Transnational Spaces

Celebrating Fifty Years of Literary and Cultural Intersections at NeMLA

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Foreword

As a critical concept and analytical tool in the field of cultural criticism, the "transnational" circulates in close, yet usually contested, proximity to terms such as the "transcultural" or the "postcolonial." On an immediate level, they all register, with different points of emphasis, origin, and intellectual debt, the demographic mobility and geopolitical change of recent decades. In tandem, as a mode of cultural categorization, the "transnational" vies with descriptive containers such as "global" and "world" in attempting to make sense of cultural encounters and exchanges that exceed national borders and the classificatory logics of ethnic, racial and cultural kinship that result from a nostalgic overinvestment in, what was, the monolingual nation. While a lot of energy has gone into differentiating in capillary detail, what each term offers or occludes, the overarching point is that this body of creative, critical thinking has generated an assemblage of dissent which makes the nation and the belief in a singular national culture unrecognizable to itself. This assemblage amounts to a political project of decolonizing thought and practice. It is also the hesitant response to the question of how to approach the study of languages, cultures, and literatures now, and a sharp recognition of Rebecca Walkowitz's pertinent observation that "viewed from the perspective of migration, the concept of literary belonging may have outlived its usefulness" (2015, 25). *Transnational Spaces* is an important new contribution to the ongoing and multi-faceted conversation about the location of our disciplinary fields in these debates and about how to engage productively and imaginatively with them.

For teachers and researchers in Modern Languages, there is undoubted value in prising away the "transnational" from its affiliated terms to dwell on its specific implications, and on the nature of our implication in its border-crossing energies and critique of "literary belonging". As a vector of critical analysis, the transnational reiterates a particular set of foundational questions that challenge our own disciplinary boundaries. For some time now, the limits and limitations of reading national literatures and cultures within a static monolingual frame have been evident. Yet notwithstanding the heft of Emily Apter's contention that "languages are inherently transnational" (2008, 583), it has been difficult to go beyond the ingrained ideological and institutional attachment to language, nation, and identity as an organizing principle of analysis. Habituated practices of methodological nationalism or ethno-nationalism are still forces to be reckoned with. Degree programs and their curriculum still tend to reinforce this traditional bias. Innovative change to the syllabus is most commonly additive rather than structurally revisionary. By opening up the

commonplace conflation of language and territory, the transnational focuses attention on emergent geographies of mobile language communities and on multilingual practices of communication. Translation, in its multiple forms, finds new energy through the expressive potentialities of creative encounters and unpredictable fusions in moments of linguistic and cultural intersection. These transformations occur through what Homi Bhabha has called "interstitial intimacy" (1994, 13) in spaces where the boundaries of previously articulated differences are traversed. Yasemin Yildiz figures such multilingual encounters as "touching tales" (2012, 19) in acknowledgement too of the affective charge of these haptic communications.

Transnational encounters also constitute points of stress and potential fracture. In the introduction to their recent volume, *Multilingual Literature as World Literature*, Jane Hiddleston and Wen-chin Ouyang write of the "friction" caused at linguistic borders when translation appears to falter unable to secure transparency of meaning. Yet rather than judging this brake on communication as a failure, they claim "opacity" and "unintelligibility" (2021, 6) as important instigators of interlingual creativity and co-creation. They are reminders of the illusory investment in linguistic mastery and the fiction of a singular national language. "Friction" also recalls Anna Tsing's book of the same name in which she sets out "an ethnography of global connection" inspired by late twentieth-century demographic and cultural movements, acutely attentive to the interactions of global and local forever imbricated in unequal dispositions of power. Tsing argues that "friction" allows as well as slows down mobility, and through this kinetic tension generates new forms of knowledge as well as opens up fissures and gaps in existing patterns of intelligibility. "Friction" as a critical term is also a reminder that knowledge and its exchange are grounded in material circumstance which doesn't elide differences of power and dominance.

A key reference point in the debate around geopolitical scale, mobility, and agency is Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih's edited volume *Minor Transnationalism*. With great dexterity, they make the case for the relevance of cultural expression which does not align with the formative shaping of the nation-state. At the same time, they remain aware that "minor transnational" subjects, not always recognized in the terms set by the nation, lead precarious lives. Drawing on Édouard Glissant's idea that cultures are never pure entities, but "always already hybrid and relational," they argue that "the transnational is our language to designate this originary multiplicity or creolization, which foregrounds the formative experiences of minorities within and beyond nation-states" (2005, 9). By standing back from a too emphatic instance on the presentness of the transnational, they posit it as a malleable conceptual tool rather than a cultural descriptor. This sense of the transnational as a mode of critiquing the nation while acknowledging its purchase is echoed by Jessica Berman. She figures it

"as a critical optic or practice that engages with the discursive categories of nationality while recognizing activities that critique and transcend them." The term's prefix instantiates a "position, action, or attitude toward the nation and its cultural apparatuses" whose compelling consequence is that the transnational is then "a practice that requires activity from us" (2017, 476). Through its attention to points and practices of interconnectedness and exchange, a transnational optic promises a transformative take on processes of cultural transformation. But this optic also places the burden of its activation onto us.

Transnational Spaces is a timely and necessary intervention in a long conversation about mobility, settlement, borders, power, subjectivity, creativity, language, translation and so much more. It reflects on colonial legacies while recognizing the imprint of other histories. It diversifies understandings of what counts as knowledge, its sites of production, precariousness, and provisionality. It is also abidingly about how we inhabit a shared and increasingly unequal global ecosystem which urgently requires us to script a better "ethnography of global connection." The editors begin their Introduction to this collection by referencing the Covid-19 pandemic and how it illustrates our interconnectedness yet accentuates division not least in unequal access to health care. A transnational critical optic will not resolve such inequalities, but it may foster new understandings of them and intimate the possibility of new alliances and alignments in the spaces of 'interstitial intimacy."

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the memories of the city's diverse communities, the events of 1992 provide opportunities to examine how personal narratives and public history are co-constructed, allowing us to connect this historical moment to other acts of state violence and subsequent protests.

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Yasaman Naraghi received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature (Theory and Criticism) from the University of Washington. Titled *A Natural History of Genius: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Totalitarianism,* her project thinks through the concept of the genius as an ambivalent figure that is revised in the late eighteenth century to denote a singular man capable of originality. This line of inquiry argues that this radical conceptualization of genius sets up systems of knowledge whose logic inevitably promotes a movement towards nationalism and further into totalitarianism. She is currently expanding this project with a particular focus on how genius in this manner functions in the rise of contemporary far-right movements worldwide, where charismatic figures are not necessarily embodiments of transformation but are merely empty husks through which transformation can be articulated. She currently teaches in the English Department at Gonzaga University.

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Introduction: transnational spaces. Celebrating fifty years of literary, cultural, and language intersections at NeMLA

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Writing about the transnational in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and its variants is no easy feat. In an effort to increase and enact safety and health measures, one of the consequences of the virus was the closing off of national borders and the curtailing of the transnational movement of people and ideas. The focus was anything but the crossing of borders which the transnational evokes and which we seek to theorize here. At the same time, if there is one thing which the pandemic has showcased, it is the awareness that no matter how vehemently and forcefully national boundaries are maintained as impervious lines of division, they cannot function as such. The world is truly interconnected, in tragic ways when it comes to viral contagion, as well as rewarding ways when it comes to the flow of people, ideas, and cultures. It is the aim of this book to highlight the multi-pronged ways in which the crossing of national, cultural, and identity boundaries has both enabled and disabled various social and resistant practices in the liminal spaces that define the transnational.

Specifically, *Transnational Spaces: Intersections of Cultures, Languages and Peoples* offers a contribution to the study of our present, transnational condition, from the point of view of an organization, the *Northeast Modern Language Association* that, since its inception in 1969, has sought to provide a space of encounter, debate, and open intellectual exchange for all its members, as well as for the academe at large. As witness to the powerful political, economic, social and cultural transformations of the last half-century, NeMLA has positioned itself at the center of a dynamic international network of critical thinkers and scholars, supporting and welcoming several languages, literatures, and cultures in all their complex historical and geographic dimensions. Over the years, NeMLA has embraced a philosophy of openness, pluralism, and diversity, fostering

debates and confronting emerging trends and issues with increasing commitment and enthusiasm. In this special volume, we have selected eight essays representing different voices and interpretive lenses to reaffirm the significance of a transnational perspective. We are well aware of the ambiguities rendered manifest by globalization, and cognizant of the criticism leveled at multiculturalism, difference, and identity politics; nevertheless, we continue to believe that they are powerful antidotes against the essentializing discourses and grand narratives of the past.

In the *Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha (1994) observes that ever since the late 1960s and early 1970s, the concepts of "homogeneous national cultures" and the "consensual" transmission of cultural heritage have been subjected to a process of transformation and redefinition. Culture is challenged in its generative processes by the very nature of the locations that produce it. Indeed, these spaces are no longer fixed through the binary of metropole/periphery. Rather, they are complicated by the emergence of liminal "contact zones" where the complex flow of peoples and cultural paradigms generate heterogeneous and discontinuous discourses. Through various forms of appropriation and transformation, new forms of expressions are channeled into the arts, music, cinema, and the media. Similarly, highlighting the lack of homogeneity and the porousness that define the spaces in which cultural production thrives, many scholars have continued to challenge the legitimacy of notions such as national literature, universality, cultural absolutism, and the concept of a monolithic cultural identity.

Within the academe, the debates regarding transnationalism's resistant nature have been animated as well as complicated by the systemic transformations that have impacted societies and nations at the political, economic, and cultural level since the twentieth century. On the national level, the U.S. experienced important social turbulences due to the anti-Vietnam War and the women's movements, civil rights struggles, and the gay rights movement. At the international level, the processes of accelerated globalization championed a model of turbo-capitalism and techno-feudalism that has engendered wars, famines, land grabbing, economic spoliations, forced migration, displacement, and enslavement.

Behind the façade of noble athletic principles and values, transnational transactions or events such as the Olympics have for decades promoted a series of exploitative practices aimed at making disproportionately high profits for countries through the procurement of low-cost raw materials and manpower. Governments of host nations continually hire sub-contractors that exert authoritative control on workers, mainly from the Global South, curtailing their human and labor rights in the process. Temporary migrant workers suffer the brunt of these coercive and exploitative practices, lacking the safety of basic

rights, such as health insurance and grievance redress systems that are instead granted to settled migrants.

Yet, while the levels of economic inequality and political disempowerment seem to have reached unprecedented heights, societies have also moved toward cultural forms of co-existence that recognize and nurture hybridity and complex (inter)subjectivities. This shift from a model of sameness to one of relationality in difference has been both celebrated as revolutionary and challenged as limited.

On the scholarly side, practices have increasingly embraced critical paradigms rooted in diversity, complex subjectivities, and an engagement with differences such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability. Scholars in the various disciplines of feminist, gender, and sexuality studies, as well as of race and postcolonial studies, have worked to re-historicize and re-contextualize their critical work, thus moving away from an Arnoldian model of literary studies that privileged the universal, while dehistoricizing, decontextualizing, and ultimately dematerializing human experience. Escaping from what Doris Sommers (2007) calls the "romantic enchantment" (3), scholars have directed their attention towards those spaces where boundaries are crossed, linguistic lines are negotiated, notions of national history, culture, and language are contested.

Propelled by the profound social transformations of the last century, changes in academic curricula have in turn engendered an expansion and diversification of the professoriate. After the 1970s, an increasingly diverse faculty with experience in the political and cultural movements of the 1960s appeared on North American campuses and, not surprisingly, started to challenge the institutional status quo. Questioning the ideological foundations and critical practices responsible for the marginalization and silencing of the multiple voices and gazes emerging from various U.S. realities, they initiated long-term processes of curricular transformation, developing new programs and opening the way to new disciplines.

In *Global Matters. The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*, Paul Jay (2010) similarly situates the transnational turn in literary studies at the confluence of domestic and international events, when minority, postcolonial, feminist, gender and sexuality studies productively intersected with the geopolitical effects of globalization on local economies. The global "networks" established by the free flow of goods which characterizes the market economy has impacted all social dimensions, including the circulation and fruition of books and knowledges, acting as an accelerator in the dismantling of national literatures and nationalistic claims over specific cultures. Thus, although globalization is not the only phenomenon to consider in relation to the revolutionary openings in literary studies, it certainly contributed effectively to the dismantling of traditional discourses surrounding the literary canon. Inevitably, questions arose regarding

the nature of English as the language through which empire supports its ideological edifice and in turn drives globalization, effectively moving forward its agenda of economic and cultural hegemony. It is at this very juncture that English established itself also, not unambiguously (Goyal 2017), as a transnational language that crosses national boundaries while making them its principal object of analysis. In Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), borders materialize as in-between spaces, tormented "homelands" where mobility and migration displace and destabilize, breeding a subjectivity that finds its redemption in hybridity and cultural *mestizaje*.

Itself a "borderland," English emerges in locations such as Africa, Asia, and South America, generated by authors that are multilingual, multinational, and multicultural, or as translations of literary works produced in various locations of the empire. Today, parting with its aspirations of remaining rooted within a narrative of national sovereignty, "English" represents a complex plurality, a space of global encounters, of oppositional temporalities, of cosmopolitanism. If, as Rebecca Walkowitz (2006) notes, "Books are no longer imagined to exist in a single literary system" (528); English literature and literature in English need to be imagined as circulating and engendering meaning in different geographies and at different latitudes. Various practices of circulation and fruition, uneven as they may be, inevitably compound with a variety of voices, discourses, and narratives, requiring new interpretive lenses that are aware of and take into consideration both the agents as well as their articulated historicities. Paul Jay (2010) correctly asserts that "English literature is becoming increasingly difficult to understand without recognizing its relationship to a complicated web of transnational histories linked to the processes of globalization" (26).

At the center of this new transnational critical framework, we find the renegotiation of space, of national and cultural geographies, the re-thinking of language(s) and literature(s) not exclusively in English, the re-orientation of the study of race, gender, sexuality, and class within and across national boundaries, as well as, most pertinently for this anthology, the location of new theoretical formulations, the space to rethink the role and significance of the humanities in today's world.

To quote Stuart Hall, the essays contained in this volume emphasize "the contradictory ground on which new interrelationships and interdependencies are being created across the boundaries of nationhood and region, with all the forms of trans-national globalization that have come to dominate the contemporary world" (quoted in Meeks 2007, 284). At the same time, they remind us that the present in the U.S. calls for a radical examination of its history of systemic racism, which continues to produce incidences of police brutality, to rationalize cultural and economic exclusion and, tragically for our democracy, to normalize the incarceration of African Americans and "illegal" immigrants, including

children. It is our conviction that, as James Baldwin (1998) stated, "history is literally *present* in all that we do … it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations" (723). In this light, with this volume, we hope to provide inclusive, egalitarian, and cosmopolitan spaces of encounter, exchange, and interrogation.

The volume is divided in three parts. In Part I, *Theoretical Framework*, Yasaman Naraghi and Andrea Delgado's essay, "Inhabiting Transnationalism: The Production, Embodiment, and Appropriation of Transnational Identity," familiarizes the reader with the theoretical discussion surrounding Transnational Studies by interpellating the category of the "transnational" to challenge critically its commodification in the spaces of the North American academe, where it is often relegated to specific marginalized groups. In their essay, Naraghi and Delgado approach transnationalism by examining their own embodied experiences as transnational female faculty who have witnessed first-hand academe's problematic relationship with race, ethnicity, and gender. Following Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's (2015) "theory in the flesh," they juxtapose their physical realities and cultural position *vis-à-vis* the student body and the university administration to reveal, through their cooperation and testimony, their struggles as racialized and genderized transnationals and possibly to find ways to overcome the contradictions inherent to their positionality.

It is no secret that for some time now, the humanities have been experiencing an existential crisis. To remedy low enrollments in those disciplines, universities have opted to offer courses and programs centered on "professional-managerial training" (Melamed 2011, 14) rather than rethink what role the core values of a liberal education play within a globalized world. Naraghi and Delgado see how academic institutions have taken the easy way out, translating the transnational into global literature course offerings that continue to reaffirm national boundaries and promote a dangerous "us versus them" mentality. Rather than creating spaces where non-hegemonic forms of knowledge can emerge and innovative cultural paradigms are fostered, students are asked to become global citizens in a world that separates the privileged from the rest, giving the latter the false assurance of moral and historical superiority.

In their essay, Naraghi and Delgado also denounce the limitations of institutionally-legible options for racial identity while challenging the exploitation of transnational faculty who, due to their "authentic" positionality, are often burdened with teaching intercultural competence courses as well as holding additional administrative responsibilities and serving on committees and initiatives centered on diversity.

Through a theoretical framework that engages, among others, the methodological strategies of Leela Fernandes, Chela Sandoval, Jodi Melamed and Denise Ferreira da Silva, Naraghi and Delgado renegotiate the categories of the

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