expectations with his own sense of the country's profoundly altered place in the world, when the logic of outsourcing and the dynamics of the transpacific partnership will inevitably change in the long term ways in which the American middle class positions itself in relation to the emergent economies of China and India. The phenomenon of Donald Trump's political popularity should not, I think, be a surprise to scholars of international American Studies, since this kind of resentment and anger has been brewing for a long time in the United States, and not just within the purlieu of the white working class. I remember giving a talk about ten years ago at a university in Missouri, where I made the quite unexceptionable claim that some of Frederick Douglass's political and religious views in his later life were shaped by his interactions with his German mistress, Ottilie Assing. Assing was based in the United States but she sent back newspaper articles and reviews to be published in German in her native Hamburg, and it was she who introduced Douglass to the work of German "Higher Critics" of the Bible, such as Ludwig Feuerbach and David Friedrich Strauss. This moderate transnational intervention received a very sour-faced response from a Midwestern graduate student who said the reason he had chosen to do American literature in the first place was so that he would not have to trouble himself to learn "foreign" languages, as he put it. I do not want to make a direct equation here with Trump, but this theme of radical unsettlement and systematic displacement is infiltrating US life in all kinds of interesting ways in the second decade of the twenty-first century, and it should be the remit of international American studies to track these kinds of frictions, so as to reposition the US domain, provocatively but judiciously, within a wider global orbit.

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