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THE RIPTIDE CURRENTS OF TRANSNATIONALISM

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As a hermeneutical tool in hemispheric studies, we might usefully think in terms of three interacting streams of transnationalism: an imperial-capitalist form; a regional form; and an activist-diasporic or cosmopolitan form. The American hemisphere provides a site for studying the intersection of all of these streams and at the same time, as I describe below, it can itself be understood as a regional-transnational formation. My hope is that distinguishing these three streams may help us to analyze both the movements of different texts and authors and the cultural work accomplished through their literary tropes or interventions.

My comments here are prompted by the other contributions to this forum, and they offer a provisional framework for bringing together our diverse materials. I am not aiming to offer a taxonomy of transnationalism or of the contributors' papers. Instead I conceive of something more dialectical. These three streams of transnationalism unfold together historically and they interact. Over time, into the present, they continuously constitute, strain, redirect or, in pockets, break up each other.

We might distinguish **the imperial-capitalist form of transnationalism** as an invasive or aggressive form of transnationalism which appropriates foreign lands and resources for mostly private profit while also uprooting and shipping laborers across continents and oceans. As analyzed by Immanuel Wallerstein and others, capitalism arose as a world-system that sought out distant markets and took advantage of disparate or unevenly developed economies throughout the world (Wallerstein, 1974). It fostered the banking and material infrastructure for a system based on wage labor, credit, and commodity consumption, a system requiring new markets and thriving on the surplus generated by the discrepant valuation of labor and capital. As many scholars have argued, the modern capitalist system gained its competitive edge especially via the seizure of Amerindian lands and the importation of enslaved Africans into the Americas and the Caribbean. In this way, arguably, capitalist-imperialism has distinguished itself from other or past imperialisms as a particularly aggressive financial, transnational, and globe-encircling 'settler' form of imperialism.

In the Atlantic world in particular, this transnationalism increasingly took shape, ideologically and economically, by way of the modernity/coloniality formation originally theorized by Arturo Escobar, developed by Walter D. Mignolo, and cited in this forum by Jeremy Paden (Escobar, 2004; Mignolo, 2005). In this formation, some nations

and peoples were deemed modern and capitalizing, others backward and colonial. As Escobar and Mignolo emphasize, there is no modernity without coloniality; the relation between them is utterly contingent and dialectical at both the symbolic and material levels. This formation furthermore became deeply racialized, so that the world's peoples came to be seen as races and then these were categorized as either 'civilized' or 'savage.' This imperialist and racialized modern/colonial formation is transnational not only in the sense that it arises within a system that cuts across national borders but also in that it creates dividing lines within nations, stratifying the nation's peoples and defining their identities across national lines—such as the black/white line that disenfranchised 'Blacks' within the US and aligned them with 'Blacks' throughout the Atlantic world. Jeremy Paden's work reveals how the modern/colonial formation of imperialist transnationalism is also organized within an imaginary of nearness/distance: 'we' *over here* are civilized and modern, while 'they' *over there* are backward and savage. Paden in turn argues that the poet Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz troubles this formation by insisting on a 'we' over (t)here.

It may be that this dividing line, and the transnational imperial-capitalist structure, comes under strain from the next two kinds of transnationalism: that is, the regional and activist-disaporic streams, which sometimes cut through, resist, and unsettle this imperialist one and its racializations. In this sense, it may be that the historical pressure exerted by the next two forms are in part what has moved us toward deconstructions of race. If this is true, perhaps hemispheric and transnational studies will help to complete this deconstructive project provoked partly by those transnational travelers and again called for now by Cyraina Johnson-Roullier in her essay. That is, such studies will help us to dislodge even the 'interracial' model that, as Johnson-Roullier points out, implicitly retains race as a category.

The **regional form** of transnationalism is generated by geography, or the physical adjacency of nations. That is, nations have tended to form alliances, identities, and also conflicts in clusters, often organized around geographical formations and resources (e.g., the Mediterranean basin) and languages or beliefs (e.g., Islam, Arabic). In many cases, the regional identifications of these (trans)national clusters were originally generated by empire, as to some extent with the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean world and the Roman (Catholic) Empire in Europe. But thereafter they take on lives of their own as regional formations of culture and politics. This history of regional transnational formations is what makes it valid for scholars now to study cross-racial, regional forms of *modernism*—such as Stephen Yao's work on Pacific Rim modernism, Margaret Mills Harper's work on Irish/British modernism as it is 'haunted' by America, or on the Atlantic-world Anglophone novel and African-Atlantic and Anglo-Atlantic modernism in *Bordering on the Body* (1994) and *Freedom's Empire* (2008). These transnational clusters are constituted by the contested-yet-shared stories, rhetoric, religions, and sometimes languages that dominate in a region—creating what Yuri Lotman calls semio-spheres (Lotman, 1990).

Further, we might consider hemispheric studies as one variation of this regional and geographically-contoured kind of transnationalism (and attendant modernisms). While it is true that US Americans like myself who study Anglophone literatures are still unlearning false assumptions about similarities across the Americas,



it might nonetheless also be true that certain histories have indeed formed these many American peoples around some common mythemes and memories, or within shared semio-spheres. Such common imaginative formations might include, for instance, tales of ocean-crossing travelers, crossings that create a crisis of traumatic contact (disease, war, conquering, and colonization, and, for some, unprecedented opportunity and wealth) and also precipitate historical breaks (from Europe, or from African or indigenous ancestors). The images of a *vast ocean-crossing distance* (with its Biblical undertones) discussed by Paden hints at such a 'hemispheric' trope. And might this trope appear on the Pacific side as well, so that 'ocean-crossing' becomes one American-hemisphere trope, among others? Additionally, might such imagery appear in the writings of the activist transnational travelers that Sonita Sarker studies? And if so, we might ask how they inflect their feminist political solidarities and critiques. I raise these possibilities simply as questions for further exploration.

The last yet essential point to make about the regional form of transnationalism is that it can (like national stories and affiliations) tug on and even undercut the imperialist thrust and racialized divisions of the first form of transnationalism—and may perhaps likewise provoke modernist aesthetic de/formations. We might in this connection consider the way that New World hispanophone creole revolutions broke up the Spanish empire and created identities and literatures at odds with Spanish literature, even if ambivalently and partially—including, in some cases, through symbolic and problematic alliances with indigenous outlooks and expressive traditions. In the case of African-diaspora blacks in the US or the 'new world', these regional or hemispheric riptide strains of transnationalism have come into play in several ways, such as when indigenous and African-diasporic communities have gone to war on behalf of creole and colonial Americans in emergent nations against Europeans. Or to take another kind of instance, under circumstances ranging from the 18th century Sierra Leone project to the Ghanaian Independence movement, African-American and Caribbean travelers to Africa reported that they quickly learned that they were after all 'American', in both a national and hemispheric sense. The differences of language, political beliefs, and individualist or communal orientations threw into relief their westernized American-ness. In these cross-hemispheric travels American-diaspora Blacks inevitably re-experienced the falseness of the imperial and racialized modern/colonial ideology that aligned all blacks regardless of continent or nationality. For some, this re-orientation fostered a broad and energizing perspective on the specific nature of their racial and national struggles back in the Americas, including by heightening their sense of the shared Caribbean/American histories of slavery, political languages of rights, and varieties of color oppression. Insofar as these cross-hemispheric movements involved activists, they bring us to the third stream of transnationalism.

The third stream of transnationalism—**an activist-diasporic or cosmopolitan form**—is comprised of persons, movements, and communities who suffer exile or travel deliberately for political reasons and who cultivate an activist orientation or critical cosmopolitan consciousness in the process, often as representatives of one or more diasporic communities. Their movements (in both senses) are often generated by the workings or legacies of imperialist transnationalism and yet they also work, intentionally in many cases, against its formations—in the process loosening or

reconfiguring the borders and identities of the regional within the colonial, modern formation. This is the stream in which we would place the transnational feminist writers that Sonita Sarker studies. Similarly, Elleke Boehmer has recently documented this kind of transnational formation in her excellent study of transnational postcolonial resistance movements, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890–1920* (2002). Such movements are also effectively analyzed within some new theories of cosmopolitanism, such as those collected in *Cosmopolitics* (Cheah, Robbins, 1998). As I hinted above, we might ask whether and how these activist transnational actors deliberately, or simply by their presence, tend to break up, or reinforce, or create aporias within the imperialist and regional forms of transnationalism—and vice versa.

Might it help us understand the relation among diverse modernisms, including but not limited to those outlined in the other contributions to this forum, to think about them as they are multiply shaped by these riptide streams of transnationalism? Are some forms of modernist practice shaped more by one stream than another, even while no text or author can escape being influenced by all of them? Are the tensions and contradictions in modernist literary or political works explained in part by the tensions and contradictions animating these intersecting streams or pressures of transnationalist modernity? These are some of the questions that a theory of riptide transnationalisms might generate.

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