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NASSIM WINNIE BALESTRINI (Ed.)

Adaptation and American Studies

Perspectives on Research and Teaching
With an Afterword by Linda Hutcheon

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Nassim W. Balestrini

Adaptation Studies and American Studies: Interfaces

When, in the mid-1980s, I decided to study American and Russian literatures and cultures, I envisioned becoming something like an intercultural ambassador, be it as a journalist (my second minor was media studies) or as a representative of an international organization. Examining the United States and the Soviet Union as Cold War players whose territories comprised large sections of the globe that were home to multiethnic and multilingual traditions suited my desire to contemplate relations between unlikely partners. It thus made sense that my first large-scale research projects, my M.A. and Ph.D. theses, focused on the works of a multilingual writer who spent most of his life in exile. Delving into the Russian- and English-language fictional worlds of Vladimir Nabokov's works of the 1930s became my early foray into inter- and transcultural features within a writer's aesthetics and poetics. The drawing power of research that crosses language and other boundaries has not lessened for me, perhaps also because of my bicultural background. With my postdoctoral project, I ventured into the realm of interart, intermediality, and adaptation studies: stage and, in particular, operatic adaptations of nineteenth-century American fiction were my focus. Not only the sheer wealth of material waiting to be explored astonished and exhilarated me, but also the fact that a phenomenon that has existed for about two centuries had remained largely uncharted. From the perspectives of reception and canonization histories, interest in stage adaptations of nineteenth-century American fiction is easily justifiable. At the same time, the relative obscurity of the majority of these adaptations raised eyebrows when I explained my research project to others. A particularly striking instance of such a response occurred when I enumerated some of the composers and librettists to a colleague in the humanities who then, smiling and convinced of the validity of her verdict, cut off the conversation by saying: "In other words, nobody important adapted these works."

Why then did other scholars respond positively? At various conferences, I gave papers whose outlook, trajectory, and objects of study were received enthusiastically, mostly by scholars working in interdisciplinary areas linking literature, theater history, cultural history, and music. I found allies,

so to speak, among members of the Lyrica Society for Word–Music Relations. I became a founding member of the Modern Language Association's discussion group on "Opera as a Literary and Dramatic Form." After publishing my monograph on dramatic and operatic adaptations of Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and Henry James's *Washington Square* in 2005, I became interested in the interfaces between researching and teaching adaptation in my field. Thus, I developed the idea of inviting scholars from North America and Europe to contribute to an essay collection on this topic and of incorporating adaptation into my own teaching. Encouraged by Linda Hutcheon, the project whose result you are now reading was launched at the 2006 annual convention of the Modern Language Association, in the course of the very semester in which musicologist Peter Niedermüller and I co-taught a seminar on adapting Hawthorne and Poe at Johannes Gutenberg-Universität in Mainz, Germany

Rather than providing an overview of the essays collected in this volume, I would like to contemplate how the recent surge of publications on adaptation and the continuing debate about the (inter)discipline still called American studies (albeit tentatively renamed in multiple programmatic ways) can be fruitfully related.[1] The struggle to define a field as well as its imaginary, theories, methodologies, and implications within academia and society has troubled both areas of inquiry and has nevertheless yielded usable insights. To put it briefly, the (inter)disciplinarity debate and the ongoing attempts at defining a transnational American studies can, I will argue, benefit from new developments in adaptation research. New theories and methodologies promoted within American studies underscore the desire within adaptation studies to go beyond antiquated and distortive types of inquiry and methods of analysis.

1 Susan Gillman suggests that the comparative features of adaptation studies resemble the comparative approach underscoring "a new, critical or post-national US Studies" (415). Based on an example of adaptive links between U.S. and Cuban cultures in the nineteenth century, she suggests "a return to [José] Martí as a new intersecting point for Americas Studies" (436). I agree with her claim that "adaptation provides an interpretive practice well-suited to the emerging transdisciplinary field of study variously called post-nationalist American Studies, the literature of the Americas, or comparative US studies" (437–38). She does not go into detail because this essay merely previews her long-term project (437). Adaptation studies, as this entire volume demonstrates, is one of the fields in which numerous scholars of multiple disciplines are contemplating shared sets of questions. The current state of my response can be found in this introductory essay.

Hierarchies into Interdependencies

The middle years of the first decade of the twenty-first century saw the publication of seminal works by Robert Stam (2005; 2004, 2005 with Alessandra Raengo), Julie Sanders (2006), and Linda Hutcheon (2006) with which the authors theorize adaptation studies in unprecedented depth. Stam focuses on the relation between novel and film, which has traditionally spearheaded adaptation studies.[2] Sanders illustrates her central distinction between adaptation and appropriation in large part through case studies of British and American works (primarily novels, plays, and films); like Stam and Hutcheon, she also includes non-English-language examples. Hutcheon covers a more diverse cultural field that traverses genres across time and space; rather than offering extended case studies, she distills characteristic elements from the "product" and the "process of adaptation" (*A Theory* xvi).[3] The study of narrative and film continues, but other adaptation scholars besides Hutcheon have also begun to expand their range of interest to include further "receiving" arts and media as well as the study of adaptation as a multifaceted sociohistorical, political, educational, and economic phenomenon.

The continued dominance of film can be seen in the launching of the *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* in the United Kingdom in 2007 and, two years later, of the Oxford University Press journal *Adaptation*, linked to the Association of Literature on Screen Studies and edited by a trio of scholars from Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.[4] The first issue of *Adaptation* includes a "Review Article" in which

2 One indicator of the early prevalence of such studies is the *Literature/Film Quarterly* founded by James Welsh in 1973 (Salisbury University, Maryland).

3 Stam's essay on adaptation theory serves as the introduction to the 2005 volume *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, coedited with Alessandra Raengo (1–52). In contrast to Sanders, Stam and Hutcheon treat appropriation as a subcategory of adaptation (see Stam, *Literature through Film* 186; Hutcheon, *A Theory* 8).

4 Whereas the journal title does not further restrict the purview of the periodical, the editors, Cartmell, Corrigan, and Whelehan, stress in their introduction that "*Adaptation* is a journal solely devoted to the academic study of literature on screen in the broadest terms" (2) with the goal of enabling dialogue between "the two disciplines [. . .] not as Literature and Film, but as literature on screen and 'screen' on literature, not demonstrating how the two arts are or are not similar, but how they contribute to and enrich each other through an understanding of the translation of one art into another and the commingling of the 'literary' and the 'cinematic' across both" (3). Another example—besides the *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance*—of the growing interest in (stage) performance in adaptation studies is the 2009 volume edited by MacArthur, Wilkinson, and Zaiontz, which resulted from the "2006 Festival of Original Theatre:

Thomas Leitch critiques the diverse directions which adaptation studies has recently taken.[5] He concludes: "The most urgent item on the agenda is to shift evaluative problems the field has inherited from literary studies—fidelity, hierarchy, canonicity—from the praxis of adaptation studies to part of its subject" ("Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads" 76). While "fidelity, hierarchy, [and] canonicity" are evaluative categories found across the humanities, Leitch's point regarding the effect of such criteria of aesthetic judgment as well as of inclusion and exclusion is nevertheless well-taken. Integrating the history, theory, and methodologies of humanities research facilitates the critical examination of analytical practices and their results. The lack of a journal devoted to adaptation as a phenomenon comprising so much more than the narrative–film–stage nexus indicates that this larger disciplinary view does not yet constitute the core of adaptation studies as an academic field.

In American studies, the challenge of facing what are perceived as shortcomings of the field has elicited emphatic responses since the 1990s. The profusion of journal articles, special issues, essay collections, and monographs on seeking to define and redefine American studies—from the debate about American studies being a misnomer to discussions of applicable theories and methods—amply demonstrates this response.[6]

What strikes me as significant when studying the developments within American studies alongside those within adaptation studies is that the growing interest in remedying what has been read as an orientation toward hierarchical evaluations (be they rooted in cultural politics, in economics, or other power relations) has led to increasing appreciation of interdependence as a major force in knowledge production. A second shared feature is, as will be shown in the penultimate section of this essay, the complementary study of processes and products aimed at disentangling the threads of the creation, the composite nature, and the impact of the artistic product.

Discourse on context has, thus, dominated recent theorizations of adaptation studies and of American studies. As Hutcheon puts it, adaptation has "a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture" (*A Theory* xvi). As simple as this may sound, her discussion of the circumstances of an adaptation's genesis, inherent qualities, and reception shows that the potentially complex reasons for adapting something have been understudied.[7] Analogous to this call for a context-oriented discussion which might involve major changes in the way we look at art (95), Jan Radway's programmatic presidential address at the 1998 American Studies Association conference emphasizes the necessity for unraveling "the social, political, cultural, and intellectual consequences of both internal and external forms of U.S. imperialism" in order to foster "new ways of thinking the relationship between geography, culture, and identity" (51). Especially in research on specific North American ethnic groups, scholars have scrutinized "the exercise of power at specific, concrete sites" (55). Radway envisions the study of "*intricate interdependencies*" (53) in order to avoid interpretative pitfalls based on socially and culturally productive hierarchies.[8] Almost a decade later, Emory Elliott contemplates the consequences of such a reorientation when he speaks of

> a complete revision of what we thought we knew about nineteenth- and twentieth-century cultural, social, political, literary, and intellectual life in the United States and beyond its borders. New worlds of previously ignored or erased diasporic interrelationships and remarkable cultural interpenetrations have begun to appear. (13)

To him as to Radway, ethnic studies offers a fertile field for zeroing in on such interlaced phenomena. In his response to Elliott's address, Winfried Fluck then makes clear that while transnational Americanist work on ethnic writers provides useful "models for a search for intercultural connections" (27), the ultimate goal is broader inclusivity. In other words, rather

Adaptation in Performance," held at the Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama at the University of Toronto.

5 Leitch's 2007 monograph contributes to reshaping the study of narrative and film.

6 I will not here duplicate the review articles and other synthetic treatments of this issue. Instead, I recommend consulting, for instance, the presidential addresses and the responses to them published in the American Studies Association's journal *American Quarterly* and the essays devoted to recent field-defining thought published in the first three volumes (2009, 2010, 2011) of the open-access online *Journal of Transnational American Studies*.

7 Hutcheon acknowledges that reasons such as adapting something that audiences already revere and that seemingly must become a success (*A Theory* 86–88), legal considerations (88–91), and the intention to create an "upwardly mobile" (91) adaptation that benefits from the high status of the chosen model have been studied more than "*Personal and Political Motives*" (92) for creating an adaptation expressive of either subversion or reverence. The main reason for the latter deficit is the rejection of intentionality analyses in the wake of New Critical and poststructuralist ideas (see 95, 108–09, 111). Also consider: "if libretti are to be integrated into the reception history of their source texts, then the contexts of each libretto's genesis, its presentation to the public, and its critical response must be grasped" (Balestrini, *From Fiction to Libretto* 15–16; also see 20–21).

8 See Levander and Levine who, using similar diction, desire hemispheric American Studies to open up vistas of "intricately intertwined geographies, movements, and cross-filiations among peoples, regions, diasporas, and nations" (3). Their hope for a transnational "dialogue" between histories and especially between historiographical master narratives recalls the preoccupation with Mikhail Bakhtin's theories in adaptation studies.

than replacing the study of the previously privileged through the exclusive study of the previously and/or currently disadvantaged, these newly evolving perspectives require scrutiny of both the mainstream and the margins. Fluck, thus, unhinges hierarchy-oriented and exceptionalist discourse, and he simultaneously sets out to prevent the creation of new—even if reversed—hierarchies.

These Americanists' take on negotiating mainstream and margins corresponds with newer views in adaptation studies and its relation to other fields delineated by genre, region, or language: adaptations resemble one of the formerly neglected or essentialized areas within American studies in the sense that they should be studied both for their own sake *and* with the goal of elucidating established areas of inquiry such as narrative, drama, theater, film, English and American studies, Romance studies, and Slavic studies. Just as Hutcheon implies that new ways of researching adaptation can affect the way scholars approach art in general, Alfred Hornung points out that transnational American studies can contribute to a revised understanding of global interrelations, which might ultimately be a prerequisite for human survival. Most strikingly, he refers to Japanese Canadian natural scientist David Suzuki's "transnational 'Declaration of Interdependence'" (42) which, again, is an act of dropping boundaries and of replacing hierarchies with lateral relations. In other words, the contextualization demanded here will impact research on the microscopic and macroscopic levels. Interrelations probing the immediate spatial and temporal environment of the smallest unit of scholarly inquiry may be as relevant as large-scale interdependencies extending across the arts and into various branches of studying culture and human interaction in the broadest sense.

In order to hypothetically project how adaptation and American studies could intersect, I would like to reflect on the example Hutcheon provides in the context of her argument regarding the importance of an adapter's motivations. This particular example—David Henry Hwang's adaptation of Richard Rodgers's and Oscar Hammerstein's *The Flower Drum Song* (stage musical [1958], film [1961], adapted from C. Y. Lee's novel [1957]) (94–95)—lends itself especially well to a discussion from the vantage point of transnational American studies. Keeping broad chronological developments and specific time-bound sociocultural predicaments in mind, one would have to consider the respective contexts of Lee's novel, of Rodgers's and Hammerstein's musical and film, as well as of Hwang's adaptation. Among multiple possible considerations, the study of changes in the perception and self-perception of Chinese immigrants and their descendants, of genre conventions, of publication and performance conditions as well as histories, and of responses by various segments of the population in the United States and elsewhere would elucidate an intricate web of details, which would probably require the unearthing and interpretation of data not yet explored and related in this manner. The questioning of hierarchies would, in this case, occur not only in the world depicted in the works of art but also within the environments of the creators and recipients and within the evolving understanding of genres and of art.

That this kind of contextualizing and de-hierarchizing methodology affects our understanding of art and culture—and of American art and culture in particular—far beyond individual works becomes clear in the following examples pertaining to two canonized American authors: Washington Irving and Henry James. Studying specific contexts which sway evaluations of adaptative processes in American literary and cultural history can unearth often rather volatile criteria for constructed hierarchies.

The narrator of Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1819) acknowledges the story's indebtedness to German folk sagas. In reviews and in literary criticism, praise for Irving's achievements as prescribed by English neoclassical stylistic traditions competed with accusations of plagiarism for decades on end.[9] At a time when American literature appeared to be a contradiction in terms because American culture was regarded as unoriginal, necessarily derivative, and consequently of little value, Irving's adaptive stance rattled those who strove for cultural independence, which meant, first, shedding the inferiority complex of being an inadequate copy of European and especially British culture and, then, founding an original tradition. Romanticism—waning in England and waxing in North America—fostered dreams of individual originality reflective of national genius. Whereas the demand for originality was meant to elevate both the artist and the nation she or he might represent, openly acknowledged appropriation or adaptation was potentially read as evincing an author's lack of agency since the result was regarded as hybrid and thus unoriginal and uncreative.

Six decades after the publication of Irving's *Sketch-Book*, which contains "Rip Van Winkle," critics disagreed in like manner regarding the assessment of the British and/or American features of Henry James's novella *Washington Square* (1880). In the 1970s, a reevaluation of the narrative began, which culminated in declaring it "a masterpiece" (Bell 52). To authors of intertextual analyses of *Washington Square*, James's use of other writers' ideas and stylistic features and of living persons' experiences is

9 For an overview of responses to Irving's story, see Balestrini, *From Fiction to Libretto* 95–106.

the work of a genius, not of a plagiarist—and not even of an adapter.[10] Ironically, film directors who contributed to the 1990s wave of James adaptations were roundly criticized by those who credit James with originality and who discredit film directors as mere imitators (Newell 206–07).[11] The critical struggle with assessments and theorizations of "imitation, adaptation, and improvement" (209) and with a hierarchy of genres (in which institutionalized genres are deemed better than those existing on the margins of education, academia, and high-brow culture [see 210]) has hobbled American drama and theater history since its inception; and only recently have theater and drama historians begun to overcome the effects of such discourse.[12]

Why is the concern with originality relevant to the relation between adaptation and American studies? It is worth contemplating the significance of derogatory attitudes toward adaptation in the widest sense (including the absorption of preexisting cultural traditions into a society's evolving self-definition) when studying the deeply ingrained sense of exceptionalism ascribed to American culture and American studies. Exceptionalism implies a degree and a manner of acquiring difference that runs counter to the notion of adaptation as a diluted copy of a preferable original. That exceptionalism in American politics and in American studies as a field has been under scrutiny, and rightly so, might encourage scholars to become more open to cultural products and their historical significance which, for the longest time, have been neglected or marginalized, as demonstrated by the debate about bringing previously or currently disadvantaged sections of society and their culture closer to the center or at least into the widening spotlight of scholarly attention. In American studies and adaptation studies, the growing awareness of long-standing interdependencies requires new ways of perceiving self and other—not as binaries but as reciprocally influential elements of a culture in flux.

[10] For a discussion of reviews and critical analyses of *Washington Square*, see Balestrini, *From Fiction to Libretto* 319–21.

[11] Regarding such reductive notions of artistic creativity, also see Stam: "Adaptation [. . .] can be seen as an orchestration of discourses, talents, and tracks, a 'hybrid' construction mingling different media and discourses and collaborations. Complete originality is neither possible nor even desirable" ("Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation" 9).

[12] Theater and drama histories unhampered by national boundaries or evaluative categories of the type described above are the ones by Londré and Watermeier, and Wilmeth and Bigsby. By way of contrast with studies which cast adaptations as low-quality imitations, one might want to consider Domville's essay on both the adaptative processes and the adapted materials in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and in Poul Ruders's and Paul Bentley's opera adaptation of this novel. Domville takes adaptation for granted as part of artistic creativity within many genres. Also see Edney who offers an insightful reflection on how common prejudices against the genre of the musical affected the production of and response to such a stage adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (225–27, 237, 243–44).

Interpreting the frontier, an American master narrative which has contributed to exceptionalist views, can also foster thought within adaptation studies, especially regarding the necessary de-hierarchizing of understanding the relation between what is adapted and the result of the adaptive process. The search, still today, for the Great American Novel or the Great American Opera implies that some critics continue to perceive artists as fighting on cultural frontiers.[13] The concept of the frontier assumes (according to Frederick Jackson Turner's late-nineteenth-century thesis) that adaptation takes place for the sake of survival, but the features adapted from the new locale (and, by implication, its nature, people, and culture) is then overarched, assimilated, and absorbed into the adapter-survivor's newly established rules. This desired loss of identifiable adapted features stresses the adapter-survivor's creation of something that is interpreted as original, exceptional, and thus preferable. In this sense, frontier ideology reverses the fidelity discourse of adaptation: the adapter only wants to be true to what she or he claims about her or his own special status as explorer and creative genius.

As I hope to have demonstrated, the study of adaptation in American culture can benefit from the context-oriented outlook currently prominent in adaptation studies and in American studies. At the same time, I am aware that the rejection of discourse steeped in hierarchies and exceptionalism has been attacked as a hypocritical neoliberal attempt at saving an endangered academic subject.[14] Nevertheless, a more positive view of these new developments can be sustained: the New Historical endeavor to study literary and non-literary texts as equals whose parallel scrutiny combines close reading with historicized contextualization; the broadening of the term "text" in semiotics, cultural studies, and performance studies; the interdisciplinarity of various paradigm shifts such as the move toward visual cultural studies; the aforementioned goals of transnational American

[13] See Kramer's critical comments on the fact that the search for the Great American Opera seems necessarily focused on opera adaptations of canonized literary works and of historical events which portray "protagonists doomed by exceptionality, the American trait par excellence in the national myth cycle" (70). Although these characters are doomed, "exceptionality in the person becomes an allegorical expression of the exceptionality built into the national character" (76).

[14] For thought-provoking and helpful critiques of potential exceptionalist pitfalls of transnational American studies, see Giles; Gurley; Pease; Traister. For a polemical view of the potential for strife between American studies and what the author calls international comparative studies, see Kadir 33–34.

studies as opening up cultural and historical understanding as a multidirectional flow of effects and influences—all of these phenomena are also either found in or can be made useful for adaptation studies.[15] Most importantly, recent developments in both fields favor a diversity of approaches which are continuously tested, adjusted, and expanded.

While recent discussions in adaptation studies have devalued fidelity discourse for its prejudices and oversimplification (see, for instance, Stam, *Literature through Film* 4; Hutcheon, *A Theory* 7), promoters of didactic and other uses of fidelity questions remain.[16] At the same time, there are scholars who do not worry about fidelity at all and rather discuss adaptations in light of multi- and transnational cultural history (see Powrie et al.; Raw, Tunç, and Büken).[17] In order not to use adaptations of narrative texts into films (and into more modern media) for the simple reason of stronger student appeal, Kathleen L. Brown, for instance, enlists film adaptations for the teaching of literary theory. In a sense, Brown thus follows Stam's trajectory of reflecting on the history of the novel through film adaptation (Stam 2005). Brown's two-track approach fosters appreciation for films as creative interpretations (rather than pale dilutions) of their adapted materials and appreciation for the insights of literary and cultural theory in unraveling all forms of interpretation (12). As a result, the screen's putative accessibility—which may predispose students to engaging with

15 McFarlane lucidly argues that "the most helpful discourse surrounding this [i. e., the literature–film connection] may be one which, respecting the specificities of each, is concerned to explore how they deal with each other rather than which came first and which is 'better' than the other" (28). Also see Shohat 23. Equally important, Murray calls for a sociological turn in adaptation studies which incorporates "[t]he political economy strand of media analysis" (10), new cultural theories which help "comprehend [the] nexus of commercial and cultural values at play in the modern adaptation industry" (11), and insights from research on the "history of the book" (11). Murray would probably welcome Weedon's essay on "the market for print adaptations" (111).

16 See James M. Welsh's foreword to Cahir (1–5; esp. 5) as well as Diamond.

17 The volume edited by Raw, Tunç, and Büken approaches adaptation as a cultural phenomenon that, in the context of American studies, comprises reciprocal adaptive processes. This volume grew out of the 2008 conference of the American Studies Association of Turkey and includes essays on transcultural phenomena not covered elsewhere in current adaptation scholarship. The intensification of internationally cooperative research is all the more desirable when one realizes that, for instance, research such as Albert Gier's theory of libretto adaptation and Klaus Kanzog's work on adaptive processes as well as the intermediality research not published in English continues to be ignored in English-language publications (for further examples of adaptation research, predominately in the realm of opera libretti, published in German, see Balestrini, *From Fiction to Libretto*, esp. 25–36). Work in the vast field of Shakespeare adaptation also frequently contains a transnational component (a recent example is the essay collection edited by Kliman and Santos).

films—sharpens these viewers' skills of distilling the respective adapter's outlook through the apparatus of, by implication, less accessible literary theory.[18] The fact that the reevaluation of previous film research methods and insights goes beyond the relation between literary narrative and cinematic work confirms the growing awareness of adaptation as a far-flung cultural practice that can be understood more deeply when considering the contexts of its genesis (including the range of individuals involved), its public and critical reception, and its historiographies. In his monograph on Hollywood productions from the 1920s through 1950 focusing on historical topics, J. E. Smyth calls for historical specificity in dealing with individual movies of this era (8).[19] Analogous to Brown's view that films need to be read as interpretations of their adapted texts, Smyth "foregrounds these films' continuities with traditional historical writing and interpretation and explores their self-conscious interpretation of American history" (21).[20] Thus, Brown and Smyth share the outlook which also characterizes

18 In the same vein, Dennis Cutchins, Laurence Raw, and James M. Welsh present their 2010 volume on film adaptations, with its large section on teaching such works, as *Redefining Adaptation Studies*, and the complementary volume entitled *The Pedagogy of Adaptation* published the same year.

19 See Palmer's 2007 study in which he claims that "[u]ntil recently [. . .] neoromantic assumptions about the preeminent value of the source text have discouraged a thorough analysis of the complex negotiations (financial, authorial, commercial, legal, formal, generic, performative, etc.) that bring adaptations into being and deeply affect their reception. Traditionalist aesthetic considerations have also foreclosed discussion of the place of adaptations within the history of the cinema" (*Nineteenth-Century American Literature on Screen* 1). He credits the growing significance of cultural studies with having contributed greatly to seeing adaptation contextually. A striking example of how the public persona of a contemporary performing artist can impact the reception of an adaptation is the 1949 Disney Film *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad*, a double feature including an animated version of Washington Irving's "Legend of Sleepy Hollow" in which Bing Crosby lends his voice to the protagonist, Ichabod Crane, a greedy Yankee schoolmaster (Inge 99). He was selected for his reputation as a quintessential American and "as perhaps the most successful and widely-loved performer in the first half of the twentieth century" (100). According to Inge, audiences did not want Crosby's Ichabod Crane "to lose the girl" (106). Thus the performer's reputation can override the role he plays.

20 Nevertheless, other scholars still fear the term adaptation as a possibly derogatory badge on the genre of film. See Cahir who prefers the term "translation" to "adaptation" because, to her, the analogy to language change implies interpretation (14), which she regards as a marker of quality. At the same time, translation scholar Ton Hoenselaars argues that "translation may be defined as a mode of adaptation, while adaptation may convincingly be defined as a form of translation in a metaphorical sense. But the two terms cannot be used interchangeably" (50). He describes as a central challenge of Shakespeare studies "the search for a more focused rapport between the 'translation' of the literary text and the 'culture' of which it is part" (64). Two phenomena whose

my study of nineteenth-century American fiction adapted to the stage: the first context of response—either literary criticism of the adapted text or historiography of a specific event or era—becomes a player in the interactivity between pre-existing sources, their adaptations, and the recipients of these readings.[21]

Processes and Performances

Suggestions for pathways toward understanding how phenomena evolve and how they create meaning abound in theorizations of transnational American studies and of adaptation studies. Processes have become central to research on change rooted in spatial and temporal relations, and on change within the interpretation of phenomena. Thus, process complements context by adding the role of motion (in a physical and in a metaphorical sense) to the shared emphasis on interdependence. Process also highlights agency, its motivations, characteristics, and impact. Radway, for instance, speaks of culture as "the result of complex social processes" (55). Shelley Fisher Fishkin focuses on "cultural forms, processes, or products" (3). Günter Lenz demands "a new self-reflective, processual, and performative understanding of 'culture' as always hybrid and transgressive" (4). Freda Chapple derives her notions of "pedagogies of adaptation in the arts and humanities" from adaptation research as "an exploration of the processes of change that happen as one or more cultural artifacts move across medial and disciplinary boundaries to inhabit the space of another" (55).[22] The orientation toward processes both within the subject and the method of study has led to discourse that repeatedly refers to "fields of knowledge," which implies that exploring and mapping the synchronic and diachronic interrelatedness of features results in knowledge production.

Theorists of transnational and adaptation studies frequently enlist interdisciplinarity as a necessary tool for doing justice to the multifarious nature of their fields of knowledge. In both areas, broadening perspectives on possible foci and methods have been complemented with suggestions not only

history has been full of venom and prejudice have thus been approaching each other via cultural studies–inspired perspectives in current scholarly discourse.

21 An excellent example of this multifaceted approach is Samuel Otter's discussion of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* as a highly adaptative text that, in turn, has been adapted into multiple art forms and media; Otter specifically contemplates works by Laurie Anderson, Rinde Eckert, and John Barrymore based on the premise that "they help us to see the book anew" (291). Also see Schultz.

22 The migration-based diction is yet another, in this case rhetorical, link between transnational American and adaptation studies.

for revising the relations among cooperating disciplines but also for contemplating hitherto neglected links to other fields of knowledge production and application. In transnational American studies, ethics and globalization studies have been gaining prominence (Fishkin; Lenz et al.; Pease). In adaptation studies, scholars have been theorizing links with the natural sciences, especially evolutionary biology (Hutcheon, *A Theory*; Bortolotti and Hutcheon; Sanders). In either case, scholars envision that openness to perceiving structural parallels among fields of knowledge production and to acknowledging fluidity within one's own interdiscipline may prevent the formation of encrusted methodologies and may empower researchers to keep surmounting ostensible barriers within scholarly inquiry.[23]

Agency on multiple levels plays a central role in the considerations that I have just sketched; it is a crucial factor in creating situations which are subsequently perceived as phenomena described with the prefixes "inter" and "trans," as the following examples illustrate. First of all, adapters need to be studied in order to fathom intricate sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts as well as idiosyncratic motivations for creating a work that relocates a narrative to one or various different arts or media. The adapter's agency is not only considered in terms of its impact on the adaptation as product but also in terms of its potential effect on the product's reception. Reception is, in turn, interlaced with the role of the recipient's own context and of the recipient's potential familiarity with the adapted source(s) and the adapter (Hutcheon 107, 109, 111). Interart and transgeneric, inter- and transcultural phenomena, thus, require interdisciplinary, process-oriented, and boundary-transcending analyses. The interflow of adaptation into transnational American studies becomes especially obvious in areas of transcultural adaptation because non-hierarchical perspectives on possible genre switches and cultural transplantation cooperate in preventing readings based on still extant genre hierarchies (such as printed narratives versus performances of dramatizations, canonized novels versus adaptations) and on essentializing views on ethnic self-definition and perception of difference.

23 As Hong puts it, "*JTAS* [*The Journal of Transnational American Studies*] strives to demonstrate that there is no one narrative of transnational American Studies, that projects in this growing field are incredibly heterogeneous in topic, scope, and purpose" (2). Corrigan praises adaptation studies as counterbalancing rigid disciplinarity (41, 42; also see 30, 33). Similarly, Cartmell and Whelehan describe "adaptation as a field in process which can capitalize on its liminal disciplinary positioning by ever appropriating and reframing critical and theoretical models to suit its own purposes" (5). This liminality is not seen as a lack of definition but rather as an openness that provides flexibility and the possibility of Bakhtinian dialogue.

To provide an example that subsumes these considerations within itself: Sandra Cisneros's 2002 novel *Caramelo* includes a "Chronology" (435–39) which adapts conventions of historiography (chronological structure, brief entries on ostensibly noteworthy events and individuals, interpretations and evaluations). This tongue-in-cheek section of the novel plays with the reader's possibly essentialist views on the agency of the writer and on the national histories described. In such a hypothetical scenario of reader response, specific notions of Chicana literature and Chicana authors, such as the idea that ethnic women's fiction is necessarily autobiographical and ethnographic, might well clash with traditional views of historiography as representative of mainstream thinking as found in national master narratives. What happens when a Chicana writer creates a novel in which an adolescent Latina interweaves the stories of individual characters as well as the histories of Latin America (especially Mexico), the United States, and Europe? How will "interpretive communities"—to adopt Stanley Fish's phrase—respond to these stories, histories, and their interpretations within the work of art? How will they integrate ideas about Cisneros as the supposed representative of a specific ethnic group, gender, and generation (to name three potentially essentialist categories) with ideas about history? A combination of recent approaches in adaptation and transnational American studies will, one would hope, produce different results than earlier approaches.

In this sense, both areas of inquiry promote a cultural studies perspective on literature which, although it can incorporate aesthetic considerations, simultaneously goes far beyond them. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle points out in a recent *PMLA* special issue on "Literary Criticism for the Twenty-First Century," philosophers have recently been contemplating "literature [. . .] not as a minor aesthetic diversion but as a field of knowledge central to their philosophical concerns" (917); they envision literature as cooperating with "science" and "philosophical concepts" in replacing "sedimented common sense" with detailed "understanding" that may lead to "action" (918–19).[24] Cisneros's novel may be seen as promoting such an understanding-based new sense of agency derived from literature, which—in the case of a novel about multiple national origins and cultures—must be

[24] In the same issue of *PMLA*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak rejects her colleagues' focus on influencing politics as rather ineffectual and useless, and instead promotes education as the central arena of humanities scholars' activities (Caruth 1020). Despite the seeming contrast between a pro- and an anti-political stance, Spivak also regards the teaching of how knowledge can be defined and understood as central. Ultimately, she also advocates individual agency for the disadvantaged.

rooted in what Vera M. Kutzinski calls "literary representations of human experiences across the planet" which do not "build thematic gateways to universality but [. . .] chart sets of relations" (981). Kutzinski's image of systematizing linkages among multiple reference points recalls transnational American studies' concern with averting exceptionalist discourse which essentializes the margin (especially as defined by race, ethnicity, gender, and class), universalizes the center (thus assuming an air of cultural imperialism), and prefers petrified myths to constantly shifting conditions. Instead, distinctive mappings of how cultural and social situations evolve and of how they are constituted at the points in time in which they are scrutinized become desirable. This is equally relevant for the hierarchy and fidelity discourse in adaptation studies because, instead of offering value judgments based on genre-based biases, such an approach calls for context-specific assessments of the inner workings of artistic texts in the widest sense (which, in turn, may be judged according to aesthetic criteria, if that is the goal of a specific study).

Processes of gaining understanding are also at the center of suggestions regarding the expansion of an inter- and transdisciplinarity that interweaves the humanities and the natural sciences. Ottmar Ette's program of promoting literary and cultural studies as major players in the Life Sciences, which are—at least in public discourse—often exclusively associated with natural sciences, is also useful within adaptation studies and American studies. By developing "eine nicht-reduktionistische Konzeption der Lebenswissenschaften" (11) (a non-reductionist conception of Life Sciences), literary studies can contribute to Life Sciences through approaching literature as a continuously circulating repository of knowledge about life, survival, individual ways of life, living together, and processes of experience (13, 16, 22). Especially the notion of a multi-parameter phenomenon (19), which stresses lateral complexity, as well as the notion of chronological continuity, which adds a historical dimension, can be harnessed for an adaptation studies which moves away from the intrinsic comparison of two or more texts to the analysis of diachronic contexts and of a historicized view of intertextual and intermedial relations.[25] Ette's vision of fostering intercultural understanding (25) and of regarding literature as self-reflexive and performative (26) finds its counterparts both in the transnational goals of American studies and in the growing importance of performance studies.[26]

[25] Ette adopts the idea of a multi-parameter phenomenon from a medical study and thus demonstrates one possible link between humanities theory and non-humanities research.

[26] For a brief introduction regarding the current influence of performance studies on multiple fields, see Roach, esp. 1081; also see Culler 907; Phelan.

Ultimately, if the study of literature and culture are necessary components of comprehensive Life Sciences, then conceptions of the potentials of and perspectives on art must change—as Hutcheon also implies regarding the possible effect of adaptation studies on, among other things, intentionality.

How are Americanists and adaptation scholars currently dealing with the natural sciences as co-disciplines? On the simplest level, commonly occurring metaphorical usage of terms such as taxonomy in the humanities intends to pinpoint similarities regarding systematic study geared toward classification.[27] Humanities scholars have also been interested in implying analogies between biological and artistic processes (rather than classification systems which have been criticized as rigid). John Bryant, for instance, speaks of "the evolutionary nature of textuality" (1058). Reminiscent of Hutcheon's inclusion of the authors' and the recipients' agency as well as her theory of traveling narratives, Bryant argues in favor of what he calls "fluid texts," that is, the fact that literary texts do not only evolve in a writer's lifetime but that subsequently "editors intervene or expurgate, readers appropriate, translate, adapt, quote, and misquote" (1043). Retrieving these instances of change and development then heightens our understanding of the cultural work in which various versions of a text have been engaged. Bryant's 2006 electronic edition of Herman Melville's novel *Typee* illustrates the ways in which new, context-focused features of adaptation and transnational American studies intersect.[28] To my mind, another promising form of interdisciplinary work which would complement the study of authors', editors', and readers' thought processes in light of adaptation could make use of the recent collaborative efforts of scholars in cognitive science and in literary studies.

Both Sanders and Hutcheon suggest that concepts used in evolutionary biology can elucidate processes of adaptation. Sanders refers to the unraveling of DNA (along with musicological insights regarding repetition and variation) as offering possible models from which explanations of adaptations might be deduced (40–41, 155). Rather than genetics *per se*, Hutcheon contemplates Richard Dawkins's concept of the "meme," which he introduced in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and which he has continued to address in later publications.[29] Dawkins stresses that his concept

[27] For instance, some scholars refer to Gérard Genette's take on textual interrelations as "taxonomic" (see Palmer, "The Sociological" 258; also see Raw and Tunç, Introduction 6). Genette—along with Mikhail Bakhtin—remains one of the most often discussed theorists when it comes to redefining the relations among artistic works and other texts in adaptation studies.

[28] Also see Fishkin's 2011 call for "Digital Palimpsest Mapping Projects" (7).

[29] See his foreword to Blackmore.

was often misunderstood and that he devised the meme concept in order to offer an alternative to the gene as a replicator within natural selection processes (xvi); he argues that a "meme" can be anything that continues to exist in a culture and that is perpetuated, among other possible factors, through imitation rather than through genetic material. Through the "meme," Dawkins characterizes cultural development by discussing it in light of how it differs from and resembles process- and context-oriented features of biological evolution. He thus implies the possibility of studying human culture through the natural sciences without simplistically equating the two realms.

In the context of aligning adaptation studies and transnational American studies, it is not primarily important whether Dawkins's concept of the "meme" effectively explains the ways ideas within a culture evolve. It is indeed crucial that, first, Dawkins as a biologist endeavors to map his understanding of evolution onto a field of knowledge considered part of the humanities and, second, that Hutcheon as an adaptation scholar replicates and changes this transfer of a concept from the natural sciences to the study of a phenomenon within art.[30] In the process, adaptation research adopts Dawkins's theory by way of "homology" (Bortolotti and Hutcheon 444) and adapts it by narrowing down Dawkins's focus on ideas to narratives. In other words, this interdisciplinary transfer of thought patterns is an instance of what Ette demands, albeit in the realm of theory and methodology. Remarkably, evolutionary biology and the study of the history of ideas (cultural studies in the widest sense) have, in this example, been approaching each other from their respective directions. Disciplinary distinctions nevertheless remain clear: Bortolotti and Hutcheon differentiate biology from adaptation studies and do not use the natural science as the saving grace for adaptation studies. As the closing section of their work shows, "intentionality" distinguishes the creation of adaptations within a culture from "random [. . .] mutations" (453) in biology. The use of concepts from another discipline thus inspires unprecedented directions in trying to understand phenomena in one's own field of study. If hierarchies are replaced by a lateral view of coexisting and intertwined phenomena whose relations can be scrutinized and, to some extent, disentangled for the sake of understanding processes of approach, response (attraction or repulsion), intersection, or shared development, then hybridity within art

[30] Both in *A Theory of Adaptation* and in an essay co-written with biologist Gary Bortolotti, Hutcheon argues that "biological and cultural adaptation [. . .] are understandable as processes of replication" (Bortolotti and Hutcheon 444) through which "lineages of descent" as well as change can be studied (445).

forms as well as interdisciplinarity within knowledge production will be less focused on hierarchy and power relations and more on contextual interplay and mutual learning.

Focusing adaptation studies on the ways narratives travel again illustrates the potential reciprocity between this field and transnational American studies. Hutcheon's claim that "we experience adaptations (*as adaptations*) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (8) finds its counterpart in memory studies, one of the burgeoning fields within cultural studies (see Hebel, Introduction 1–2). Reminiscent of the process- and context-oriented transnational American studies, memory studies scholars address questions of mediality, intermediality, and remediation. Accordingly, Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney write:

> The rise, fall, and marginalization of stories as constitutive parts of the *dynamics* of remembering have [. . .] emerged as key issues in memory studies. This turn towards memorial dynamics demands [. . .] new insights into the factors which allow certain collective memories to become hegemonic or, conversely, allow hitherto marginalized memories to gain prominence in the public arena. (2; italics added)[31]

Not surprisingly, memory scholarship within transnational American studies has also absorbed this focus on dynamics and on the conflict between old hierarchical structures and the integration of previously marginalized discourses. As Edward T. Linenthal puts it, "processes of remembrance" (448) within transnational contexts "by definition challenge boundaries" (449). Memes and remembering, thus, undergird a central *desideratum* of adaptation studies and transnational American studies: understanding the evolutionary, or at least developmental, processes within these fields of knowledge without being hampered by previously established boundaries that may forestall new ways of thinking.

Palimpsestuous Knowledge in *Easy A*

I would like to close this essay with a brief discussion of director Will Gluck's and writer Bert V. Royal's film *Easy A* (2010) from the perspectives of adaptation and transnational American studies. This film—in which Olive Penderghast (played by Emma Stone), a California high school student, traverses the experiential spectrum from being utterly unnoticed by the opposite sex to becoming the notorious focal point of rumors about her supposed sexual promiscuity—lends itself to an analysis geared toward contexts and processes which counterbalance the predominant perception of static hegemonic structures. Furthermore, the self-reflexive and appropriative features of the film, especially the references to Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* and its cinematic adaptations as well as the protagonist's multilevel roles, contribute to making *Easy A* an example of and a commentary on narratives traveling within American cultural memory and from England via Massachusetts to California and through the World Wide Web.

Ironic jabs at genre hierarchies and at adaptations as—at least highly ambivalent—forms of reception recur throughout the film. Since *Easy A* can be categorized as belonging to the "school film [. . .] subgenre of youth films" (Shary 26), viewers may expect that it will exclusively appeal to juvenile audiences.[32] But what happens when a teen film adapts a classic literary work? Such movies tend to comment self-reflexively on being adaptations and, as a remark on high school life, on the fact that many students regard watching film adaptations as handy replacements for reading the adapted literary text.[33] *Easy A* goes into depth in this respect by addressing parallels between *The Scarlet Letter*, which Olive reads for her English class, and Olive's experience of ostracism as well as her response to it. Olive differentiates between supposedly good and bad film adaptations, praising director Victor Sjöström's 1926 silent film (starring Lillian Gish) and finding fault with director Roland Joffé's 1995 film (starring Demi Moore). While she criticizes the 1995 film for being unauthentic, she calls the 1926 movie version the "original," thus obliterating this status marker from Hawthorne's text. In a conversation with her English teacher who voices his concern regarding her recent display of revealing bodices enhanced with large-size red "A"s, she playfully refers to knowing the "original" silent film in order to pretend that she has not read *The Scarlet Letter*. She eventually admits being familiar with Hawthorne's romance, as if she wanted to imply that passing comparative judgment requires knowing the adapted material—whatever "knowing" might mean. Furthermore, Olive acknowledges that her film also adapts *The Scarlet Letter* and that she participates in the adaptative process of "updat[ing]" (Davis 53; also see Leitch, *Film Adaptation* 100).[34] The happy ending—Olive discovers her

[31] Also see Assmann 59–60.

[32] On the generic features of high school films, see Shary 26–79.

[33] See Davis's discussion of the 1995 film *Clueless* (52). Regarding the growing complexity of teen films, in particular adaptations, see Davis 59 and Shary 7.

[34] For a helpful study which addresses the "cultural processes, deriving from economic, industrial and institutional conditions and from particular historical and ideological circumstances" (9) of adapting children's literature to the stage, the screen, and the new

real love interest and realizes he feels the same—coheres with genre expectations derived from romantic comedies and merges Olive's high school reality with the scripted world of youth films to which she repeatedly refers.[35] The ending confirms that Olive frees herself from her association with Hester Prynne; it is also a commentary on adaptation history in the sense that especially the attractiveness of happy endings in adaptations of tragedies held the stage.[36]

The film invites discussion of the relation between process and product and of the possibilities and limits of individual agency. Olive Penderghast plays the double role of protagonist and narrator-director. She frequently provides voice-over commentary and appears as the narrator who structures the film into sections. She emphasizes this epic function of narrating and commenting on her experience by presenting these sections as an amateur digital recording for a webcast and by holding up handwritten section titles which recall silent-film aesthetics. The allusion to silent movies does not only fit into the context of the 1926 *Scarlet Letter* film, but it also contrasts Lillian Gish's voicelessness as an emblem of acquiescence to suffering with Olive's centrality in visualizing *and* verbalizing her own story. When Olive first addresses her audience, she stresses that—while every story has more than one side—she presents hers, which she designates as "the right one." The necessity of presenting her version and of asserting authority over its telling becomes obvious through the embedded plot whose rapid development she cannot control: the sequence of events demonstrates how taking up a role (in her case, that of a promiscuous teenager) in order to shock and thus silence her overly curious best friend can backfire. The power of rumor and ostracism jeopardizes Olive's sense of agency, and her performed identity—which she cannot easily shed, thus recalling the doubtful effectiveness of having Hester take off the scarlet letter in the romance—overwhelms her in unexpected ways. In the process of taking Hester Prynne–like pity on her peers who feel social pressure regarding their sexual prowess or rather lack thereof (she pretends to have sex with a classmate who thus wants to hide his homosexuality; she pretends to get involved with others who are not socially accepted because of their weight

media, and across language barriers, see Collins and Ridgman. Juvenile literature and/or adaptations for younger audiences offer a vast field for further research. Also see Cavanagh.

35 *Easy A* includes several clips from other films such as *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), and *Can't Buy Me Love* (1987). At the end of *Easy A*, Olive and her new boyfriend re-enact details from these films.

36 In English-language literature, the most famous examples are probably Colley Cibber's *Richard III* and Nahum Tate's *King Lear*.

problems or ethnic background), Olive bears the increased marginalization and condemnation to which most of her schoolmates subject her. Eventually, she can only stop the escalation of events by confessing that a lie started this avalanche of rumor and deception.

The return to being Olive Penderghast rather than playing an updated version of Hester Prynne goes along with Olive's demand for privacy rather than public scrutiny, for being accepted as an autonomous individual rather than being objectified as a slut and a scapegoat for the world's ills. In terms of the adaptative devices and the contextualization of the protagonist's growing understanding of herself and her twenty-first-century U.S.-American high school environment, *Easy A* enlists current technology and societal debates to contemporize elements of Hawthorne's nineteenth-century romance about seventeenth-century Puritan New England.

First, the spreading of rumors about Olive's promiscuity and about her offerings of sexual services for money is visualized through text messages and images rapidly spreading from one mobile phone to another, a process which is supported by speeding up short segments of the film and thus focusing on the visual effect of information veritably sweeping across space. This technique is a fitting cinematic equivalent of "sexting" (a pun on "texting"), that is, the currently hotly debated phenomenon of spreading illicit materials (texts or images) through cell phones, which Hoffman compares to the spreading of a virus (see his article on the repercussions of an eighth-grade girl sending a nude photo of herself to her boyfriend from her cell phone without considering the possibility of her photo being distributed further). Hofmann's article describes how this trend is both used to badmouth the person on the photo as a whore and to enhance one's standing with peers who regard sexual activity as a requirement for acceptance into the in-group.

Second, Internet technology serves as a device of Olive's self-defence which simultaneously returns the viewer to her opening comment on multiple sides of the same story: when Olive webcasts and thus publicizes her confession in order to subsequently return to privacy, the film shows those who are watching the obviously public webcast on their personal computers (and often in a private setting); significantly, their responses range from approval of Olive's courage and honesty to frustration with unfulfilled voyeuristic expectations of viewing underage Internet pornography.[37]

Third, the film embeds the protagonist's experience within current debates about religious fundamentalism, homophobia, the oppressive effects

37 This use of new media technology coheres with Casetti's point about adaptation as a "*reformulation of its* [the adapted material's] *communicative situation*" (83).

of beauty ideals, and sexuality. Olive's antagonist, the fundamentalist Christian Marianne who—with her followers—manages to have the school mascot changed from a blue devil to a woodchuck and who wants to purge the school of those she brands sinners like Olive, eventually is crushed by her boy-friend's hypocrisy (he has an affair with the school counselor and contracts chlamydia, which he then blames on Olive); furthermore, Marianne's father is a pastor and one of the voyeuristic viewers of Olive's webcast. In contrast, Olive's family, whose tolerance and harmony is tantalizingly and somewhat ironically foregrounded, include her middle-aged mother (whose tales of sexual escapades in younger years embarrass Olive), her somewhat younger-looking stepfather, and her adopted African American brother—who has one of only two speaking roles assigned to non-white characters in the largely white upper-middle-class world of the film.[38] These details—whose clear contrasts may draw criticism in the sense that such juxtapositions merely confirm clichés—invite further analysis regarding their interrelatedness within contemporary predicaments and historical developments and regarding their participation in a story rendered from the I-narrator-protagonist's understanding.[39]

The film's repeated hints at the limited capacity for understanding oneself, let alone others, include the protagonist as much as the viewers. Viewers who speak German and/or who are aware of the history of *Scarlet Letter* films will chuckle at the scene in which Olive goes to a movie theater to see an obscure film whose title, as displayed on the theater's marquee, she tries to pronounce: *Der scharlachrote Buchstabe*, that is, Wim Wenders's 1973 adaptation of Hawthorne's romance. Similarly, Olive's use of phrases that sound as if they were lifted verbatim from Hawthorne's text could be discussed further in terms of Hutcheon's call to consider the repercussions of perceiving (or not perceiving) an "adaptation *as* an adaptation" (*A Theory* 21). What will be the differences in response depending on whether a viewer only knows that this is a canonical American novel about the punishment of adultery in seventeenth-century Puritan New England, or whether a viewer knows one of the film adaptations, or whether the viewer knows Hawthorne's text and its reception history in depth? Viewers who are not familiar with the fact that Hawthorne's proto-modernist narrator offers multiple perspectives on the possible meanings of the letter "A" beyond the obvious reference to the crime of adultery will neither mark the exchange of witty in-group remarks between Olive and her English teacher, nor will such a viewer necessarily feel encouraged to link the "A" with adaptation (which, in fidelity studies discourse, has been seen as an act of adulteration) and to question the links between an "A" as the best possible grade and Olive's role play in which she assumes Hester Prynne's multiple roles from adulteress (in Olive's case, a putatively sexually promiscuous teenager) to angel. The longevity of the notion that students need to identify with fictional characters in order to understand and possibly appreciate them is parodied as wavering between emulating a figure in a canonized text and compromising oneself. More importantly, Olive's webcast confession inverts the trend of U.S. politicians' and other public figures' often tearful and widely broadcast admissions of guilt and remorse with regard to private matters. Olive pinpoints not only what *Easy A* depicts as her society's obsession with exposing the shortcomings of individuals but also the voyerism involved in publicly shaming and thus rejecting these individuals on account of private decisions and actions. The film certainly does not celebrate adultery; and it offers no glorification of underage sexual promiscuity. Instead, it references prevalent contradictory reactions to these behaviors and thereby speaks in favor of viewing sex between consenting adults as a private rather than a public matter. Olive accordingly regrets her own decision, albeit made under duress, to tell her English teacher about his wife's, that is, the school counselor's, affair with a student (who is repeating twelfth grade and thus an adult) because this news led to a divorce. That the negotiation of this discourse arises in the context of an adaptation of a seminal artistic statement about American Puritanism is likely not a coincidence, and viewers may choose, furthermore, to think about how the arts negotiate possible links between the bygone days of New England Puritanism and American society of late.[40]

An in-depth analysis of *Easy A* requires an essay of its own. I nevertheless propose that these closing reflections demonstrate the potential inherent in applying recent developments in adaptation studies and in American studies. The importance of locating interdependence and of contemplating processes can occur on multiple levels when discussing this film within cultural American history. The fuzzy boundaries between the private and the public spheres which *Easy A* illustrates through com-

[38] Olive's college-age brother is mentioned but not seen in the film.

[39] In this context, it may be worth pursuing the question as to whether the screenwriter wanted viewers to associate Olive Penderghast with the Pendergast family (Penderghast minus the "h" for Hester?), which is central to a series of thrillers written by Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child. These thrillers focus on murder investigations with supernatural components (for more information on these novels, see the authors' official website at http://www.prestonchild.com). The name Penderghast could also be a pun on "aghast."

[40] See Balestrini, *From Fiction to Libretto* 250–53, 307–09, and Balestrini, "*The Scarlet Letter* as Centennial Melodrama and Contemporary Opera" 198–206.

munication via mobile phone technology and the World Wide Web exemplify how interpreting the plot and the thematic core of this film requires consideration of all of its adapted materials (across genres and time periods) as much as consideration of its genre-specific techniques. The related issue of agency vs. directedness also gains depth because it extends from the seventeenth-century New England Puritans depicted through Hawthorne's mid-nineteenth-century eyes to the twentieth- and twenty-first-century world of Olive Penderghast, her creators, and her recipients. In terms of the transnational cinematic geography, the transatlantic and transcontinental nexus requires scrutiny, as do the migration of ethnic groups and globalized flow of information. The dynamic and increasingly transnational discussion of defining and redefining effective and unprejudiced approaches and methods within adaptation and American studies promises to provide tools with which scholars—both individually and cooperatively—may, I hope, successfully meet the challenge to traverse chronologies of multiple arts and to think about changes within interpretations and historiographies of human experience.

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