On The Redundancy of “Transnational American Studies”

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Abstract and Keywords

This article investigates the profound redundancy, terminological and historical, of transnational American studies. It argues that transnational American studies is a logically incoherent formulation whose plausibility arises from its perpetuation of a hemispheric cultural-political project of a very long nineteenth century which has distinguished America as more than yet another nation but rather a teeming nation of nations. The article discusses the works of Thomas Paine, Simón Bolívar, and José Vasconcelos.

Keywords: transnational American studies, cultural-political project, America, Thomas Paine, Simón Bolívar, José Vasconcelos

The thesis is simple: “Transnational American Studies” is a logically incoherent formulation whose plausibility arises from its perpetuation of a hemispheric cultural-political project of a very long nineteenth century (1776–1939) that has distinguished “America” as more than yet another nation but rather “a teeming nation of nations.” The essence, or promise, of “American” nationality, the argument goes, is precisely its transnationality. One can draw a line from Thomas Paine’s 1776 trumpeting of “the cause of America” as “the cause of all mankind,” which foresees in the nascent multicultural republic an enlightened cosmopolis in which petty national distinctions might dissolve, to Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s 2004 celebration of the United States as “a transnational crossroads of culture” that has “itself generated a host of other crossroads of cultures as it has crossed borders”—for instance, Gandhi’s Thoreauvian and then Martin Luther King’s Gandhian education in civil disobedience. Both formulations belong to the same political meta-narrative: enlightened values—here, cosmopolitan fraternity and civil disobedience—are on a global march, and “America” is a primary base of operations. Even as transnational...
American studies attempts to elude American exceptionalism by proclaiming “the freedom of trans-nations” (Lott 201) over and against the hegemonic nationality of the United States, it reveals its rhetorical and conceptual indebtedness to Paine's elevation of “America” as precisely the first trans-nation.

Current critiques of transnational American studies are too presentist to unravel this genealogy whereby transnationality and Americanity became fundamentally linked. A familiar materialist critique reifies rather than unpacks the linkage of Americanity and transnationality by its too facile equation of global capital with the United States (see Pease, “Re-thinking”). A certain disciplinary critique likewise reasons from a contemporary moment in which American power seems especially ominous to urge American studies to “go back inside,” resuming “the task and interpretative challenge for which it was created”: “the analysis of the cultural sources of American power” (Fluck 28–30). Neither critique sufficiently comprehends that American studies' transnational turn is not merely mimetic of contemporary U.S. hegemony but a profound and predictable return to the very wellspring of American exceptionalism—the Enlightenment localization of the universal in “America.” The cosmopolitan frame of planetarity to which many transnational American studies practitioners hopefully look for global justice is not only a “period concept … developed within the paradigm of global modernity” but quite literally contingent upon the European discovery of the Americas and the emergence of “Americanity as a concept” (Pease, “Literary Extraterritoriality” 20; Quijano and Wallerstein). Americanity, globality, planetarity, and modernity predicate each other. This historical circumstance has made “America” the projection screen of the modern radical imaginary—the site, actual and otherwise, of a utopian dreaming of collectivities that might transcend the limiting “claims of historicity” (Quijano and Wallerstein).

“Transnational American studies” rather than simply “transnational studies” presupposes a special relationship between Americanity and transnationality that has historically been the basis of a robust brand of American exceptionalism. “Transnational American studies” is thus not so much “oddly oxymoronically” as it is unselfconsciously synonymizing (Brickhouse 696). This chapter investigates the profound redundancy—terminological and historical—of transnational American studies in hopes of tempering the field. By providing a much deeper historicization of the field, I aim, on the one hand, to dampen certain enthusiasms about having eluded American exceptionalism but, on the other, potentially to strengthen the field by pointing toward a new critical history of “Atlantic/world” modernity that frankly addresses the complex centrality of “America” to any imagination of the global.¹
Republicanism, American and Universal

“In the beginning, all the world was America,” John Locke famously averred, and, by a certain principle of eschatological symmetry, so many philosophers thought it should be in the end (Locke 29). The American (and later the French) Revolution was taken as heralding the direction that all the world should go, pointing the way toward the universal republic invoked by Paine, Anacharsis Cloots, Immanuel Kant, and many others. Cosmopolitanism thus has a particular national(ist) “cradle.” Two Atlantic cosmopolitans, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur and Thomas Paine, derived cosmopolitanism from experiences of the multicultural transnationalism of revolutionary North America, as registered in their seminal works, Letters from an American Farmer (1782) and Common Sense (1776). Specifically, “America” furnished two enduring figures that at the time seemed to throw into dramatic relief the small-mindedness of European-style nationalism: “continental” space and a new American “race.”

The seemingly infinite expanse of North America is a crucial starting point for Crèvecoeur and Paine. British cultural and political insularity reflects literal, geographical insularity (“the narrow limits of three hundred and sixty miles,” as Paine notes) and contrasts with an American cultural and political hospitality enabled by spatial vastness. America’s massive continentality becomes cosmopolitanism’s condition of possibility: because there is literally “room for everybody in America,” Americans “know, properly speaking, no strangers” (Crèvecoeur 81, 80). To be American is thus not to be American per se, but cosmopolitan: “When in England, [the English emigrant to America] was a mere Englishman; here he stands on a larger portion of the globe, not less than its fourth part, and may see the productions of the north, in iron and naval stores; the provisions of Ireland; the grain of Egypt; the indigo, the rice of China” (Crèvecoeur 81). Once in America, the former “mere Englishman” is organically transformed into a citizen of the world—call it natural supernationalism.

Both Crèvecoeur and Paine rather literal-mindedly refer the moral universality of the American experiment to its greater geographical fraction of globality: because it constitutes “a larger portion of the globe, not less than its fourth part” (Crèvecoeur), because it is “a continent ... at least one eighth part of the habitable globe” (Common Sense 4, 28–29), America represents a “universal” “circumstance.” Crèvecoeur and Paine anticipate contemporary invocations of planetarity as the basis for a new cosmopolitan humanism—just witness how cannily Paine couches his universalist claim for the rights of man in a planetary metaphor: it is “a subject that embraces with equatorial magnitude the whole region of humanity” (Rights of Man 210). But what cannot be missed is the historical fact that Americanity was perhaps the original vehicle whereby abstract
universalist humanism was translated into concrete planetary humanism, which of course is precisely the function it continues to serve in contemporary transnational American studies—take Wai Chee Dimock’s much celebrated recasting of American literature as a sort of transhistorical, transnational portal through which we might glimpse a better global future.

So the continental space of America creates uniquely cosmopolitan conditions, bringing together diverse peoples in an environment wherein they can peacefully coexist—and, it turns out, cohabit. Transnational marriages and children become the ultimate measure of the cosmopolitan, which gives way to a vision of an American “race” that by its very mixed makeup underscores the enlightened tenet of human equality. Insofar as the American race is here being leveraged as a metonym of the human race, race is meant to operate as the most capacious of categories, shaming the provincialism of nation. That said, it is essential to note that “the scope of diversity” for both Paine and Crèvecoeur is extremely limited (p. 272) by our standards—pan-Europeanism represents the extent of their fantasizing, although this should not be trivialized in light of substantial national and imperial conflicts (Hollinger, *Postethnic America* 90). “That race now called American,” writes Crèvecoeur, is a “promiscuous breed” of “English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes,” possessing “a strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country” (68, 70). Exceptionalism inheres in encyclopedism: “I could point out to you a family,” Farmer James reports, “whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations” (70–71). The American race is a race of derácïnés whose multiple origins effectively cancel each other out, clearing the ground for the formation of an enlightened autonomous subject.

But intractable tensions and tautologies here begin to rear their heads. What does it mean to define Americanity as a subjective state of transnationality? At what point does the delineation of “America” as a special subject of universal history reduce the universal to a particularized subject of “American” history? Above all, what does it mean to racialize cosmopolitanism as an “American” birthright, the outcome of an organic process of development under uniquely “American” conditions?

The great liberator of South America, Simón Bolívar, was vexed by questions like these—by the alternately exemplary universality and insular particularity of the “America” he knew. Bolívar’s “Jamaica Letter” (1815), written from exile at a nadir of the Latin American revolutions, translates the semantic ambiguity inherent in these various formulations of American universality into finely wrought affective ambivalence. On the one hand, Bolívar interprets events in his America as possessing universal moral import: “Generous souls are ever interested in the lot of a people to recover the rights with which the Creator, or nature, has endowed them, and one would have to be in the grip of error
or passion to reject such a noble sentiment” (Bolívar 17). But the same features—continental space and a new American race—that afford Paine and Crèvecoeur the confidence to universalize make Bolívar less sanguine about the New World's power to renew humanity. For Bolívar, the specter of American “farmers, shepherds, nomads, lost in the middle of vast, thick forests, solitary plains, often isolated by lakes and torrential rivers” produces an epistemological anxiety that undermines any Enlightenment political meta-narrative: “Who could come up with complete and accurate statistical data for such regions.... Any idea relative to the future of this land seems to me purely speculative” (18). American expanse becomes a topos of hermetic sublimity rather than coextensive globality. Bolívar feels isolated and dwarfed rather than connected and aggrandized by the vastness: “We are a small segment of the human race,” rather than its nifty shorthand version.

Bolívar's uncertainty is only deepened by the prospect of a new American race. Often cited as a founding statement of the Latin American cult of mestizaje, the “Jamaica Letter,” like Crèvecoeur's Letters, understands ethnic mixture as a process of negation, a “melting” away of established identities that yields something new and unforeseen, “American.” But Bolívar describes this process in decidedly more negative terms as producing painful in-betweenness rather than triumphant aboveness: we are “neither Indians nor Europeans, but a race halfway between the legitimate owners of the land and the Spanish usurpers—in short, being Americans by birth and endowed with rights from Europe—we find ourselves forced to defend these rights against the natives while maintain[ing] our position in the land against the intrusion of the invaders. Thus, we find ourselves in the most extraordinary and complicated situation” (18). American exceptionalism consists in a criollo political and cultural predicament wherein the “American” is indeed a self-sufficient subject, but in the most precarious sense—cut off from authorizing origins on either side, ineffectively legislating ex nihilo. The fruit of colonial interracialism and multiculturalism in Latin America is a historically bounded people ill equipped to morph into the idealized “people” of republican theory. Bolívar's comparative pessimism about “America” presents a useful point of contrast in probing the structuring paradoxes of a common Enlightenment discourse on Americanity.

Postcolonial American Cultural Nationalisms: Turning History into a natural Resource

Postcolonial American cultural nationalisms creatively extended Enlightenment environmentalism into the nineteenth century. Noteworthy articulations of American difference—Walter Channing's “Essay on American Language and Literature” (1815) and Argentine statesman Domingo Sarmiento's Facundo: or, Civilization and Barbarism
(1845)—theorize national distinctiveness as a reflection of natural surroundings. Channing's thesis is that “the remotest germs of literature are the native peculiarities of the country in which it is to spring.... [And] the whole external character of our country [the United States] is totally unlike that of England” (308, 309). Sarmiento concurs: “If any form of national literature shall appear in these new American societies, it must result from the description of the mighty scenes of nature” (Sarmiento 28). And both likewise agree about the defining quality of formative American nature. Echoing Paine, Crèvecoeur, and Bolívar, Sarmiento identifies “immensity” as “the universal characteristic of the country” (9). An Argentine literature is ready-made, for “the disposition and nature of the Argentine people are poetic” as a result of the inherent sublimity of Argentina's soul-stretching vistas: “What impressions must be made upon the inhabitant of the Argentine Republic by the simple act of fixing his eyes upon the horizon, and seeing nothing.... Here is poetry already” (30–31). Channing reverts to the same topos of scale: “How tame will his language sound, who would describe Niagara in language fitted for the falls at London bridge, or attempt the majesty of the Mississippi in that which was made for the Thames?” (309). The particularity of the American scene seems unabashedly to be in the service of a romantic nationalist project. But in this case, natural peculiarity signifies beyond the end of establishing national distinctiveness insofar as the very peculiarity of American nature is located in its sweeping representativity (an argument only given fodder by—and perhaps providing fodder for—the spectacular U.S. land grabs of the nineteenth century). Geographical immensity and variety are enlisted to insinuate a greater universality at the very core of American nationality, which makes America more than merely national: America is “every person's country,” because “the variety of our soils, situations, climates ... and produce hath something which must please everybody” (Crèvecoeur 80). To be “Nature's nation” is to be a cosmopolitan trans-nation. What is particular about the American environment is precisely that it is not particular, so huge and topographically compendious as to be more seamlessly evocative of the planetary. What makes America unique is the fact that it is not a quaint place but something like pure space—Sarmiento's Argentine horizon of nothingness, which draws his mind to wander to “the wilds of Asia,” “Arab tents,” “the life of the Spartans and Romans” in an attempt to describe his native land (15, 20, 22). Dense locality vaporizes into airy translocality.

The point resonates with Paul Giles's recognition that nineteenth-century American cultural nationalists did not necessarily “mark [their] originality” through “mimetic reflection of locality” but rather through “intertextuality, through taking icons and ideas from classical European culture and spinning them round in a new way” (Giles 42). More precisely, the American writer's “mimetic reflection of locality” actually fuels this strategy of intertextuality insofar as infinitely various American nature is understood to afford the American writer much more than national self-understanding—namely, what
Emerson called “an original relation to the universe,” an opportunity to be not just an American but a “universal man” who surveys space and time, selecting from the smorgasbord of universal history the tastiest tidbits of world culture. Emerson's transcendentalist comrade, Margaret Fuller, crystallizes the connection in her Things and Thoughts in Europe: the “thinking American recognize[s] the immense advantage of being born in a new world and on a virgin soil, yet does not wish one seed from the Past to be lost. He is anxious to gather and carry back with him all that will bear a new climate and new culture…. He wishes to give them a fair trial in this new world” (Fuller 406–407). Fuller's America is quite literally the ground of the universal. It is a laboratory in which tests can be conducted on bits of world culture to determine their universal value. If they flourish under American conditions, that means they transcend the national. So America is not a nation but a clearinghouse of national cultures out of which emerges a universal one. American postcoloniality assumes a much grander form than mere cultural differentiation from the mother countries; it aims at the transcendence of the narrow notion of a national culture altogether, asserting originality through a “cannibalizing encyclopedism” that converts history into empowering resource rather than constraining source (Bersani 153).

A luminary of the first generation of U.S. cultural nationalists will further illustrate. Over several essays in his Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent. (1819–1820), Washington Irving constructs a natural history of “bookmaking” that cleverly capitalizes on American coloniality—its cultural derivativeness and marginality. “Providence” has wisely “implanted in authors” a “pilfering disposition” that fosters the endless “mutability of literature,” English in particular. English never has been and never will be “Spenser's 'well of pure English undefiled,’” but rather is “a mere confluence of various tongues, perpetually subject to changes and intermixtures” from the hollow, flatulent antiquarians Crayon encounters in the British Museum library, the literary greats among whose tombs he walks in Westminster Abbey, and, of course, American aspirants like himself (Irving 80–81, 132–134). This promiscuous proliferation enables the dissemination and (re)discovery of “family jewels” in the textual rough—“the beauties and fine thoughts of ancient and obsolete authors” (136, 81). Irving’s analogical point of reference for this comprehensive process is nature, American nature specifically. Just as nature has provided “for the conveyance of seeds from clime to clime, in the maws of certain birds,” so she has provided that “seeds of knowledge and wisdom shall be preserved from age to age,” “caught up by [the] flights of predatory writers and cast forth again to flourish and bear fruit in a remote and distant tract of time,” “spring[ing] up under new forms” in their new spatiotemporal locations (81; cf. 133). The particular “nature” upon which Irving’s analogy depends is vast, various, and dynamic in precisely the ways that “English scenery”—“associated in the mind with ideas of order, of quiet, or sober, well-established principles, of hoary usage and reverent custom,” Irving sums up in another essay—is not
(70). Instead, any naturalist analogy of the sprawling vicissitudes of a transhistorical and transnational literary history must settle on/in America: “The clearing of our American woodlands; where we burn down a forest of stately pines, a progeny of dwarf oaks start up in their place, and we never see the prostrate trunk of a tree, but it gives birth to a whole tribe of fungi” (81).

Not only is the source of Irving’s naturalist metaphor a postcolonial American imperative to decenter (English) literature, the particular source of the metaphor, in the technical sense of cognitive linguistics—“our American woodlands”—enacts a recentering of the very forces of “bookmaking” in the geographically and culturally wide-open spaces of the new American republic. The argument implicit in the metaphor is that the practice of ceaseless cosmopolitan translation—both linguistic cross-pollination and spatiotemporal reincarnation—that constitutes the literary as such comes more naturally to Americans. “American literature” deserves our attention not so much because it is American but because it is somehow more attuned to the universalist ontology of literature. The reason English critics don’t appreciate American literature is because its themes are simply “too vast and elevated for their capacities,” which have been formed of course by the provincial charms of their topographically and socioculturally manicured little island (57). It is not their particular nationalist resentments but an Old World principle of nationality itself that prevents them from comprehending the elementally trans- or supernational character of literature produced in the United States, which, as a “republic … opening … an asylum for strangers from every portion of the earth,” is necessarily “destitute of national antipathies” (63). “What have we to do with national prejudices,” Irving asks, doing his best Crèvecoeur imitation. “They are the inveterate diseases of old countries…. We, on the contrary, have sprung into national existence in an enlightened and philosophic age, when different parts of the habitable world and the various branches of the human family have been indefatigably studied and made known to each other” (63).

But this trope of the American trans-nation betrays itself, and perhaps with Irving’s knowing wink. For the fortunate emergence of the United States in an “enlightened and philosophic age” is immediately cast in terms of hereditary nobility associated with the unenlightened political and cultural imperialism of England: “We forego the advantages of our birth if we do not shake off the national prejudices as we would the local superstitions of the old world” (63, my italics). Through Irving’s chicanery, the upstart republic on the margins—“the infant giant”—is thus destined by birthright to supersede England and become global modernity’s exemplary aristocracy (59). As the first and best local realization of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, the American republic is king by a familiar principle of primogeniture that converts fugitive cosmopolitanism into triumphant American nationality. The finishing touch of this reverse cultural imperialism
is a sanctimonious expression of cheek-turning liberality: although English writers have greeted American literature with disdain, American writers will demonstrate the moral superiority of their republican transnationalism by continuing to “place England before us as a perpetual volume of reference, wherein are recorded sound deductions from ages of experience ... wherewith to strengthen and to embellish our national character” (64). Here the rhetoric of colonial receptivity—of Americans as a “young people, necessarily an imitative one”—is transmuted into a form of postcolonial cultural agency: no longer does England determine which books Americans read and write; rather England itself is now but a book—among many books—from which cosmopolitan America benevolently culls its universal culture.

**Two Critiques of the Cosmopolitan-American**

Herman Melville and Henry James both bought into such cosmopolitan-Americanism early in their careers but subsequently became two of its most sophisticated critics. Nationalist enthusiasm courses through Melville’s early writings, most famously in a passage from *Redburn* (1849): “We are not a nation, so much as a world.... Our ancestry is lost in the Universal paternity; and Caesar and Alfred, St. Paul and Luther, and Homer and Shakespeare are as much ours as Washington.... We are heirs of all time, and with all nations we divide our inheritance. On this Western Hemisphere all tribes and people are forming into one federated whole; and there is a future which shall see the estranged children of Adam restored as to the old hearthstone in Eden” (*Redburn* 239). A generation later, James expressed similar sentiments in an 1867 letter to a compatriot: “We young Americans are (without cant) men of the future.... To be an American is an excellent preparation for culture. We have exquisite qualities as a race, and it seems to me we are ahead of the European races in the fact that more than either of them we can deal freely with forms of civilization other than our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically etc.) claim our property wherever we find it” (*Letters* 1:77). At the heart of the nineteenth century in the work of two of America’s most trenchant cultural critics one finds the same distinctive mélange of Americanity, globality, cosmopolitanism, and racialism: Americans as the superrace of a global future that will somehow deliver on the promises of Enlightenment universalism by embodying it.

But Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* (1857) and James's *The American* (1876) show both men taking a more skeptical view of the localization of the universal in cosmopolitan America. *The Confidence-Man* anticipates contemporary debates regarding the “trade-off” between the empirical and normative dimensions of cosmopolitanism: “To the extent
that it seems to float outside or above social life ... cosmopolitanism will always be vulnerable to charges like elitism and inefficacy.... But to the extent it is ... grounded, becoming the possession of actual social groups, it takes on the less-than-ideal political characteristics of those groups, each of which can of course be seen as less than ideally cosmopolitan in its treatment of others” (Robbins 214). The Confidence-Man addresses cosmopolitanism as a formal problem—what authentic form, if any, can cosmopolitanism take—and it does so through the problem of its own novelistic form.

From its opening invocation of the “cosmopolitan and confident tide” of the Mississippi, Melville's novel establishes an equation between cosmopolitanism and the con that draws our attention not only to how cosmopolitanism may be the ultimate con but also to how cosmopolitanism itself is an unbalanced equation. For the novel's tipping point is none other than Frank Goodman, the Cosmopolitan. Once he appears on the scene in chapter 24, the serial performativity of the confidence-man—seven disguises over the first twenty-three chapters—is transmuted into the performative simultaneity of the Cosmopolitan over the final twenty-two chapters. Purely in terms of the novel's formal arithmetic, the advent of the Cosmopolitan marks an incremental “increase in seriousness” that ushers the reader from episodic enjoyment of dramatic irony as we detect the confidence-man in each of his successive disguises to an apocalyptic eclipse, well suggested by the absence of a twenty-third chapter to make the novel perfectly equilateral—a darker version of Tristram Shandy's black, blank page. The Cosmopolitan Frank Goodman skews the structure of the novel and, in so doing, draws our attention to how cosmopolitanism itself just never adds up.

Through the figure of the Cosmopolitan, Melville enacts a dilemma between a Kantian “empty” cosmopolitanism and a Hegelian “full” one (see Hollinger, “New Cosmopolitans”). On the one hand, Goodman's cosmopolitanism is empty: he climactically urges on the barber a patently Kantian moral position—“the experiment of trusting men” in toto. But this empty cosmopolitanism seems to correspond to the terrifying emptiness of Goodman's character. To the extent he can be called a character, he highlights the extent to which character is a matter of mere characters — words on a page, dramatis personae that constantly shift and blur due to Melville's grammatical and typographical tricks like deliberately removing quotation marks and deictic markers (162–164). Even as the novel seems to settle on and in the guise of the Cosmopolitan, even as the Cosmopolitan would seem to become a center of sorts, the narrative itself becomes more nonlinear—digressing even more wildly and even being entirely overtaken—at least momentarily—by the inset narratives of Colonel Moredock, the Indian-hater, and China Aster. We can read the characterological emptiness of the Cosmopolitan as a commentary on the impossibility of sustaining an entirely uncompromised, uncompromising—an empty—cosmopolitanism, of locating an integrity in the confidence-
man's duplicity. Melville’s Cosmopolitan is either mere assemblage without depth—the pure splendidous surface of his crazily stitched costume of “Highland plaid, Emir's robe, French blouse,” etc. (136)—or a profound principle of apocalyptic negation (225, 233). In either case, he is empty. It seems one can be a “liberalist” only “in dress” or as demigod (136).

On the other hand, the Kantian moral position that Goodman urges on the barber, we should not forget, is circumscribed within an unfair bet, drawn up in snaky legalese, from which the Cosmopolitan stands to profit. Universalism is blatantly compromised by its interested articulation. Hence, the novel is also attuned to the liabilities of a “full” cosmopolitanism—the extent to which cosmopolitanism “is a discourse of the universal that is inherently local—a locality that is always surreptitiously imperial,” as Timothy Brennan has put it (81). Even more so than Brennan and his cohort, Melville seems to appreciate that the problem of cosmopolitanism's locality is a problem of language—not only of enunciation, of the sitedness of the spoken—but of language itself, of something like Derridean differáncé. Time and again in the novel, one traces universalism’s descent in and through language. “Philanthropy”—in its original Greek root, abstract love of man—is colloquialized aboard the Mississippi steamer to mean any cranky humanitarian project, and then finally subliminalized as an especially effective form of capitalist enterprise—“the charity business” (47–48, 230). Along similar lines, “charity” lexically devolves from a Christian theological virtue into a hermeneutical practice suspiciously described in the terms of finance capital: to be charitable is to take things on “credit” (127). Cosmopolitanism is fundamentally a problem of representation—linguistic before political.

More than a “comedy of thought ... [or] action” The Confidence-Man is, in its very form, a self-deconstructing tragicomedy of language that demonstrates how the synthetic rhetoric of a “full” cosmopolitanism is subsumed by the very particulars it attempts to subsume. Beginning with the initial comparison of “the man in cream-colors” to Manco Capac, the mythological founder of the Incan empire, The Confidence-Man follows “a pattern in which Melville superimposes geography and theology from other times and places onto the United States of the 1850s” (9 n. 2). This heavy-handed cosmopolitanism of reference unravels in striking ways. Take the Whitmanian catalogue with which Melville completes his initial description of the globally diverse “pilgrims” aboard his American ship of fools. “Natives of all sorts, and foreigners,” from “English, German, Scotch, Danes” to “slaves, black, mulatto, quadroon; modish young Spanish Creoles, and old-fashioned French Jews,” are breathlessly enumerated (16). American continentality and cosmopolitanism are yet again linked: the eclectic cultural landscape mirrors the “American woodlands,” which “interweave [the foliage]” of “pine, beech, birch, ash, hackmatack, hemlock,” as well as “the Mississippi itself ... uniting the streams of the
most distant and opposite zones ... in one cosmopolitan and confident tide” (17). But just when we think we’re on familiar ground, Melville slyly settles this “dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West” under the sign of quaint ethnicity: the global tableau partakes of a “Tartar-like picturesqueness,” he writes (17). The jarring effect (one cosmopolitan allusion too many?) makes the reader aware of the extent to which the catalogue as cosmopolitan device is bound by a synecdochal logic in which the final particular of the catalogue may awkwardly stand in for the universalistic whole the trope is meant to evoke. Suddenly, the arbitrariness of the entire edifice is thrown into relief: how can the globe possibly be compressed into the United States and then further compressed into the Western frontier of the United States and still further compressed into a single Mississippi steamer? Language itself has been called into question—“the doctrine of analogies” that underwrites metaphor, allegory, and so many communicative modes is exposed in the novel as nothing more than a tautological means of “corroborating ... cherished suspicions” (135). Sure, America is the world if your world is America.

The representational conundrum of cosmopolitanism thus comes to the fore, underscored by Melville’s other esoteric reference in his opening catalogue to Anacharsis Cloots, the Prussian-born Parisian and self-appointed ambassador of the human race who brought a multiracial and multinational delegation before the French National Assembly in 1790 to agitate for universal human rights. In describing his American shipload as an “Anacharsis Cloots congress of all kinds of that multiform pilgrim species, man,” Melville draws attention to the dense historicity of cosmopolitanism, to the fact that it is a recent “age-of-revolution legacy,” as Lawrence Buell has observed (Buell 142–146). In a profound sense, the allusion suggests, cosmopolitanism itself never was or is cosmopolitan—it is rather the idiosyncratic idiom of crackpots with silly names caught up in intensely localized struggles for national autonomy. Historically speaking, it has been of a piece with American and French national cults. Melville’s bewildering satire thus leaves us with a sense of cosmopolitanism as intrinsically a con—a too-good-to-be-true ideal that can only tragicomically hypostatize the universal into the gross particulars of a fallen world.

Henry James’s *The American*, centering on Christopher Newman's betrayal by the French aristocratic family of his fiancée, Madame de Cintré, is also a novel interested in the confluence of cosmopolitanism and confidence. On multiple levels, *The American* severely qualifies James’s youthful statement regarding Americanism as an “excellent preparation for culture.” This is not to say that James paints his prototypical American protagonist as a hopelessly insular provincial; rather, the labor of the novel is to delineate a particular style of American cosmopolitanism and (p. 280) consider its limits. The novel is conscious of a tradition of routing cosmopolitanism through Americanism on the basis of the United States’ sociopolitical codification of certain Enlightenment values. When Valentin de Bellegarde characterizes Newman in patently cosmopolitan terms as possessing “an air
... of being thoroughly at home in the world,“ Newman attributes it to “the privilege of being an American citizen... That sets a man up” (95). James further ventures into familiar territory when he has Bellegarde chalk up the fact that the American has “fewer prejudices even than I” to Newman having “revolved to and fro over a whole continent as I walk up and down the Boulevard. You are a man of the world with a vengeance” (97). James not only particularizes but literalizes the trope of the “man of the world”: the American is more cosmopolitan by virtue of having logged more planetary miles. So what exactly is the nature of this cosmopolitanism that accompanies “the great Western Barbarian's” “democratic instincts”? the novel asks (42, 52; see also 38, 152).

Two primary qualities of American cosmopolitanism emerge: its indiscriminate voracity and its acquisitive rather than inquisitive character. From the opening scene in the Louvre in which he proves himself unable to and uninterested in distinguishing original from copy, Newman is presented as someone with an insatiable “appetite for facts” rather than a discerning taste for culture: “Everything interests me,” he declaims, and so he must rely on travel guides and tourist gossip to organize his sightseeing time, to provide him with a to-do list whose items he proudly checks off (66, 124, 17, 18, 75). It is no mistake that Newman is “fond of statistics,” for it is precisely in the calibration of facticity that his cosmopolitanism consists (55).

Newman’s calculating cosmopolitanism in relation to things, places, and people is a kind of consumerism, a worldliness purchased by purchasing the world around him. “The world, to his sense, was a great bazaar, where one might stroll about and purchase handsome things,” and so with the “mania of the 'collector’” Newman sets out to “get the best out of [Europe] I can”: “the biggest kind of entertainment ... the tallest mountains, and the bluest lakes, and the finest pictures, and the handsomest churches, and the most celebrated men, and the most beautiful women” (66, 26, 33, 35). The desire of Newman's cosmopolitanism is to have—and relish the mere presence of—lots of things, rather than to know anything in depth: perfect self- and mutual understanding are not prerequisites for his friendship or love, a quality, it should be said, that is not treated unsympathetically in the novel (71).

Above all, as the last term in the above sequence suggests, Newman is interested in acquiring a wife who is “the best article on the market,” and it is in his failed courtship with Madame de Cintré that James most clearly shows us the limits of his American cosmopolitanism (44). What we might call Newman’s purely affective cosmopolitanism eventually leads to his downfall with the Bellegardes. Not only does his cosmopolitanism not need to know, it doesn't want to know, especially about particular things. In a particularly revealing moment, Newman tells the young Marquis de Bellegarde, his fiancée’s oldest brother and head of the household, “I don't understand you at all.... But you needn't mind that. I don't care. In fact, I think I had better not understand you. I
might not like it. That wouldn't suit me at all, you know. I want to marry your sister, that's all" (143). Here Newman’s “natural and organic” “sense of human equality” is exposed as less than universal. His egalitarian sympathy is politically circumscribed, not straightforwardly by nationalism but by a cosmopolitanism historically particular to the Atlantic Age of Revolution that is closely identified with Americanism: it cannot extend to an anachronistic aristocrat of the ancien régime, a man whose “single political conviction” is “the divine right of Henry of Bourbon, Fifth of his name, to the throne of France” (152–153). Newman's implicitly (post)colonial cosmopolitanism clashes with Bellegarde's monarchist metropolitanism and so marks the peculiarly modern scope of his universalist sentiments.

Newman's inability or unwillingness to understand the Bellegardes even as he feels his way toward great affection for both Madame de Cintré and Valentin eventually entraps the American (as well as The American) in a story not of his own making. As in the case of The Confidence-Man, metafictionality becomes a measure of a critique so profound as to become reflexive. From the time of its publication, critics, including James himself, have lamented the extravagant contrivances of the last two-thirds of the novel, which include Valentin's purposeless duel to a pathetic death, Madame de Cintré being spirited off to a nunnery, the uncovering of the Marquise de Bellegarde's murder of her husband, and a secret document attesting to the crime. But might not the collapse of this novel about an exemplary New World man into a clichéd Old World romance be interpreted not (only) as artistic immaturity but also as a metafictional symptom of the unwitting recolonization of a confident, know-nothing American cosmopolitanism by Europe? To the extent cosmopolitanism is identified in the novel as a recent postcolonial American formation shot through with Enlightenment optimism, does its fragile historicity render it vulnerable to the much-longer-lived metropolitanism of the French time warp Newman enters?

The novel simply goes too far in its metafictional goofiness not to consider such a reading. One could summarize the moral of The American thusly: because Newman has “never read a novel,” he is subjected to living through the bad “novel” that is the last two-thirds of the novel, The American (38). From the moment Newman enters the Belgarde vortex, James compulsively characterizes the action as seeming weirdly like a novelistic or dramatic romance: “It is like something in a play,” Newman says upon first hearing of Madame de Cintré's predicament, and when he meets her, sure enough, it is as though “he had opened a book and the first lines held his attention,” a topos that becomes tiresome by novel's end not only to the reader but seemingly to Madame de Cintré herself, who recognizes that Newman apprehends her as an operatic character like Donna Elvira: “I am not a heroine,” she warns him (80, 82, 200, 138; see also 98, 99, 102). Everyone in this premodern world seems to walk out of a romance: the Marquis de
Bellegarde's mustache is like “a page in a romance” (90); the chatter of the marquis and novel-addicted “comical old duchess,” “a bit of amusing dialogue in a play” (288–289, 190); Valentin's duel a “wretched theatrical affair,” attended by a doctor who gives Newman “an old copy of ‘Les Liaisons Dangereuses’” to keep him wakeful at his friend's dying side (211, 227). Once the Bellegardes make their play to stonewall the marriage, Newman alternately finds himself “playing a part, mechanically, in a lugubrious comedy” and living “a page torn out of a romance” (231, 246). The narrative voice even has to bring him down to earth occasionally, as when it parenthetically interjects that the plaintive scene of Newman hearing Madame de Cintré chanting behind the convent wall is likely fiction “inasmuch as she had obviously not yet had time to become a member of the invisible sisterhood” (276–277). When the Bellegardes' English servant, Mrs. Bread, gives Newman the dirt on the Bellegardes, her “decent narrative” of secret murder, full of dramatic pauses fit for “the most artistic of romancers,” plunges him and us back into “the page of a novel” within the novel (259, 262).

And so Newman momentarily becomes “a man with a plot in his head,” as Mrs. Tristram observes: will he bring this romance to its glittering, gory end, blackmailing the Bellegardes and regaining from them the right to marry Madame de Cintré perhaps only to find that she has killed herself out of despair in the convent before the news has been conveyed or some other such grand climax? (307). No, Newman—and James—resolve to “close the book” on this romance and relent from pursuit (306). But James does not allow this abandonment of the Old World romance that has usurped the novel to stand for the New World's moral and literary ascendancy and autonomy (243). Instead, the uncanny Mrs. Tristram suggests, this American anticlimax—Newman's and the novel's final eschewal of the Old World literary plot—may have actually played into the plot of the Bellegardes, who all along had “confidence” that “[Newman's] remarkable good nature”—clearly a coyly encoded allusion to his Americanness, his “democratic confidingness”—would prevent him from insisting on the marriage (309, 25). This would-be moment of proud Americanism collapses into a moral critique of Newman's “loose,” American-style cosmopolitanism, “unstiffened” by any content, which leaves him ever (a) Newman, the American, the selfsame despite his excursion into otherness (243, 70). The American's cosmopolitanism is caught in a loop that merely feeds back into his nationalized ego. A poor cosmopolitanism, to be sure.

**Epilogue: “The Cosmic Race” and Other Americanizations of Universal History**

Melville and James exposed the false cosmopolitanism of American culture and so steadfastly subordinated Americanity in relation to globality and universality, disabling
any metonymic reflex. But cosmopolitan-Americanism found a new lease on life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. National, hemispheric, and global crises—the U.S. Civil War, Emancipation, the Spanish American War, World War I—occasioned ideological recommitments that attempted to (re)solidify various American exceptionalisms that often competed with and opposed one another. Given the rising stakes of U.S. imperialism for both its proponents and opponents, it is perhaps no surprise that one encounters in this period a new set of national and subnational cosmopolitanisms across the Americas that sought to establish themselves on the seeming bedrock of race.

Walt Whitman's nation-healing incantation, *Democratic Vistas* (1871), is a case in point. Its premise is the insufficiency of liberal contractualism to ground the nation. Political democracy—"popular superficial suffrage," as he dismissively calls it—is just too damn democratic: it has no telos and so permits disasters like civil war (932). Beneath—if not before—thin political liberalism one needs the thick cultural communitarianism of "feudalism, castes, and ecclesiastic institutions," and literature, of course, with its "irresistible power" (959, 957, 960). In a word, one needs the historically programmed automatisms, the motivating mysteries not of nationality, as Whitman might have said before, but of race. Whitman attempts to provide a literally more compelling account of democracy by transmuting civic into ethnic nationalism, by "convert[ing]" the political ideal of "democracy" into a racial teleology of "America" (954). The past, present, and future of democracy are thus contained in the story of America's ongoing messianic racial formation. Only with the emergence of what Whitman calls "the democratic ethnology of the future"—will his longed-for "imperial republican forms" emerge to benevolently "dominate the world," making the United States "the empire of empires" (987–988, 983, 954, 1014–1015).

This bastardized version of universal republicanism is predicated on a eugenic scheme whereby two vaguely adumbrated high castes—"new races of Teachers," presumably male, and "strong and sweet Female Race, a race of perfect Mothers"—are bred to "endow the birth-stock of a New World," eventually yielding "a copious race of superb American men and women," each of which is a perfect democratic "personality" (954, 964, 985). Whitman gives us a science fiction of a biologically and socially engineered master race of "sweet democratic despots" (998). Given his rather weak and vague rhetoric of inclusivism—the American race draws on "the grand, common stock" of both North and South (clearly national reunion rather than multiracial democracy is the imperative)—Whitman's assertion that "parentage must consider itself in advance" sounds like a racist recipe for reproducing only "the best blood" (970, 987). *Democratic Vistas'* unabashed racialization of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism is ground zero of xenophobic U.S. imperialism.
By the same token, the essays written in the 1890s by one of Whitman's many Latin American admirers, Cuban activist-writer José Martí, are ground zero of an anti–U.S. imperialism out of which was born Latin American cosmopolitanisms. The cult of *mestizaje* from which Latin American exceptionalist claims to representative globality have typically been made largely originated in defiant self-distinction from the racist U.S. imperium. One sees this dialectic clearly in Martí's work, which time and again draws a fundamental contrast between the meaning and function of racial difference between the two Americas: “our America … must save herself through her Indians … and is going from less to more … North America … drowns its own Indians in blood and is going from more to less” (Martí 289). The source of Latin American ascendency is its potential, based on what is perceived as a greater degree of interracial contact, to embody Enlightenment universalism more perfectly. But, unlike Whitman, who lets his cultural-nationalist ideal of “adhesiveness” collapse into racial identity, Martí maintains that “an affinity of character is more powerful than an affinity of color” (320). The cultural nation must remain the primary category—people only “see their patria in the color of their skin or abjure the land where they were born” if their patria affords them no “roots and a pillow to sleep in,” as is the case for African Americans in the United States (311–312). By contrast, “in Cuba there is no fear whatsoever of a race war. ‘Man’ means more than white, more than mulatto, more than Negro. ‘Cuban’ means more than white, more than mulatto, more than Negro” (319).

So *Cubanidad*—as an avatar of multicultural and multiracial nationality—becomes the true measure of the cosmopolitan. Martí’s cunning conflation of “Man” with “Cuban” reroutes universal history through “our America,” through those who, “in heroic stages, are climbing the road that republics travel,” rather than through the decadent empire of North America. Performing the same gesture as Irving at the end of “English Writers on America,” Martí urges his compatriots at the end of “Our America” to demonstrate their more authentic cosmopolitanism by refusing “out of a villager's antipathy, [to] impute some lethal congenital wickedness to the continent’s light-skinned nation,” even though, of course, the neocolonial United States “does not think highly of quick-tempered, swarthy men” (296). Martí’s strident antiracism wins for his side the exceptionalist contest between the two Americas. However, it must be emphasized it is an antiracism founded on the givenness of Latin American *mestizaje*—cosmopolitan nationality presupposes a racial intermixture so profound as to submerge race as a primary marker of identity. Hence, Martí’s assertions arguably all come back to a sense of Latin America having produced a more bona fide American race than the United States.

Some U.S. African American intellectuals similarly experimented with relocating cosmopolitanism at the sub/transnational level of African America. In his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), James Weldon Johnson establishes a tight circuit
between the African American, the American, and the universal: Negro literature and art, he argues, are the only “distinctive American products” that have achieved “universal appeal” (Johnson vii). Johnson thus establishes African American culture as the litmus test for the United States’ metonymic globality. If the United States wants to think itself the cosmopolis, then it will have to acknowledge forms like ragtime as the quintessential expression of “our national spirit” (xv). The price of fulfilling the national globalist fantasy is fully nationalizing the Negro. But Johnson, not content with mere national recognition, assumes the globalist fantasy for his race: “This power of the Negro to suck up the national spirit from the soil and create something artistic and original, which, at the same time, possesses the note of universal appeal, is due to a remarkable racial gift of adaptability; it is more than adaptability, it is a transfusive quality. And the Negro has exercised this transfusive quality not only here in America, where the race lives in large numbers, but in European countries, where the number has been almost infinitesimal” (xix). It is a brilliant turn—the cosmopolitan inheres not in exceptional American conditions (p. 285) but in the “creative genius of the Negro” wherever he finds himself. The diasporic African has something like a knack for universality, Hegel be damned.

The American racialization of the cosmopolitan reached its apotheosis in the work of two mystics from Latin and African America, Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos and erstwhile African American avant-gardist, Jean Toomer. Vasconcelos's *The Cosmic Race* (1925) wrests universal history from the other America on the basis of Latin America's colonial history of *mestizaje*. In Vasconcelos's eschatological scheme, the age-defining “conflict of Latinism against Anglo-Saxonism” has until now seemed tilted in the latter's favor—"It seems as if God Himself guided the steps of the Anglo-Saxon cause, while we kill each other on account of dogma or call each other atheists"—but God is now poised to subordinate Anglo-America for “the sin of destroying those races” that Latin America “assimilated” (10, 17). In a now familiar move, Vasconcelos figures the cosmopolitan ideal as a millennial “mixing of all peoples” but one prophetically anticipated by Latin rather than Anglo-American “tradition,” which exhibits “greater facility of sympathy towards strangers…. Our civilization, with all its defects, may be the chosen one to assimilate and to transform mankind into a new type; that within our civilization, the warp, the multiple and rich plasma of future humanity is thus being prepared” (9, 16–17). Latin American cosmopolitanism in the colonial past paves the way for a glorious Latin American global imperium in the future: because they have assimilated the most races, all races, including Anglo-Americans, will now be assimilated to them. The great “Universopolis will rise by the [Amazon] river” (25). The way for one America to get a leg up on the other—and everyone else—is always to declare itself more cosmopolitan, to consecrate its “American soil” as the gathering place, the end of “dispersion” (18). On the one hand, in the context of inter-American cultural politics, Vasconcelos's transmutation
of a disparaging discourse of Latin American “mongrelization” into an oppositional cultural nationalism must be appreciated for its bravery and creativity. On the other hand, like any other variant of cosmopolitan-Americanism, it is bound to embarrass itself as a provincialism at the core. In Vasconcelos’s case, this takes the forms of aesthetic racism—blacks “may” disappear in his “Fifth Age” due to the fact that its regnant “free instinct of beauty” may not select for them—and Christian triumphalism—because Christianity “contains universal, not national revelation,” it will of course be “one of the fundamental dogmas of the fifth race” (35). It becomes hard to distinguish Vasconcelos’s vision of a cosmic race from the oldest dreams of the Spanish Franciscans and Jesuits who saw in the New World a chance to realize a genuinely universal Catholic Church.

In his personal communications and writings of the 1930s, Jean Toomer took the idea of a new American race in less conventional directions. An African American who could pass for white and who had high literary ambitions, Toomer was eager for personal and professional reasons to identify himself as “simply an American” (106). But by “American” Toomer meant something infinitely greater than a national or even racial identity. He begins with a strong sense of a fundamentally mixed “American race” of which he is an exemplar, and he associates this (p. 286) race, à la Vasconcelos, with “the birth of a new order, a new vision, a new ideal of man” (105). This American race, he emphasizes, “is itself, a third thing, a different and unique substance with unique attributes” that cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts—the American represents the supersession of “the old divisions into white, black, brown, red” (109, 105). But, in the end, Toomer’s point seems to be that the universality and profundity of race mixture effectively means “there is only one pure race—and this is the human race. We all belong to it—and this is the most and the least that can be said of any of us with accuracy” (109). Interracial mixture at any given time yields not a special fifth race but merely “other members of the human race” (110).

So whence the new American race?

The real and main difference between this new American group and previous groups will be found, necessarily not in blood, but in consciousness. ... In America we have a new body. And, having recognized this, let [us] forget it ... Let us be born above the body. The important thing is consciousness. Here, in this country, among the people I refer to, the human essence, humanness, is again to be realized and emphasized.... We are waking up, we are nonidentifying from surfaces and from the preferences and prejudices associated with them, and we are realizing our basic human stock, our human essence, our humanness, our fundamental and universal humanity. Those who have or who are approaching this [sensing?], this realization—these are the ones I mean when I say Americans.
These Americans are not of America only; they are of the earth. And, with various [titles?] in various countries they of course exist in other national groups. These are the [natural?] conscious internationalists. (110)

No longer is the American inherently—racially or otherwise—cosmopolitan; rather, the cosmopolitan is nominally “American.” “American” signifies not the U.S. national but the “conscious internationalist” anywhere. Well, sort of. The slipperiness of cosmopolitan-Americanism is nowhere more evident than in the blockages, qualifications, and hedges of Toomer's rhetoric. Toomer allows America's globalist fantasy to quietly die when he finds himself forced to concede that there might be “[titles?]” other than “American” under which the cosmopolitan might travel, other “national groups” from which “conscious internationalists” might spring. Cosmopolitanism's condition of possibility might just be cosmopolitan, not primally, purely, or chiefly American. “Transnational American studies” would do well to learn from this language lesson and ask itself how its own cosmopolitan visions have been shaped by this long tradition, from Paine to Toomer.

Bibliography


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Notes:

(1) For “Atlantic/world” as a concept meant to emphasize the opening of the Atlantic to the global, see Coclanis.

(2) The “cradle” metaphor is Cloots’s, qtd. in Kristeva 211 n. 65: “France was the cradle and rallying point of the god-people.”
(3) “Nature,” “History,” and “The American Scholar” are the key texts here. See Emerson 7, 67, 237, 250.

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