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What Is the *Transnational Turn* in American Literary Studies? A Critical Overview

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This article presents a critical overview of the state of the art of transnational American studies in the wake of the so-called *transnational turn*. After an introduction to key ideas and concepts surrounding transnationalism as applied to American studies and, more particularly, to literary studies—including comparative and international approaches to American literature—I interweave critical arguments with brief reviews of key publications—monographs, edited collections and individual essays—produced in the US and abroad—particularly Spain—in the twenty-first century. My overview mainly focuses on general literary studies, but it also tackles particular areas such as gender, ethnicity, aesthetics and political transnationalism. My conclusion suggests that the transnational turn will continue to shape our scholarship in the decades to come.

Keywords: American studies; transnational turn; ethnicity; gender; comparative studies; internationalization

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¿Qué es el *giro transnacional* en los estudios literarios norteamericanos? Una revisión crítica

Este artículo presenta una revisión crítica del estado de la cuestión de los estudios transnacionales norteamericanos, surgidos a raíz del llamado *giro transnacional*. Tras una introducción a las ideas y conceptos clave en torno al transnacionalismo aplicados a los estudios norteamericanos y, más concretamente, a los estudios literarios—incluidos enfoques comparativos e internacionales—entrelazo argumentos críticos con breves reseñas

de publicaciones clave—monografías, colecciones de ensayos y artículos—producidas en los EUA y en el extranjero—en particular España—en el siglo XXI. Mi revisión se centra principalmente en los estudios literarios, pero también aborda áreas concretas como los estudios de género, étnicos, la estética y el transnacionalismo político. Concluyo sugiriendo que este giro transnacional necesariamente afectará a nuestra práctica académica en las próximas décadas.

Palabras clave: estudios norteamericanos; giro transnacional; etnicidad; género; estudios comparados; internacionalización

I. INTRODUCTION

It has been said that one of the most prominent developments in American studies since the 1990s has been its *transnational turn*, that is, “the increasing interest in approaching the study of the US in a more international framework, in terms of both the questions being asked and the resources deployed to answer them” (Heise 2008, 381).¹ The effect of this turn was to dislocate the imaginary identification of American subjects with their native context, an equation that had steered the American studies movement in the US and “whose guiding theoretical premise was based upon the supposedly exceptionalist qualities of the US environment” (Giles 2019, 31). One distinguishing feature of transnationalism is its propensity to make associations between cultural narratives and the material infrastructures sustaining them. From this perspective, “the ways in which literary texts circulated between different domains can be understood as a crucial component informing their worldly constitution” (Giles 2019, 32). As Ursula K. Heise explains, the theoretical projects that inform the transnational turn are by no means uniform, so that while some scholars aim to approach American studies hemispherically by linking explorations of Anglo-American and Latin American literatures and cultures, others focus on transpacific connections around the “Pacific Rim” (2008, 381). Yet other theorists focus on transatlantic cultural bridges, diasporic communities or islandic sites. But what is of the utmost interest for non-American scholars are the approaches that seek to internationalize American studies through greater attention to the work of Americanists from outside the US, thus bringing a different range of institutional, disciplinary and cultural perspectives to bear on the discipline. In Jahan Ramazani’s view, transnationalism can help US citizens understand and imagine a world in which cultural boundaries are fluid, transient and permeable, and thus read themselves “as imaginative citizens not of one or another hermetically sealed national or civilizational bloc, but of intercultural worlds that ceaselessly overlap, intersect and converge” (2006, 355).

Yogita Goyal points out that, since the 1960s, social movements such as civil rights, feminism and antiwar campaigns have transformed literary canons by placing gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity at the center of the study of culture, as well as by replacing exceptionalist visions of American innocence with an analysis of imperial actions that link the US with other European powers (2017a, 8). More recently, hemispheric, transatlantic and postcolonial frames have further reshaped literary studies, bridging boundaries that have long confined cultural inquiry within narrow frameworks of nation, ethnicity or language (Goyal 2017a, 8). The ramifications of the transnational turn in all its complexity highlight American literature’s encounter with the rest of the world, exploring the construction of the foreign and the domestic, of global and local identities, as well as raising questions of translation, multilingualism and worldliness

¹ I will refer to *American studies* rather than *US studies* throughout, since this is the denomination for the field in the US.

(Goyal 2017a, 8). As indicated by Donald Pease, “some transnational Americanists have highlighted the transhemispheric, the transpacific and the transatlantic as zones of cultural production informed by inevitable transnational interactions, while others have invented transregional territories —Aztlán, the Black Atlantic, *La Frontera*, the Afro-Caribbean, the Pacific Rim and the Borderlands—that have brought areas from the disavowed underside of US exceptionalism into stark visibility” (2011, 26).

What is the transnational turn that has permeated American studies since the 1990s? The online *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Pease explains, offers two definitions of *transnational*: as an adjective, it describes “processes between or beyond national boundaries involving several nations or nationalities”; as a noun, *the transnational* describes “someone operating in several countries” (2011, 4). The term *transnational* reaches back into the nineteenth century, when John O’Sullivan linked it to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny to justify expansionist US policies designed to realize what Thomas Jefferson described as an “Empire of Liberty” (Pease 2011, 4). Eventually, the term appeared within the twenty-first-century lexicon alongside a number of other *trans-* terms—*transcultural*, *transstatal*, *translocal*, *transterritorial*, *transdifference*—to describe the traversal effects of global economic institutions, nonstate actors and nonnational processes (Pease 2011, 4). Inherently relational, “the transnational involves a double move: to the inside, to core constituents of a given nation, and to an outside, whatever forces introduce a new configuration” (Pease 2011, 5-6).

The drive to internationalize the study of American culture is not new, but it assumed a new urgency from the mid-1990s onwards, following “the process of (economic) globalization spearheaded by the Clinton administration, and a world linked by the internet” (Hornung 2005, 67).² Previous to the transnational turn, during the 1980s and early 1990s, a great deal of literary practice and criticism was devoted to the exploration of family histories, places of origin, migration, local communities, material contexts, embodied experiences and situated forms of knowledge (Heise 2008, 382). The conceptualization of many of these local subjects as composites of different cultural, racial, ethnic, religious and national traditions paved the way for the recent shift from the localized subject within the nation to one that “reaches across national borders in what has variously come to be theorized as critical internationalism, transnationalism, diaspora, or cosmopolitanism” (Heise 2008, 382). Jonathan Arac takes the argument one step further when he describes the potential positive outcomes of a more comparativist outlook on American literary history:

It is quite common to think about American literary history in relation to American economic history, American social history, American political history, American religious

² Significantly, the International American Studies Association (IASA) was founded in June 2000 at a meeting convened by Djelal Kadir and held at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Conference and Study Center in Bellagio, Italy.

history, etc., but it is much less common to think about American literary history in relation to Mexican literary history, French literary history, Russian literary history, Chinese literary history, etc. I do not mean that no studies have ever made connections of work to work or author to author, but we have barely begun thinking about how to compare the large literary history of the US to the literary history of another nation. (2008, 2-3)

In this sense, in his 2010 book *Global Matters* Paul Jay explores how the transnational turn in literary studies has resulted in a remapping of the locations we study. This remapping, he contends, “has grown out of a focus on migration and cross-cultural experience, generally, and a particular interest in tracing complicated histories of displacement. In the United States this has led scholars in African, Asian, Native American and Latina/o literary and cultural studies to turn what used to be a narrow US focus into a hemispheric and even global one, so that the locations that now come under the rubric of ‘American Studies’ have become transnational” (8).

If we want to study literature in light of a globalized world order, Oliver Scheiding wonders “what categories—besides the larger analytical frameworks launched by a variety of ‘turns’ in current literary and cultural studies—could replace genre, period, and authors, all predicated by the nation?” (2019, 42). To that question, he goes on to provide answers given by various scholars who “seek to emphasize the similarities and cultural connecting points in literature that transgress historical periods and national boundaries” (43). In their variety, transnational approaches have often been associated with comparative literature, but it must be clarified that “while all transnational approaches are necessarily comparative, not all comparative scholarship is transnational, nor is all comparative scholarship collaborative in its genesis or gesture” (Hornung and Morgan 2019, 2). Indeed, in literary studies there have historically coexisted a number of different paradigms for studying the discipline within a transnational framework, principal among them being comparative literature, gender studies and postcolonial studies. These paradigms not only focus on literature written in English, but may cover “literature written on every continent and in myriad languages from a point of view increasingly critical of colonialism and the kind of Eurocentrism informing early approaches to the comparative study of literature” (Jay 2010, 5). As Jay contends, since the late 1990s, the discourses of multiculturalism, border studies, diaspora studies and cosmopolitanism have been invoked in various ways to help underwrite a transnational approach to literary studies (2010, 5).

In her 2004 presidential address to the American Studies Association (ASA), Shelley Fisher Fishkin spoke against the national paradigm of the US as a clearly bordered geographical and political space, and called for projects that analyze America, quoting Paul Lauter, as “part of a world system, in which the exchange of commodities, the flow of capital, and the iterations of cultures know no borders” (Fishkin 2005, 21). Until recently, she observed, “the world was still divided into ‘us’ and ‘them,’ the ‘domestic’ and the ‘foreign,’ the ‘national’ and ‘international’” (21). But the complexity

of today's American studies requires "that we pay as much attention to the ways in which ideas, people, culture, and capital have circulated and continue to circulate physically, and virtually, throughout the world"; it demands "that we see the inside and outside, domestic and foreign, national and international, as interpenetrating" (Fishkin 2005, 21). In a similar vein, Emory Elliott proclaimed in a 2007 essay that in a time of deep political division, national paranoia and global uncertainty, scholars in the humanities, arts and social sciences across the globe "must learn from each other, share perspectives, and continue to broaden the range of ideas needed to bring about change" (2). He confessed that, after attending a conference in 1982 in Paris, he found himself "embarrassed to realize that I was sadly ignorant of the excellent research in American studies being done abroad, and I was disturbed by how parochial our conception of American studies in the United States had become" (7).

Transnational outlooks on American literature are very much linked to the internationalization of American studies. In Jay's view, before the advent of contemporary theory and the social, cultural and political changes that took place in the second half of the twentieth century, literary study was organized on the basis of a national model: "English literature involved the study of British, Irish and Scottish literature; and American literature the study of writing in the US" (2006, 176). This model "has progressively given way to transnational forms of study that tend to treat English less as a national literature than a language, in which people write from disparate parts of the globe" (Jay 2006, 176), and has placed American literature in a hemispheric or global context.

This overview of transnational American studies is intended to be a transnational act in itself and that is one of the reasons I conceived it. So, I will now resort to what David Simpson has called a rhetoric of "situatedness" (2002) and formulate, as a Spanish scholar, some thoughts on the issues we are discussing. As a Spanish Americanist, it seems to me that in 2020, three decades after the rise of the transnational turn, it is about time to address the pertinence of "doing" transnational American studies, with a special mention to their presence in my country.

The ASA is, arguably, the main American studies association in the US. If international academic conferences, besides publications, are an index of the state of the art of a specific area, it may be deduced that the annual meetings of the ASA can give us some valid, verifiable data to help us conduct a sort of empirical and comparative study about the presence of transnational approaches to American studies. As a minimally reliable sample, I will use results from the past ten ASA conferences (2010-2019), which gathered some two thousand panelists, for my comparative purposes. To begin with, it must be clarified that the papers read at the ASA meetings, apart from being allocated to their corresponding panels, are also classified in an alphabetically organized "Subject Index" of some one hundred subjects which, with slight annual variations, usually begins with "African American Studies" and ends with "Working-Class Studies." One of those subjects is, precisely, "Global/Transnational." If we now consider the papers

that have been classified under this rubric in the past ten ASA meetings, we see that the numbers range from 45 (2013) to 114 (2012), 63 being the average number—a telling and considerable amount, indeed. In addition, every year the International Committee of the ASA organizes “International Talkshops,” in which the transnational has been a prominent theme over the same ten years, with titles such as “Building Transnational American Studies Scholarship” (2019), “Transnational Research from Emergency to Emerging Projects” (2018), “Transnational Performances, Practices, and Responsibilities of Dissent” (2017), “Teaching American Studies Transnationally” (2014), “Transnational American Studies and North America” (2013) and “The Politics of Transnational Publishing” (2012) (American Studies Association).

If we now turn to the sister association of ASA in Spain, the Spanish Association for American Studies (SAAS), likewise exclusively focused on US studies, we can verify that throughout its twenty-five years of history and its fourteen biannual conferences, on only two occasions has transnational studies figured prominently—I am referring to the 2013 and 2015 conferences, respectively entitled “TRANS: The Poetics and Politics of Crossing in the US” and “American Communities in a Global World.” My general impression is that, although Spanish academics are by nature transnational critics of American literature and culture, we tend to be more nationalistic in our scholarship; we tend to focus purely on the US and often miss the privileged position in which we find ourselves, as foreign observers of a culture that is not our own, to build critical and analytical bridges between the two sides of the Atlantic in our scholarship. This, arguably, could be related to the structure of our university studies with respect to disciplines—we do not have “American Studies” departments in Spain—and to the strict lines that still separate one area of studies from the other in Spanish academia, in spite of much talk about the blessings of interdisciplinarity. Perhaps this would explain our tendency, especially in literary studies, to avoid crossing the line of what is strictly US-American. Still, the situation is changing, as the publications I mention in the next section indicate.

2. A FRUITFUL BIBLIOGRAPHIC FIELD

Today, transnational approaches to American literature are much more than an emerging field, as the ceaselessly rising number of publications and conferences organized on the theme shows. In this second part of the article I provide a brief critical overview of some of the most outstanding titles and trends since the 1990s, without the slightest intention of being exhaustive and all-inclusive, because that would be an almost encyclopedic task.

Elliott explains that, in her essay “What We Know that We Don’t Know: Remapping American Literary History,” published in *American Literary History* in 1994, Carolyn Porter drew attention to what she recognized to be a major blind spot in American literary and American studies research. Porter asserted that the

attention of US-based American literature scholars had been focused narrowly upon the national literature with little regard to the relationships of American literature with the literatures of other countries (Elliott 2007, 8). Porter therefore encouraged US-based Americanists to turn their attention to the ways in which the US is interconnected culturally to Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America and to put more emphasis upon “a historicized politics of location” (quoted in Elliott 2007, 8). Since this transnational spark was lit by Porter and others in the early 1990s, numerous articles and book-length studies have appeared both in the US and abroad. In fact, two titles appearing in the 1990s are often quoted as major pioneering volumes: *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, edited by Amy Kaplan and Pease (1993), and *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narrative*, edited by Pease (1994). My study, nevertheless, focuses on work published in the twenty-first century.

Four important volumes published after 2000—Pease’s *The New American Exceptionalism* (2009), *Globalizing American Studies*, edited by Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (2010), Paul Giles’s *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (2011) and Juan Carlos Rowe’s *Afterlives of Modernism: Liberalism, Transnationalism, Political Critique* (2011)—are all of them notable accomplishments against traditional conceptions and teaching of American studies. As Evan Rhodes reminds us (2012, 899), the claim that American society and the nation itself are “exceptions” to the historical rules that guide other national histories is deeply ingrained in the self-image of the US, from John Winthrop’s “Dreams of City on a Hill” (1630) through Alexis de Tocqueville’s insistence on fundamental egalitarianism of the US (1835-1840), to Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” (1921). Rhodes further contends that accounts of American exceptionalism have most often transmitted positive historical narratives of the US that have “obscured national catastrophes such as slavery, Native American genocide, and US imperialism” (2012, 899). But it appears that no moment in the history of American studies has been so shaped by an antiexceptionalist position as its current transnational turn. In conceptualizing the US beyond the nation-state and emphasizing its often unacceptable international policies pursued in the name of exceptionalism, the four transnationally oriented volumes mentioned above address the realities of US global power and “make an effort to move beyond the metacritique of anti-exceptionalism and toward a global American studies exploring the kinds of knowledge that can be built in its wake” (Rhodes 2012, 900)—in fact, the transnational turn has also been called the “Postexceptionalist Turn” (Pease 2011, 23). Just to mention one particular example, in the first chapter of *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (2011, 29-69), reviewed by Rhodes (2012, 907), Giles argues for a more worldly canon of early American authors, including Timothy Dwight and Ebenezer Cook, whose writings deal with the transatlantic exchange of intellectual and economic property in the southern US colonies, and remaps Cotton Mather’s Puritan epic *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702) by rereading it in terms of its debt to the work of John Dryden.

Other volumes published in the past ten years that are quoted almost inevitably by most subsequent authors have been edited, coedited or coauthored by Pease within “Re-Mapping the Transnational: A Dartmouth Series in American Studies,” which he chief edits for Dartmouth College Press. These volumes bear witness to the emergence of transnational American studies in the wake of the Cold War, which is viewed as the most significant reconfiguration of the discipline since its inception. As Pease contends in his introduction to the series, “the shock waves generated by a newly globalized world order demanded an understanding of America’s embeddedness within global and local processes rather than scholarly reaffirmations of its splendid isolation and exceptionalism” (Shu and Pease 2015, n.p.). A landmark critical volume in this collection is *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies*, coedited by Pease with Winfried Fluck and Rowe in 2011. As noted on its back cover, the volume is the outcome of a transatlantic conversation on the topic “Transnational America” conducted over a three-year period from 2007 to 2009, in which scholars from universities in the US and Germany met to assess the historical significance of and examine the academic prospects for the transnational turn in American studies (Fluck et al. 2011). Pease’s introduction elucidates the broad sweeps that have marked the field and provides many of the critical cornerstones around which twenty-first-century American studies will continue to be built in the coming decades. “America,” Pease claims, remains the commonly accepted self-representation in American studies associations, but “the term ‘transnational’ has replaced ‘multicultural,’ ‘postcolonial,’ and ‘postnational’ as the most frequently invoked qualifier” (2011, 1). We may disagree with this statement, for such terms have, in fact, maintained their presence in current scholarship as can be ascertained in a myriad of recent publications. However, continues Pease, “in acquiring this status, the ‘transnational’ has exercised a monopoly of assimilative power that has enabled it to subsume and replace competing spatial and temporal orientations to the object of study, including multicultural American studies, borderlands critique, postcolonial American studies, and the more general turn to American cultural studies” (2011, 1).

Other more specific but also state-of-the-field collections in the above-mentioned Dartmouth series are Yuan Shu and Pease’s *American Studies as Transnational Practice* (2015), Laura Bieger, Ramón Saldívar and Johannes Voelz’s *The Imaginary and Its Worlds: American Studies after the Transnational Turn* (2013) and Helmbrecht Breinig’s *Hemispheric Imaginations: North American Fictions of Latin America* (2016). Of course, I have only provided a small number of titles, which does not do justice to the enormous outpour of publications on transnational American studies produced only during the past two decades. In fact, two major publishing companies have recently launched volumes that compile essays on various topics and approaches. In 2017, Goyal edited *The Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature*. Divided into four sections—“Shape of the Field,” “Literary Histories,” “Critical Geographies” and “Literature and Geopolitics”—its fifteen chapters provide a history of the field, key debates and instances of literary readings that, as stated on the back cover, “convey

the way in which transnationalism may be seen as a method, not just a description of literary work that engages more than one nation” (Goyal 2017b). It is difficult not to agree with her when she asserts in her introduction to the volume that the transnational turn “offers a valuable occasion for examination and critique” (2017a, 9).

2019 saw the publication of *The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies*, coedited by three scholars from three continents—Nina Morgan (US), Alfred Hornung (Germany) and Takayuki Tatsumi (Japan)—something which in itself speaks of a transnational collaborative project, as does the list of the thirty-one authors, scholars from universities in all parts of the world. The five sections that comprise the volume focus on theories of transnational American studies, culture and performance, translating texts and contexts, political imaginaries and remapping geographies and genres. *The Routledge Companion* is, in fact, an offspring of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies (JTAS)*, an online journal that was founded in 2009 by Fishkin, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Hornung and Tatsumi and is published by Stanford University. *JTAS* was launched with the idea of broadening the interdisciplinary study of American cultures in a transnational context and, as they state on their website, with the mission of creating “an open-access [...] forum for Americanists in the global academic community, where scholars are increasingly interrogating borders both within and outside the nation and focusing on the multiple intersections and exchanges that flow across those borders” (*Journal of Transnational American Studies*).

In the interest of space, this overview must inevitably pass over many compelling contributions to *The Routledge Companion*, but I would like to just briefly comment on two particular examples that have given me a clear view of the utility of transnational approaches to American authors, themes and genres. Hornung’s chapter, entitled “Confucius and America: The Moral Constitution of Statecraft” (2019), not only explains the Western attraction to Chinese culture, as evidenced in Ezra Pound’s series of Chinese Cantos (1940), but also dismantles the traditional reading of Benjamin Franklin’s famous catalog of thirteen virtues—as presented in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1793) and for which he has been so harshly ridiculed and undermined by some critics—by unveiling that said catalog was inspired by the morals of the Chinese philosopher Confucius, through its Jesuit Latin translation. In addition, Confucius’s example also guarantees the “pursuit of happiness” as one of the inalienable rights, next to life and liberty, with which all human beings are endowed by their Creator, as laid down in the *Declaration of Independence*, and both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson affirmed the connection between the practice of virtue and happiness as prefigured by Confucius (Hornung 2019, 156). As a reader, I have been able to ascertain how this transnational reading turns upside down two quintessential American tenets as traditionally transmitted by nationalistic, US-centered approaches.

For his part, in “The Performance of American Popular Culture” (2019) Swiss scholar Boris Vejdovsky starts off from the “Eastern Tropism” of Henry James’s “international novels,” particularly *The American* ([1877] 1978), to reconceptualize the Western,

liberating it from what Kaplan called “the tenacious grasp of American exceptionalism” (2004). This transnational reading of the Western mobilizes “both a geography and a global repertoire of ideas that circulate in a form and style under the peculiar auspices of ‘the Western’ as a quintessential genre of American popular culture” (Hornung and Morgan 2019, 6). It is my contention that Vejdovsky’s essay constitutes a clear case of what Fluck has called “aesthetic transnationalism” in what I consider a landmark essay, “A New Beginning? Transnationalisms” (2011), which I briefly focus on in what follows due to its importance for transnational American literary studies.

According to Fluck, the use of the term *transnationalism* signals an attempt to go beyond the borders of the nation-state as an object of analysis. In an age of globalization, “such a project is obviously timely and the description of transnational studies as a bold step across borders is ideally suited to serve as a commonsense legitimation” (2011, 365). However, it is not enough to discuss transnationalism merely as an interpretive procedure that is open minded enough to go beyond the borders of the nation-state. There is not just one method or interpretive procedure called transnationalism, Fluck contends; there are several different versions of transnationalism that give different reasons for going beyond the borders of the nation-state and envision different rewards in doing so (366). The transnational, thus, cannot be separated from the national from which it takes its point of departure. Seen from this perspective, transnational American studies, despite their programmatic claims to go beyond the American nation-state, also imply theories for and about “America” (367). Fluck goes on to propose two basic paradigms, which he calls *aesthetic transnationalism* and *political transnationalism*.

Aesthetic transnationalism does not necessarily mean a form of transnationalism that focuses on cultural or aesthetic objects, but rather one that “describes transnational phenomena in terms of an enriching, revitalizing, sometimes almost intoxicating experience” (Fluck 2011, 368). Following Fluck’s argument, when American culture is no longer explained on narrow national grounds but reconceptualized in relation to “a multitude that extends beyond national borders,” it can appear more creative and aesthetically far more interesting than the white WASP culture canonized by American exceptionalism, so that “a ‘Puritan’ culture gives way to a culture of sensuous abundance” (369). Russ Castronovo has also written on aesthetics and transnationalism in the US, concluding that “transnational aesthetics can encourage the widespread dispersion of new and exotic ideas and feelings as part of an implicit politics” (2017, 77).

As regards political transnationalism, Fluck argues that transnationalism is not only used to outline a new aesthetic configuration but also to envision new ways of political change. Thus, political transnationalism may also be called “transnational radicalism” (Fluck 2011, 372) because it is an extension of cultural radicalism beyond the nation-state. As Fluck sees it, there are two models competing with each other on the basis of this premise. One envisions a move to “collectivities not subsumed by the nation-state—whether the borderlands, the Black Atlantic, the Pacific Rim, the American hemisphere, diasporic communities, or urban networks” (372). Such a

shift increases the stature of those on the margins who have not been interpellated by the American nation-state. The other model offers a form of resistance, a type of political transnationalism whose goal is the extension of the new, post-1960s social movements in the US beyond national borders in order to “find new allies, now on a transnational basis” (373). That is, this second version of political transnationalism “is the counterprogram to the state of exception that characterizes the American nation-state and manifests itself in the formation of a national identity that is based on racialization, violent exclusion, or enforced deterritorialization” (374).

I consider that an outstanding example of what Fluck calls political transnationalism is a study entitled “Contested Passages: Migrants Crossing the Río Grande and the Mediterranean Sea,” written by Spanish scholar Ana María Manzanás Calvo in 2006, which, to my view, has not received the international—or transnational, meaning, in this case, beyond Spain—recognition it deserves. In this timely essay, Manzanás Calvo studies the migratory flows from the northern coast of Africa to Spain across the narrow Mediterranean strip separating the two continents, one of the most deadly international borders—more so, in fact, than the line separating the US from Mexico. In her comparative reading of the two geographical, historical and spiritual boundaries, Manzanás Calvo concludes that these two migratory flows from the poor South to the rich North connect the US and Spain with their respective histories:

Mexico and the United States on one side, and Morocco and Spain on the other, share a common past in which cultural, linguistic, national and racial borders are blurred: Mexicans lived in the Southwest of the United States, and claim that territory as part of the mythic Aztlán; Africans lived in Spain for eight centuries, and secured a strong hold on the southern part of the country, what they called Al-Andalus. Aztlán and Al-Andalus thus provide the imaginaries of Mexicans and North Africans with a historical and mythic referent that constantly conjures the inextricable presence of Mexico in the United States and of Africa in Europe. (Manzanás Calvo 2006, 765)

At a time when Donald Trump’s wall seems to be a clear sign of the US’s “exceptional” status, this transnational comparison of migratory movements across rivers and seas, through borders and boundaries between two worlds, presents the “counterprogram to the state of exception that characterizes the American nation-state” Fluck speaks of (2011, 374).

Going through all of these publications, one perceives that there are certain keywords or terms that appear repeatedly and speak for themselves as cornerstones of transnational American studies. The list is extensive, but I will mention, in no particular order, the most recurrent ones: remapping, reciprocities, critiques of imperialism, interdisciplinarity, collaboration, connectivity translation/s, expanded focus, geographical expansion, connections, interaction, (avoidance of) stratification, polycentric, resistance, worlding, relational deterritorialization, transterritorial,

oceanic, transculturations, affiliations, comparisons, intertextuality and intermediality, liminality, dialogues and encounters, intersectional, polyglot, pluriversality, anti-identitarian, hybrid, in-between, crosscultural, crossethnic, transpatriotism, crossfertilization, flow and flexibility. At the same time, it must be clear by now that a transnational approach to American studies implies sympathies with other approaches or “area studies” such as hemispheric American studies, Black/Red Atlantic studies, archipelagic studies, transoceanic studies, island studies, transindigenous studies, planetary studies, global and postcolonial studies and transatlantic, transpacific or antipodean studies (Hornung and Morgan 2019, 3).

Speaking of transatlantic/transoceanic American studies, it is obligatory for me, as a Spanish scholar devoted to the internationalization of American studies, to mention a recent volume edited by a team of Spanish scholars under the title *A Critical Gaze from the Old World: Transatlantic Perspectives on American Studies* (Durán et al. 2018). This volume is the product of a joint collaborative effort to bring together critical views from Europe by contributors who are leading Americanists working in Spanish academia, from a multidisciplinary, inclusive and comparativist perspective. The volume constitutes a testimony to the current state of research on transnational American studies in Spain, which occupies a key position in the transatlantic appreciation of the field. As stated by the editors on the publisher’s website, “ranging from Romanticism to Postmodernism, from the human to the post-human, from the Salem witchcraft trials to the Holocaust, from the Other to the Zombie, from fiction to history, from African-American slavery to Native-American reservations, from Spanish Unamunian philosophy to Whitmanesque poetry,” the entire volume is grounded in a transatlantic vision and dialogue (Peter Lang, 2018). In other words, by comparing cultural spaces, literary traditions and social realities between the US and Europe through a critical gaze from abroad, the authors look from one shore of the Atlantic to illuminate, understand or intervene in what happens on the other.

Needless to say, transnational approaches are also applied to more specific, poignant areas within literary studies, such as gender, race and ethnicity, so that many of the essays published in the volumes mentioned above deal with specific fields of study within American literature. Again, I must reduce my account to just a few instances that may illustrate the point.

2.1. Gender Studies and Transnationalism

In our era of globalization, most of the issues affecting women around the world are shared because of the flow of capital, people, goods and ideas across borders. Therefore, forging alliances and solidarities across borders is an explicit feminist goal, such that transnational feminism is inherent to the most recent feminist political project (Desai 2007, 334). However, as Manisha Desai explains, contemporary transnational feminism is different from its nineteenth-century predecessor in a number of ways. The earlier

transnational feminism was primarily focused on suffrage, with the exception of socialist women's movements, which focused on economic and social issues as well. But activists in nineteenth-century transnational feminism were primarily from Europe and the US, whereas today transnational feminism is much more global, with the issues ranging from the social to the economic and cultural and a human rights-based approach having led to a shift in agenda and organizations (Desai 2007, 334-35). In her essay "Gender and Transnational American Studies," Sarah Ruffing Robbins explains what it means, in practice, to "gender" transnational American studies and, conversely, what the study of gender gains through sustained dialogue with transnational American studies (2019, 183). In her overview of the field, Robbins reviews a number of recent publications pertaining to the humanities and the social sciences that demonstrate that "gender and transnationalism seem eminently harmonious" and that "feminist scholarship has moved away from overgeneralized categories such as 'women' to addressing identity structures such as race and social class as interacting with gender" (2019, 184, 187).

Another recent essay that deserves attention is Crystal Parikh's "Transnational Feminism," where she points out that transnational scholars and critics of gender and sexuality have begun to "develop a multinational and multilocational approach" that has the effect of "pluralizing feminist politics" (2017, 223). In Parikh's view, transnational feminism arose as a theoretical challenge rooted in various scholarly and activist experiences in order to dispute presumptions of a shared state of patriarchal oppression and the category of "woman" as, in itself, a readily distinguishable identity or social position across space and time. She even goes as far as to assert that transnational feminist literature is not only a critical practice or method, but also a "literary genre" that has taken shape only very recently (225). After analyzing two feminist novels by women of color with a transnational agenda—Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* (2012) and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013)—Parikh concludes that, as a critical practice, transnational feminism allows us to reassess "worldly" women writers from earlier periods "who pursued their subjects beyond and against the social and political constraints of national culture" (225).

My own contribution to *The Routledge Companion* mentioned above, entitled "Transnationalism, Autobiography, and Criticism" (Durán 2019), proposes cultural translations between the US, Canada, England and Spain as an instance of intersection between gender and transnationalism. My examination of the interrelations that exist between the writers Susan Gubar, Margaret Atwood, Virginia Woolf and Rosa Montero on the basis of their life writings establishes autobiography as a genre fit for transnational readings, in so far as their existential realities and feminist attitudes, as literary women and critics, prove to be more cross-nationally related than purely nationalistic.

Gender scholars have also emphasized a transnational turn in lesbian and gay studies and queer theory. In "Queer Transnationalism," Petrus Liu traces how transnational analysis since the 1990s has complicated the familiar blueprint of the 1969 Stonewall riots-based queer American history, making visible other sexual histories. Following

the inspirational trail of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Liu concludes that “we can no longer assume that homosexuality has a single origin,” since “queer theory is, after all, a discourse that mobilizes a definitional indeterminacy” (2017, 247). For some, he clarifies, “the transnational turn seems to shift queer theory out of the comfort zone of American postwar history in a way that entails a loss of definition, epistemological certainty, and conceptual anchorage” (247-48). Likewise, Martin Joseph Ponce’s “Transnational Queer Imaginaries” addresses critical accounts of American literatures inside and outside the US borders. As he acknowledges, “to bring to bear a transnational analytic to the study of queer US literature is to interrogate the national frame of ‘America’ as the organizing principle of literary and sexual history and to open up the field to hemispheric, oceanic, postcolonial, and diasporic approaches” (2015, 224). Following this argument, the main convergence between transnational US literary and queer studies would lie in their shared critiques of American political and sexual exceptionalism and the narratives of capitalist and queer progress that underlie those fantasies. In Ponce’s view, the field of queer literary studies has been extended by examining recent “homonationalist” processes and this has even brought about an autocritique of the nationalism of much American LGBTQ writing that has informed, and sometimes thwarted, the literary efforts of various writers across genres and historical periods (226-27).

2.2. Ethnic Studies and Transnationalism

Ethnic literatures in the US have also received much attention from both defenders and critics of transnationalism. An interesting viewpoint is presented by Ramazani in “A Transnational Poetics”, where he undertakes a broad sweep of historical and geographical intercultural connections of world poets and poetry. Ramazani starts by giving a thorough account of modernism as profoundly crosscultural, translocal and transnational through his reading of, for instance, T. S. Eliot and Pound’s achievements as being incomprehensible without seriously taking into account the global reach of a polyglot and transcultural modernism that interweaves “Euroclassicism and Chinese ideograms, cockney gossip and Sanskrit parable, Confucius and Thomas Jefferson, the thunderous God of the Hebrew Bible and a Brahmin Creator God” (2006, 335). His conclusion is that under the conditions of post-Cold War US hegemony, deconstructing mononationalist paradigms and revealing the web of dialogic interconnections that belie them is an imperious necessity. In his words, “a complex and nuanced picture of cross-national and cross-civilizational fusion and friction is badly needed today, and denationalized disciplines in the humanities may be able to help provide it” (355). However, at the same time, he concedes that transnationalism is not inherently emancipatory any more than nationalism is always reactionary, and has words of caution against recuperating without revision the “international modernist” paradigm articulated by an earlier generation of critics, since its Eurocentrism left scant room for the developing world and its supposed

universalism tended to de-ethnicize writers (350). “To see all literatures as ‘global’ in the same way” due to the globalization of capital, he contends, risks “evacuating the specificities of intercultural friction and assimilation. When using such contested terms as *transnationalism*, *hybridization*, and *creolization*, we need to remind ourselves constantly that the cultures, locations, and identities connected or juxtaposed are themselves agglomerations of exceedingly complex origin” (353; italics in the original). Ramazani’s proposal is, therefore, to opt for a *translocal poetics*, neither localist nor universalist, neither nationalist nor vacantly globalist, which highlights the dialogic intersections of specific discourses, genres, techniques and forms of diverse origins (350). Unfortunately, he does not provide examples of how what he calls translocal poetics differs from the transnational poetics of his title.

To continue with ethnicity, Tatsumi’s “Thinking after the Hemispheric” presents a somewhat controversial view that has repeatedly been contested, particularly by Latino/a studies scholars in the US. In one section of his essay, Tatsumi contends that “at this point the vision of planetarity will lead us to question the *artificial discursive framework of ethnicity*,” which he claims “has been revealed to be an effect of modern Western culture from the beginning. The political stance that remains to us is no more than ‘strategic essentialism,’ as Gayatri Spivak pointed out” (2019, 365; italics added). As an example of strategic essentialism he mentions his own cultural background as a Japanese scholar, and aligns himself with Japanese-American writer Karen Tei Yamashita’s radical critique of the concept of “pure Japanese” when she wonders, in the prologue to her fourth novel *Circle K Cycles* (2001), “what could it be to be a ‘pure Japanese’? [...] Purity of race was not something I valued or believed to be important, and yet, in Japan, I was trying so hard to pass, to belong” (quoted in Tatsumi 2019, 365). In fact, Tatsumi’s controversial thesis about the “artificial discursive framework of ethnicity” sounds very similar to the one propounded by Werner Sollors in his now classic *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (1986), where he basically demystifies ethnicity. It seems logical that in a global world, more and more intellectuals align themselves with a deromanticized view of ethnic identity. But it is also very true that much ethnic studies scholarship hails nationalistic views of ethnic pride and cultural heritage as a political weapon with which to fight American imperialism and superiority and (re)claim their own cultural, social and political power. More specifically, some scholars of Chicana/o literature speak of a conflicted relationship between the borderlands paradigm pioneered in Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) and transnational approaches as a natural next step in their scholarship. As John Alba Cutler has observed, “transnationalism appears to threaten hard-won institutional gains for Chicana/o studies by overshadowing the work of local actors,” and scholars and activists fear that their studies may end up being subsumed within “an amorphous, sometimes ahistorical transnationalism” (2017, 157-58). Again, if Ramazani warned that in a transnationalized reframing of American studies, nationality and ethnicity still need to play important roles if we wish to avoid an updated version of the universalist “golden treasury” paradigm that erases national and ethnic experience,

similar words of caution from ethnic scholars must be attended to when applying transnationalism to specific literatures that claim their own critical paradigms.

One such cautionary view was presented by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih in their 2005 edited volume *Minor Transnationalism*, a term coined to urge a move beyond the limitations of globalization theory, ethnic studies and transnationalism in the study of minority cultures. The editors aptly criticize the way in which academic approaches to transnationalism tend to break down into a binary vertical model that opposes the global to the local and the mainstream to the minority, relegating the latter to romanticized views of ethnicity while consigning the former to the category of an elite experience. In their words, “what is lacking in the binary model of above-and-below, the utopic and dystopic, and the global and the local is an awareness and recognition of the creative interventions that networks of minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries” (Lionnet and Shih 2005a, 7). The lens of minor transnationalism, the two critics believe, would help scholars to analyze the horizontal relationships among diverse minority groups.

To round off the discussion of transethnicity, an interesting publication produced, again, by Spanish scholars with a transnationalist agenda is the volume *Selves in Dialogue: A Transethnic Approach to American Life Writing*, described by its editor Begoña Simal as “a multifarious collection of transethnic explorations of American life writing” (2011, 13). The collection aims at establishing crossethnic dialogues, with each chapter taking a comparative or contrastive view between at least two different cultural traditions that cultivate a spirit of “mixing rather than segregating” (Simal 2011, 13). Simal explains that “transethnic” reflects at once the comparative approach of this volume, as well as suggesting a critical, revisionist agenda regarding ethnicity. Reading this volume one perceives that the transnational, transethnic approaches to American literature are finally gaining their well-deserved status after decades of the excessive pigeon-holing practiced by intraethnic literary criticism.³

3. CONCLUSION

As has been shown, transnational American studies leaves behind the “national” origin of reference as an analytical tool and results in various strategies of analysis and intellectual shifts that together produce an interpretive project “less vulnerable to the ideological reproduction characteristic of American Studies’ peculiar form of American exceptionalism and less confined to a bilateral or hierarchical model” (Hornung and Morgan 2019, 2). In other words, this revisionist approach reconceptualizes the US domain as a series of historical and cultural encounters “between near and far, rather than regarding the subject as bound inextricably to one specific site of geographical integrity” (Giles 2019, 34). Transnational discourses, therefore, have changed the

³ For a review of this volume, see Isabel Durán (2013).

ways in which Americanists imagine their disciplinary objectives as well as the practical context for the articulation of their scholarly projects (Pease 2011, 6). Clearly, transnational approaches are good news for non-American Americanists, who, as transnational scholars, should always be inclined to apply such paradigms in our literary analysis. Likewise, scholarship on American literature produced beyond the US is gaining more and more importance and critical interest, not only thanks to the transnational turn, but also to the globalization of the book industry and open-access journals. As Elliott humbly admitted in his 2007 essay quoted above,

The arrogant assumption that we who live in the City on the Hill are the best, the brightest, and the strongest, who know what is best not only for ourselves but for the rest of the world, is a dangerous and deadly error. For a nation as self-satisfied and self-isolating as the United States, the need to humbly seek and carefully consider outside perspectives and criticism is essential to the future of the country and its citizens. As Americanists, we need to listen and really hear all voices and make greater efforts to engage with colleagues from around the world, not only to share our knowledge of the United States but to learn other ways of perceiving, thinking, and behaving in the world. (18)

Another way to look at transnational American studies is in terms of how it affects the question of identity. As Fluck argues, transnationalism “is not just about going beyond the nation, or across national boundaries, which is neither a new phenomenon nor a novel analytical idea” (2011, 375). Instead, the relevant fact about transnationalism is its potential for forging new identities: “Transnationalism [...] raises basic questions about the meaning of national belonging and identification, or cultural identity, when a population is dispersed broadly spatially, following different historical trajectories in different locations. It also assigns a formative power to encounters between people of different and national backgrounds, who are transformed by the encounters in different ways” (Fluck 2011, 375). Undoubtedly, we must preserve our ties to the history of the discipline, connect with the new circumstances of the present and forestall the development of the future. So, even if transnational American studies seems either too celebratory of a crossroads of cultures or too dystopian in its attack on the US empire, and even if we must be attentive to the critical voices that claim that such a methodology reinforces American exceptionalism and erases difference, it seems difficult to argue for ignoring the ways in which the globe has always been connected, perhaps never more so than today, through networks of power, commerce, culture and resistance (Goyal 2017a, 3).

As a Spanish Americanist, I do not foresee that the transnational turn will modify academic programs or syllabi in Spain—we will continue offering courses on periods, authors or genres of “US Literature” at our universities—nor do I envision that transnationalism will do away with “American Studies” departments in the US or other countries where they exist. But, clearly, our teaching and scholarship will have to reflect that literature is not always and not only the expression of a national essence that compels

us to adopt mononationalist paradigms. In this way, transnational approaches will impel us to reformulate the basic object and scope of literary analysis in and about the US. Or, as Giles puts it, “it is not that nationalism will simply disappear in the twenty-first century, any more than Christianity has disappeared in the twentieth; but its capacity to operate as a fundamental social principle will be seriously diminished” (1998, 539). As I write these lines from my Madrid home, in the midst of the global confinement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, I think of all those ideas that repeatedly appear in the daily press about the coronavirus: that the virus does not heed national boundaries; that the post-COVID-19 world will be a different one altogether; that the pandemic is nurturing the never-ending confrontation between the two world powers, the US and China—let us not forget that Trump has persistently called the coronavirus “the Chinese virus”—that our sense of freedom and privacy, of community building and of democracy will be altered when the pandemic is over; and so on. As Yuval Noah Harari, the author of the global best-selling *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* ([2014] 2020), puts it, “in this time of crisis, we face two particularly important choices. The first is between totalitarian surveillance and citizen empowerment. The second is between nationalist isolation and global solidarity” (2020). Surely, in the years to come—just as happened with the literature produced after the previous world crisis caused by the 9/11 terrorist attacks—the dystopic fiction and nonfiction, indeed all the literature produced by writers, social and political analysts, historians, philosophers and scientists on and about the global coronavirus crisis that changed the world in 2020, will necessarily be of a transnational kind.

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