

Review Essays

Transnationalism's Territories: The Nation, the World, and the New American Literary History

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Leslie Elizabeth Eckel, *Atlantic Citizens: Nineteenth-Century American Writers at Work in the World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 248 pp., \$112.00 cloth.

Tom F. Wright, ed., *The Cosmopolitan Lyceum: Lecture Culture and the Globe in Nineteenth-Century America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 280 pp., \$80.00 cloth; \$27.95 paper.

Over the course of the past decade, the boundaries of “American” literature have been redrawn by scholars who have taught us to see powerful networks of literary influence and engagement across continents and cultures. Leslie Elizabeth Eckel’s *Atlantic Citizens: Nineteenth-Century American Writers at Work in the World* and Tom F. Wright’s edited collection *The Cosmopolitan Lyceum: Lecture Culture and the Globe in Nineteenth-Century America* pair beautifully because both volumes approach this wider geography by keeping their own topics quite narrow. In these books, we find a methodology for transnational

scholarship that does not attempt to comprehend vast reaches of space and time (an approach modeled by Wai Chee Dimock's *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* [2006]) or to engage cultural pluralism as an everyday experience (an approach modeled by Lawrence Rosenwald's *Multilingual America: Language and the Making of American Literature* [2008]). Instead, Eckel and Wright focus on discrete, delimited times and places wherein the cosmopolitan forces of American culture can be critically interrogated. For Eckel, the careers of six American writers (Longfellow, Fuller, Douglass, Emerson, Whitman, and Grace Greenwood) become transnationally legible if we unpack certain eras and watershed moments in those careers. Eckel shows, for instance, how the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1851 caused Emerson to lose his trust in the moral integrity of the United States, paving the way for the composition of *English Traits* (1856) as an "emphatic warning to Americans about the perils of [...] nation-based thinking" (112). Wright draws the circle of study even tighter, offering the lyceum – where itinerant speakers presented on topics ranging from overseas travel to the philosophical foundations of cross-cultural experience itself – as a potential epicenter for cultural "interconnection and global consciousness" (16).

I admire the commitment to the finer details of literary and cultural history in these books. Precisely because they do so much with such delimited topics as "The Peripatetic Career of Wherahiko Rawei" (a longtime Māori performer on the lyceum and lecture circuits) and Frederick Douglass's travels in Britain and Ireland in 1845-47, both volumes are highly informative and – not a small point of appeal for academic volumes – very readable. To some degree, these studies can be understood as a series of biographical sketches oriented to the global careers of their subjects: in addition to Wherahiko Rawei and the writers studied by Eckel, Wright's volume offers us, in individual chapters by scholars in various disciplines, largely biographical readings of Emerson as a lyceum lecturer; of William James as the Giffords lecturer at the University of Edinburgh; of William H.H. Murray, the wilderness guide;

of George Robins Gliddon, one of the popularizers of Egyptian history and culture in the United States; and of Bayard Taylor, perhaps the nineteenth century's most well-known foreign traveler. Together, *Atlantic Citizens* and *The Cosmopolitan Lyceum* make an implicit argument for the degree to which we must continue to learn to think transnationally about the nineteenth century, and about some of the most interesting figures who can help us do so.

By the same token, readers who are looking for scholarship that provides a contestable interpretive claim about transnationalism itself – that is, readers interested less in the individual careers studied in these volumes than in more generally applicable theories of how global cultural activity operates – will probably find little that appeals in *The Cosmopolitan Lyceum* and will want to read *Atlantic Citizens* more selectively than comprehensively. The premise of *Atlantic Citizens*, to be sure, has the potential to become a flashpoint in wider discussions about the porosity of national boundaries in the nineteenth century. In brief, Eckel argues that the history of literary transatlanticism in the nineteenth century is a history of "vocational" motives. "Vocational," it turns out, means one thing for the first four writers discussed. She asserts that these figures used their transatlantic travels, connections, and professional networks to advance such fundamentally political "work" as resisting American literary exceptionalism by training readers to read comparatively (Longfellow), by revitalizing America's egalitarian promise through contact with the revolutionary energies of mid-century Europe (Fuller), and by challenging slavery by contrasting it with more enlightened British policy (Douglass and Emerson). "Vocational" means something else for Grace Greenwood, the nom de plume of Sara Jane Clarke Lippincott, and for Walt Whitman; these two writers pursued transatlantic experience, or cultivated professional contacts overseas, in order to help market their literary productions and cultural personae at home. In these latter cases, Eckel's emphasis on "writers at work in the world" describes writers working less as agents of political transformation than as their own literary agents, a phenomenon most

pointed when we find Whitman writing reviews of his own oeuvre from the perspective of a British citizen reading this most “American” of poets. Eckel’s two ways of configuring vocation, as politics and as promotionalism, are different enough that the volume presents less of a single sustained argument than divergent aspects of how we might understand transnational experience in relation to literary work, literary professionalism, and literary purpose. That said, Eckel’s outstanding realization – that porous national boundaries are relevant not just to what literature *represents*, but to what it actually *does* in the world – will expand our methodological use of transnational insights, provided that readers bear in mind the crucial differences between political and promotional work.

The Cosmopolitan Lyceum, by contrast, offers less general use for transnational insights; however, some of its individual chapters provide many excellent insights. In the introduction, Tom Wright suggests that “the culture of the American popular lecture is often seen not as an incubator of global ideas, but as one of the patriotic icons of nationalist identity”; the collection aims to revise this assumption by focusing on how “lecturing was as much about looking outward as inward” (2). Two limitations of this formula, as a description of the book’s purpose, appear in the chapters that follow. First, the opening essay by Angela G. Ray identifies several areas in which the lyceum took tentative steps toward engaging with the world, but Ray finds that these steps are so tightly interwoven with nationalist motivations that she remains “convinced by available evidence that much of lyceum practice promoted nation building” (37). Averring, correctly, that “consensus is not required for this book to contribute to new understandings of nineteenth-century culture,” Ray’s essay nevertheless opens *The Cosmopolitan Lyceum* on a decidedly deflationary note (24). For the author of a major monograph on the lyceum – *The Lyceum and Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (2005) – to claim that the lyceum wasn’t so cosmopolitan as its promise, tends to belie the volume’s premise.

The second limitation of Wright’s formula, as a brief for a book subtitled “Lecture Culture and the Globe in Nineteenth-Century

America," involves the generic aspect of the claim that nineteenth-century public lectures involved "looking outward." Here, Wright does not specify that such looking involved a horizon of actual national boundaries; as it develops over the course of the collection, we encounter the lyceum as a forum for reinventing all kinds of borders, but the borders under discussion can have little to do with geography or the globe. To put this another way, the book is full of strong material, but often on different grounds than its framing. Virginia Garnett's essay "With Press and Paddle: William H.H. Murray's 'Adirondack' Lectures and the Making of a Wilderness Guide" exemplifies this phenomenon. Garnett describes how the national denunciation of the authenticity of Murray's *Adventure in the Wilderness* – which he intended as much as an entertaining collection of "tall tales" as a practical guidebook – led him to conceptualize the lectern as a platform that would be less vulnerable to misreading. The issues at stake here will interest readers of *Nineteenth-Century Prose*. The discussion, apparently based on a dissertation Garnett is writing about how the "lecture [...] challenged popular notions of literature and authorship," adeptly weaves ruminations on the literary borders of print and oratory, fiction and non-fiction, into important cultural questions about credibility, authenticity, action, and first-hand experience (241). But a tacked-on three pages about Murray's lectures on the Canadian wilderness are not enough to turn the essay toward the volume's themes. Robert Arbour's essay, "Mr. Emerson's Playful Lyceum: Polyvocal Promotion on the Lecture Circuit," presents the same situation. As an essay for *Nineteenth-Century Prose* itself, it would work beautifully. Arbour reveals how Emerson, who often shuffled his paragraphs and reordered his lectures on the fly, used the lyceum to try out an ever-shifting, experimental, and polyvocal performance of self and identity. Understanding this, Arbour suggests in a powerful reading of "The Transcendentalist," helps us account for the rhetorical and philosophical moves of the print essays that emerged from Emerson's work at the lectern. But Arbour loops this argument back to the volume's theme by describing what he calls a "theoretical cosmopolitanism," an

“inward-oriented” flexibility of identity that relates only analogically to actual experience across national boundaries – a subject that the essay, in fact, does not address (95). In the relationship of these and similar essays to a volume putatively about the globe and theoretically predicated on “looking outward” from American culture, Angela Ray’s opening skepticism seems borne out. The construction of Arbour’s essay itself implies that Emerson’s lyceum, at least, presented more nebulous ideas about pluralism than ways of thinking about national borders or global geographies per se.

Edited collections, of course, should provide different interpretations of a subject. But the viability of the subject itself feels shaky when half of the contributors of the book struggle, like Ray and Garnett and Arbour, to bring their areas of research – and their often excellent interpretations – under the banner of truly global motivations. That said, a number of the contributors do speak more directly to the possibility that the lyceum may have been an outlet for transnational energies. Ray’s opening essay is immediately followed by an outstanding piece by Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray that reveals how women often stressed – in their diaries, journals, and correspondence – the cross-cultural aspects of the lyceum events they attended. Zboray and Zboray remind us that what audiences took from the lyceum, in terms of global scope, could differ from what performers and organizers brought to it. If William H.H. Murray, as described by Garnett, appears as a weak standard bearer for the “cosmopolitan lyceum,” Zboray and Zboray provide a methodology that would allow scholars to search the record of reception, rather than the record of the performance itself, for the signs of the nineteenth century’s global consciousness. Such consciousness does appear a matter of the lecturer’s design in the strongest essay in the book, Peter Gibian’s “The Lyceum as Contact Zone: Bayard Taylor’s Lectures on Foreign Travel.” Gibian’s scholarship presents so well not just because it takes up a figure whose world travels and stardom on the lecture circuit so obviously cohere with the volume’s interests, but more pointedly because Gibian questions the common understanding of Taylor

as an agent of Western culture whose travel lectures reinforced the superiority of U.S. national traditions. For Gibian, those conclusions can arise only from selective readings of the concluding minutes of Taylor's lectures, wherein he backpedals from the deeper levels of unfiltered immersion in the "foreign" that he otherwise promotes. Styling himself on Washington Irving even as he refigures the Irvingesque traveler not as a detached observer but as an engaged participant in local culture, Taylor comes into focus as a nomad whose sense of geographical and cultural boundaries is less reified than we knew.

In stressing the relation of the essays to the book's premise, I am aware of having sidestepped one of the major framing questions advanced in the introduction and in a number of essays. Readers are asked at many junctures to consider whether the border-crossing energies of the lyceum constituted a viable "internationalism" or an outlet for "imperialism" that depended on invidious comparisons between cultures. Tom Wright's positioning of this question at the center of the volume offers us a helpful framework for cohering those essays, or portions of essays, that involve truly global terrain or exchange in the lyceum setting. Wright's framing question can also lead us back to Eckel's *Atlantic Citizens*, for her work makes a powerful case for American literature as motivated, in Wright's terms, by "internationalist" forms of exchange and relativity. I have already described how the book's first four chapters configure the transatlantic politics of Longfellow, Fuller, Douglass, and Emerson. This block can be further subdivided by the likenesses that emerge between the latter three writers. For each, Eckel reveals, the promise of the nation (and therefore the idea that each writer represents "America" or "Americanness") only emerges through their mid-career overseas experiences. All three writers, as it happens, traveled abroad during the revolutionary unrest of the mid and late 1840s. Fuller, tragically, never quite returned, dying in 1850 when the *Elizabeth* foundered just a few hundred yards from the Long Island shore. But what matters to Eckel, drawing on Kwame Anthony Appiah's notion of "partial cosmopolitanism" (which preserves a certain allegiance to nation

even while demanding that we recognize ourselves as global citizens), is how Fuller, Douglass, and Emerson drew upon their transatlantic experiences as a “source of revolutionary energy” that could be laid at America’s doorstep as a model for reforming the nation on principles truer to its self-image (83). Finding this “revolutionary energy” in Fuller’s dispatches from Europe for the *New-York Tribune*, in the newspapers Douglass edited upon his return to the United States (*The North Star* and, later, *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*), and in Emerson’s *English Traits* and his writings about Abraham Lincoln, Eckel shows how nationalism and internationalism interweave and inform one another. In this account, America can be productively “deterritorialized,” an action Eckel repeatedly contrasts to the insistence upon geography visible in the ideologies of manifest destiny and in the expansionist agenda of the literary circle of the so-called Young Americans (65). Once we see literary history in terms of principles rather than place, Eckel implies, the influx of transatlantic energy that constitutes the “Americanness” of these writers becomes clear.

If Fuller, Douglass, and Emerson thus constitute a triad whose political sensibilities emerged in ways similarly oriented to the outrages of slavery and to the principles of freedom, Longfellow – the other writer Eckel reads in terms of his transatlantic politics – mounted a campaign of resistance to literary nationalism on more particularly aesthetic grounds. The chapter on Longfellow opens the book by defending the writer’s much-deprecated didacticism as an aspect of his global reach. Eckel argues, in effect, that Longfellow’s work as professor of modern languages offered him a platform for teaching multilingual cosmopolitanism, and for compiling anthologies of world literatures, as elements of a “progressive curriculum” (20). The animus of that curriculum – as a device to “counteract the insistent territorial expansionism of his literary nationalist peers” – becomes clear in Eckel’s subsequent reading of *Evangeline*. A dispossessed Acadian, *Evangeline* appears most interesting to Longfellow not when wandering across the landscape, but when she halts. At these moments, Eckel proposes,

Longfellow zeroes in upon the emotional terrain of Evangeline's dispossession and, stressing her stasis while drawing out her feelings, delimits geography, movement, and territory as motive forces in the narrative. Longfellow's aestheticized sentimentalism, as much a target for his critics as his didacticism, thus serves the same end as his university teaching and as the transatlantic relays of Fuller, Douglass, and Emerson. The literary history of the United States is best understood, for Eckel, when stripped of the insistently territorial energies of physical boundaries and borders.

Revitalizing Longfellow as a key player in a new, transnational literary history seems enormously promising and important to me, as do Eckel's readings of the global literary vocations of Fuller, Douglass, and Emerson. I am less taken with the book's turn to Greenwood and Whitman as profiteers of the transatlantic, although not because her interpretations appear categorically wrong. On the contrary, they appear too easy, to cast more complex readings – the kinds that anchor the earlier chapters – into the shade. The last third of the book charts an inexorable course toward a depressing conclusion: that more recent literary travelers (Adam Gopnik and Paule Marshall, in particular) have inherited an emphasis on "self-centered transatlanticism," as opposed to social justice, from Greenwood and Whitman's deployment of transatlantic networks of literary criticism to promote their own works. In the chapters on Greenwood and Whitman, the biographical orientation of the book as a whole operates not to support the interpretation of individual texts such as *Evangeline* and *English Traits*, but as its own argument. Here, Eckel focuses on what her subjects *did* – rather than, as in the earlier chapters, on what they *thought* and on how, through transnationalism, they thought it. The dystopian conclusion about the bourgeois texture of more recent travel writing, which for Eckel reverses the "hard-won victory" of political activism achieved through global experience by Douglass and the others, thus concludes the book on the grounds of its less-groundbreaking arguments and methodologies.

I do want to reiterate, in concluding, how the biographical nuance of both *Atlantic Citizens* and *The Cosmopolitan Lyceum* offers readers a

comprehensive picture of an era in which border- and boundary-crossing gave meaning to the American experience. If those boundaries in *The Cosmopolitan Lyceum* are not always national ones, readers will nevertheless encounter a series of figures with impressive capacities for experiment and for adaptation. And if the animus of boundary-crossing in *Atlantic Citizens* shifts a little too abruptly from the political to the promotional, this book generates an important methodology for studying how transnationalism shaped the vocational sensibilities of nineteenth-century writers. Given the content of recent conference proceedings and publications, we have crossed an important boundary of our own in scholarship on the nineteenth-century United States, moving toward a far more comprehensive view of the nation in dialogue with the world. These two volumes exemplify how, a decade into what has been called the “transnational turn,” we are now ideally situated to settle that turn into impressively close scholarship on a wide array of familiar and less-familiar figures – and, most importantly, on the nuances of particular, closely interpreted episodes in the lives of those people.

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