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Shades of the Planet

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INTRODUCTION

Planet and America, Set and Subset

Wai Chee Dimock

WHAT EXACTLY IS “AMERICAN LITERATURE”? Is it a sovereign domain, self-sustained and self-governing, integral as a body of evidence? Or is it less autonomous than that, not altogether freestanding, but more like a municipality: a second-tier phenomenon, resting on a platform preceding it and encompassing it, and dependent on the latter for its infrastructure, its support network, its very existence as a subsidiary unit?

This jurisdictional language is meant to highlight American literature as a constituted domain and the variously imagined *ground* for its constitution. That ground, though methodologically crucial, is often left implicit. On what footing can the field call itself a field, and according to what integrating principle? What degree of self-determination can it lay claim to? And what does it have in common with the territorial jurisdiction whose name it bears, whose clear-cut borders contain an attribute we are tempted to call “American-ness”?

After the World Trade Center, and after Katrina, few of us are under the illusion that the United States is sovereign in any absolute sense. The nation seems to have come literally “unbundled” before our eyes, its fabric of life torn apart by extremist militant groups, and by physical forces of even greater scope, wrought by climate change and the intensified hurricane cycles. Territorial sovereignty, we suddenly realize, is no more than a legal fiction, a man-made fiction. This fiction is not honored by religious adherents who have a different vision of the world; nor is it honored by the spin of hurricanes accelerated by the thermodynamics of warming oceans.¹ In each case, the nation is revealed to be what it is: an epiphenomenon, literally a superficial construct, a set of erasable lines on the face of the earth. It is no match for that grounded entity called the planet, which can wipe out those lines at a moment’s notice, using weapons of mass destruction more powerful than any homeland defense.

“Globalization” is the familiar term used to describe this unraveling of national sovereignty. This process, seemingly inevitable, has been diagnosed in almost antithetical ways. On the one hand, theorists from Michael Walzer to Jürgen Habermas see an enormous potential in the decline of the nation-state; for them, this jurisdictional form, historically monopolizing violence, and now increasingly outmoded, must give way to other forms of human association: a

“global civil society,” a “postnational constellation.”² On the other hand, theorists such as Fredric Jameson caution against such optimism, pointing to the “McDonaldization” of the world, a regime of standardization and homogenization ushered in by the erosion of national borders, presided over by global capital and the “unchallenged primacy of the United States.”³

What Katrina dramatizes, however, is a form of “globalization” different from either scenario. Not benign, it is at the same time not predicated on the primacy of any nation. Long accustomed to seeing itself as the *de facto* center of the world—the military superpower, the largest economy, and the moral arbiter to boot—the United States suddenly finds itself downgraded to something considerably less. “It’s like being in a Third World country,” Mitch Handler, a manager in Louisiana’s biggest public hospital, said to the Associated Press about the plight of hurricane victims.⁴ This Third-Worlding of a superpower came with a shock not only to Louisiana and Mississippi but to unbelieving eyes everywhere. Not the actor but the acted upon, the United States is simply the spot where catastrophe hits, the place on the map where large-scale forces, unleashed elsewhere, come home to roost. What does it mean for the United States to be on the receiving end of things?⁵ The experience is novel, mind-shattering in many ways, and a numbing patriotism is not incompatible with a numbing shame. To the rest of the world, however, this massive systemic failure confirms their view of the United States not only as a miscreant abroad—a “rogue nation” both in its rejection of the Kyoto Protocol and in its conduct of the Iraq War—but as one equally inept at home, falling far below an acceptable standard of care for its own citizens.⁶ Scale enlargement has stripped from this nation any dream of unchallenged primacy. If Europe has already been “provincialized”—has been revealed to be a smaller player in world history than previously imagined, as Dipesh Chakrabarty argues—the United States seems poised to follow suit.⁷

In this context, it seems important to rethink the adequacy of a nation-based paradigm. Is “American” an adjective that can stand on its own, uninflected, unentangled, and unconstrained? Can an autonomous field be built on its chronology and geography, equal to the task of phenomenal description and causal explanation? Janice Radway, in her presidential address to the American Studies Association in 1998, answers with a resounding “no,” and proposes a name change for the association for just that reason. A field calling itself “American” imagines that there is something exceptional about the United States, manifesting itself as “a distinctive set of properties and themes in all things American, whether individuals, institutions, or cultural products.”⁸ This premise of exceptionalism translates into a methodology that privileges the nation above all else. The field can legitimize itself as a field only because the nation does the legitimizing. The disciplinary sovereignty of the former owes everything to the territorial sovereignty of the latter. Against this conflation of nation and field, Radway proposes a rigorous decoupling, a

methodology predicated on the *noncoincidence* between the two. The nation has solid borders; the field, on the other hand, is fluid and amorphous, shaped and reshaped by emerging forces, by “intricate interdependencies” between “the near and far, the local and the distant.”⁹ In short, as a domain of inquiry, the “Americanist” field needs to be kept emphatically distinct from the nation. Its vitality resides in a carefully maintained and carefully theorized zone, a penumbra intervening between it and the conceptual foreclosure dictated by its name. That penumbra makes the field a continuum rather than a container:

It suggests that far from being conceived on the model of a container—that is, as a particular kind of hollowed out object with evident edges or skin enclosing certain organically uniform contents—territories and geographies need to be reconceived as spatially-situated and intricately intertwined networks of social relationships that tie specific locales to particular histories.¹⁰

Radway’s challenge to the “container” model turns the United States from a discrete entity into a porous network, with no tangible edges, its circumference being continually negotiated, its criss-crossing pathways continually modified by local input, local inflections. These dynamic exchanges suggest that the American field has never been unified, and will never be.¹¹ Still, though not unified, the nation remains central for Radway: it is a first-order phenomenon, a primary field of inquiry. If it is no longer a “hollowed out object” filled with contents unique to it and homogenized within it, it remains a *disciplinary* object second to none, conceptually front and center, and naturalizing itself as the methodological baseline, a set of founding coordinates, reproducing its boundaries in the very boundaries of the field.

What sort of distortion comes with this nation-centered mapping? And how best to rectify it? The essays collected here implicitly engage these questions, trying out various paradigms not U.S.-centric. Rather than taking the nation as the default position, the totality we automatically reach for, we come up with alternate geographies that deny it this totalizing function. Forging such geographies might be one of the most critical tasks now facing the field.¹² How best to fashion a domain of inquiry not replicating the terms of territorial sovereignty? What landscape would emerge then? And what would American literature look like when traced through these redrawn and realigned entities?

The language of set and subset is especially helpful here as a heuristic guide.¹³ While that language can sometimes conjure up a hierarchical ordering of part to whole, its interest for us lies in a different direction: not in stratification, but in modularization. What it highlights is the strategic breakup of a continuum, the carving of it into secondary units, and the premises and consequences attending that process. For units are not given but made. They are not an objective fact in the world, but an artifact, a postulate, aggregated as such for some particular purpose. Their lengths and widths, the

size of their grouping, their criteria of selection, the platforms they rest on—all of these can be differently specified. Each specifying throws into relief a different kind of entity: mapped on a different scale, performing a different function, implementing a different set of membership criteria. And looming over all of these is the long-standing, still evolving, and always to be theorized relation between each unit and the larger continuum. A language of set and subset, in short, allows us to “modularize” the world into smaller entities: able to stand provisionally and do analytic work, but not self-contained, not fully sovereign, resting continually and nontrivially on a platform more robust and more extensive.

“American literature” is best understood as a subset in this sense. The field does stand to be classified apart, as a nameable and adducible unit. It is taxonomically useful as an entity. At the same time, that taxonomic usefulness should not lure us into thinking that this entity is natural, that its shape and size will hold all the way up and all the way down, staying intact regardless of circumstance, not varying with specifying frames. On the contrary, what we nominate as “American literature” is simply an effect of that nomination, which is to say, it is epiphenomenal, domain-specific, binding only at one register and extending no farther than that register. Once it is transposed, its membership will change also, going up or down with the ascending or descending scales of aggregation.¹⁴ And, across those scales, at every level of redescription, it can be folded back into a larger continuum from which it has only been momentarily set apart.

In *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (1979), Douglas Hofstadter discusses these ascending and descending scales and their intricate enfolding as “recursive structures and processes,” to be found not only in mathematics, the visual arts, and music, but also in domains still more elementary: the grammar of languages, the geometry of the branches of trees, even particle physics. What all of these have in common is the phenomenon of “nesting”: a generative process that modulates continually from the outside to the inside, from the background to the foreground, with several units, differently scaled, reciprocally cradling one another and overlapping with one another, creating an ever wider circumference as well as an ever greater recessional depth. Rather than proceeding as a straight line, recursive structures and processes give us a reversible landscape that can be either convex or concave, either bulging out or burrowing in, sometimes pivoted on the smallest embedded unit and sometimes radiating out to take in the largest embedding circumference. Hofstadter calls this reversible hierarchy a *heterarchy*. “The whole world is built out of recursion,” he says.¹⁵ This entanglement between inner and outer limits allows entities to snowball, with each feedback loop generating an “increasing complexity of behavior,” so much so that “suitably recursive systems might be strong enough to break out of any predetermined patterns,” modifying the input to such an

extent that the outcome becomes utterly unpredictable. Such unpredictability, Hofstadter adds, “probably lies at the heart of intelligence.”¹⁶

We explore the intelligence of American literature in just this light, as the unpredictable outcome stemming from the interplay between encapsulation and its undoing: between the modularity of the subset and an infinite number of larger aggregates that might count as its embedding “set.” What are some of these aggregates? They are uncharted and uncataloged for the most part. One thing is clear, though. In order for American literature to be nested in them, these aggregates would have to rest on a platform broader and more robustly empirical than the relatively arbitrary and demonstrably ephemeral borders of the nation. They require alternate geographies, alternate histories. At their most capacious, they take their measure from the durations and extensions of the human species itself, folding in American literature as one fold among others, to be unfolded and refolded into our collective fabric.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Paul Gilroy have proposed the term “planet” as one aggregate that might do this work of enfolding. In *Death of a Discipline* (2003), Spivak argues that “planetarity” is a term worth exploring precisely because it is an unknown quantum, barely intimated, not yet adequate to the meaning we would like it to bear, and stirring for just that reason. It stands as a horizon impossible to define, and hospitable in that impossibility. Its very sketchiness makes it a “catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility,” for that sketchiness preserves a space for phenomena as yet emerging, not quite in sight.¹⁷ In *After Empire* (2004), Paul Gilroy also invokes the “planet” in this loose-fitting sense. The concept can be helpful only in the optative mood, as a generative principle fueled by its less than actualized status. For its heuristic value lies in its not having come into being: it is a habitat still waiting for its inhabitants, waiting for a humanity that has yet to be born, yet to be wrested from a seemingly boundless racism.¹⁸

What are the consequences of invoking the planet, in its actualized and unactualized dimensions, as a research program? What practical difficulties might arise? What professional training is required? And what sort of creatures would literary scholars have to become to be practitioners of this new craft? It is helpful here to turn to another presidential address, delivered by Philip Curtin to the American Historical Association in 1983, one that eerily speaks to the current situation. Entitled “Depth, Span, and Relevance,” this presidential address zeroes in on the very question of professional training. “The discipline of history has broadened in the postwar decades, but historians have not,” Curtin observes. “We teach the history of Africa and Asia, but specialists in American history know no more about the history of Africa than their predecessors did in the 1940s.”¹⁹ Nor is Africa alone terra incognita in the minds of scholars. Europe, it seems, is also a dark continent: “Americanists know less European history than they did thirty years ago.”²⁰ Expertise so narrowly defined has serious consequences for the field as a whole. Americanists

seem to have forgotten “that one of the prime values of a liberal education is breadth, not narrow specialization. Even before the explosion of new kinds of historical knowledge, historical competence required a balance between deep mastery of a particular field and a span of knowledge over other fields of history. Depth was necessary to discover and validate the evidence. Span was necessary to know what kind of evidence to look for—and to make some sense of it, once discovered.”²¹

The elimination of “span” as a scholarly requirement undermines the work of Americanists in the most basic way. For one thing, it arbitrarily restricts the database, limiting it to a national archive. This foreclosing of evidence makes the modularity of the field deceptively absolute: it is a distorting lens in some cases, a fatal pair of blinkers in others. Jerry Fodor, one of the leading cognitive scientists of the twentieth century, and best known for his work on the “modularity of mind,” nonetheless sees fit to warn us against what he sees as a “characteristic pathology” of modular thinking:

It is worth emphasizing a sense in which modular processing is *ipso facto* irrational. After all, by definition modular processing means arriving at conclusions by attending to arbitrarily less than all of the evidence that is relevant and/or by considering arbitrarily fewer than all of the hypotheses that might reasonably be true. . . . Informational encapsulation is economical; it buys speed and the reduction of the computational load by, in effect, delimiting *a priori* the data base and the space of candidate solutions that get surveyed in the course of problem solving. But the price of economy is warrant. The more encapsulated the cognitive mechanism that mediates the fixation of your beliefs, the worse is your evidence for the beliefs that you have.²²

To take just one example of such undue encapsulation, slavery, so often studied only within the geography and chronology of the United States, becomes a virtually unrecognizable phenomenon when it is taken outside these space and time coordinates. Curtin’s own classic study, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex* (1990), dramatizes the conceptual broadening that comes with this broadening of the evidentiary ground, giving us a history that does indeed try to collect data from the long human sojourn on the planet.

By “plantation complex,” Curtin refers to “an economic and political order centering on slave plantations in the New World tropics.”²³ The phenomenon cannot be confined to the United States, since “many of the trade goods to buy African slaves came from India, and silver to buy these same Indian goods came from mainland South America.” Though slavery did evolve to become a distinctly American institution, its tributary and circulatory networks were exogenous, extending to Africa, Europe, as well as Asia. This geographical spread must, in turn, be complemented by a long history, for the “origins of this economic complex lay much further back in time. Its earliest clear forerunner was the group of plantations that began growing sugarcane in the east-

ern Mediterranean at the time of the European crusades into the Levant. These plantations, like their successors, produced mainly for a distant market in Europe, thus becoming the center for a widespread commercial network.”²⁴

The space and time coordinates needed to understand slavery are five continents and some thirteen hundred years. Curtin’s first chapter—“The Mediterranean Origins”—begins with “the rise of Islam after about 700 A.D.”²⁵ The rise of this Afro-Eurasian civilization means that “the old intercommunicating zone of the Indian Ocean came into much closer contact with the southern Mediterranean. As a result, a whole range of new crops from the Asian tropics began to be grown in the Mediterranean basin.” Among these, one that would soon rise to world-historical importance was sugarcane: “Europe’s contact with sugarcane began at the time of the Crusades, Europe’s first intense contact with the Muslim world. It was an impressive discovery for people whose only source of sugar was honey.”²⁶

That impressiveness was not only a matter of taste, for sugar also had a unique economic value. “Once concentrated, cane sugar products had a high value-to-bulk ratio. This meant that they could be transported for long distances, especially by relatively cheap water transport, and still sold at a profit. Economically, therefore, sugar could enter long-distance trade over far greater distances than wheat, rice, or other starchy staples in common use.” With the discovery of sugar, the star ingredient of a world economy was found. Once the Europeans seized control of the Muslim-owned sugar production already flourishing in the Levant, the stage was set for a “plantation complex” with its four requisite features: slave labor on the plantations; maritime trade routes; European capitalization; and long-distance markets. Cotton and coffee would later be added as variations on this theme, but sugar was its first prototype. These fourfold ingredients would be reworked and retooled as they migrated from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, to the Pacific, and back to the Indian Ocean, linking Asia, Europe, Africa, and the two Americas as circulatory networks on a terraqueous globe. This is as encompassing a “set” as one can hope for. Slavery in the United States is very much its subset, caught up in this large-scale world history. Curtin writes: “The North American segment of the plantation complex is hard to understand if it is merely seen in the context of U.S. history. The origins of the plantation complex antedate Columbus’s voyages, and it lasted elsewhere long after its end in the United States.”²⁷

Given this large-scale history, the *prenational* emerges, along with the *post-national*, as two domains of evidence that cannot simply be written off the temporal map, falling as they do on either side of the nation, bearing a diacritical relation to it. This transnational axis dissolves the field’s autonomized chronology, meshing it with a continuum still evolving, and stretching as indefinitely into the past as it does into the future. There are many levels of aggregation here—many “sets”—to which U.S. history might be reintegrated

as a subset. These aggregates, by their very nature, require alternate geographies—a span of five continents, no less—a world atlas of which the national map is inextricably a part. These are the longitudes and latitudes needed in order to examine U.S. history as a “nested” phenomenon, cradled by the history of the world. It is a staggering research program, beyond the competence of most of us. Curtin writes: “Historians of the medieval Mediterranean, of Africa, of Latin America, of Europe, and of the United States all deal with parts or aspects of the complex, but they rarely try to see it as a whole.”²⁸

What is true of history is equally true of literature. The planet stands here too as a cradle—a set that describes and redescribes its subsets—and one that puts an impossible burden on the Americanist trying to come to terms with its daunting amplitude. The essays gathered here face up to that burden and try to parse it on two fronts. On the one hand, we see the unactualized (and perhaps unactualizable) dimensions of the planet as a justification for modular analysis, though without undue encapsulation. The trick is to come up with well-defined projects that are, at the same time, entry points to a broad continuum. On the other hand, the interest of that broad continuum is such that we also see it as a cognitive horizon in its own right, a challenge to all of us to rethink the institutional landscape of the university: the division of the academic fields, the professional training required of each, and the claims and limits of American literature as a field of knowledge, as yet to be theorized, not to be automatically equated with the nation.

We begin with “Global and Babel,” Jonathan Arac’s attempt to drive a wedge between nation and field by way of the multitudes of tongues. The languages of American literature are a subset of the languages of the world; they take their cue not from their membership in a nation, but from their membership in a universe of tongues. For Arac, this transnational “set” realigns American English, and realigns as well the protocol for language requirements in graduate training. Drawing on the work of Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, he argues for a remapping of the disciplinary boundaries of three fields—American studies, area studies, and comparative literature—both as a template for a new practice of close reading and as an ambitious ground plan for curricular reform. How many languages should a doctoral student in American literature be required to learn, and which ones in particular? Arac comes up with an intriguing number and one highly unlikely candidate, while arguing at the same time that the emphasis of language instruction should fall less on mastering a “high cultural accent” and more on a degree of familiarity with the street vernacular, “flawed and irrevocably marked by one’s own English.”²⁹ Rather than mastering the world as the master language, American English is in fact foreign sounding to most human populations. It is helpful for our own education to acknowledge that fact in reverse.

For Arac, foreign words embedded in American literature turn this body of material from a modular unit into part of a continuum, folded into a trans-

national babel. This enfolding of the outside and the inside is crucial to all the essays in this collection. In the hands of Paul Giles, it emerges as a methodological argument directed against our tendency to integrate the field on the basis of the nation's territorial integrity. In "The Deterritorialization of American Literature," Giles points out that the geographical borders of the discipline are not a given, and not a constant. They must be seen against a history of their operating environments, against "other kinds of geographical projection, of the kinds found in cartography and other forms of mapping," and, even more crucially, against various social, political, and economic forces with a vested interest in stipulating (or not stipulating) those borders. Beginning with the early years of the republic, and tracing a series of transformations extending through the presidency of Jimmy Carter, Giles argues that the identification of American literature "with the current geographical boundaries of the United States is a formulation that should be seen as confined to relatively limited and specific time in history," roughly from 1865 to 1980. American literature as a spatially determinate set is a thing of the past. For Giles, deterritorialization is both salutary and necessary in order to integrate the field into a larger research program.

The articulate shapes of that research program are, of course, very much an open question. Some of its lineaments can already be traced, however, in Susan Stanford Friedman's essay, "Unthinking Manifest Destiny: Muslim Modernities on Three Continents," the most thoroughgoing in this volume, one that puts the maximum distance between the boundaries of the field and the boundaries of the nation. Shanghai and Hong Kong, Baghdad and Basra are cities that Americanists need to know about, for they are not extraneous, but an enfolded part of the American landscape. With this in mind, Friedman revisits the long histories of Chinese and Arabic civilizations, against which the brief chronology of the United States can only be seen as a humble subset. Once this subset is recognized for what it is—not self-contained, and not blessed with any provable advantage over other subsets—modernity in general, and American literature in particular, will be seen to be "polycentric," with multiple horizons, alive with the possibility that the future of the world (like its past) might be more vitally developed in other regions on the planet. Feminism, quintessential child of modernity, is a case in point. Friedman analyzes the writings of Fatima Mernissi and Azar Nafisi as feminism with a difference: indigenized, indebted to Scheherazade, enmeshed in Islamic politics, and, for all these reasons, reflecting more of the vexed contours of the world than its Western counterpart.

Friedman's essay marks the outer limits of a paradigm that rejects the nation and embraces the world as its evidentiary ground. From this explosive performance, we turn to two essays weighted toward material more recognizable as "American," nested, however, in a geography and a chronology far exceeding the bounds of that adjective. Both take Eastern Europe as a test case. This is

a part of the world quite different from the France and Germany and Italy traditionally conjured up by the word “Europe,” a locality whose deep entanglement with American literature is just beginning to be recognized. In “Mr. Styron’s Planet,” Eric J. Sundquist asks what it means for William Styron, in *Sophie’s Choice*, to imagine a “sinister zone of likeness” between Poland under the Nazis and the slaveholding American South. In making his heroine a Polish Catholic anti-Semite and embroiling her in a pornographic melodrama, Styron stages a Holocaust without Jews, claiming that its driving force is not anti-Semitism but totalitarianism, productive of a vast system of “slave labor” more reprehensible than a system of genocide. In this way, *Sophie’s Choice* picks up where *The Confessions of Nat Turner* leaves off. This de-Judaization does not stand alone, Sundquist argues, nor is it at the center of its own universe. Rather, it is a subset, a sideshow, of a piece with the sanitized account of the Holocaust in postwar Poland, with the *Historikerstreit* (the debate in Germany in the 1980s about the uniqueness of Nazi crimes), and with the Christian triumphalism promulgated at Auschwitz by Pope John Paul II. These are facts that have a bearing on American literature, facts that Americanists need to know. Our understanding of *Sophie’s Choice* would have been infinitely poorer without this scrupulous reconstruction of a larger set of evidence.

That larger set of evidence is also the animating force in Ross Posnock’s essay, “Planetary Circles: Philip Roth, Emerson, Kundera.” Likewise centered on Eastern Europe, this essay in many ways reverses the flow of Sundquist’s argument. While Sundquist sees “de-Judaization” as an affront and a denial of history, Posnock sees it as a tribute, a broadening of the web of filiations extended to authors hitherto identified only by their ethnicity. Philip Roth, he argues, is better seen as a cosmopolitan rather than Jewish-American writer: one who for thirteen years lived half the year in London, and who played a crucial part in the translation and publication of Eastern European authors, forming close friendships with several of them, including Kundera and Havel. The Americanist field, as Posnock envisions it, is necessarily intercontinental, with America flowing into Europe and Europe flowing into America. The presence of Kundera and Havel gives us not only a new Roth, but also a new Emerson, a new Melville, and a new clustering within the “world republic of letters,” as described by Pascale Casanova.³⁰ American literature is very much a subset of this republic, “simply the first circle,” Posnock says, around which a series of larger circles can be drawn.

Joseph Roach injects a cautionary note. The drawing of larger and yet larger circles for our discipline can be less than benign, he suggests; indeed, it is an act of self-aggrandizing not unlike the global transactions of capitalism. Operating under conditions of inequality, it might lead to a World Bank model of aggregation. Rather than taking American phenomena as a subset of the phenomena of the world, this World Bank model globalizes the world by instituting a vertical hierarchy, imposing itself as the most encompassing of sets,

and through a continual transfer of local resources to corporate structures, devours the rest of the world as its tributaries. The incorporation of two Australian performances—*Bran Nue Dae*, widely known as the “first Aboriginal musical,” and *Ningali*, a subsequent solo performance by Josie Ningali Lawford—into the Broadway musical *Oklahoma!* dramatizes this insidious logic. Aggregation of this sort strips away the protective barrier put up by local governments, taking what it will and where it will, giving new currency to indigenous legacies, but always by engulfing them and subordinating them.

It is a frightening scenario. Still, it is probably not the only scenario at play as we bring the circumference of the globe to bear on the circumference of the nation. The complex tension between these two can also be the genetic ground for a different kind of aggregate: not from the top down, as in the World Bank model, but from the bottom up, what Arjun Appadurai calls “grassroots globalization.”³¹ Grassroots activities of this sort suggest that the most vital cross-border filiations might be below the threshold, operating at a *subnational* level.³² This is the focus for Homi K. Bhabha. Using W.E.B. Du Bois as a point of departure, Bhabha calls attention to a “global minoritarian culture,” one that does not necessarily add up to a racial or ethnic minority within a single nation. That not-adding-up allows a different aggregate to emerge—what Bhabha calls a “partial community”—rendered partial by its off-center relation to the national government, and by its far-reaching and locally mediated kinship with other distant minority groups. This is a subset of humanity that cannot be integrated into a sovereign whole, a subset always partly external to any nation-based set. Its resilience lies precisely in that reversed hierarchy.

Nor is this an isolated instance. Indeed, reversed hierarchy might turn out to be the rule rather than the exception in most localities porous to a global flow of culture, but not so porous as to stop existing as *localities*. Put another way, we can also say that the subset, in requiring more specifying than the set, will in most instances *overflow* that supposedly larger container. David Palumbo-Liu explores that paradox in “Atlantic to Pacific: James, Todorov, Blackmur, and Intercontinental Form,” a study of the signatures of the local, operating below the threshold both of the nation-state and of a transnational regime. Beginning with the sense of spatial disorientation starkly recounted in Henry James’s “The Jolly Corner,” Palumbo-Liu uses this as a generative matrix, linking the formal experiments of James as an expatriate American in Britain to the reinvention of poetics by Tzvetan Todorov as an expatriate Bulgarian in France, and to a series of lectures delivered by R. P. Blackmur in Japan in 1956, at the Nagano Summer Seminar in American Literature. These dislocations are more than just variations on a theme; they are variations that cannot be recuperated as a theme. Palumbo-Liu sees them as “ghosts” of a sort that resist homogenization: ghosts that stalk not only the linguistic forms of

James, Todorov, and Blackmur, but also the architectural forms of, say, Paris in the 1960s, or the “International Style” in postwar Japan.

Haunting, for Palumbo-Liu, stands as a shorthand for the untotalizable sum between part and whole, between set and subset. It is a perennial witness to a reversible hierarchy. That reversible hierarchy appears in an even more striking guise in environmental thinking, a paradox that Lawrence Buell explores. Buell begins with the observation that the oldest form of globalism is environmental rather than economic or political. To think “environmentally” is to think against the grain of a nation-based paradigm. And yet, environmentalism is more than just a cognitive style; it is, perhaps even vitally, an affective style, animated by an attachment to particular localities, a feel for the near-at-hand, and haunted by the fragility and finiteness of mountains, streams, plants, and living creatures. Buell calls these emotional bonds “ecoglobalist affects,” and traces their presence throughout the length of American literature, from Mary Rowlandson to Leslie Silko and Karen Tei Yamashita. While environmental *thinking* invokes the large-scale as its analytic coordinates—climate change, toxic fallouts, nuclear proliferation, phenomena that lie outside the purview of any single nation—environmental *feeling* tends to attach itself to the near rather than the far, the tangible rather than the disembodied. Here too the subset, in its intensities, might turn out to overflow the set. Buell, for that reason, acknowledges the force of place-centered ethics, more locale-based than nation-based, as a complement and offset to the more abstract, planetary scales of identification.

The importance of affect in environmental writing highlights the function of *genre* as a point of transit—a kind of switch mechanism—in the reversible hierarchy between the local and the global. Genre is, in fact, the analytic pivot for Rachel Adams as she studies local innovations emerging in the shadow of global players in one particularly volatile part of the world: the U.S.-Mexico border. The genre in question is the crime novel. Initially aligned with the mean streets of Los Angeles and New York, of late it has drifted significantly to other cultural terrains: Ciudad Juárez, El Paso, Tijuana. This internationalization of the genre provides an excellent test case for measuring the strengths of the local against the power of the global. Drawing on the work of Walter Mignolo, Adams argues that the crime novel embodies a special form of knowledge, “border gnosis,”³³ that it has as much to tell us about the impact of NAFTA as it does about the grassroots filiations of bilingual, bicultural, and binational communities. Rolando Hinojosa, Paco Ignacio Taibo II, and Alicia Gaspar de Alba use various conventions of detective fiction to highlight not only the arbitrary nature of territorial regimes but also the sustained efforts of local groups to collaborate across linguistic and national boundaries. Just as the subset of crime fiction can no longer be fitted into a nation-based set, neither can any vibrant understanding of community.

This reversible hierarchy between subset and set also animates the last essay in this collection, one that explores the “nesting” of the transnational in the subnational by tracing the planetary circuits embedded in one of the most baseline of activities: the use of language. In “African, Caribbean, American: Black English as Creole Tongue,” Wai Chee Dimock looks at this street vernacular as a linguistic form bearing the imprint of many geographies, many chronologies. Though clearly local, it is nonetheless the effect of an African diaspora, enriched by a host of European languages along the way. Drawing on the research of Lorenzo Dow Turner, Robert Hall, William Stewart, and William Labov, Dimock argues that the apparent ungrammaticalness of Black English will appear in a new light when it is seen as a subset in a linguistic continuum, comprising such West African languages as Wolof, Ewe, Fon, Mende, and Ibo. Basic syntax requires at least three continents in order to make sense. With the help of these large-scale coordinates, inflected always by the small-scale signatures of local groups, this volume circles back to Jonathan Arac’s opening plea for curricular reform, with language instruction playing a crucial part, as an empirical link between American studies, area studies, and comparative literature. What is intimated here is the field as a multilingual and intercontinental domain. Its features are just becoming legible, and we invoke it in that spirit: as a cipher, a cradle, a horizon yet to be realized.

NOTES

1. The correlation between intensified hurricane cycles and warmer ocean temperatures was first reported in the July 31, 2005, online edition of the journal *Nature* by Kerry Emanuel, professor of meteorology in MIT’s Department of Earth, Atmospheric, and Planetary Sciences. See the release from the MIT News Office, <http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2005/hurricanes.html>. See also “Is Global Warming Fueling Katrina?” *Time*, August 29, 2005; “Katrina’s Real Name,” *Boston Globe*, August 30, 2005; “Katrina Reignites Global Warming Debate,” *USA Today*, September 1, 2005.

2. *Toward a Global Civil Society*, ed. Michael Walzer (Providence, R.I.: Berghahn Books, 1995); Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation*, trans. Max Pensky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001). For other important works that argue along these lines, see David Held, *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995); Mary Kaldor, *Global Civil Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003); Étienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Anne-Marie Slaughter, *A New World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

3. Fredric Jameson, “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue,” in *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 54–77, quotation from 64. For critiques of global capital, see John Gray, *False Dawn: The Delusion of Global Capitalism* (New York: New Press, 1998); and Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 2003). For

McDonaldization, see George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (London: Sage, 1992); *Global America?* ed. Ulrich Beck, Natan Sznaider and Rainer Winter (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003); and, for a qualifying argument, *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia*, ed. James L. Watson (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).

4. See <http://www.cnn.com/2005/WEATHER/08/31/Katrina.people/>.

5. This development puts a wrinkle not only in Jameson's argument but also in the arguments about "empire" set forth by Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and Niall Ferguson. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

6. For the United States as a rogue nation, see Clyde Prestowitz, *Rogue Nation: American Unilateralism and the Failure of Good Intentions* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); Peter Scowen, *Rogue Nation: The America the Rest of the World Knows* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2003).

7. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

8. Janice Radway, "What's in a Name? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 20, 1998," *American Quarterly* 51 (March 1999): 1–32, quotation from 4.

9. *Ibid.*, 10, 15.

10. *Ibid.*, 15.

11. For important collections that affirm the multicultural nature of the United States, see, for instance, *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*, ed. David Palumbo-Liu (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); *Mapping Multiculturalism*, ed. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, ed. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996); *Streams of Cultural Capital*, ed. David Palumbo-Liu and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997); *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997); *Postnational American Studies*, ed. John Carlos Rowe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

12. See, for instance, Sheila Honess and Julia Leyda, "Geographies of American Studies," *American Quarterly* 57 (December 2005): 1019–32; and Donald E. Pease, "The Extraterritoriality of the Literature for Our Planet," *ESQ* 50 (2004): 177–221. For a discussion of the carving of spaces in Africa that bears on American studies, see Achille Mbembe, "At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa," in *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 22–51.

13. Set theory is a highly technical mathematical field, considered by some to be the foundation of mathematics. Much of the literature is difficult for humanists to understand. I have found the following helpful: Abraham Fraenkel, *Foundations of Set Theory* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Science Publishers, 1984); E. Kamke, *Theory of Sets*, trans. Frederick Bagemihl (New York: Dover, 1950); Michael Potter, *Set Theory and Its Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). For a bracingly partisan account, see David Lewis, *Parts of Classes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991).

14. For a more detailed discussion, see my “Scales of Aggregation: Prenational, Subnational, Transnational,” *American Literary History* 18 (Summer 2006): 217–27.
15. Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: The Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 127–52, quotation from 142.
16. *Ibid.*, 152.
17. Giyatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Planetarity,” in *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 71–102, quotation from 102. In this context, also see my essay, “Literature for the Planet,” *PMLA* 116 (2001): 173–88.
18. Paul Gilroy, *After Empire* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2004). Spivak and Gilroy reverse Mary Louise Pratt’s understanding of “planetary consciousness,” which she aligns with an imperialist vision. See Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
19. Philip Curtin, “Depth, Span, and Relevance,” Presidential Address to the American Historical Association, San Francisco, December 18–30, 1983. Reprinted in *American Historical Review* 89 (February 1984): 1–9, quotation from 1.
20. *Ibid.*, 1.
21. *Ibid.*, 2.
22. Jerry A. Fodor, “Modules, Frames, Fridgeons, Sleeping Dogs, and the Music of the Spheres,” in *Modularity in Knowledge Representation and Natural-Language Understanding*, ed. Jay L. Garfield (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 25–36, quotation from 25. Fodor’s well-known argument in favor of modularity is set forth in *The Modularity of Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).
23. Philip Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), ix.
24. *Ibid.*, ix.
25. *Ibid.*, 3. This unexpected incorporation of the rise of Islam into the discussion of slavery is characteristic of world history as a subfield of history. William McNeill and Marshall Hodgson, two other leading practitioners, likewise put Islam at the center of their accounts of world history. See Marshall Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); William McNeill, *The Rise of the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).
26. Curtin, *Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex*, 4.
27. *Ibid.*, 4, x.
28. *Ibid.*, x. Curtin’s other works are equally intimidating in their range. See, for instance, his *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); *The World and the West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
29. Arac’s thinking about the institutional meaning of vernacular speech has evolved over the years. See, for instance, his “Whitman and the Problem of the Vernacular,” in *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 44–61; and “*Huckleberry Finn*” as *Idol and Target: The Function of Criticism in Our Time* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 203–6.
30. Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004). For Casanova, this is not an entirely benign development, with peripheral innovation flourishing under the aegis of first-world domination.

31. Arjun Appadurai, "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination," in *Globalization*, 1–21. In an earlier essay, Stuart Hall has also called attention to globalization from the bottom up. See Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," in *Culture, Globalization, and the World System*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1–29.

32. Thomas Bender has likewise argued that "[r]ather than shifting our focus from the nation to some other social/territorial unit, we would do well to imagine a spectrum of social scales, both larger and smaller than the nation and not excluding the nation." See Bender, Introduction, to *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 1–21, quotation from 8.

33. Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledge, and Border-Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 11.