Cultural Text Studies 2:
Transatlantic

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Introduction

Camelia Elias and Andrea Birch

This volume of interdisciplinary scholarship brings together explorations of transatlantic perspectives in arts, literature, history, philosophy and law. In the individual essays the transatlantic perspective opens up comparative aspects of phenomena within these fields, but this perspective also allows for a new type of engagement with the phenomena themselves, which can be analyzed in new historical, transnational contexts. The present volume is itself an expression of a transatlantic exchange. The contributors are all affiliated with either Aalborg University or Brenau University, two small research and educational institutions which over a number of years have experimented with transatlantic exchanges of students, faculty and scholarship. Out of these exchanges came the idea to commission essays exploring the transatlantic aspects of the contributors' core fields. The ensuing essays have been grouped to further highlight the interplay between different scholarly fields and approaches. The scholarship is therefore hopefully presented in such a way that the whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts.

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The transatlantic connection is at its clearest in the investigation of what is representational in the relation here vs. there. The representation of place, space, and belonging is a process of registering differing mentalities. These mentalities help create the emergence of some binary dichotomies: home vs. abroad, us vs. them, ideal vs. real, motivation vs determinacy, cultural exchange vs. negotiation, being in transit vs. settling, adaptation vs. assimilation, exile vs. expatriotism and invasion (cultural hegemony or imperia-
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lism), historicity vs. belonging. Crossing the Atlantic thus involves some economies of representation and the essays presented in this volume aim at disclosing the implications of the notion of transatlantic for the way in which we read the significance of cultural texts. The transatlantic connection explored by the essays in *Transatlantic* emphasizes not only a desire to explain different cultures, but also to focus on the mechanisms of representing difference and heterogeneity in literature. The representation of place can be said to be mediated in terms of both an imaging of place and an imagining of it, while space can be considered in terms of the sublime in which the experience alone of being abroad is rendered in terms of greatness. Greatness is linked with anticipation, and anticipation is something that all subjects involved in a transatlantic crossing share. Whether territorial or cultural displacement is induced by coercion or follows the will of a subject, the transatlantic crossing always opens up a space for communication across influence, dominance, interactions, exchanges, master and local narratives. A sense of belonging springs out of the need to re-articulate one's anticipation of a place and expectation to understand a different culture.

In the following each essay will be discussed in terms of its specific contribution and situated in its transatlantic context, as well as in its place within the scheme of the volume:

Bent Sørensen's essay "Images of Europe: Readings in the Transatlantic Topography of Generational Texts" is oriented by his observation that Europe has functioned as a counter-image in American intellectual thought and debate at least since the 1920s and onward. Insofar as any representation of place usually takes place after the fact, after the arrival to a certain place, it is noteworthy to observe that before a place is visited or chosen for longer settling some mental images are always conjured up not necessarily by what constitutes factual information about the said place, but by imagination, by the way in which the place is being imagined. These imaginary images often find their way in descriptions which present themselves as objective. Sørensen's essay looks not only at how place is represented but also offers insights into the semiotics of place as it is linked to experience. The central argument revolves around the idea that Europe has been imaged by American intellectuals and writers as carrier of an element of Bohemianism and greater tolerance towards deviation. Yet, as Sørensen contends, experience also has darker aspects, as Europe is considered by writers (both exiled and travelers) as a "free space" for drugs and the uninhibited unfolding of sexuality. Opposed to the representation of Europe as a

decadent place, Europe is also an 'old' continent, which has implications for the way in which Europe is both imagined and experienced. Here Sørensen makes an assumption and raises a central question: "one thing is to go into exile, another is to write about it. How do we get from the writer being located in a foreign locale to even talking about a representation of this place as something different from any other textual construct? How is foreign place or even place as such present in texts?" Sørensen places under scrutiny texts from four generations: from Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, via selected Beat and Blank Generation texts, to Douglas Coupland's *Shampoo Planet*, and analyzes signifiers and key concepts such as "Eurotrash", and "Bohemian or machismo Paradise" in the light of cultural exchange which is dependent on the imaginary construction of place in general and the significance of age, conservatism and modernity in particular.

Another essay which emphasizes an imaginary idea behind the representation of place and the cultural negotiation of meaning in a historical dimension is Dovile Budryte and Charles Perrin's essay "The Idea of Europe in Selected American World History Textbooks". This essay analyzes two textbooks that are currently used in world history classes in the United States: *World Civilizations: Their History and Culture* (Philip Lee Ralph, et al., 1997) and *Traditions & Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past* (J.H. Bentley and H.F. Zeigler, 2003). Each case study is organized around the following questions: what is the unit of analysis within each textbook, how prominent is the "European" theme, how do the authors describe the development of European societies before 1500, how do they explain the rise of Europe after 1500, and how do the authors describe European interactions with other parts of the world? Ralph and the other authors of *World Civilizations* use the term "civilization" as the unit of analysis and conceptualize a civilization as a real entity with more or less distinct borders and characteristics. The text has a European focus. In the first part of volume one, the image of a European civilization emerges after the survey of the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Hebrew civilizations. Their vision of Europe sets the stage for a dualistic approach to transatlantic relations. Europe is one entity and the United States will remain the "other". In the second part of volume one, titled "The World of the Classical Era", the authors elaborate on the European theme. In volume two the European nation-states play a central role. The non-Western, non-European civilizations are marginalized until the rise of a "new" post-World War II "world civilization". Europe is then

merely one of several regions (but still the authors describe post-World War II developments in Europe in more detail than developments in other geographic areas). Interestingly, although the authors of the text claim that the current world civilization is characterized by US dominance, they do not pursue the consequences of that observation. Instead, they try to identify common global issues (such as, the environmental crisis) that unite the common world civilization. However, given their geographic approach to the world and their emphasis on the fragmented, nation-state system, Budryte and Perrin argue that the authors do not convince readers that there *are* any common, shared global issues.

In contrast to the first textbook analyzed, Bentley and Zeigler clearly want their text *Traditions & Encounters* to be free of Eurocentrism. In their preface they explicitly state that "it…is impossible to understand the world's history by viewing it through the lenses of any particular society". They claim that their textbook will include expanded treatments of several non-European societies. To support their efforts to avoid privileging any one society, Bentley and Zeigler try to avoid using the word "civilization". Instead, they use "complex societies" as their unit of analysis. The term European civilization is absent; it is replaced with the more unfamiliar and ambiguous term "European society". The first complex society which they identify as European is western Europe during the middle ages. Only two of the twenty-two chapters on the pre-modern era deal exclusively with western Europe. China is the subject of three chapters. However, in contrast to the chapters on the pre-modern era, Europe does figure prominently in the chapters on the modern era. Even more surprisingly, Bentley and Zeigler seem to have no reservations about introducing the idea of European exceptionalism. However, they conclude that the Europe of today is not a superpower. In a textbook that is 1,169 pages long, the European Union receives one paragraph and a table shows that Europe is the only area of the world whose population is projected to decline over the next fifty years. Europe is merely one actor (and not a very strong actor) among many. The hidden message is that Europe is not capable of challenging the power of the United States.

Both texts ultimately have the consequence of de-emphasizing Europe. *World Civilizations* does so by ending with the concept of a world civilization that must face common global issues. *Traditions & Encounters* is more overt in showing that Europe is just part of the complex mosaic of societies; it is not the centerpiece. With either textbook, students in the US are left

wondering: Where does the United States fit into this mosaic? Does the United States even fit into the mosaic at all or is it isolated? What are the consequences of this isolation? Does it lead to world dominance or to a form of marginalization? Are there ways to bridge the divide between the United States and other parts of the world? In particular, are there ways to cross the transatlantic divide and partner with Europe, long admired by the US (if only secretly) as so central to civilization and world society?

Camelia Elias's essay "Passage-way to Culture and Writing" takes its point of departure in what can be termed the transatlantic experience and the literature of transit insofar as the texts she analyzes are all written by immigrant writers. Andrei Codrescu, Raymond Federman, Eva Hoffman, and Charles Simic's quasi autobiographical writings themselves link the idea of crossing borders and the Atlantic with the kind of writing which is rendered crossed – in a metaphorical sense – by notions of belonging, being in transit, and strategic positioning vis-à-vis cultural understanding. Elias's paper foregrounds the idea that what makes the literature of transit transatlantic is its ability to turn writing into a sort of religion which observes and subverts the customs of new territories.

The essay explores, on the one hand, the notion of transatlantic through a consideration of the concept of belonging and develops the idea of neutrality as a strategy in dealing with the sense of belonging in the context of shifting nationalities and cultural backgrounds. Insofar as the examined texts themselves anchor their narrative in cultural observations that have a specific double perspective and transnational import, Elias's text considers how writing which uses the metaphor of border-crossing forms the basis of successful integration in a society which invokes mentality as a differing factor in its reasons for acknowledging or dismissing the presence of foreigners. On the other hand, the essay sees the notion of transatlantic as a metaphor of in-between-ness through which the literary value of the literature of transit can be assessed. Here Elias makes the point that when the authors analyzed seem to ask the question as to how they can translate their life stories into fictional ones, they also ask the question of how geographical displacement can be translated into a geography of emotion characterized by a desire to go against norms of conventionality. The transatlantic experience is thus rendered as the site of non-conformity insofar as it settles in the paradox of belonging. Some aspects of American culture emerge against such a background, and places such as New York, San Francisco, and Chicago

are shown to function as transatlantic spaces where creativity happens because and in spite of belonging.

Another example of the literature of transit which "atlanticizes" the very space where it takes place is Lene Yding Pedersen's essay "Atlanticized: Joseph O'Connor's America". Her arguments constitute a significant contribution to the idea that spaces and places are negotiated by crossings in their "atlanticized" form. The suggestion is that crossings always involve an economy of representation. She thus distinguishes between economies of space and economies of writing as they are manifested in contemporary Irish writer Joseph O'Connor's writings which offer representations of America and the Atlantic that are shown to be in an interdependent relationship with each other. Following critics such as Robert James Scully who claimed that ever since the 1840s Ireland has undergone a process of 'Atlanticizing' itself, Yding Pedersen examines two works by O'Connor. In her reading of *Star of the Sea* (2002) she explores the novel's problematic representation of the Famine against the background of themes dealing with history and history writing. Her reading of *Sweet Liberty: Travels in Irish America* (1996) examines the 'Atlanticized' idea in a contemporary context. The idea of crossing is significant here insofar as it stands for the formation of compounds: Ireland is not Ireland without America. What is at stake is the idea that the transatlantic crossing determines and predicates identity. Thus, Yding Pedersen uses this premise to investigate the meaning of O'Connor's 'Irish America' and she shows how *Sweet Liberty* depicts America in the 1990s by portraying as well an image of the 'Atlanticized' author. In her readings of both books she points out O'Connor's use of literary genres (the historical novel and travel writing) for his thematization of the Famine and Irish America, and she points out how both of O'Connor's books relate to these genre conventions in a paradoxical way. Yding Pedersen's essay furthermore suggests that the challenging of literary conventions from an atlanticized point of view has a direct implication for the ways in which identity can be re-fashioned. The author is who he is not only because he writes, but also because he crosses cultural boundaries in writing and in life.

Elias and Yding Pedersen's essays share an interest in the specific function of the notion of transatlantic: to actively change and determine a writer's prerogatives. Exile and travel writing is here seen not only as part of a negotiating process in cultural exchange but also as an investment in making

the personal narrative inherently transatlantic regardless of the borders crossed.

Insofar as the notion of transatlantic emphasizes not only exchange but also the way in which exchanges are interpreted by both sides, it is interesting to note how processes of adaptation, assimilation, and invasion also trigger a revisionist approach. Steen Christiansen's essay: "Continuity Breach: The British Revision of the American Superhero" takes stock of how the genre of comic books is first invaded, and then revised according to new marketing strategies and new creative modes of thinking. Christiansen's essay is an examination of the way a number of British comicbook writers entered the US comics field and altered several of the key conventions of the comicbook and particularly the superhero genre. Christiansen argues that the British writers' invasion of the American genre and premise in the 80s, and the subsequent revision of it on their own terms, unlike other transatlantic crossings, constituted a revitalizing move within the field since especially the mid 80s faced a period of transition due to the poor sale of comicbooks.

Drawing on Harold Bloom's notion of the anxiety of influence, Christiansen offers a semiotic account of the intertextual connections and discontinuities between the work of British writers (Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, and Grant Morrison) and that of the superhero genre. The essay then looks at the reception of comicbooks and notes the shift to their being accepted into mainstream culture. Christiansen's essay not only looks at the current status of the comicbook genre but also links the paratextual reading of a number of comicbook covers with the problems associated with adaptations and revisions, such as the translations of the mentioned writers' comicbooks into fiction and film. The transatlantic perspective is here made explicit as Christiansen contextualizes the idea of cross aesthetics by looking at how the examined authors not only crossed the Atlantic to come to the US, but also opened a space in their work for a crossing over in other areas.

Another essay which emphasizes a crossing over in its more metaphorical sense is Marian Dolan and Kay Keels's essay "Song of the Silenced: American Performance of Baltic Choral Music". In this case, the crossing involves having an American choir learn and perform Baltic musical scores. Dolan (the conductor) and Keels (one of the singers) describe three challenges the American conductor and the American singers must face. First, the Baltic music that had been silenced in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania by the Soviets is to be re-presented by Americans who have no experience of this silencing.

Time and effort must be spent on getting the Americans to almost spiritually cross over into the Baltic composers' cultural context.

Second, the American singers, who like most Americans are uni-lingual, must learn a foreign language in such a way that they do not merely mouth the words but sing them with meaning. In a world where English is becoming the common language, the American singers had to gain a sensitivity to why a language, such as Estonian, spoken by only a few, is significant. For nations with small populations, language is a great unifier and promotes a sense of identity. During the years of Sovietization, the languages of the Baltic countries were silenced and replaced by Russian. The Americans in the choir learned that silencing a language is culturally shattering and learning the Baltic languages became almost a cultural study.

Third, so they could convey the message convincingly to listeners on the American side of the Atlantic, the American singers had to capture how important communal singing is to the Balts. This was a challenge because Americans are individualistic and choral singers often try to impose their individual voices on the ensemble. Moreover, for most Americans singing is merely a pleasant, entertaining pastime. So, how was an American choir to sing as one (as a Baltic choir would) and how would the American singers understand that to represent the Baltic composers' intent they had to feel the power inherent in communal singing? One solution was to tell the Americans about the history of the national song and dance festivals of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, show them video footage of the huge Baltic song festivals, and impress them with statistics (if one-third of the Estonian population attended the 1998 *Laulupidu*, the equivalent 33% of the 1988 US population was 83 *million* people!) Yes, Dolan and Keels prove in their account that Americans can sing with understanding if they make the investment in crossing over into a new cultural context, another language, and the ideals of community.

Just as Americans can cross over to embrace the spirit of the Baltic countries, an almost complementary article by Kay Keels, "Entrepreneurship in Lithuania: Embracing a Western Tradition", shows that citizens of the Baltic country of Lithuania have made a decision to cross over to the west as the model for their society. Societies are texts that we can read. We read the US, a western country, as a land of rugged individualists. It has become a commonplace to assume that individualism is the necessary prerequisite to entrepreneurship. (Entrepreneurship can be defined as the creation of new enterprises by free-thinking risk takers who identify unmet

needs, charge money for the satisfaction of those needs, and so generate wealth.) How did Lithuania, a country that had been squeezed into the sphere of the Soviet planned socialist economies and with an historic communal tradition, transform itself into an entrepreneurial society?

If we read Lithuanian society, we can actually identify beneath the communal text some sub-texts that reveal qualities that are assets to entrepreneurs. For example, the communal national song festivals of Lithuania grew into rallies of cultural pride during Soviet occupation. These rallies, which became known as the Singing Revolution, bore witness to the fact that Lithuanians have the fierce self-confidence and determination needed to become successful entrepreneurs. Indeed, by 2003 the World Bank had listed Lithuania among the top twenty countries known for ease of starting a new business. Because so few people are familiar with the languages of the Baltics (except, perhaps, the American choral singers referred to above!), the peoples of Lithuania have not only had to literally hone their foreign language skills, they have had to metaphorically cross over and adopt positive associations with the language of western capitalism. For Lithuanians, no longer is entrepreneurship a dirty word; they are no longer ambivalent toward capitalism; and, they no longer are resentful of those who accumulate wealth.

In an intriguing footnote, Keels does point out a warning to the citizens of the Baltic countries. In the rush toward gaining individual recognition for their own accomplishments, each Baltic country wants to be evaluated as a separate entity. However, as Keels advises, the Baltic countries should not lose the spirit of cooperation that helped to bring about their independence from the Soviet system. Keels's suggestion that the Baltic countries should retain a communal spirit among themselves points out the secret of US (and increasingly European Union) success: the creativity of individuals is fostered within the united strength of united states (or, in the case of the EU, united countries). The paradoxes of cross cultural, transatlantic exchanges multiply. Individualistic Americans learn about community from the Balts and the historically communal Balts can learn about individualism and cooperation from the Americans across the Atlantic.

The challenge of uncovering the direction of transatlantic exchanges becomes very obvious in Heather Gollmar Casey's essay, "The Transatlantic Flow of Morality: A Case Study of Abortion Politics". Historically, the transatlantic crossing of social policies has been from Europe to the US, with the US diluting the innovative (liberal) policies before implementing them on

the American side of the Atlantic. Casey's close examination of abortion legislation and abortion discourse in the United States, United Kingdom (excluding Northern Ireland), France, and Germany suggests that rather than the US adopting European policies, the countries are apparently arriving simultaneously at increasingly more restrictive abortion legislation, while using different discourse to justify the fairly similar outcomes. Specifically, in the US, discussion of women's rights focuses on individual rights. More restrictive abortion legislation is then justified on the grounds that prioritizing women's concerns limits the rights of others (future citizens, the fetus, etc.). In the European countries, discussion of women's rights tends to focus on government responsibility to support mothers by creating environments in which women can afford to raise children. More restrictive abortion legislation can then be justified on the grounds that the government is providing public health care and other humanitarian services for women so there is no need for a woman to have an abortion. Casey speculates that the current US administration wants to claim that more restrictive abortion legislation is an example of the reversal in the direction of transatlantic crossings. Whereas liberal policies once came from Europe to America, now conservative gales are originating in the US and blowing toward Europe. Still, even if that is so, Casey demonstrates that the discourse does not flow neatly from east to west, nor west to east across the Atlantic, but remains rooted in American or European rhetoric of justification. How can there be exchanges of ideas, true dialogue, and questioning of policies if discourse is almost manipulated to appeal to specific audiences?

One solution might be to move beyond metaphorical crossings to literal physical crossings of the Atlantic as Mary Beth Looney describes in "*Dove sono le donne artisti…*and Other Questions Regarding Revisionist Art History and Italian Women". In one week in March 2004, Looney guided under-graduate level students from her Special Topics in Art History class to three Italian cities. The course content focused on women as art makers in the Renaissance and Baroque eras and the students embarked on their trip with the expectation of viewing works by the women artists so celebrated in their English language texts. Of course, the students were aware of the rarity of women artists and history's treatment of them. Still, it was impossible to completely prepare 21st century American students, so conditioned to consider the "other" in all aspects of life and exposed to revisionist historical practices in the US, for what they would find or, rather, not find in Italian museums and churches. Not only were the works of