

In Ghostlier Demarcations: Transnationalism and the Aesthetic

David Watson

Uppsala University

david.watson@engelska.uu.se

A world perhaps always, at least potentially, shares the unity proper to the work of art. That is, unless it is the opposite, or rather, unless the reciprocity between “world” and “art” is constitutive of both.

— Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*

“Cosmos” (world) originally meant something like “order” or “adornment,”—a cosmetic, figural addition to the world—before it was extended to refer to “the world” itself (Robbins, “Comparative Cosmopolitanism” 176). One lesson to be drawn from this conflation of figure and ground is that you cannot have a world without the “making up” of the world; it is a tautology to speak of the aesthetic rendering of the “cosmos.” If this is indeed the case, this piece pursues a tautologism: it is an attempt to consider whether the category of the aesthetic can provide a point of entry to transnationalism. This is not to imply that these terms are necessarily commensurate; indeed, on the face of it, they have little in common, no matter what an etymology of “cosmos” suggests. Transnationalism, as a term, serves here as a designation for numerous recent attempts to de-emphasize the nation-state as a discursive object and analytical category, whereas the aesthetic serves as a general rubric primarily for concerns about form, but also related issues such as, to turn briefly to the Kantian tradition here, autonomy, beauty, and disinterest. Transnationalism implies taking the world as a whole as a terrain—or, at least, some slice of the globe—whereas the aesthetic is often taken as pointing towards an experience bereft of worldliness: it has been put to work frequently to differentiate a static “realm called art from those of other human pursuits, cognitive, religious, ethical, economic, or whatever” (Jay 43).

If the aesthetic can offer a critical lens into transnationalism, then it must be taken not merely as an autotelic, rarefied phenomenon, not even only as a category of interest to what Marjorie Levinson calls a “backlash new formalism,” which in its response to an often caricatured new historicism seeks to “bring back a sharp distinction between history and art, discourse and literature” (559), but as a resource in the rethinking and conceptualization of models of transnational relationality. On the one hand, this means that the aesthetic is to be treated as a category demarcated by porous boundaries that implicitly deny its autonomy and the restriction of aesthetic discourses to autotelic works of art; in other words, a kind of

worlding of the aesthetic becomes necessary.¹ On the other hand, an invocation of the aesthetic here serves as a reminder that transnational discourses are often concerned with finding an adequate form within which to frame or aggregate a heterogeneous collection of particular entities, and that aesthetics, primarily a meditation on questions about form, offers one of the most sophisticated vocabularies available with which, perhaps, to approach this imposition of form on the globe. In attempting to make legible transnational connections and networks, we require, as David Palumbo-Liu puts it, “an intermediate and mediating Form” (196) within and whereby these relations become imaginable.

There might very well be more than pragmatic or heuristic reasons for running together the aesthetic and the transnational here. Why is it that the recent resurgence of interest in transnational connectivity has occurred simultaneously with a renewed interest in the aesthetic?² Is it a coincidence that Bruce Robbins’ critique of a specific kind of cosmopolitanism, linked by him to international modernism, proceeds by associating it explicitly with a rarified form of aesthetic experience: it “is open to the very few, and it takes its aesthetic value—in part at least—from that very inaccessibility, that critical remoteness from the benumbed multitude” (*Feeling Global* 15)? The point here is that variants of transnationalism and the aesthetic have repeatedly been on the receiving end of the same judgment: they are grounded in an elitist defamiliarization of a common world at best, and, at worst, they function as a flight from politics (Brennan) or, which amounts to the same thing, as its aestheticization. In fact, the odd synchronicity of a simultaneous turn towards the aesthetic and the transnational in the field of criticism might have to do with their incommensurability with fields grounded in homologies of identity, locale, history, and politics. As Ross Posnock points out, “the two-decade reign of multiculturalism” has served as a kind of “house arrest” (804) for cosmopolitanism and its transnational tendencies, primarily because the questions raised by the latter serve to test the limits of the notions of the former regarding identity, belonging, and ethical or political responsibility. Robert Kaufman offers a formalist echo of this, writing in “Everybody Hates Kant: Blakean Formalism and the Symmetries of Laura Moriarty” that the “material, the social, and the historical” (132) have often been pressed into service as the other of aesthetic formalism, a view he contests through the recovery of a constructive formalism in Adorno and Marx. It might indeed be that the waning of multiculturalism, new historicism, and related fields has created a kind of historical opening for the reemergence of both aesthetic and transnational theories. If so, the work of Robbins and Kaufman is indicative of what is involved in returning to marginal concepts in criticism, which is to say that they not only return to cosmopolitan or aesthetic concerns but also refract them through the work that displaced them from their position in disciplinary configurations.

It is not clear that this shared history constitutes a reason to think that transnationalism and the aesthetic share anything more than being viewed with suspicion by some of the same critical discourses. And this is certainly not the first time that transnational discourses and the aesthetic have been on the receiving end of the same hostilities. One might recall here that for Plato, in the *Republic*, the well-being of the *polis* depended not only on the exclusion of the poetic, but also on the maintenance of restrictions on foreign travel: no man under forty

1 In *The Truth in Painting*, Jacques Derrida suggests that it is impossible, in any case, to restrict aesthetic judgment to works of art since the border between the work of art, and that by which it is framed is permeable.

2 Marjorie Levinson’s “What is New Formalism?” is an invaluable overview of a renewed interest in formalism. Beauty has also returned to the critical scene. See, for instance, Isobel Armstrong’s *The Radical Aesthetic*, Elaine Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just*, and *Beauty and the Critic: Aesthetics in the Age of Cultural Studies*, ed. James Soderholm.

should be allowed to travel abroad, and no man shall travel in a private capacity, but only as a herald or an observer, who will return to the city-state to teach the population that the institutions of other cities and countries are second-rate in comparison to their own (950d–951c). Yet, leaving aside questions about historical contingencies, it is difficult not to feel that what appears at this juncture as a kind of common ground for the aesthetic and transnationalism is that both seem to imply a resistance, subtle or otherwise, to determination by the social order and, by extension, the nation-state. For transnationalism, on the one hand, it is a matter of disconnecting from the *ethos* of the nation-state, that is to say, the manner of being and feeling that its condition imposes. On the other hand, the aesthetic, as Terry Eagleton points out, “is an end in itself and... will stoop to no external determination” (338). For this reason, it can function as “an imaginary consolation for a bourgeoisie bereft of home” (337), and keep alive the image of a “residually common world” (3) for the species as a whole. Although Eagleton might appear idealistic here, becomes clear here that aesthetic formalism has the potential to be put to work in a manner that would not only run parallel to the projects of transnationalism, but which would also make it the aesthetic a potentially transnational category.

It was, of course, in Kant’s Third Critique that the link between the aesthetic and Eagleton’s “residually common world” was worked out.³ When, for instance, I judge a work of art to be beautiful, I assume that my taste is more than subjective, but that somehow my judgment warrants universal assent. In other words, I intersubjectively assume the position of others, who would share my evaluation of the aesthetic work. Aesthetic judgment, a form of reflective judgment, thus implies a kind of “uncoerced consensus building” (Jay 52) that would integrate the species as a whole into Kant’s “enlarged mentality.” Hannah Arendt, among others, has suggested on the basis of this that Kant’s work on aesthetic taste can also be read as a political philosophy, with aesthetic judgment providing a model for the eventual attainment of “perpetual peace”: “the capacity to judge is a specifically political ability in exactly the sense denoted by Kant, namely, the ability to see things not only from one’s own point of view but in the perspective of all those who happen to be present” (221). Since judgment here starts not from a general concept but from contingent, given particulars, it avoids subsuming everything under the same rule or decision, thereby making this a kind of allegorical model of a politics not devoted to the perpetuation of the same, but to a perpetual mediation between the general and the particular, homogeneity and heterogeneity. From this perspective, Eagleton’s “residually common world” seems to presuppose an intersubjective sphere of continuous debate and consensus forming.

With a slight shift in emphasis, however, it becomes clear that what is at stake here is a form for—or the perpetual formalization of—a common world. After claiming that what he is pursuing is “a sense *common to all*, a faculty of judgment which, in its reflection, takes account of the mode of representation of all other men”, Kant goes on to remark in §40 of *Critique of Judgment* that we “could even define taste as the faculty of judging of that which makes *universally communicable*, without the mediation of a concept, our feeling in a given representation.” Now, for Kant a “concept” is an *a priori* ordering structure whereby we organize sense impressions according to their purposes. What is judged here as “*universally communicable*” is exactly what Kant offers as a definition of aesthetic form, a kind of purposiveness without purpose, or a form that appears to have been made without any purpose in mind that would, in turn, determine the formal qualities of the work. Aesthetic form, or beauty, then becomes the content of a judgment assumed to have planetary assent.

3 Dieter Heinrich, in his *Aesthetic Image and the Moral Image of the World*, suggests that Kant’s moral philosophy in the Third Critique potentially offers an image of global humanity. See especially “The Contexts of Autonomy: Some Presuppositions of the Comprehensibility of Human Rights” in the volume.

But if it forms that which is “*universally communicable*” then the reflection whereby Kant arrives at “a sense *common to all*” must, first of all, produce “all other men” as constituting a formal framework for the process of aesthetic judgment. In other words, this sense common to all, the Kantian *sensus communis*, can only be known in terms of its formal properties; as soon as it becomes attached to a concept it would no longer be possible to assume that it is indeed a universal *sensus communis*. The “residually common world” that becomes visible here is a formalized world, which might be why Eagleton insists that it is only a remainder of commonality that appears with the aesthetic.

What Kant does here then is to put into play a form whereby to imagine relationality on a global scale. In the same way that his solution to the problem of establishing a perpetual peace begins by a subordination “of the material principle, or goal, of perpetual peace to the formal principle” (Shell 157) that would enable this peace (the establishment of procedures for international dispute-resolution), the intersubjective relations that form part of reflective judgment arise and are perhaps indistinguishable from the framework that enable them by guaranteeing universal communicability. Two further points are worth making regarding Kant’s discussion of reflective judgment. The first is that reflective judgment is inherently experimental.⁴ If a general rule or concept is already in place, a judgment is determinant in nature; if, however, only the particular or a array of particulars are “given for which the universal has to be *found*, the judgment is merely reflective” (§15, emphasis added). In other words, reflective judgment is a matter of trying out forms under which various particular givens can be subsumed; it arises, as Samuel Weber points out, when “we are confronted by the unknown, the unusual or the unexpected, or in fact by anything that the concepts we have at our disposal are incapable of subsuming” (16). Following from this, and this is my second point, it appears that reflective judgment is always a partial, ongoing process. If a functional general concept has been produced by reflective judgment then it is no longer reflective but determinant: a successful act of reflection amounts to self-erasure. The process of reflective judgment can only continue if it is necessary to begin searching again for an adequate form with every new encounter. On the one hand, it becomes clear why Kant speaks of a judgment that is “*merely* reflective” (emphasis added), since it seems here this judgment is constituted and maintained by its own internal limitations.⁵ On the other hand, if reflective judgment resists subsuming a given particular under a concept or general scheme, it is also, as Jonathan Loesberg claims, a way to defamiliarize an object by “choosing to attend only to [its] form giving qualities” and by resisting “the normal perspective of explaining form by purpose” (543).⁶ Reflective judgments arise in relation to that for which no concept exists as of yet, but there is nothing to prevent it from functioning as a way of deliberately imposing a new

4 Robert Kaufman offers in “Red Kant, or the Persistence of the Third ‘Critique’ in Adorno and Jameson” a stronger version of this claim by linking Kant’s reflective judgment to “construction, to the present activity of constructing new concepts” (721) through the elaboration of an abstract form prior to any manifestation of an empirical concept.

5 It is possible that another name for reflective judgment would be what Derrida calls “the law of genre.” This “law” posits that there “is always a genre and genres but this participation [of the text in genre] is never a belonging” (264). What interests me here is the inoperability of “belonging” to a genre, which mirrors the inoperability of being subsumed by the concept in aesthetic judgment.

6 For Loesberg, Kant’s definition of the aesthetic form as purposiveness without purpose is nearly contradictory, and depends on a willing suspension of any notion of purpose. Interestingly, he offers Foucault’s *The Order of Things* as an example of this formal wager, claiming that just “as in Kant, in aesthetic apprehension, one may attribute to a bird’s song ‘gladsomeness and contentment with existence’ regardless of ‘whether it have this design or not’ (144-5), in Foucault, one can resee history according to Borges’s strange, defamiliarizing taxonomies, even though they are chosen for their antipodean quality” (543).

perspective on a given particular. In either case, for the judgment to remain reflective it cannot solidify into a determinant judgment, which, strictly speaking, would be the point where aesthetic judgment is transformed into an aestheticization of the particular (or the socio-historical world), since it would blur the boundaries of form and matter. In other words, reflective or aesthetic judgment might produce a static, atemporal form, but this is only a conditional stasis since the form produced here by judgment is part of a series of attempts at arriving at a concept that will suffice. The Kantian common world, or rather *form* of a common world, is then the product of dynamic, experimental conception of form in which the search for, rather than attainment of, relationality is emphasized.

By sketching this interpretation of Kant's reflective judgment, I do not mean to suggest that there its direct influence is visible in transnational studies today. That certainly was the case for older variants of transnational or cosmopolitan thinking. This is particularly clear in the field of comparative literature, the history of which has been determined to a large extent by René Welleck's assertion, after Kant, that any discipline must have its own autonomous field of study that cannot be treated as a symptom of other disciplines (Lawall 3–24). Be that as it may, I am more interested in how the structure and dilemmas of reflective judgment resonate with a similar set of problematics in transnationalism. How to negotiate between the particular and the global? What framework can serve as a sufficient form for an array of heterogeneous entities dispersed across cultures and nations? How to re-see ossified national homologies as operative within in a different, global frame? Are the limits between determinant and reflective judgments not also, as Rey Chow suggests, "constitutive of the politics of comparison in the postcolonial global context" (304), where it becomes a question of subsuming cultural differences under a general concept, or keeping alive the processes of reflective judgment and resisting this final absorption? What is the status of the form of the world offered by a particular variant of transnationalism? Is it to be taken as a static image of the world or as its conditional formation, which amounts to asking whether more than one form of transnational connectivity is available to us? These questions do not belong exclusively to either transnational studies or discussions about reflective judgment and aesthetic formalism; instead, they circulate in the space opened by overlapping of these discursive formations into something that might well be described as a form of reflective transnationalism.

In what follows, I will attempt to trace the subsistence of these questions in discursive domains where aesthetic problematics are articulated together with transnational narratives, which means both various forms of transnational literary studies, such as comparative literature and area studies redefined as the transnational rescaling of national literatures, and various attempts by, for instance, Jacques Rancière and Jean-Luc Nancy to position the aesthetic in relation to the limits of the nation-state and discourses on globalization. For my purposes here, Kant's account of reflective judgment is useful not only for how it draws attention to the formal issues involved in imagining transnational connectivity, but also insofar as it is suggestive of the domain inside which this judgment, and I would argue transnational studies, operates. As a mode of judgment that is activated when an organizing concept for thinking objects is no longer available or desired, reflective judgment points to a domain that exceeds the scheme whereby it is represented, and which is grasped in the act of judgment as excessive to an *a priori* framework. Relocated to transnational studies, this means that the terrain of the transnational is distinct, first of all, from the spatial and temporal grid that demarcates nation-states. The differentiated forms produced by the logic of this grid give way to a kind of sublime proliferation, in the mathematical sense, of what Wai Chee Dimock describes as the heterogeneous array of "input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment" that "thread" the nation-state, here America, "into the topical events of other cultures" (*Through Other Continents* 3). By virtue of the same logic, it

is necessary for the transnational to be distinct from schemes that figure the globe as an already totalized entity always available to the panoptic gaze of a viewer. Linking globalization with what she describes as a paranoid “oneworldedness,” Emily Apter diagnoses this condition as symptomatic of the systematic subsumption of the globe as a whole under a cognitive or epistemological scheme:

Like globalization, oneworldedness traduces territorial sovereignty and often masks its identity as another name for “America.” But where globalization is an amorphous term applied to economic neo-imperialism [...] *oneworldedness*, as I am defining it, refers more narrowly to a delirious aesthetics of systematicity; to the match between cognition and globalism that is held in place by the paranoid premise that “everything is connected.” (Apter 366)

It is perhaps a misnomer to refer to this homology of “cognition and globalism” as “aesthetics” in the Kantian sense of the term. The strict correspondence imagined here between the form given to the world and the terrain of the globe itself institutes a hyperbolic relationality (“everything is connected”) as a conceptual determination tasked with overcoming differences, contradictions, and disharmonies across the globe. On the one hand, this is the form of the nation-state reproduced on a global scale; on the other, this is not a species of aesthetic or reflective judgment but exactly the point where reflective judgment abnegates itself and where the form it produces is written back into world and installed as its representational truth.

In her charting of an encounter between comparative literature and area studies in *Death of a Discipline*, Gayatri Spivak proposes a territorial category, that of “planetarity,” that seems more apt for the reflective transnationalism I am talking about here than either the nation-state or Apter’s “oneworldedness.” Planetarity refers to a kind of pre-capitalist territorial commons, but this apparently historical designation is deceptive since the planet is what “we inhabit... on loan” (72), and that which we encounter in the same mode whereby alterity is encountered, which implies that we are not the agents of the encounter and that this meeting takes the form of an spatial and temporal aporia. Distinct from the globe of globalization or “oneworldedness,” which “allows us to think that we can aim to control it” (72), the planet resists conceptual determination and appears heterogeneously excessive to its representations. At once a defamiliarization of the global, and the appearance of a territorial commons that has always been there and that precedes any conceptual determination, the notion of “planetarity” introduces an incommensurability between cognition and world into transnational studies that is analogous to the incommensurability that serves as a ground for reflective judgment. How to imagine relationality or, to use Spivak’s term, “collectivities” in this space that is simultaneously the world we inhabit daily and irreducibly other to us? This is a task for the “power of fiction” (49). It is through “imaginative making,” a kind of *poiesis* or rather *teleopoiesis* in which affective repetitions across a distance is imagined and gambled on, that the figure of a collectivity becomes apparent. The relationality produced by *teleopoiesis*—like the collectivity it suggests performatively—is inherently figural, or rather, to use Spivak’s term, it is a “prefiguration” (44). A prefiguration is the production of relational form that does not provide any taxonomical assurance, and does not function like a concept: the “generality of *poiesis* depends on its unverifiability; it cannot be tied to a singular ‘fact’” (44), Spivak suggests. The forms sketched by *teleopoiesis* are not to be confused with literal or determinative forms then. Instead, they are contingent, groundless constructions of a collectivity that, as “prefiguration” suggests, belong to “the unimaginable future” (32).

What Spivak does in her work on planetarity and *teleopoiesis* is, quite obviously, to theorize a possible transnationalism that does not rely on taxonomic assurances and presumptions of similarity and equivalence. The guiding questions of her work can be

understood as stemming from a desire to think together planetary relationality and forms of alterity. What surprises, perhaps, is the relation between *poiesis* and the collectivity that transnational studies take as its subject. It is necessary to imagine a form for the multiple singularities of the world so as to posit a collectivity, even if it is posited only as a kind of future anterior possibility. This form might be aesthetic, and it is certainly only a speculative approximation of whatever relationality might inhere in the world, but is also absolutely necessary for the possibility of a transnational collectivity to become visible. What Spivak does is to offer *poiesis*, and by extension form, as the uncertain grounds of possibility for transnational studies, uncertain because, as has become clear, this is an abysmal ground, and one that arises, in any case, as a kind of necessary wager.

Not surprisingly, the scholars who have been working in literary studies, or have some allegiance to the field, are somewhat more explicit about the formal aspects of the transnational narratives they offer. With a focus on mediating between the traditional terrain of area studies—the nation-state—and the transnational, for instance, a number of critics have foregrounded forms in their work that allow for the depiction of the commonalities, incongruities, and conflicts between different cultures and literatures. Since the transnationalization of area studies takes as its point of departure the sub-national or national and the globe as its (receding) destination, these forms tend to be resistant to closure. Instead, they encourage an expanding, centrifugal motion, an open-ended dissemination of relational echoes and reverberations.

In his work on comparativism and Southeast Asian studies in *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World*, for instance, Benedict Anderson investigates what makes comparisons across national boundaries possible. In the same way that for him the narrative form of the traditional novel made it possible to imagine the “homogeneous empty time” of the nation, the newspaper allows for a comparative method according to which, for instance, Indonesia appears within an “incurable doubled vision” (2) in which it is framed by Europe. Newspapers, operating under the presupposition that they take the whole world as their domain, present the world to the nation in a manner that enforces a kind of global simultaneity and discursive standardization—the local and the foreign are written about in the same way and inscribed in the same daily temporal cycle. The newspaper allows for its readers to imagine the nation as an unbounded form, as part of a series that runs across the globe. It is necessary here to recognize that the nation-state remains the position from which this opening up of the nation’s form takes place. Rather than providing a general overview of the globe, each newspaper maps the world in relation to its own position in the globe. What is interesting about Anderson’s turn to the newspaper as a comparative form is that content here is largely immaterial. He is interested in the formal role of the newspaper as a space where local and global news are juxtaposed. Any news from any territory can make its way into the newspaper, which makes it exemplary of the kind of centrifugal forms I suggested are favored in the transnationalization of area studies. At the same time as the newspaper functions as an open-ended form for transnational comparisons, it also, in Anderson’s analyses, implies a standardization of the content it presents, a leveling determined by its attachment to a specific locale and perspective. The transnational space mapped by the newspaper is then not to be mistaken for the territory it covers, but emerges as an approximation of this space.

There is little standardization in Paul Giles’ version of transnational American Studies, but he also, like Anderson, bases his account in *Virtual Americas* of how American literature intersects, modulates, and is modulated by other literatures on a formal narrative. Giles presents the imbrication of American Studies in the rest of the world as a surrealization of

formations of identity and the nation-state.⁷ Drawing in part on Roger Shattuck's description of surrealist form as a space where different cultures "interpenetrate and interact through contrast and humorous conflict rather than by discursive logic or conventional perspective" (238–39), Giles substitutes for accounts of literature's organic unity with geography a narrative in which American literature points towards a "disjointedness" within its "national allegories" (126), and enters ceaselessly into "bizarre, random juxtapositions" (119) with other literatures, which, for Giles, leads to a demystification of ideas of nationhood. Surrealism's "pursuit of heterogeneity" (Suleiman 150) operates at this point as a formal principle in American literature's transnational narratives: these operate in such a way as to generate juxtapositions and mixtures of the familiar and the unfamiliar. The difference between Anderson and Giles should be clear at this point. While Anderson views transnational narratives as the product of a standardization and flattening of cultural differences, Giles offers an account in which heterogeneity is maintained, even, it might be suggested, taken as a general principle for the circulation of cultural forms across national boundaries. This difference can be traced back to the form they choose as a model whereby to imagine and represent transnational relationality. Both forms are open-ended: for the newspaper, there is always more news to report from abroad, while, for the surreal narrative, the pursuit of heterogeneity is paramount and, importantly, this heterogeneity is not subsumed, at least formally, by a single perspective. Both forms imply for these authors an expansion into the world beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Where Anderson's and Giles' projects differ are in terms of the relation they envisage between the transnational forms they invoke and the form of the nation-state. For Anderson, there is no necessary tension between nationhood and the transnational: in the same way that nationalism in Indonesia can co-exist with memories of a colonial past and comparisons with Europe, the position from which the focalization of the unbounded space mapped by the newspaper takes place is located firmly within the national. Giles, however, imports surrealist forms into American isomorphisms of text and geography so as to view the "nation's unconscious assumptions, boundaries, and proscribed areas" (3) from a willfully "estranged perspectives" (5). Giles, in other words, utilizes a form dependant on incongruous juxtapositions and heterogeneity to begin a deliberate defamiliarization of the *a priori* concepts that have aggregated around American Studies.

Wai Chee Dimock, in her *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*, gambles also on the possibility that if a different form or framework for American literature was to be offered, one in which the nation-state is not privileged, a different image of this literature would come into being: "What would happen if we go beyond 1776 and 1620, if we trace threads of relation to the world that antedate these allegedly founding moments? What would American literature look like then, restored to the *longue durée*, a scale enlargement along the temporal axis that also enlarges its spatial compass?" (4). Dimock wagers on the possibility that if a work of literature is reinscribed in a different temporal framework—Fernand Braudel's *longue durée*—the work of, say, Ralph Waldo Emerson might seem closer in nature to that of the fourteenth-century Persian poet Hafiz (47) than necessarily to Thoreau's *Walden*, which, in turn, might be threaded together with the *Bhagavad Gita* (9). This transnational, or perhaps rather transchronological, poetics

7 It is not only Giles that have turned towards surreal forms to theorize transnational and transcultural imbrications. Rehabilitated after Sartre accused it in *What Is Literature?* of being amoral (139), surrealism has returned with force in anthropology: James Clifford speaks of it as an aesthetic "that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions" (118). Once it is defined in this way, the task of the anthropologist becomes "the invention and interruption of meaningful wholes in works of cultural import-export" (147).

foregrounds both the presence of spatial and temporal forms in our mapping and interpretation of literatures, and the estranging effects produced by a modulation and outwards expansion of these frameworks. With Dimock, as with Giles, we are squarely within the framework of a reflective transnationalism that generates modes of relationality through formal procedures, while simultaneously defamiliarizing the objects inscribed in these configurations by suspending the normal concepts, whether spatial or temporal, whereby they have been schematized

What Dimock does here, in *Through Other Continents*, is still part of the project of the transnationalization of area studies. America, even if not privileged as an analytical frame, still serves, as it did in Giles, as a literal point of departures for the relational threads drawn between it and other national and sub-national cultures. In other words, Dimock's project here is to de-emphasize and defamiliarize the spatio-temporal form of the nation, but this can only take place through a movement away from this formation. In her recent work on genre theory though, Dimock shifts towards taking the literature of the whole world as her terrain. This move was already implicit in the scale implied by Braudel's *longue durée*, but when she seeks to posit "world literature" as a genre in "Genres as Field of Knowledge," it becomes difficult to associate her work with area studies instead of comparative literature. Genre, it turns out, is a relational form that connects under the rubric of "ontologized names" (1379) such as epic or lyric "texts both ancient and modern and groupings both large and small, understood to be prenational in their evolutionary past and transnational in their geographic spread" (1383). The taxonomic classes of genre theory operate as names for different spatio-temporal constellations, which offer a different set of coordinates whereby to map the globe. The first point that needs to be made here is that is almost a tautology to posit that "world literature" (1379) is one particular kind of genre. Taking into account the determination given to generic forms by Dimock, "world literature" is, if anything, a kind of genre of genre, both a part of a generic set and a mode for describing the entire field. The second is that Dimock is faced here with a different set of problems than those involved with, to put it plainly, thinking across the boundaries of area studies. "The membership—of any genre—is an open rather than closed set, because there is always another instance, another empirical bit of evidence, to be added" (1378), she claims, suggesting thereby what is at issue here is how to frame within the boundaries of one genre an excess of multiplicities, how, in other words, to subsume a heterogeneous array within a singular form. Ironically, especially given that the idea of genre is intimately connected to issues regarding frames, classifying systems, and norms, a generic designation is, for Dimock, akin to the attachment of an ontological name to a "process that is by and large without ontology." The names provided by genre theory function as contingent and incommensurable forms for a perpetually shifting ground excessive to their representations. What generic classification requires is the perpetual positing of new or modified forms to match, or rather to keep up with, or accidentally match, the multiplicity of forms they seek to name.

Neil Hertz has described a process that he calls a "moment of blockage in sublime scenarios": "The scholar's *wish* is for the moment of blockage, when an indefinite and disarrayed sequence is resolved (at whatever sacrifice) into a one-to-one confrontation, when numerical excess can be converted into that supererogatory identification with the blocking agent" (60). Choosing, aptly, the image of the "scholar" reading a difficult text as example, Hertz examines in this passage the complex forces at work in an encounter between the mind and an unstable textual system—a text in which "an indefinite and disarrayed sequence" holds the possibility of closure at bay. In the face of these textual difficulties, the "scholar" hopes for a reduction, a "moment of blockage" that would bring the signifying flows of the text to a halt. This "blockage" ensures then the integrity of the text and the "scholar," who is also lost among the multiple significations of the text. Extrapolating from Hertz' discussion here, I

want to suggest that the moment of “blockage” he identifies is an apt description not only of a scholar confronted with an unlimited and ongoing textual semiosis, but also a recurring pattern in critical studies, such as that of Dimock’s, that attempts to engage with the literature of the planet. The names of genre have such a blocking function in Dimock’s work; they function as contingent points of rest in an ongoing process of classification and form giving. Does this mean that comparative literature, as a mode of engagement with the literature of the planet, can be understood in terms of a positing of taxonomic forms for world literature that simultaneously narrows this field to make it more manageable? In other words, if the transnationalization of area studies goes hand in hand with a centrifugal, expansive notion of form, is the opposite true for those critics who take as their terrain global literature, and is there a kind of centripetal notion of form visible in their work?

David Damrosch offers in *What is World Literature?* the figure of the ellipse as a way to think the suspension of a work of world literature between the twin foci of its “source and host cultures... connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither alone” (283). The ellipse then also provides him with a form whereby to conceptualize the field of world literature: “*World literature is an elliptical refraction of national literatures*” (281), he suggests in one formulation. According to this, world literature is that which circulates between cultures without coming to rest in one particular culture. What is of interest here is less this perpetual uprootedness of world literature than the form given to it by Damrosch’s ellipse. On the one hand, the ellipse, by marking the point where national literatures enter the field of world literature, operates very much like a threshold for the transnationalization of a national literature: works of a national literature are yanked into the orbit of world literature via translations that add something of interest to the source text, and by the choices involved in selecting which texts from a foreign culture are to be read. On the other hand, as the foregoing makes clear, Damrosch’s ellipse also functions to demarcate the field of world literature from those national literatures that do not gain anything in translation, and which are not read internationally. The signifying field of the term “world literature” is restricted to those works “actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture” (4).

There is a kind of deliberate *askesis* visible in Damrosch’s account of world literature, a centripetal movement away from the excessive heterogeneity implied by the term “world literature” taken in its broadest sense. A similar movement occurs in Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters*, which purports to be, among other things, a study of the organization of an unequal world literary space by translators, publishers, and international prizes. What interests me here in relation to Casanova’s work is how a diachronic literary history is pressed into service as a form whereby to map “the literary field in space and time, or, better perhaps, in a time that has become space” (*World Republic* 101). Casanova’s diachronic account of literature is inherently a progressivist notion of aesthetic development: “writing the history of literature is a paradoxical activity that consists in placing it in historical time and then showing how literature gradually tears itself away from this temporality, creating in turn its own temporality” (*World Republic* 350). The history of literature is an account of the literary aesthetic overcoming history, the nation, and the political, and generating thereby its own autonomous space. In other words, literary history is a teleological narrative terminating, it seems, with Samuel Beckett’s “invention of the most absolute literary autonomy” (*World Republic* 320), which for Casanova is identical to his flight from any kind of “rootedness” (*World Republic* 318). On the one hand, Casanova rejects the valuation of critics that rely on ahistorical and universalizing readings of literary works, a practice she scorns as ethnocentric, and questions by offering an account of literary history that sees it as very much in competition with socio-cultural and political forces. On the other, her literary history displaces the aesthetic autonomy on which universalizing and ahistorical literary interpretations depend to the point at the end of literary history where this history culminates

in the achievement of the literary “freedom” she associates with literature’s independence from the world.

Transposed into a map of a literary field, this historical narrative frames the world republic of letters as a field of unequal development. Literary autonomy, what Casanova calls the “Greenwich Meridian of Literature” and associates with the Parisian publishing industry, is reached by only a few, yet it centers and structures the literary field to such a degree that it becomes a figure of literary modernity. Accordingly, the “aesthetic distance” of a work from this ideal also implies a “temporal remove from the canons that... define the literary present” (*World Republic* 88). The argument here is that the field of literature has its own spatial and temporal co-ordinates, which are determined in relation to Casanova’s “Greenwich Meridian.” The aesthetic remove of a work from the ideals of autotelic literature is one way to determine its position in this field. This aesthetic distance also translates into a temporal distance, however, which means that the work is positioned in terms of its temporal relation to the “literary present.” More concretely, a perhaps unintended effect of Casanova’s suggestion that a “literature... relatively dependent on politics” (39) remains distant from the literary “Greenwich Meridian” is that her literary field ends up reproducing in some way a geography in which much of the postcolonial world gains meaning and significance only in relation to the centers of modernity. What is clear is that the form given here to world literature is radically centripetal: the literary “Greenwich Meridian” functions as a center of gravity for the literary field, narrowing the number of possible forms of literary relationality to the relationship a work enters into with modernity and its institutions. Unlike what we find in Damrosch there is no clear outside to the world republic of letters: Casanova suggests, in a formulation bringing to mind Apter’s “oneworldedness,” that “the national and the international are not separate spheres; they are two opposed stances, struggling within the same domain” (“Literature as World” 4–5). Instead, Casanova offers a systematized account of the literary field, in which the structure of this field repeats its history, which is recapitulated again by the relation between each literary text and the literary “Greenwich Meridian”: each literary text is constituted by its hierarchical relation to literary modernity, while at the same time no other form of relationality, which would link together, for instance, different peripheral literatures, is imagined. As Christopher Prendergast suggest, in Casanova there is no room for “relations other than competition” (“Negotiating World Literature” 109).

With Casanova, world literature is transformed into a manageable concept through a comparative form that restricts the kinds of relations between texts from all over the planet. Franco Moretti’s account of world literature as a singular, but “not uniform” (“Conjectures” 3) system offers a different set of challenges to an account of the operations of form in constructions of transnational literary relations. From Moretti’s perspective, world literature comes into being through the diffusion and evolution of literary forms: exported from Western Europe, the novel is imported by the rest of the world through a process of transculturation, the “foreign form” (“Conjectures” 4) of the novel is assimilated by the local culture, combined with local content, and then enunciated by a “local *narrative voice*” (“Conjectures” 4). In other words, the evolution of the novel is an account of a compromise between imported formal patterns and local realities.⁸ The only way to capture adequately this spread and evolution of the novel is through “distant reading.” Opposed to close reading, distant reading takes as its object not the text and its content, but the small elements of the literary work, its “devices, themes, tropes” (“Conjectures” 2), and larger literary frameworks, literary “genres and systems” (“Conjectures” 2). What is elided here is the text itself, and the

8 It might be possible that this account of literary evolution is only applicable to the novel. Moretti suggests, in “More Conjectures,” that “novels would be representative, not of the *entire* system” of world literature, “but of its most mobile strata” (1).

comparativist mapping the unequal, evolutionary space of world literature is forced into relying on the conclusions of others. There is a double exclusion at work here. In the first instance, the world literary system is reproduced by the critic independently from the hermeneutic processes of reading; secondly, world literature is flattened to an account of large and small forms. In other words, texts and the content of texts are elided in this construction of world literature in favor of forms, and the construction of forms whereby to depict the global spread and development of forms. What Moretti does is to perform a formal *askesis* upon world literature, which is slimmed down to an account of the export and transformation of Western literary forms; after all, the content of a text is of no concern to the comparativist.

Moretti, as Christopher Prendergast discusses in his “Evolution and Literary History,” frames his comparativist project as a mode of scientific enquiry through “a general appeal to the validity of scientific method as such; and a particular appeal to the life sciences, crucially evolutionary theory” (2). His depiction of, say, the spread and evolution of the novel is grounded then in an appeal to the truth-value and objectivity of scientific inquiry, and the graphic presentations of this evolutionary development in his *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary Theory* thus claim for themselves a kind of mathematical, representational value, according to which they are abstract formal depictions of observable and objective processes in the world. Yet, it might well be that these forms function more as a figural rather than mathematical depiction of these processes. In his discussion of the provincial novel, Moretti suggests that “like the *provinciae* of antiquity, subject to Rome, but denied full citizenship, the provinces are ‘negative’ entities, defined by *what is not there*; which also explains, by the way, why one cannot map provincial novels—you cannot map what is not there” (*Graphs, Maps, Trees* 53). To map or describe “provinces” is to perform a *catachresis*, the aberrant imposition of a figure or name on that which resists naming and description; it is to fill in arbitrarily a blind spot in your vision. But, to return to Moretti’s account of the evolution of the novel, if the evolution of the novel is to be described purely in terms of the export and transformation of a literary form, then the places to which the novel is exported are also defined by “what is not there” but derived from elsewhere. These places and the local pressures these realities enforce on the novel form are “negative” elements in the history of the evolution of the novel. These entities are then provincial, and their graphic presentation, even if mediated by processes of distant reading, raises the specter of a possibly *catachrestic* imposition of form on a receding, barely visible ground. In other words, Moretti’s excursion into a discussion of provincial forms raises issues regarding the scientific veracity of his project and his depiction of a global literary space. It might well be little more than the imposition of a tropological form on an incommensurable ground, rather than an abstract map of a clearly delineated territory.

The forms suggested by Casanova and Moretti for world literature raises a problem of a different kind from the representational qualities of these forms themselves. For both, Western literary modes, whether literary autonomy or the form of the novel, serve as a starting point for conceptualizing a world literary space. These modes spread everywhere and anywhere, creating a system in which literature is not solely the province of the West in all its geographical specificity, but in which there is an irreducible association between literature anywhere and the determinations given to literature in Western Europe. In other words, they verge on systematizing the literature of the globe by subsuming it under one model of the literary. To what extent is this a globalization of the literary, whereby world literature is grasped as “indistinct totality” (33), to utilize Jean-Luc Nancy’s description in *The Creation of the World* or *Globalization* of the world as reproduced by globalization into an undifferentiated set? This is perhaps primarily a way of asking whether a form proposed for the world has to be necessarily complicit with the framework already inscribed in it. For Moretti and Casanova’s descriptive models of the world literary system, the inequalities of

this system are political and social givens that their accounts simply reproduce. This determination is, however, exactly what is problematized and questioned by the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Rancière on aesthetic forms. For Rancière, aesthetic forms “introduce lines of fracture and disincorporation into imaginary collective bodies” (39), which is to say that aesthetic form opens a space for the appearance of that which is undetermined by models and classifying systems. In this system, a collective body is formed through what Rancière describes as the “distribution of the sensible”; in other words, by the construction of particular ways of viewing and inhabiting the world. The aesthetic introduces the potential of the political, which he understands as dissent, into the collective body or communal *ethos* because it presents a form that does not conform to a function or purpose proposed by the sensible regime of the state or the collective. If Rancière, it could be argued, discovers the potential for a politics in the purposiveness without purpose Kant’s associates with the aesthetic, Jean-Luc Nancy does the same with regard to Kantian reflective judgment. The “creation” of the world means for him that the form given to the globe by globalization must be opposed by acts of *world-forming*. This means for him that the representation of the world must be treated as a site of a “struggle for a world” (54). Since globalization implies for him the subsumption of the world under a general concept of the globe, this “struggle” takes place through the production of a form for the world “that is not only produced in the absence of any given, but held infinitely beyond any possible given... it is never inscribed in a representation, and nonetheless always at work and in circulation in the forms that are being invented” (52). How to give form to a world without resorting to classifying systems and established taxonomies, while at the same time foreclosing upon the possibility of this form becoming a new mode whereby to represent the world as if it is simply a given? The possibility of distinguishing between globalization, on the one hand, and the creation of a world open to alterity (109) depends for Nancy on this question.

Transnational literary studies is preoccupied with questions about what form to give to the world. But simply to give form to a world is not sufficient, as Kant’s description of reflective judgment makes clear, as Spivak suggests within the disciplinary boundaries of area studies and comparative literature, and as my brief excursion to the works of Nancy and Rancière underscores here. The modality of this form, and its relation to other representations of the globe cannot be excluded from discourses on the transnational, certainly not if the transnational is to be anything like the inscription of “ourselves and of our origins, / In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds” (Stevens 106). More broadly, thinking about aesthetics and form in relation to the world does not mean to resort to an aestheticized and unworldly figure for the planet. On transnational scales, form and relationality become interchangeable. Form, in this context, becomes the terrain in which ethico-political questions are contested, and in which the debits and credits of how we imagine the planet become apparent. To avoid the question of form is, in effect, to naturalize one model of the world as its representational truth; instead of, as Nancy would have it, to treat representations of the globe as opportunities for transnational contestations.

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