

Paul Giles. *The Global Remapping of American Literature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010. Pp. 340. US\$45.00.

Paul Giles' *The Global Remapping of American Literature* is an ambitious book that may well be indispensable for scholars interested in the recent transnational turn in U.S. literary studies—which is to say, any scholars interested in U.S. literary studies. The book proposes nothing less than a complete, new framework for American literary history—a framework consistent with a transnational perspective.

Giles argues that the borders of U.S. literature, like the borders of the nation, were only solidified between 1865 and 1980 and that at other times the national literature, like the national geography, was more amorphous. “During the colonial period and the early years of the republic, the country’s more amorphous territorial framework engendered parallel uncertainties about the status and authority of American discourse,” he argues. “Similarly, since about 1981, the multidimensional effects of globalization have reconfigured the premises of U.S. national identity in relation to a wider sphere. The identification of American literature with U.S. national territory was an equation confined to the national period” (1). Giles contests standard American literary histories that seek to project national identity back to the earliest days of colonization and that construct a coherent national culture throughout the nation’s history.

Unlike standard U.S. literary histories that recognize more periods, Giles identifies only three periods of American literature: the transnational era (early settlement-1865), the national era (1865–1980), and the globalized era (1981–present). Separate chapters deal with each of the periods, i.e., all of U.S. literary history—an impressive feat at a time when few scholars claim command over such a broad sweep of U.S. literature (or any literary field).

Chapter one explores colonial texts by James Cook, Cotton Mather, William Byrd, Phillis Wheatley, and others in the context of British Augustan literature, arguing that “the cultural traditions of Britain and America from 1640 onward were much more closely intertwined than has usually been imagined” (32). The second chapter proposes that Republican literature (Emerson, Longfellow, Hawthorne, Melville) might be characterized as Medieval, given its intense preoccupation with history, its anti-industrial spirit, its nostalgia, and its Gothicism. Throughout both early chapters, Giles includes geographical maps that reveal the instability of U.S. national borders; the illustrations provide compelling support for his claim that the nation’s literature and culture were equally unstable and porous.

Later chapters address the transnational sensibilities of contemporary writers like David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers. These chapters also examine specific regions of the U.S.—the South and the Pacific Northwest—in order to further destabilize the nation’s spatial map. Giles examines the South in relation to the Caribbean and the Atlantic slave trade: he puts Frederick Douglass in conversation with William Simms (a Southern writer who imagined a broad Caribbean slave-holding region encompassing the American South); he places the Cuban author José Martí in conversation with U.S. imperial discourse on Cuba; and he explores the ways Zora Neale Hurston and Elizabeth Bishop were influenced by Latin American culture. On the West Coast, Giles discusses the influence of Buddhism and Eastern philosophy on Gary Snyder as well as the relationship between American and Canadian cultures in the works of William Gibson and Douglas Coupland.

It is telling that Giles devotes only one chapter out of six to the “nationalist” period, which encompasses both realism and modernism. His lack of attention to the era suggests he’s not entirely confident in his ability to prove that this period is truly nationalist, and indeed the chapter does not effectively support the argument. In fact, he often undermines the claim, as when he points out that multilingual American literature was more recognized in 1920 than today (122), or when he points out that globalization (as we know it today) arguably began for the U.S. at the turn of the twentieth century (122), or when he points out that modernists, so many of whom (Pound, Eliot, Stein, etc.) lived and traveled outside the U.S. and were inspired by developments in European art, might easily be positioned in a transnational literary matrix (many scholars of American modernism have in fact done this).

There are too many complexities to view 1865–1980 simply as a national era. The racist nativism at the turn of the twentieth century, for example, represented a global way of thinking about American culture by linking it with Northwest-European, Anglo-Saxon culture. Efforts of cultural nationalists like Whitman were defensive products of a globally-circulating culture in which U.S. art was often seen as inferior to British and European art. Realists were often inspired by European literature; Howells, for example, wrote that “the literary spirit is the true world-citizen, and is at home everywhere” (*Literature and Life* 204), and the writers he admired most included Turgenev, Verga, Valdés, Galdós, Zola, and Tolstoy. James arguably saw himself participating in a British rather than an American literary tradition. The unifying, nationalist, melting-pot culture of the turn of the century was an anxious response to the sense of the porous boundaries of the U.S. and the record number of immigrants who did not speak English or participate in national culture. Much of the immigrant writing at the turn of the twentieth

eth century—the work of Abraham Cahan, for example—clearly reflected a transnational sensibility.

While Giles' overall argument is not completely convincing—ultimately any period in U.S. history might be considered transnational, notwithstanding the way mapmakers imagined the nation—it is provocative, nevertheless, to consider the implications of accepting his reconfiguration of American literary history. Should we divide the teaching of American literature into his three periods? Why preserve the nationalist paradigm (“American literature”) at all if the goal is a truly transnational or post-national study of literature? Why continue to study American literature in its English form rather than, as Werner Sollors has suggested, recognizing the multilingual products of U.S. literature? Giles does not offer clear answers to these questions, and the form of his book, with its emphasis on texts written in English and more-or-less canonical U.S. literature and culture, does not stride away confidently from worn paths. The book is a global remapping of *American* literature, not a global remapping of *literature*.

If Giles' book is any indication, the transnational turn in U.S. literary studies seems poised not to radicalize the discipline but rather to offer modestly new approaches to a traditional subject; it is a reformist rather than a revolutionary project. Nevertheless, Giles' book is an outstanding model and example of the new approach, and it deserves a place on the shelf of anyone who is serious about staying informed of recent developments in the field.

#### Works Cited

Howells, William Dean. *Literature and Life*. New York: Harper, 1902. Print.  
Sollors, Werner. *The Invention of Ethnicity*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991. Print.

Michael Tavel Clarke