



New Directions in (Transnational) American Literature Studies

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New Directions in (Transnational) American Literature Studies
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American literature studies today is in a state of transition that is both exciting and somewhat confusing. Its momentum during the past two decades has been centrifugal rather than centripetal. Increasingly the field is marked by a wide range of loosely-interlinked initiatives that are extending its boundaries and redefining its methods of inquiry, rather than by the comparatively firm consensus about the definition of literary canon, periodization, and critical method dominant until 1970 and even to a lesser extent even into the heydays of poststructuralism and new historicism in the 1970s and 1980s. For despite the challenges to both canon and method during these decades from the new gender and ethnic studies movements, both poststructuralism and new historicism tended to enlist traditionally canonical “major” authors and texts as its central reference—as in the work of Harold Bloom and Sacvan Bercovitch. By contrast, the scene in American literary studies since 1990 looks more variegated, messy, and confusing—even when one allows for the impossibility of generalizing about one’s own immediate historical moment with the same clarity and coherence as about an era from the distant past.

All this is not to imply, however, that American literature studies today is nothing more than an incoherent morass, without continuity to previous eras. Although this paper will mainly emphasize new initiatives that have created an unprecedented commotion in the field, at the end it will also try to provide some reassurance for those readers who may find its analysis disconcerting. For the intent of this paper is precisely the opposite. It seeks to extend an

invitation, not to make the reader feel shut out or excluded. Indeed, perhaps my single most important message for fellow Americanists in China is that American literature studies today is paying closer attention than ever before to scholarship by non-native scholars of American studies.

Why is this? Partly it can be explained by certain trends in U. S. social history. Partly it is for discipline-specific reasons that have pushed American literature studies in more transnational and comparative directions. Section one of this paper will quickly review these background factors. Section two will discuss the new directions in detail.

Let me caution in advance that I shall not be able to discuss every single interesting new initiative in American literature studies today—only those that pertain most directly to the subject of transnationalism. For example, I shall not have time to discuss such recent developments in gender studies as queer theory, or the burgeoning new interdiscipline of “history of the book” or print culture studies, which has forged closer intellectual alliances in the U. S. between departments of history and of literature than have existed since the decline of traditional intellectual history after the 1960s. Rather, I shall concentrate especially on those newer areas of critical inquiry in which American literature scholars are attempting to define the field more expansively by looking beyond the boundaries of the cultural, linguistic, and territorial boundaries of the U. S. itself as traditionally understood.

First, a brief narrative sketch of the evolution of the American literature field. Some details will doubtless be familiar, but it may be helpful to review them as background.

American literature studies is a little less than 100 years old as a scholarly specialization.

It first defined itself in terms of differences from the British. American literature studies' number #1 priority for its first half-century starting in the 1920s was to define distinctive national traditions of thought and expression—such as the Puritan influence in classic American literature, the frontier or wilderness romance starting with James Fenimore Cooper, the experimental, open-form poetics of Walt Whitman, etc.

This emphasis on mapping American literature as a set of distinctive internal narratives or patterns caused many younger scholars to look inward at American culture rather than outward toward the rest of the world. It also involved other restrictions of focus, four of which deserve particular mention.

First, “American” meant “United States,” the nation—not the continent or the hemisphere.

Second, “American literature” meant “literature written in English by people born or assimilated in the U. S.” or—before nationhood—the thirteen British colonies that became the U. S.

Third, “American literature” effectively meant literature of the dominant subculture, the white Euro-American, especially the Anglo-American—and most especially the small number of Anglo-American writers seen as truly “great”: from Emerson and Hawthorne to T. S. Eliot and William Faulkner. Few leading Americanists before 1970 cared much about either minority-group writing or about non-European influences. The only exceptions were obvious cases of indisputably “major” figures—such as Ezra Pound’s passion for classical Chinese poetry and Confucian thought. Otherwise, no. The early scholarship on Faulkner and Mark Twain was interested in their views of African Americans, but not in the possibility of reciprocal influence—not in whether Twain’s writing (for example) was significantly influenced by slave narrative or

Faulkner's by black cultural practices.

Still another limitation of this early period was that the most prestigious scholarship was wholly the work of U. S. nationals, all white and mostly male. The citizenship limitation resulted in large part from the relative lack of scholarly interest in American literature abroad, compared to British. English departments in the U. K. showed little interest in American writing. Indeed, foreign programs in English literature throughout the world featured British literature and also British English. This created a communication gap at a bad time: as Britain's star was fading and the U. S. rising. So English language-and-literature studies abroad remained too narrow; and this inevitably reinforced the insularity and provincialism American literature specialists in the United States by making them suppose that foreign scholars would have little to say about their subject.

All this began to change in the 1960s. Serious American literature studies had now started up abroad, especially in Germany and the U. K., which today still have the strongest programs outside the U. S. Soon immigrant scholars became prominent Americanists within U. S. literature departments. The foremost early Americanist of the last third of the 20th century was Sacvan Bercovitch, a Jew of Russian background from Francophone Canada who lived many years in Israel before moving to the U. S. to study and teach. Two of the leading African Americanists who helped transform the field into a major interdiscipline in the 1970s and 1980s were Werner Sollors (from Germany) and Arnold Rampersad (from Trinidad).

The dramatic rise of African American studies was symptomatic of a more fundamental shift at that time: the challenge to the traditional literary canon as excessively white and male.

Suddenly women's writing and the various U. S. minority literatures were studied far more seriously. This shift was partly driven by national politics and policy, such as the women's liberation and civil rights movements, and by the changing composition of university populations that followed from them: new admission and hiring programs that diversified faculties and student bodies. Also important, though more gradual in impact, was the long-overdue liberalization of immigration policy in the 1960s, especially for Asians.

But an even more decisive reason for canon revision was that national literature itself was changing in ways that had become too obvious to ignore. From the mid-20th century onward, U. S. Writing has been renewed and energized as never before by a series of ethnic renaissances—African American, Jewish American, Asian American, Latino or Hispanic American, and Native American. Significantly, the last two winners of the Nobel Prize for literature from the U. S. were Jewish-American novelist Saul Bellow and African-American novelist Toni Morrison. As late as 1970 no nonwhite writers were considered canonical. Today our anthologies tell a very different story. The transformation of America's elite universities is even more dramatic. Today Harvard's undergraduate student body is more than 40% Asian, black, and Latin American in background, versus something like 5% in the 1960s.

The various U. S. minority literatures have each attracted a body of specialists, many from the minority group itself. As they have established themselves, their models of inquiry have also been changing. At first the emphasis was on their distinctiveness from mainstream literature and culture, rather like the earlier push to differentiate American literature studies as a whole from British. But the critical scene has become more complex. We've become more and

more aware that the differences between minority and majority aren't clear-cut or fixed but partial and shifting. Today the solidity of all of the ethnic and cultural categories are being put under question even as we recognize their continuing importance in many contexts.

This includes the biggest cultural category of all for American studies—the category of the national. Arguably, the single most far-reaching result of the canon controversies of the 1970s and 1980s was to demonstrate the insufficiency of the old myth or dream of “a” distinctive national literary tradition. Two main reasons explain this change. One, the field of American literature today simply seems too diverse and incoherent to permit magisterial unitary generalizations, at least to the extent proposed in the past. And two, the realization that American literature isn't and never was contained within the borders of the United States.

The latter will be my main concern from here on: the increasing tendency among American literature scholars to think of their subject in transnational and comparative terms, ultimately even global terms—regardless of historical period and regardless of topic. More and more Americanists are thinking about what is national in terms of how it connects up with the rest of the world, not in isolation.

Before going into more detail, however, I should mention one other influence from outside American studies that has reinforced this way of thinking, namely postcolonial studies. Colonial and postcolonial discourse studies were introduced to English departments especially by non-western intellectuals with western graduate educations—three figures especially: the late Edward Said of Columbia, Gayatri Spivak (also now of Columbia), and Homi Bhabha (now at Harvard). At first this work concentrated on British literature and the British colonies

independent since 1945. But in the 1990s, it started influencing U. S. literature studies in two main ways. Mostly it's been used to reconceive the literary and cultural history of U. S. minorities as instances of "internal colonization." But it's also been used to rethink that of the dominant group, particularly the colonial and early national periods, either as a kind of colonial discourse that basically mimicked the mother country or as a species of postcolonialism: a settler-culture or white creole version, comparable to the earlier literatures of Australia or English-speaking Canada, for instance.

I list a collection of critical essays as the first item in my bibliography (Schmidt and Singh). But for present purposes, I confine myself to brief mention of postcolonialism as a background factor, not only for its methodological influence but also, no less importantly, for what it tells us about the politics of American literature studies in the U. S. today. Especially notable here is the keen interest since the early 1990s in the analogy between British imperial history and that of the U.S. First-stage American literature studies between 1920 and 1970 developed a generally affirmative and patriotic narrative of the rise of national literature to maturity in the context of the growth of democratic institutions, with special emphasis on major canonical writers who helped both to affirm national ideals and to criticize their abuse. Recent American literature studies tends to tell a much less cheerful story: the story of an expanding, heterogeneous literary marketplace developing both within and against a dominant culture and politics of emerging imperial aspiration from the pressure of whose influence few if any major "mainstream" creative writers were immune—evolving through a series of cataclysmic events from the conquest of Native America and Mexico increasingly toward the aspiration to dominate

the entire world, economically and culturally if not also militarily. According to this revisionist account, America's boasted "freedom" is seen as the achievement of the privileged classes at the expense of the poor, the achievement of the predominantly white elite's subjugation of white and—especially—nonwhite underclasses.

How much more accurate this sharply critical reassessment is relative to the older, more self-congratulatory one seems to me a very open question. My own personal view is that both are somewhat mythicized versions of history and that some fusion of the two would be more accurate than either one. What is clear, however, is that the more critical narrative has—at least for now—become American literature studies' preferred myth of mainstream U. S. cultural history. Its critique actually dates back to the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 1970s, which was bitterly opposed by the majority of the American intelligentsia; but since the end of the Cold War the narrative of disenchantment has become more pronounced. Item #2 in the bibliography lists an influential collection of pertinent critical essays (Kaplan and Pease). Much of the scholarship we shall review in a moment, though certainly not all, takes this dissenting view in some degree. Here we see an interesting paradox. On the one hand, the anti-imperial critique surely also speaks for many intellectuals outside the U. S. throughout the world today—perhaps never more so than now, given that the foreign policy of the present U. S. administration has been the more aggressive of any for at least a century, since the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. On the other hand, such outspoken dissent by the U. S. literary intelligentsia also testifies to their position of privilege: to the great freedom of expression they enjoy, without fear of reprisal. This irony deserves a lecture in itself. But for now, on to part two: the five new transnational

directions listed in my abstract. I shall discuss them in order. As you will soon see, the various categories overlap considerably. But it may nonetheless be useful to discuss them separately.

1. Author-focused studies that broaden the critical horizon of understanding beyond the scope of the national. One obvious example of such a book is the collection *Walt Whitman and the World*, which gathers together more than 50 assessments, old and new, from Europe, Israel, India, China, and Japan. But a more original project is *Faulkner, Mississippi* (1996, tr. 1998) by the French Caribbean writer-critic Edouard Glissant, which interweaves personal travel narrative with critical musings about Faulkner's country of the imagination as part a larger Caribbean geography and culture. This indeed is one of the most significant new directions in Faulkner studies now: the reconception of Faulkner's genius not merely regional or national but hemispheric.

The same applies to the treatment of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in a more conventionally academic book that I will discuss further under heading #3, *Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere*, by Anna Brickhouse of the University of Virginia. This book devotes a chapter to the connection between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and two Francophone texts it influenced, one a travel narrative by a racist Frenchwoman who attacked it, the other a play by a Haitian dramatist (in the French Caribbean) who applauded it. But beyond just identifying these lines of influence, Brickhouse also rereads *Uncle Tom's Cabin* itself as a text that's more saturated in Afro-Caribbean culture than anyone has realized before.

Twenty years ago, critical analysis of U. S. writers based on the transnational reception

history of their work was not considered so important. In 1989, for example, few Americanists noticed the first translation into English of the notes to Lin Shu's 1901 Chinese edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published right after the Boxer uprising. Lin extends Stowe's indictment of slavery by bitterly comparing American oppression of blacks to American aggression toward China and racism toward Asians generally (Arkush and Lee, 77-80). Today the situation is very different. I myself plan to draw on Lin Shu's remarks in my forthcoming book on American fiction.

These examples of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* take us to our second category:

2. Projects focusing on translation, either in the literal sense or the figurative sense of cross-cultural communication. The most far-reaching translation studies project so far has been the series coordinated by Werner Sollors and Marc Shell devoted to translation and critical study of the large body of American writing from the colonial period to the 20th century not written in English. It includes a *Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* and a collection of critical essays, *Multilingual America*. The latter has an illuminating essay by Yin Xiao-huang, formerly of Nanjing University and now at Occidental College in Los Angeles, that reveals how such writers as Lin Yu-tang, working in the U. S. during the period of the Republic were much more critical about both American and Chinese affairs when they wrote in Chinese than when they wrote in English.

Sollors and Shell name their project the "Longfellow Institute," after the popular nineteenth-century American poet and translator who mastered a dozen European languages and adapted the literatures of many in his own work. Longfellow himself is the subject of a fine recent book where translation issues figure prominently. This is *Longfellow Redux*, by the

German scholar Christoph Irmscher, now of Indiana University. It belongs under heading #1 as well. Irmscher elegantly describes Longfellow's adaptation of texts from German and Scandinavian, and his poetic accomplishment as a translator of Dante.

So clearly there's a bright future within American literature studies for more translation projects—but especially critical studies by bilingual (or multilingual) scholars like Irmscher and Yin that pay close attention both to what translations communicate in a positive sense and to what translation or bilingualism alters or screens out—and to the underlying cultural logic of such practices.

3. Studies of circulation of texts and cross-cultural influences within international zones.

This category I shall discuss at greatest length. For in recent years there has been a striking proliferation in studies of literary and cultural mobility and interaction within three international zones or regions: the Atlantic world, the American hemisphere, and the transpacific. The first is most fully developed so far: Atlantic world studies. That is quite predictable. In some ways, this is a very old subject. It dates back to the earliest days of American literature studies: studies of Cooper's debt to Walter Scott, of the Spanish influence on early national literature, and so forth. But today's Euro-American transatlantic studies are less concerned with influence or transmission from old world to new and more with the process of reciprocal exchange or circulation. For example Paul Giles of Oxford University, a leading British Americanist, argues in several recent studies that American and British literary history of the last 200 years have charted their respective courses through a complex process of mutual engagement and reaction, in ways that partially mirror each other yet also at the same time diverge.

But the strongest influence on the rise of recent Atlantic world studies has been black transatlantic studies. These have been catalyzed especially by two remarkable books now about 20 years old. One, *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), by Henry Louis Gates Jr., traces the figure of the trickster from west Africa through African American literary history. The other, *The Black Atlantic* (1993), by Afro-British critic Paul Gilroy, charts the cultural and literary history and memory of slavery throughout the Afro-Atlantic world down to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Gates and Gilroy follow the narrative of the African diaspora across the Atlantic and (for Gilroy) also north to Europe. Their work is now being refined and complicated by the next generation, both within black studies and outside it. The most brilliant of the younger African Americanists is Brent Edwards of Columbia. His *Practicing Diaspora* subtly and learnedly reconstructs the interactions among intellectuals in New York, Paris, and Francophone Africa during the second quarter of the 20th century. Here the basic organizing concept is not the diaspora as such but the communications network. The same holds for Anita Haya Patterson's *Race, American Literature, and Transnational Modernisms*, which isn't strictly speaking a work of black Atlantic studies but which shows how wide its influence has become. Patterson demonstrates that poetic modernism was not just the creation of French and Anglo-American writers but a more complex transatlantic project in which French and English Caribbean influences—white, black, and creole—all contributed.

The second transnational regionalism that deserves emphasis here is American hemispheric studies: that is, scholarship on cross-cultural relations within the Americas rather than across the Atlantic. Atlantic scholars like Patterson have recently started to join forces, and

vice-versa. But the origins of hemispheric studies are quite different. They were pioneered especially by scholars of Latin American descent working in the U. S. In its early stages—the late 1980s through the mid-90s—it concentrated on drawing attention to the growing number of fine new Hispanic-American creative writers and in exposing how traditional Anglo-centric narratives of U. S. literary and cultural history ignored Hispanic writing and operated from a restrictive definition of America itself. Two books by José Saldívar of Berkeley are representative: *The Dialectic of Our America* and *Border Matters*. The former is an audacious thought experiment that redraws the map of “American” literary and cultural geography with Cuba at the center. The latter develops hemispheric studies’ most important theoretical discourse—border theory. Saldívar and his colleagues argue for a view of national borders as fluid and contested. The assumption of a firm borderline between the U. S. and Central America misrepresents how Latinos think geographically about who they are and where they belong. To put this another way, Latinos and by extension also other bicultural Americans too are people of the border. Another influential work of this period is Doris Sommer’s *The Foundational Fictions of Latin America*, which shows how Latin American novelists have used the model of James Fenimore Cooper’s work to construct mythic national narratives of their own.

More recent hemispheric studies go beyond concentration on Latino writers almost exclusively to discuss more complex interdependencies among Anglophone and Hispanophone cultures, and sometimes Francophone as well. Anna Brickhouse’s study, mentioned earlier, is exemplary. Another is Kirsten Silva Greusz, *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing*, which stresses the importance for nineteenth century Hispanic

American writers and intellectuals of contact with the U. S. literary scene both through reading and live contact while also interweaving notable examples of U. S. writers who have taken an interest in Latin America—sometimes perceptive, sometimes not. Gruesz and Brickhouse both treat cultural influence not as a one-way transmission nor as producing cultural hybridization. What interests them especially is interaction across borders. and the construction of books, careers, and literary histories through cultural exchanges involving shifting combinations of recognition and mis-recognition.

Now for the transpacific zone. Of the three transnational initiatives discussed in this section, perhaps this will be of greatest interest to Chinese scholars of American literature. Here the state of the inquiry seems more unevenly developed—especially by contrast to Atlantic world studies, which is much older, but even the new hemispheric studies. On the positive side, there's a very smart, vigorous, and growing group of specialists in the Asian American field doing fine work on the blossoming of Asian American literature (in English) from the mid-20th century onward. Many are deeply interested in issues of migration or diaspora of people, ideas, and discourses across the Pacific. On the downside, Asian Americanists are also often limited by their primary focus on the U.S., and also by not knowing the foreign languages well enough. By contrast, all the leading hemispheric American studies scholars either speak Spanish as their first language or know it fluently enough to do research in the original. (Some are versed in French and Portuguese as well.) Another problem is that American literature scholars in the U. S. tend to lump so many different Asian literatures into a single subfield—China, Japan, Korea, Malaya, the Philippines, sometimes even Indonesia, India, and Pakistan. Obviously this makes much

more sense from the U. S. side than from a country-of-origin perspective. A version of this problem of mismatch also applies to Atlantic and hemispheric studies, but it is somewhat alleviated by the smaller number of European imperial-power languages, and the family resemblances between them.

Still, even Asian Americanists who work only in English have done some fine work with transpacific implications. For example, Lisa Lowe of the University of California at San Diego has authored an influential study of immigration narrative; and David Palumbo-Liu's *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* is a sensitively nuanced and critically sophisticated analysis of the shifting cultural conditions in the U. S. within which Asian writers of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and also Filipino descent have worked during the past century, carefully distinguishing between perspectives of Asian Americans and those of immigrants, and also to some extent between the different national diasporas. But the kind of work most pressingly needed now, I think, can only be done by bi-cultural thinkers who are also truly bilingual (or multilingual), working either in Asia or the U. S. One recent example is *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s*, by Yin Xiao-huang, whose article was mentioned earlier. This is evidently the first full-length history in English of Chinese-American literature written in both languages. It has the disadvantages of stopping at 1990 and of treating the Chinese Asian literary renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s too hastily. But it is valuable on the earlier periods, and particularly on the history of Sinophone literature in U. S. My former Harvard colleague, Yunte Huang, now at Santa Barbara, has two inventive critical studies of Chinese and American cross-connections—and especially misconceptions—the first focused on translation issues, the

second on migration and travel, both literal and fictive: *Transpacific Displacement* and *Transpacific Imaginations*. The Japanese postmodernist Takayuki Tatsumi, who teaches at a university in Tokyo, has a dense and intellectually challenging panoramic book on contemporary Japanese and U. S. experimental writing, film, and other media genres that develops a theory of mutual influence through “chaotic[ally] infectious” “intercultural synchrony”, as he calls it (Tatsumi 176, 173). It’s called *Full Metal Apache: Transactions between Cyberpunk Japan and Avant-Pop America* (2006). The title essay argues that the concept of the cyborg in contemporary American cultural studies was invented in Japan—that is, the concept of the humanoid body that’s a compound of flesh and technology. Another exciting book project still in progress is a comparative study of American and Vietnamese war memories called “The Afterlife of War,” by the Vietnamese immigrant scholar Viet Nyugen of the University of Southern California.

Now for category #4: American literature studies that reach out to encompass a global scale analysis. So-called global cultural studies are increasingly popular these days. Much more is being done by social scientists than by literature scholars; and most of the extended studies in literature are either treatises on nation theory (such as the next two items on my bibliography: [Buell, Cheah]) or short position statements like the American imperialism anthology mentioned before. But let me mention three recent wide-ranging books by individual American literature scholars. Two astute though quite polemical studies that press the US-as-empire thesis are *American Geographics* by Bruce Harvey and *The Anarchy of Empire* by Amy Kaplan. Harvey surveys the geographical imagination in U. S. writing, teaching, and popular

culture during the early national period, stressing its negative stereotypes of the non-European world. Kaplan discusses U. S. fiction and film from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century in the context of the continued subjugation of nonwhites at home and especially the pursuit of imperial ambitions abroad. By contrast, Wai Chee Dimock, a Hong Kongese scholar now at Yale, takes a very different view of the relation between the U. S. and the world in *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time*. In a series of boldly original panoramic essays she shows how the sense of memory and geography in U. S. literature from Emerson and Thoreau to the present has been profoundly interdependent with those of European, Asian, and African cultures. The contrast between this and the other two books is dramatic. Harvey and Kaplan treat U. S. culture's view of the rest of the world as arrogant, self-centered, and possessive, whereas Dimock treats it as infinitely curious, receptive, and subject to influence. It's striking to find two such disparate ideologies coexisting in the same field at the same time. But all three books do share a strong commitment to the importance of thinking comprehensively about the interdependencies between the United States and the rest of the world. Both of these sharply contrasting perspectives, by the way, are brought together in a collection of eleven original essays by different critics that Professor Dimock and I edited last year, *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*.

The final chapter of Dimock's *Through Other Continents* treats the subject of environmental imagination. Here she connects the use of animal trickster figures across cultures, particularly the symbolic monkey-figures in Afrocentric and also south and east Asian tradition, from the Indian epic *Ramayana* to the great classical Chinese novel *Syi You Ji*. This brings me to

my last category,

5. Studies of transnational environmental interdependencies or affinities. The so-called ecocritical movement is still only a dozen years old. So perhaps I should start with a definition. For more detail, please see my book *The Future of Environmental Criticism*. Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary movement committed not to any one methodology but to a particular subject: the subject how the literature and other media express environmental awareness and concern. For at least two reasons, “ecocriticism” is a somewhat confusing and inadequate term. For one thing, “eco” suggests a specifically biotic or “natural world” emphasis too narrow to encompass the broad range of environmental interests actually pursued by self-identified ecocritics, many of whom are at least as concerned with the built environment and its effects on both human and nonhuman life forms. And secondly, many literary scholars who are passionately concerned with environmental issues—including two of the three scholars whose work I am about to discuss—would object to the label of “ecocritic” as excessively restrictive, because “ecocriticism” in the first instance was used especially to designate a particular kind of literary criticism that focused preeminently on nature writing and post-Wordsworthian nature poetry with a view to emphasizing its potential for reconnecting people to nature. Hence I myself prefer the less familiar but more capacious rubric of “environmental criticism.” But “ecocriticism” is nonetheless the omnibus term, or nickname, by which environmentally-oriented literary studies is most likely to be known for the foreseeable future; and so I retain use of it here.

Ecocriticism did not start as a transnational project, but rather as a movement within U. S. and British literary studies. But since then it’s spread worldwide. In China, two major

conferences are scheduled for the autumn of 2008. And increasingly American ecocriticism, which still leads the movement, stresses the importance of thinking of national imagination and national territory as interconnected with the rest of the world, not distinct from it. It now seems self-evident that such prominent ecocritical concerns as the representation of environmental instability or endangerment and the theory of “place” or “sense of place” must be understood in comparative terms. It could even be argued that ecocriticism was always at least incipiently transnational. For instance, the first of my three ecocritical books, *The Environmental Imagination*, centers especially on Henry David Thoreau and U. S. nature writing, but it prepares the way for this by surveying how the dissemination of Eurocentric pastoral ideology throughout the Afro-Atlantic world helped form the bases of various counter-colonial discourses of nationalism in a wide number of national cultures throughout Europe, Africa and the Americas—not just in the U. S.

Three books that suggest the range of what’s happening in environmentally-oriented criticism right now are Jake Kosek’s *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico*; Priscilla Wald’s *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*; and Ursula Heise’s forthcoming *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. The first, by a specialist in rhetoric, concentrates on conflicts of ownership and management of forests in one quite local area. But its actual range is wider, because the parties to the dispute include several U. S. government agencies as well as Native American and American Latino actors whose sense of place and time extends across national boundaries and much farther back in history than U. S. history does. The second book, *Contagious*, by an American literature

professor at Duke, defines the stereotypical narrative that American writers and the American media used during the 20th century to tell the story of spread of mysterious epidemics, and how this “outbreak narrative” as the author calls it tends to reinforce suspicion of minorities at home and foreigners abroad. Chinese readers may be especially interested by the introductory section—on the SARS outbreak. The third book, by a Stanford professor of comparative narrative literature and theory, discusses how experimental genres like magical realism, science fiction, and film manifest contemporary anxieties about global environmental endangerment.

These projects show the great range of today’s environmental criticism. They differ in focus from local to global, in method from ethnography to science studies to literary and cultural theory, and also in politics from explicitly activist to relatively neutral.

Indeed, my final point about all five new directions is that the interesting individual projects are so mutually distinctive as to offer a very broad invitation to colleagues now in the process of defining their own future research programs. Obviously it pays to know as much as you can about what’s going on in the field. But in the long run, your best path is to pursue the topics and the critical approaches that seem most fascinating to you. I admire my own best students above all for their ability to surprise me, to teach the professor something new—even if this means disputing my work and superseding it some day. Indeed, I think that is precisely what old scholars like me should want, even if we sometimes react defensively.

By emphasizing this sincere conviction as my last major point, and by sketching in the main part of this paper a picture of American literature studies today as a fast-evolving field intent upon questioning cultural, territorial, and linguistic boundaries on so many fronts, I realize

that I risk leaving a disconcerting impression of a messy, elusive, ungraspable instability. Surely, one might argue, there must be more constants in American literary and cultural history than my account implies! Surely one can still identify, for example, particular genres and other traditions of discourse as “characteristically American.” Even if the restrictiveness of the traditional American literary canon has been put under question, surely the concept of canonicity itself has not been rendered meaningless. These are very pertinent and legitimate concerns. In response to them I would hasten to add that I do indeed believe, for example, that even in this age of multicultural and transnational expansion certain traditions of discourse can be identified as distinctive even if not unique to U. S. literary history—such as a strong penchant for autobiographical modes of writing, and for first personness in general—and that the intensive study of major works by major authors will continue to thrive as vigorously as ever even if the specific angles of interpretation change (as the first of my five categories is in fact meant to imply). In short, I most certainly do not wish to argue here that the world of American literature studies has fallen completely apart during the last fifteen years or so—but rather that it is moving to a new level of both vista and complexity. As I see it, these are exciting times, not scary times, for American literary studies. These are exciting times, above all, because the increase in vista and complexity of which I speak opens up a multiplicity of new opportunities for research and understanding. And as I said near the start and now repeat again, I am certain that the new cosmopolitanism toward which American literature studies in the U. S. aspires today will ensure that more and more the work of non-native scholars will be seen as crucial to the development of the field. I look forward to our future collaborations.

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Critical collections related to U. S. literature and colonial/imperial and postcolonial studies

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