Chapter 8: Colonial Problems, Transnational American Studies

> The damage that identities have done [has resulted in] the end of human community.
>
> —Said (2000)

The transnational state is the realization of a utopian dream. Like all paradise constructions, it treads on a proclaimed emotional and cultural superiority, an imagined unity, and a supposed natural (or divinely anointed) status. The maintenance of that social location is waged through penalties upon those who fail to recognize the cultural pretensions of a dominant group (generally in power through violence, not democratic initiative) and the social authority based thereon. The transnational iteration relies on the national frameworks, nuanced so that they appear to be inclusive and representational, but the same fragility underlays the transnational scope: while ostensibly emancipatory, on close inspection the division of myth only rehashes the hierarchy and inequality of the capitalist neoliberal nation-state, with modified and hyphenated or hybridized elements.

The inner problem is twofold: (1) a community linked to geography and/or culture is inherently presumptuous. Cultural communities do not generally begin or end with any relation to the territorial prescriptions assigned to them by political bodies, migrations occur constantly, and the cultural orientation of each individual should be understood as external to and not defined by external controls; (2) the cultural associations that supposedly bind the residents of the space to one another into a stable social unit are too malleable and circumstantial to maintain the exigencies articulated by the nation and its transnational subordinates.

The Limits of Transnational Performance

That identity is a fluid phenomenon, informed by social and cultural conditions is also a pillar of Queer Theory. The prescriptions that attempt to organize gender/sexual and cultural identities into rigid categories also derive from power relations embedded in formal and informal social interactions.

The concept that mutually exclusive transnational identities (recognized, situated experiences of reality drawn from supposed subnational affiliations) could exist is not unlike the suppositions necessary to maintain prescriptive gender categories: transnational identity and its codifications in material culture cannot signify without the externality of preconceived myths. A serious shortcoming, then, both in traditional takes on sexual/gender and transnational identities, is that their controls, limits, and resultant subjectivities are external to the individual; a person's relation thereto, or lack of relation, is externally imagined and articulated. In this sense, even struggles *against* such labels, toward hybridities or forms of diversity (with externally defined groups and demographies), in some ways serve power, as the new multicultural knowledges function to sustain some of the same repressive social regimes. A supposedly transnational performance or piece of material culture may be understood as a reiteration of a hybridized myth, and as Judith Butler observes, the preexisting structure yet "regulates and constrains" the nature of the act (1993, 2). As they have done in gender studies, these reflections problematize the emancipatory power and reach of the transnational and its hybridities.

The transnational's theoretical weaknesses, then, are similar to those of traditional gender prescriptions, in that the fictions of both are limited to the performances offered by the category. Transnational performativity may be expressive, but it fails to constitute meaning beyond the recursive contingencies of the collective, presumptive bases and lacks the grammars to appreciate extra-group (or non-group based or oriented) action and emotion. In light of the muddled nature of being that stems from the theoretical shortcomings of the transnational, and other group- or geography-based forms cultural inquiry, transnational approaches should be nuanced if not abandoned in consideration of other descriptors and modes of being that are, or may potentially be, more sensitive to individual agencies.[1]

These theoretical entanglements seem insurmountable. The presumption that residence in a geographic space ineludibly relates to or informs one's sense of identity or community, even in a hybrid sense, is a critical tradition that generally goes unquestioned—and among its consequences are the untenable presumptions of the transnational as a cultural container. These circumstances call for new critical avenues that elide the inadequacies of hybrid approaches to cultural and social being (with their inclusive and exclusive influence on rights, group affiliations, and so on). These should begin with new vocabularies and grammars of being that are not documented by modern and postmodern approaches, that are overlooked by the transnational, and that have the potential to complement an understanding of humanity and the specific and individual dimensions of its conditions: these should be the tenets that inform after-national criticism. It is time to unplug American (and other area) Studies from geographies, languages, citizenships, collectivities, cultures, and political molds, and their emancipations of already power.

The enemies of collective identity policies are often cosmopolitanism and curiosity, contrahistorical thinking, and individuality. When a more atomized, individual approach to a text or the work of an author is employed as a critical apparatus (instead of a cultural, national or transnational approach), linking a text to wider body of literature—such as American literature or one of its subhyphenations, and their geopolitics—because of its language or material therein, it becomes clear that such nomenclatures have expired: the presumed stability of hybrid cultural bases falls short as a representative metric of the communities (and/or individuals) that they pretend to signify. The community spirit—the central binding element in such approaches—is a slippery if not counterintuitive slope.

The Search for Universality

Even in scholarly spheres, radical emancipatory movements are almost always underground, external to the system's traditional measures and channels. The way that social cues are organized by the academy occasionally mirrors neoliberal, capitalist cultural prescriptions that allow other ideas about community to function only in opposition. Today this generally means institutionalized academic treatises often land some- where between neoliberalism and its postcolonial constructions; between capitalism and equality; between man and woman; between this and that. Epistemological (and institutional) *a priori* control of "this" and "that" allows power centers to also maintain subordination of those in between spaces.

In the context of already-appropriated in-between spaces, Homi Bhabha has argued that "The time for 'assimilating' minorities to holistic and organic notions of cultural value has dramatically passed. The very language of cultural community needs to be rethought. . . . " (1994, 251). It has been over two decades since Bhabha's landmark text gesturing toward post and transnational paradigms, and though a brief vacillation toward postnational articulations of community stirred in the 1990s, its footprint has been largely extinguished by the transnational, despite its serious theoretical flaws. Rodica Mihăilă has interpreted Bhabha's approach as one that "involves the transnational and the translational, revises the relation of binary opposition not only between the First and the Third Worlds but also between center and periphery. It, therefore, systematically subverts holistic definitions and nationalistic syntheses as it problematizes boundaries" (2011). Reading Bhabha's refection as purely *trans* (not post) national, however, only reproblematizes the circumstance:[2] the myth of multi- or hybrid cultural communities as emancipatory results in a circular articulation of the postcolonial, transnational state. This is due to the fact that robust, comprehensive non-national and non-transnational articulations of community have in large part failed to materialize on the horizons of cultural theory. Such a circumstance, however, is not an excuse to continue thinking

transnationally. Do trans approaches effectively describe the disparate nature of how people experience realities and perform sentiments? And to that end, what is the role of material objects, languages, cultural systems, and their codifications in the life of an individual? While the codified structures of collective and geographic communities are founded in fantasy, the transnational approach requires that the (also imaginary) spiritual links that each individual supposedly has and maintains with others have relevance, and foregrounds that imaginary. Such frames are burdened by serious theoretical glitches that embed them in the purely nationalist discourses they endeavor to supplant.

In defense of such approaches, Gunter Lenz has argued that the cultural expressions

> are no longer seen as happening between, or among, stable, territory-based (national) cultures or subcultures, but as two-way, or multiple-way dynamic cultural processes and transculturations in force-fields of sharp political asymmetries and confrontations and of the different 'spatial imaginary' in a globalizing world.
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> (2012, 4–5)

A theoretical problem that looms unanswered around such attempts to refigure "territory-based" cultures is that these trans-approaches (national, cultural, communal, diasporic, and so on) remain situated on the presumed stability of the *territory-based* myth essences; they add a comparative and dialectic dimension to the dialogue, but the center remains. This circumstance appears to be acknowledged by some scholars, as Gunter continues:

> That is, transnational American Cultural Studies ask us to redirect our critical perspective back to the specific, the concrete *workings of the politics of American Cultural Studies*. This can only be done if our critical discourse is empowered by the different self-reflexive extensions and revisions of the concept of culture as projected in the different discourses referred to and their critical potential and by a more cogent engagement with the political workings of 'culture' in American democratic society in a world of globalization.
>
> (Lenz's emphasis 2012, 4)

The comparative component of this theoretical shift does not detach itself from the hindering reality that trans and modified conceptualizations of cultural groups are yet cultural groups. This reduces the *trans-* trend to a self-referential base that is rooted in the supposedly stable, territory-based myths it strives to displace. While such a theoretical move gestures toward redefining the epistemologies of "culture," it does not strive to detach "culture" from geographic prescriptions of social demography; perhaps for

this reason, Lenz also emphasizes his belief that in these trans- shifts, the nation-state and its boundaries are not discardable.[3]

While the transnational engages a form of consciousness and reality constructed in large part to circumvent national and patria myth, the Transnational Turn in American Studies only remobilizes mono-"Americanism" and its subgroups—and thus its presumptive constituent bases. Donald Pease has noted that the transnational relies on "an encompassing geopolitics of knowledge" (2011, 1) connoting that the "'transnational' only makes sense within a specific historical context" (2011, 3). Thus, the function of the transnational and transpatria perspectives is articulated through the national imaginary, which, as Donald Pease notes, "prevents the closure of the nation" (2011, 5). Transnational presumptions should be understood as unstable critical bases because identity performances are demonstrably more fluid, malleable conditions than what might be understood as "usable" knowledge. In this way, the transnational and other forms transpatriotism are burdened by their motivated reasoning; the individual's actions may appear to have agency, and the approach may read as a reasoned one, but the group-based dimension of the interpretation makes the structural outcomes and end points predetermined.

Transnational Distortions

Transnational American Study is an exercise in distortion. An interpretation of identity, material culture, or community through the limits of such a frame cannot maintain the new articulations and performances of selfhood that accompany the digitization of reality or the diversity of contemporary communities, nor does the constant renaming within existent transnational structures allow sites of individual agency that recognize the fleeting, circumstantial nature of selfhood and identity. The attempts to open the focus by hybrid and hyphenated shifts have resulted in new labels—often just as rigid—that resituated individuals in new demographic interpellation and subordination to the same center: the unhyphenated "American" material culture, person, community, and so on.

The true power of American Studies as a field derives from its authority to control what may be understood (and therefore sanctioned and disseminated) as legitimate knowledge about the cultures of those who reside in spaces claimed by the US political body and other areas it supposedly influenced in a "global" or "worlded" sense. The institutionalization of the present iteration of transnational American study portrays the political space as an already-colonized, stable, and supposedly appropriated space, a verity that functions in part through the cultural production (texts that are ostensibly academic and nonfiction) of scholarly communities. While the transnational strives to disentangle the imperialisms of national and patriotic knowledge, not only do the extant structures remain—but any "new" ideas are also dependent on them.

Academic Structures and the Exigencies of Neoliberal, Capitalist Universities

Many academics who work in these disciplines have articulated serious doubt on the nation-state and its prescriptions as apposite axes of investigation: why, then, does it remain such an overdetermined force? A glimpse at the nature of the institutions that produce the investigative material in question might provide some insight on the absence and dismissal of post-national and non-national study. The relationships and interdependencies between scholarly ideas and nature of the institutions that produce them have been described in the following ways:

- Confidence in formal education and cultural study as positive phenomena;
- Confidence in the academy as medium of ideas;
- Confidence in ideas from the academy;
- Dependence on financing of educational institutions;
- Dependence on governmental aid for research and teaching;
- Academic dependency on these structures in their articulation of legitimate ideas

(modified from Alatas 1999)

While the academic freedom enjoyed by tenured scholars allows some the latitude to function outside of these structures, the percent of faculty who have access to tenured status is rapidly shrinking because of the rise of the corporate university and its attendant adjunctification of faculty. In order to enjoy tenured status, faculty must first go through a rigorous probation period that involves service, publishing, and teaching, all of which presumably realized within "acceptable" forums of inquiry and scholarly approaches, so as to substantiate one's skill in an already-institutionalized academic environment. (When coupled with graduate studies, this stint until tenured status often amounts to 16–18 years.) As the career options, particularly in the Humanities, are limited in the academy, this circumstance benefits the conservatism of re-engaging transnational approaches: non-tenured scholars of all stripes are in a precarious situation that commands adherence to existing structures rather than taking on new and radical non-national approaches.[4]

American Studies, then, can and often does function—perhaps unwittingly and unwillingly—as an iteration of colonial power by legitimizing and delegitimizing thought around the preexisting structural ideal that situates the existence of the US political body (and its present and past cultural conceptualizations) as an acceptable idea, one that informs peoples' lives, and sense of culture and being; this idea is the fundamental center of discourse (myth) reiterated by the transnational. The prescriptions of identity, cultural proprietorship, and related social material thus rely on

formal educational institutions, including scholarship produced therein, as institutional endorsements of the colonial idea of the space; these have rigidly organized the resident communities into dialectical (or "relational or comparative" as per Radway)[5] of normative and colonial models, which delimit the approaches, even those that question these characterizations, to the same allegory: that the national (and thus transnational) narrative must be understood as an appropriate venue of inquiry because the nation and its imaginaries supposedly inform the lives of those who reside in spaces claimed by the political body. Whether or not this indeed occurs is not an appropriate question: it is understood as self-evident.[6]

The transnational is also immensely popular because it is a somewhat straightforward approach that offers a constellation of arenas to engage inquiry; it thrives because transnational analyses are abundant, relatively simple, and do not challenge the power that locates them as acceptable. As Pease observes, "[e]ach contextualization of the transnational supplies a provisional meaning for a signifier whose significance solicits endless recontextualization" (2011, 6). The transnational is a robust and accessible opportunity to rethink relationships and produce "new" material, but the composition of these conclusions and their associations are restricted to top-down and trans/national-based (and therefore repetitive) reflections.

Transnational American Studies is bound to these limits. It attempts to map immense sociopolitical and cultural discourses, literary and artistic tendencies, and a broad hegemonic state system of linguistic and aesthetic norms, to a series of supposedly competing or supposedly dialectic ideologies. These ideologies and aesthetics and their points of opposition are codified and consequently sanctioned as acceptable areas of thought, in part through academic studies. John Muthyala has outlined the critical map as one that strives to

> tease out, make visible, name, identify, contextualize, and read or deliberately misread the official symbols, events, and narratives in order to effect displacements and realignments among the subject, scene, and errand—thus reinvigorating them with new meanings
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> (2012, xvi)

The operative idea here is that the counternarrative uses the original narrative as a source of opposition, an approach that (possibly inadvertently) controls the latitude of discourse and therefore the agency of the actors examined; they only exist in relation to the prescriptions of the original (national) narrative. Such an approach only sanctions the myths of the original system. The institutionalization of these ideas canonizes the composition of how the space and the cultures of its residents are to be understood, and, in this way, American Studies—despite transnationalization—has not emerged from the canonic national prescriptions of the past.[7]

The Psychology of Culturalized Spaces and their Intentional Identities

Aside from the shortcomings of employing cultural groups and their presumptions in criticism, the empirical reports on identity and behavior (and thus material culture that supposedly codifies sentiment) do not generally match the structures of contemporary area studies. In the context of the coercive cultural directives of the US political body and other similar political entities, it may seem that authorship of one's own cultural being becomes lost in a web of physical and social structures that intend to direct behavior and emotion into specific patterns:[8] and in this sense, the results of an intentional cultural system, such as that of the US political body, must be closely scrutinized. Do deliberate cultural systems function as designed? Does isolation within a web of socially and culturally engineered spaces produce the prescribed imaginary relationships and identities?[9]

Despite the intentionality of a cultural system, studies in social psychology and cultural neuroscience demonstrate that the way that an individual behaves is not necessarily reciprocal or even consistent with their surroundings or presumed demographies. It appears that collective identity is significantly more fluid and circumstantial than how these phenomena tend to be treated in cultural criticism. Cultural neuroscience is a nascent field that examines the cerebral variances in chemicals and electrical signals in terms of specific social and cultural situations. The field investigates how cultural complexes shape how our brains function and secondarily, how behavior relates to these plasticities; the field has been described as "well poised to provide supporting evidence as well as novel insights into the role of culture in thought and behavior" (Rule et al. 2011, 111). Cultural neuroscience and cultural psychology are interrelated, and they often employ similar clinical methods (Wyer et al. 2009, introduction). The predominant model from reports in both fields posits that identity and collective sentiments are situational, contingent upon surroundings, and greatly dissimilar even among people from the same cultural and social cohorts. In "Self-Identity in Sociocultural Contexts" by Shihui et. al., how we perceive ourselves is described as "modulated by sociocultural contexts" and, when two members of the same presumed cohort are examined in the same context, how the circumstance shapes self-perception was found to be "significantly different between participants"; thus, the responses to the same cultural canons "vary tremendously" (Shihui et al. 2011, 65).[10]

The inconsistencies in cultural experience have been shown to be even more profound in multicultural contexts. In the measures of neural activity for individuals performing the same cognitive task (locating north on a map or constructing a hexagon with toothpicks, for instance), there are quantifiable variances among those examined who "had been primed with different cultural knowledge" (Gladzeter 2006, 242). Moreover, it has

been shown that the same cognitive task is performed and processed differently in the brain when a person realizes the task in a different language or cultural context.[11] In "Multicultural Minds: A Dynamic Constructivist Approach to Culture and Cognition," Y. Hong et al. have demonstrated that "specific pieces of cultural knowledge (implicit theories)" can be understood as "operative in guiding the construction of meaning from a stimulus" (2000, abstract). The symbolic stimulation from a cultural canon, and thus an individual's perception of and relation thereto, is contingent on the ways that the relations are accessible in the mind; the accessibility (and, thus, the meaning of the cultural canon) varies among places, times, company, and other factors. Another problem regarding the presumed cultural relationships unpacked in transnational approaches is that "individuals possess more than one . . . cultural meaning system, and . . . a given cultural knowledge structure operates as an interpretive frame only to the extent that it is cognitively accessible and applicable to the stimulus situation" (Hong et al. 1998, 1536). That the nature of the communities in the US political space are multicultural and the reality that individuals have more than one system of social action in the mind further complicates the notion that the political body's program of cultural engineering has significantly influenced the identities of those who are exposed to it.

An exigency of cultural identity (even the transnational) is relational stability. While an intentional cultural system may have some level of significance, the fetishizations of the dominant group and its transhyphenations are relevant only in precise circumstances. In the case of each person subordinated to those canons, identity is multivariate: "the salience of one [identity] over the others varies across situations and across time" and "in some situations, the order [of dominance] switches, and one of the other identities becomes more salient" (Mio et al. 2008, 20). Thus, in order to locate the importance of a transpatriotism or another cultural identity relies on suppositions of relationships that are not always available or corroboratable.[12] That these scholarly approaches are entrenched in the academy may relate to some of the characteristics of Western culture itself: "Westerners may be more likely to see themselves as possessing fixed traits regardless of what situation they are in" (Rule et al. 2011, 111).

Intentional cultural systems do not create stable communities. The reports in multicultural psychology and cultural neuroscience refute that such systems yield a constancy of sentiment (and thus affiliation) that is necessary to perceive the residents of the US political space as a united and common people; when the transnational and patriotic sentiments exist, they are contingent upon specific, ephemeral contextualities that are not universal and not always accessible. But yet this structure is the field imaginary of American Studies: that these grouping mechanisms and their dialectics are the most appropriate way to study the cultures of individuals in those spaces is the foundation of the discipline.

[Trans/hyphenated-]*American* as a Conditional Adjective: National Myopia and the Complications of Transnational Study

In light of these empirical reports, "Americanness" and its subhyphenations (as bases of cultural identity) should be understood not as intrinsic, stable characteristics—but as conditions that are the result of exposure to canons of culture in specific spaces and at specific moments;[13] the condition is unstable and fluid to the extent that the concept ceases to maintain meaning when extricated from the complexes that produced it. The concept of collective identity and the associated appropriations of rights and perceived attachments that stem from them—that is, national and transnational systems and their hierarchies—should also be understood not in terms of stable, constancy but flux and multiplicity; the assertions of authority that underlay these systems is too irregular to be applied as a metric for individuals.

This view of personal identity (a transitive engagement and condition dependent on surroundings, rather than a determined nature or characteristic) does not to refute that particular and conventional identity structures affect selfhoods. Nevertheless, a more permeable and dynamic critical model is useful because collective action is individual action collected, and even transnational grouping models have difficulty avoiding the reduction of individuals to unstable groupings, desires, sentiments, or essences that often (in fact, *always*) depend on presumed dialectical relationships. At best social relationships and their identities may be described as temporary sensations; consequently, the expressions of these conditions in criticism should gesture toward "[trans/hyphenated-] American" and comparable terms as temporary and conditional adjectives.

This situation amounts to something of a critical divide, as the logic of the Transnational Turn in cultural studies emphasizes an individual as measured against or in relation to several dialectic structures, as a base for interpolative value. "Americans" and the subgroups thereof, even (or perhaps especially) understood to be those who have had such ideas internalized, become somewhat unreliable as well, as does the idea of [trans/hyphenated-] Americans as a unit of inquiry. Attempting to unite, on an immense scale, the national or transnational factors, and the inherent limitations associated with such terms, belies that these affiliations are not static manifestations or realities; thus, the continual reliance on a national label, even when transnationalized, is in many ways incongruent with how humans create, perform, and iterate identity.

These concepts have profound consequences on transnational (and identity) theory in general. As behavior (cultural performance here is the behavior in question) has been shown to function in concert within multiple cultural and identity spheres, not just in resistance or in support of the hyphenated (or subordinate) pair, transnational inquiry as it currently exists lacks an important dimension of circumstantial awareness. This elasticity

of identity performance in a sense requires a disengagement from the standard balkanized (other-oriented) approach and instead should understand the "[trans/hyphenated-]American" not as an unchangeable or concrete notion, or even as an opposition or relation to the dominant sphere but, rather, a conceptualization that is dependent upon provisional positions. The dominant sphere, moreover, ceases to be primordial: if not dismantled, it is re-perceived as a common projection or a meta-idea that is external *and subordinate* to an individual's circumstances.

Cultural Appropriation of America and the Instability of Cultural Myths

In an applied sense, the theoretical shifts mentioned here address the ways that the US political body exerts cultural force upon the residents of the spaces it claims: the inundation of symbol, language, and images that intends to promote a specific pattern of behavior, aside from being nonrepresentative and not established through voluntary affiliation, relies on identity assumptions that do not precisely correspond to how our minds perceive sentiments. The empirical reports reframe some of the basic assumptions of the relationships that people have with culture, including concepts like nations, transnations, and patrias. This implies that the cultural appropriation of the US political space as it is often articulated in American Studies, even in the Transnational Turn, is a much more fragile and unstable idea than how it is often imagined. Whatever be the affiliation or identification, broad transnational or national abstractions should be understood as momentary, intangible and unpredictable, and therefore of modest critical traction.[14]

In a larger sense, an inner problematic exists within the terms of investigation: What is the goal of using Cultural Groups as a forum of scholarly inquiry? If an investigation aims to produce knowledge in a collectivist vein, the statements rely on epistemological obligations about the composition of the group. When we examine the constancy of the assertions underlying the conclusions, the stability of the base is put into dispute by empirical work in other disciplines. The salient element of "what is the nature of culture" from a collectivist stance must also subsume why that nature is supposedly stable for the conclusions that a scholar moves to maintain. Many national, transnational, and other group-based ontological approaches pivot on an imagined group stability that empirical reports dispute—and thus, the dialectics that those approaches often employ have a criterion of evidence issue.[15]

Toward a More Atomized Cultural Analysis of Individuals and their Circumstances

The group approach loses integrity the further one moves into extra-disciplinary comparisons. Studies in sociolinguistics report that the structures of narrative composition, for instance, differ in measurable ways

based on several contextual cues, such that the situational prompts are thought to influence not only the ways text is used to relate ideas but also has a shaping effect on ways on how the ideas exist in the mind of the author. Studies in neurology gesture toward perceiving brain chemistry of the author (and, conceivably, the artist, the sculptor, the cinematographer, and so on) as a variable that depends on the circumstances of when and where the thoughts are forming in the mind. The implications denote that the main agents of the narrative (including narrative aesthetics, as in artistic creation) process may be much more profoundly shaped by the culture of where the text is composed; place and time; health or physical conditions; and even sounds and other actions occurring in the location of composition, than the presumed cultural-grouping affiliations.

When the circumstantial nature of identity and affiliation occupies a more central position in critical interpretation, concepts like patriotism, (trans) nationality, and cultural identity in general lose traction. Moreover, as our communities are multicultural by nature, these data should be foundational in how we understand culture, community, and social action, regardless of the location and demographics that surround the subject. The presence of many markers and sources of being renders the uniform and unifying intentions of the cultural system to comparative impotency alongside the multiplicities produced from contemporary society. The identities that a person may suppose and perform, and the relative importance that might be attached to them, are in continual flux because of personal and situational changes in their perceptions of the world and in the composition of their external surroundings.

Personhood, in this way, should be understood to arise from relations between intangible sites (such as emotions and sentiments of belonging) that derive from engagement with others and tangible markers that are sometimes linked to physical entities, such as climate, imagery, size, movement, and other concepts that, over time, develop individual symbolic qualities that are characterized by an impermanent, fleeting nature. Breaking down the national or transnational approach to another degree, an individual community member is a composite and a contextualization of these factors mediated through behavior like language, literature, and art. Thus, perceiving art and literature as representative of societies and communities requires a critical leap from what the psychology of identity demonstrates, a reality which complicates scholarly tendencies to group individuals as assumed societies (e.g., "[trans/hyphenated-] American" authors) and therefore read their work as interpellated as part of a whole (which may be a hyphenated entirety). The individual and her or his society are interrelated in a more complex fashion, one that is often rebellious to such grouping, because of the fluid, plural, and shifting nature of personhood. In a more atomized take on cultural figures, critical discussion should stem from circumstances and context, and a salient new hypothesis, given these data, might involve understanding the person and their work as multiplicity, flux, and ephemeral glimpses at local circumstances rather than grounded in presumptive relational ties.

As culture (and, perhaps more important, cultural identities) is a slippery, malleable phenomenon, any inference linking an individual to culture; or a geographic space to culture; or a community to culture, is to repeat the shortcomings of the social systems of the present—and fails to address the source of the inequalities that they initiate. In this way, nation-states (and transnational critics who, willingly or not, use national their centers as material) often overlook the associative obligations that stratify peoples who are subjected/subordinated to and categorized by these myths. Couched as the multicultures of the status quo, or a departure from the status quo, these approaches also fail to recognize how people perform cultural acts, inserting external narratives as a centers of discourse.

After Pronouns (*We* and *They*), Possessive Adjectives (*Ours* and *Theirs*), and their Cultures

The universal bonds assumed by cultural groups are often mired in abstraction. And the composition of contemporary cultural and critical systems do not generally allow discussion about how presumptive the concept "we" vis-à-vis "they" in fact is, but yet the boundaries of the groups themselves, which is to say that the obsolete distance between the terms (or imagined groups) *they* and *we* is the center of the problem. There is no "we" or "they" beyond fleeting and ephemeral sentiments—but Western social systems (often based on the nation or transnation, religious or linguistic presumptions, or racial and ethnic community) use such concepts to justify death, poverty, murder (and murder by poverty), and other forms of inequality. The concepts are so thoroughly protected in contemporary cultural and social paradigms that, for many, one humanity has already been supplanted by (or into) "we" and "they." Be the idea of the term based on religion, citizen- ship, language, place of residence, political affiliation, or something else, the notion is restrictive, nonrepresentative, and anti-democratic.

The dilemma of the future involves how to group the terms of community. Using *we* and its inherent referent to *they* confines the categorization and constructs hierarchies, intended or not, that move the discourse away from structures that respect the universalities of human existence. Using nongeographic and noncultural, nonlinguistic, nonreligious, nonsexual/gender, and nonracial *we*, however, as is argued in the next chapter, liberates the term into a forum nonrestriction in comparison to existent *we*s and their embedded hierarchies and demographic inequalities, could be understood as a corrective measure because, in a sense, it is a universality, one that is not bound by many of the inherent shortcomings of unpacking geography or culture as presumed metrics (or proxies) of community feeling.

Completing a Theoretical Move toward Postnational Communities

In humanistic approaches that involve new ways to perceive reality and community, there is no control group. There are no objective conditions

against which to examine a claim. A great deal of this book has dealt with identifying the primary components of transnational and transpatriotic systems of meaning (often spaces saturated by programmed cultural canons), and reflecting on whether they are internally stable and effective in their intentions, questioning if their assertions maintain credibility under scrutiny—or not. That these bases have been found, in this analysis, to be theoretically untenable and, thus, unstable grounds for cultural study (and, secondarily, imagined community structure) does not represent a failure in previous scholarship but an opportunity to think in new ways.

In these situations, a scholar begins wandering into new philosophies and aesthetics. New ways of thinking can commence as reconsiderations of discrete or repressed feelings; we wonder about new codifications in arenas like political and community structures, about the lag involved in implementation, and the self-protective structures that strive to maintain the status quo. Then begins a more qualitative approach: how would a non-national base of community, identity, culture, and society articulate belonging, being, emotion, and selfhood? Would there be histories? Should scholars rethink supposedly grand moments in human history as a function of the new scale? (Is the new scale indeed "new" or has it been concealed and repressed?)

Comfort with the status quo is often expressed by deriding new ideas as utopian. Labeling a new approaches naïve and idealistic is a purposeful and charged method to discard a conceptual change without discussion of it. And many people and communities, perhaps fittingly, enjoy and benefit from transnational prescriptions and their controls. But these national and transnational walls are perhaps more illogical than nongeographic approaches to community because of the presumptive nature of the legitimizations employed to maintain them as cultural registers. (Trans)national identities and communities are perhaps impossible to measure with precision: mapping universalized concepts like language, cultural action, social tendency, and so on, which are generally necessary to maintain these identities and the communities that supposedly stem from them, are inherently inaccurate, burdened by external controls and presumption. A logical conclusion is that these constructions do not exist in the ways that they are described (more accurate, prescribed). However, (trans)national statuses as legal, social, and rhetorical constructs have very real consequences for human beings—and they have been as controlling measures to determine rights for individuals and communities for centuries. The concepts of freedom and equality have been articulated through and are contingent on an individual's (trans) national status. These concepts have serious material consequences, too: the continued and intentional income gap between community A, B, A/B, and C (these variables could be based on constructions like race, gender, language, place, citizenship, and so on), derives in large part from the transnational status, linked to geography and charged with hyphenation, subordination, and hierarchical in-group and out-group inequality.

Support of New Agency within Existent Structure

Many scholars strive to work within the system's controls in order to improve conditions for oppressed demographics. Jack/Judith Halberstam has argued that these initiatives are "alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends" (2011, 24). While part of the argument in Halberstam's work is structured toward the entanglements of sexual and gender prescriptions, the seminal concepts he/she deftly expresses are applicable to new realities and ways of knowing that could nuance the transnational as a mode of study and articulation of being. Halberstam argues that structural constraints can be attacked from within through a process of purposed misremembering and failure:

> forgetfulness can be a useful tool for jamming the smooth operations of the normal and the ordinary . . . forgetfulness becomes a rupture with the eternally self-generating present, a break with a self-authorizing past, and an opportunity for a non-hetero-reproductive future.
>
> (2011, 70)

Moreover, embracing failure can be engaged as a performative act that "recognizes that alternatives are embedded in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent" (Halberstam 2011, 88). Such approaches can be fecund activist tools as they have the capacity to muddle the structures themselves and, perhaps, provoke reflection from the controlling, conservative demographics about the system's shortcomings (which is to say inherent congruency) and the inequalities that it causes.

Jodi Melamed has also sought new forms of personal agency by way of collective actions that strive to nuance the neoliberal, racist, capitalist rationality that frames the social interactions of the status quo. She is particularly critical of the commodification of difference, which has become a method to appropriate and subordinate the interests of nondominant groups—a process that is also embedded in the transnational turns in social and cultural knowledge. She supports thinking about ways to undermine the patterns of difference that function as social controls (in order to decolonize our notions of difference) through collective action. "Dialogue and engagement will normalize how things are," she notes, "unless it is done with a commitment on all sides to end oppression as it is being identified" (2014).

The corrective approach Melamed articulates relies on altruistic and communitarian action from demographics who would, conceptually (and, in a sense, unavoidably), lose social and cultural power as a result of the structural changes they would ostensibly implement voluntarily. This is the burden to bear for *any* solution situated within contemporary structures: the looming problematic is a serious and perhaps insurmountable one. Any officialized policy text that comes into existence (and codifies change) should

be understood as tangentially (if not directly) related to the interests of the institution publishing the text. By restricting the horizons of change to existent structures, it is foreseeable that when any phases of a new reality are to be articulated, the dominant players will subtly and imperceptibly—and perhaps unintentionally—engage the terms of accord in such a way that allows any new elements to be eligible for eventual commodification, appropriation, and exploitation. That should be, in effect, the expected course—as has occurred with the once-ostensibly-liberating minority discourses and the transnational. As Víctor Figueroa has argued, "[t]o oppose power is still to be defined by power" (2013, 77), a maxim that yet applies when power is hybridized and being opposed collectively. In circumstances like these, the aphorism in Spanish says, "si no hay más remedio, 'hay que desmontar el sistema' " (Poleo 1996, 64).

Resistance that is articulated from within constraints of the system makes possible forms of change that the vocabulary of the structure has provided. In the present articulation of transnational, neoliberal rationality, the vocabularies of confrontation and struggle are too narrow to be emancipatory—and codes of tolerance often internalize cultural difference. Personhood must be rearticulated from a separate metric, one that elides the enclosing reach of transnational and neoliberal structural failures. The notion of who is and is not a member of society must be broken and reimagined in ways that undo the limits of existent cartographies; these ideas must be unthinkable, ungrammatical, and perhaps appear expressly and purposefully utopian from within the system's reality prescriptions. They must seize material from and obey the voices who are negated by the status quo, and link them together in new ways. These ideas have been planted already; as Das Gupta's study makes clear:

> . . . participants in my study ask activists and scholars to imagine possibilities at which most balk: that *rights to not have to be contained within borders* . . . that national membership does not have to be the coveted goal . . .
>
> (2006, 257 emphasis added)[16]

The nongeographical community structure to be discussed in the next chapter engages the voices in Das Gupta's study, as well as the inner parts of a solution offered by Jodi Melamed, one that breaks the fundamental component of difference as it exists in the status quo: she asserts that in order to transcend the limits of the contemporary knowledge and rationalities, we should "expand our sense of collective being" (Melamed 2014). By renewing and rearticulating how we understand the relationships between humans; by decoupling identity, community, and collective spirit from the pretexts of geography and culture; by new vocabularies and knowledge of the human condition; and by new aesthetics, senses of community, and being—can the problems of the neoliberal, transnational prescriptions be emancipated.

New Agencies and Nongeographic Communities

> They are able to inhabit two worlds simultaneously … human communities, in other words, are becoming at least partially detachable from geography.
>
> —William McNeill (1995, 304)

> Where "we" end and "they" begin is at least partially detached from geography. The category of "we" is widened. Or—perhaps the crucial point—*it keeps jumping about*.
>
> —Annemarie Mol and John Law (2005, 639)

Many contemporary structures, despite their trans-natures, have colonial footprints that often celebrate and tacitly empower Eurocentric values. Eurocentrism, though widely renounced within the academy, yet maintains a comprehensive place in educational and social institutions, including the accepted critical tendencies and theoretical approaches in cultural studies (Herlihy-Mera 2015 "After Hispanic Studies"). Eurocentrism is, in part, a product of the exigencies of cultural disciplines that have been divided into an Area Studies basket. If (or, perhaps, because) these disciplines are absorbed into a geography-based form of cultural study, or hybridizations thereof, the transnational narratives they produce hinge on imaginary cultural geographies and their untenable unities. Detaching our theoretical bases from the implied belief that identity and community are linked to geography gestures toward the abandonment of European (and Western) culture as preeminent loci of importance, and makes possible a move toward a more atomized *and* universalized, and for that democratized, form of study that is more sensitive to individual agency. Placing individual action in a privileged space over the presumptions of geography (and its undue weight on cultural dynamics) in a sense liberates peoples from the burdens of contemporary critical and theoretical paradigms, their derivative hierarchies and colonialities.

If such a radical nongeographic critical move were to occur on a widespread scale, the transition would likely be accompanied by a crisis period during which the academy would restructure vocabularies of discussion on the present and past, the modes of cultural authority, the undercurrents that inform cultural performances, and the composition of cultural communities. A conviction to abandon area and geography-based approaches as exceptional players in cultural study would undo some of the imaginary glories of the past that are presently institutionalized—and make possible new aesthetics, communities, and autonomies. Using a new, democratized and egalitarian nongeographic structure, conceivably, would forge a new articulation of being that is more attuned to the cultural demographies of peoples around the globe. The present overemphasis on the transnation (and its European and the Western ties more generally), their cultures and languages, would cease to crowd out other sensitivities and redirect attention toward new connections or potential oppositions, which would

complement (or perhaps replace) the "this place"/"that place" binary that our contemporary cultural structures command.[17]

Postnations: Abandoning the Transnational Model

Patrias, nations, and transnations, however they are studied, iterated, or performed, are a form of containment. In the scope of the empirical reports noted here on identity, selfhood, and the composition of material culture, the perception and study of the cultures of residents of the US political space should shift away from the supposed dynamics of the group and toward the circumstances of the subject. New modes of study should consider more closely the life events, age, place, and time of the composition in their tracts of investigation. In order to attune the studies toward new forms of situational awareness requires a disengagement of literary and artistic tracks from their conventional channels of comprehension.

A new study of people and their cultures should build a vocabulary of perspectives that respect the engagement and disengagement with community; the nation and transnation have become so embedded in the contemporary academy (and popular imagery financed by the state) that other forms of being are elided—or rejected as utopian (though the national and transnational are utopias, certainly). If we are presumed to be (trans)national beings, already patriated from supposed exposure to cultural canons, there is to be no horizon of new inquiry. These guidelines through which we are instructed to imagine must be broken: expanding the critical horizons about being and identity will allow new criticisms, articulations of community, and comprehensions of the human condition. The dimensions of the new inquiry should focus not on supposed conditions (i.e., national and trans- national status and their expressions) but on practices of engagement that involve new forms of intercourse and being; some key discourses in new forms of understanding the self should return to the defining characteristics of human nature, such as biology, mortality, and how we grow as spiritual, cultural, and physical beings. The postnational argument in the next chapter is not a resurgence of a Paradigm Dramas of the 1980s but a departure from a widely maintained assertion about non-homogeneity; the ephemeral nature of identity renders contemporary social structures presumptuous and, therefore, they should be reframed toward close contextual readings of people that are contingent to more empirical, sometimes biological, bases.

Notes

1. Judith Butler has also argued that, because of the ways that language preconditions thought, the already-existent underpinned meanings, categories, and controls embedded in language specify that language speaks us toward (and perhaps into) these supposedly stable forms of existence (1990, Ch. 1). These ostensibly stable states of being and experiences of reality—that is, the transnational labels, be them unpacked as nouns or adjectives—like gender prescriptions, are formed

through a "signifying economy" that locates (and hinges upon) an "illusion of asymmetrical difference" between individuals (1990, 103). Lauren Berland and Michael Warner have argued that "the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations . . . make [the dominant order] seem not only coherent," but also ordinary, primordial, and indisputable (1998, 548). The promotion of specific performances as ordinary, be them articulated as a gender or transnational reality, is the apparatus that sets the center of cultural system; codifies "ordinary" performances as supposedly stable, existent, and representative; and relegates all other actions to subordinate status. Eithne Luibhéid has described these external frames as "the standard to which everyone is expected to aspire" (2013, introduction).

2. What is possibly most valuable about Bhabha's approach is his attention to the contrivance of cultural community. The transnational is burdened by the non-organic "construction of culture and the invention of tradition" (1994, 248). While affiliation, emotion, and kinship are natural to the human condi- tion, the markers of community organization, as noted by Hobsbawn, "rest on exercises in social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative" (1994, 76).
3. "They reflect on and deconstruct the focus on the nation-state without prematurely discarding its boundaries as obsolete in political analyses, and they address the intra/multicultural diversity and hybridity of U.S. culture(s) and transnational interactions in a time of globalization and relocalizations" (Lenz 2012, 6).
4. This is also the case for research funding, as the National Endowment for the Humanities and other public sources of monies generally function within such imaginaries.
5. See Radway 1998.
6. In academic studies within the national-scholarship frame, manifestations of material cultural are understood to be representative of a community as a whole. In this way, American Studies as a discipline, or the study of art and literature (and other material) should be understood to function as a device to appropriate (and thus control) culture, as well as a social mechanism to establish representative images, narratives, and characteristic protagonists (and the study thereof) for the communities of the US political space.
7. It is unclear why should scholarship should continue to be structured in these forms. Have the nationalism and transnationalisms been internalized so thoroughly by the residents of the spaces claimed by the political body that these controls are appropriate? Are the canonic prescriptions of culture reiterated in the transnational of such immense importance? What precisely foregrounds those myths and relegates post- and non-(trans)national ideas? The emphasis on the transnational realities has only rehashed the cultural imperialism of the past and re-institutionalized it, nuancing its implementation.
8. Slogans of freedom and enlightenment values are inserted as sanctioning measures, though even the automobile—a machine often promoted as a modus and symbol of freedom—only redoubles that state-sponsored patterns of "development" generally *require* that one have a vehicle in order to carry out the most fundamental components of existence—such as the procurement of food, as residences are increasingly distant from markets. The freedom to choose to *not* have an automobile is restrictive because of these physical realities. This is also the case of cultural action. Using a non-English language in public, as discussed in Chapter 2, is not always legal and cannot be used as representative, regardless of the linguistic maps of the community in question.
9. The multicultural nature of contemporary communities and the new formations of identity in digitized realities complicate a theoretical reliance on traditional

dialectics of cultural groups (this is also the case for transnational iterations of being). And there are more serious theoretical complications to reliance on patriation (or culture itself) as an axis of identity. John Muthyala has described such a system as one that functions by:

> Determining life and death [and] controlling all realms of life itself; that is, empire exercises its power through administering social life by bringing all aspects of life under the domain of observation, classification, and digitization, and by intertwining the various strands of the social, political, cultural, and economic in complex and pervasive ways. Its power extends through all realms of social existence, and because of its reach, empire presides over the magnitude of entire groups, classes, masses of people, and their living environments. (2012, 45)

10. For instance, see *Multicultural Psychology: Understanding Our Diverse Communities* (2008) by Jeffrey Mio et. al.; Multicultural/Multiracial Psychology: Mestizo Perspectives in Personality and Mental Health (2010) by Manuel Ramírez; and *Multiculturalism as a Fourth Force* (2013) by Paul Pedersen.
11. It has been argued that "similar cognitive tasks may be processed rather differently by individuals in different cultural contexts" (Zhang et al. 2006, 77).
12 Not unlike quarks, cultures are ephemeral and have the capacity to reshape themselves when scrutinized. The study of them, in this way, can have a modifying effect on the composition of the culture; cultural groups are slippery slopes of grouping because of the fluid nature of human experience.
13. The verb *to be* is somewhat complicated in English in that it has just one iteration that, through context, is interpreted to refer to a condition or a characteristic. In this sense, a person may be "American" but not "an American," as the concept is adjectival.
14. In Laura Esquivel's 2006 novel *Malinche*, Malinalli, an indigenous woman during the second phase (martial law) of the cultural conquest of México, notes, "Sin imágenes, no hay memoria" [Without images there is no memory] (2006, 17). This detail speaks to the footprint of cultural place-making, a process that—in the fifteenth century as now—engages images as a signifiers of colonial dominance. Helene Weldt Basson has unpacked what is in many ways a postcultural and postgeographic interpretation of Malinalli, locating her performances and cultural interactions in the novel as a method to fill "in many historical gaps" in the traditional approaches that are bound to conventional demographic presumptions; by a focus on how her status as a colonized and subaltern offers multiple overlapping and occasionally conflictive perceptions of reality (2013, 15). Weldt-Basson situates Malinalli as representative of recent trends in postcolonial theory and criticism, which maintain that a person "cannot be simply grouped" because different people "do not share a single perspective" (2013, 19). While there are many realities and many truths about those realities, the transnational and other geography-based approaches strive to reduce these to singular—though sometimes hybridized singularities—and their knowledge. The subordinate sociopolitical situations of semi-fictionalized (she is based on an historical figure) characters like Malinalli and historical peoples, is due in large part to the hierarchies derivative from geography-based prescriptions of being and identity.
15. When the composition of the cultural group is scrutinized, the fabric of unity (and thus the theoretical approach) comes apart because the relationships individuals have with one-another have been presumed. Transnational American Studies as a relational concept fails to contain the inherent instability of terms like

American, its hyphenations, or the circumstantial and fragile nature of assumed cultural relationships. The transnational turn sometimes offers multiple ontologies, which can be fertile grounds for innovation and elucidation of new realities.

16. The system is itself an aesthetic: that grouping people by their supposed ethnic, cultural, racial, and/or linguistic affiliations and relating these ties to concepts like geography are appropriate methods to imagine communities. The myths that derive from this aesthetic sanction inequalities, poverty, and other physical and cultural violence that are avoidable.
17. In some ways the overarching tone of the transnational is counterintuitive—as the deconstruction and destabilization of traditional centers of meaning through hybrid registers also re-institutionalizes the traditional myths (albeit unintentionally), which is an inherent shortcoming that is built into the extant theoretical vocabularies. In those realms of reality, emancipation and its reaches remain controlled by nonrepresentative and nondemocratic spheres of authority. Non-geographic thinking would offer a more attuned form of cultural reading that would lend greater subtly to individuality and engage forms of emancipation that are untenable and yet ungrammatical in the status quo. The discussion here has been informed by Anibal Quijano's "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America" (2000, 533–580).

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