Forum: Conference Debates

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Appearing occasionally as a feature of the Forum, "Conference Debates" summarizes the discussions that emerged at recent controversial conference sessions. Panel participants are invited to submit brief accounts of their positions in the light of the ensuing conversation. Panels for "Conference Debates" are selected by the *PMLA* Editorial Board.

Ethnic Studies in the Age of Transnationalism

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Framing a Forum

The interventions you are about to read are syntheses of longer papers presented at the 2006 MLA forum "Ethnic Studies in the Age of Transnationalism." The organizer of the forum, the MLA Committee on the Literatures of People of Color in the United States and Canada (CLPC), is dedicated to reflecting on and advocating a nonethnocentric conception of literary studies by underlining the cultural and literary legacies of the formerly and currently colonized and neocolonized peoples in the United States and Canada. The committee's work represents four cultural groups: African Americans, Asian Americans, Native or First Peoples, and Latinos/as, all of them long associated with the field of ethnic studies. While these various subfields are often indifferent to one another, the MLA organizes them under a single rubric, which, despite its problems and inexactitudes, has proved intellectually and institutionally productive. Throughout its many active years, the CLPC has carried out projects as varied as framing policies regarding the recruitment and retention of faculty members of color, issuing statements concerning the teaching of Native American languages in colleges and universities, and facilitating public discussions and publications that, from a comparative perspective, address issues of common interest. Moreover, the committee also provides a model for conversations among peoples and academic fields that, despite sharing a history of and a concern for coloniality, seldom think of themselves as having much in common. In this regard, the committee perhaps

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provides a blueprint for broader intellectual alliances that may help upset ethnocentric structures of knowledge still dominant in institutions of higher education.

Of course, the downside of these efforts relates precisely to the problematic notion of the "ethnic": ethnic food, ethnic music, even ethnic shampoos (orange essence for Asians, coconut and pineapple for Hispanics). "Ethnic" is a term that, as is well known, has a long history in anthropology dating back to its colonialist beginnings, and we ought to interrogate it mercilessly while we continue (cunningly?) to rely on it. One can hardly ignore the possibility that ethnic studies, even if not intentionally, may assert the existence of the "nonethnic": that is, the reinscription of "the universal," as well as the dichotomy civilization versus culture. To what extent does ethnic studies help reify, rather than deconstruct, distinctions between self and other, sameness and difference, transcendence and particularity—differences on which the organizational and epistemological principles that structure our institutions rest? And how can we engage in a decolonizing critical practice that would avoid these pitfalls?

The interventions at this forum partly aimed to elucidate these questions by exploring what current shifts toward transnational studies mean for the intellectual future of ethnic studies—a field whose expressions and permutations depend on the region of the United States or Canada where an institution is located—as well as what the analytic place of ethnicity in those shifts is. To frame these interventions, it may be helpful to lay out here some of the ideas and concerns that motivated the CLPC's decision to propose a discussion on ethnic studies in the age of transnationalism at the MLA convention and to underline the issues the committee expected to be addressed at that event.

In the past decade we have witnessed a series of exciting epistemological shifts, springing from traditional area studies and departing from nationally bounded fields, that seem to touch on this conundrum of ethnic studies. These moves (which we can describe as postnational) have been articulated through a series of transgeographic constructs such as Paul Gilroy's notion of the "Black Atlantic," Joseph Roach's concept of the "circum-Atlantic," and the idea of the "circum–Gulf of México" pioneered by Kirsten Silva Gruesz. All these constructs—which in a strict sense are analytic categories rather than self-evident geographies—seem to dislocate and problematize categories of identity that have been so central to ethnic studies by focusing on translocality and by calling attention to processes of displacement, dispersion, and exchange; to the circulation of people, objects, and ideas; and to the new cultural and imaginary territories that these mobilizations effect. Such formulations illuminate flows and polymorph, yet historically situated, mobilities rather than ontological crystallizations. This thinking exemplifies what is understood as the shift toward the transnational.

It could be argued that the emergence of ethnic studies in the United States helped pave the way for a critical examination (so central to transnationalism) of the privileges enjoyed by the nation-state as an unproblematic limit for cultural histories. By bringing to the fore the diverse and often antagonistic components of the national polity, ethnic studies subtly undermined traditional understandings of national culture. In the paradigms of ethnic studies, the nation appears as a conglomerate of dissimilar—and sometimes dissonant—traditions, histories, and cultures, which may intersect with the national but which, in the last instance, are irreducible to it. It is not, then, surprising that some of the most interesting recent examples of transnational literary and historical scholarship, such as Brent Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora* or Mai Ngai's *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, have as points of departure fields connected to ethnic studies (African American and Asian American studies, respectively). Yet, paradoxically, it could also be said that through such an interrogation, the nation has been inscribed once again as a primordial (although a fragmentary and multicultural) landscape of analytic intelligibility. Moreover, despite the fact that many ethnic formations unavoidably invoke transgeographic horizons and filiations—Africa, Asia, or Latin America, for instance—ethnic studies in its most prevalent lines of inquiry has been a matter of United States eth-

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nic heterogeneity, often and inadvertently reelaborating, against the logic of its own critical drive, ideologies of American exceptionalism.

Thus, what challenges does the shift toward transnationalism pose to the disciplinary boundaries of ethnic studies in the United States? Does this shift signal a remarginalization or displacement of the field's concerns, or does it on the contrary indicate a fruitful critical repositioning of ethnicity and a development of the field's unspoken potentials? How are academic transnational reorderings conditioned by ethnicity, and how does a move toward the transnational alter the cognitive and disciplinary maps in which this category has been produced and positioned? Furthermore, insofar as ethnic studies in United States academia has been closely tied to broader political concerns and movements (most salient among them the civil rights movement), the CLPC expected that the forum would explore the politics involved in the shift toward transnationalism. For example, is it relevant to ask if the power asymmetries at work in recent attacks on affirmative action should be placed in conversation with the waning of the ethnic subject, as it was conceived in traditional ethnic studies? Or, what are the connections between economic processes of globalization and the drive toward transnationalism? How are ethnic subjects positioned in these processes, and what epistemological reroutings do such positions enable?

These are some of the questions the committee expected to elucidate at the forum, issues on which the following interventions shed light and that are crucial to the future development or demise of ethnic studies, as well as to a better ethical and political understanding of the shift toward the transnational.

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Native American Critical Responses to Transnational Discourse

My part in the forum was to work through why the transnational as a critical category has been little used among Native American scholars in literary studies. This is more, I argued, than a case of unsophisticated, uncritical revanchists refusing to participate in a broader world of theoretical insight, which is how some seem to see it. Here, as in the forum, I want to explain how a wariness toward ideas like transnationality can be (though certainly isn't necessarily) intellectually defensible and a source of theoretical insight.

The category "transnational" came to literary theory several decades ago by way mainly of Marxist criticism. It describes the movement of capital across, in spite of, and without regard for either national boundaries or international institutions. In this, the transnational supplanted the idea of the international. The best current usages derive from this sense that the focus of critical and political attention has shifted from national and international power to permeable boundaries, political solidarity across borders and identities, and social connections that transcend geography.

Most Native scholars attempt to embrace in their work at least some of these critical pursuits. So why, then, is the paper trail on transnationality among Native American critics so scant? I attribute this relative absence to the uneasy, yet ultimately productive, relation most Native scholars have to the leading theoretical approaches in contemporary literary studies. Exceptions exist, but Native Americans engaged in literary studies have established a practice of keeping various theoretical trends, including the move to transnationality, at a measured intellectual distance in their study of American Indian texts and issues.

A literary example that illustrates this well is also one I hesitate to offer because I risk being read as romanticizing the connection between the work of Native scholarship and the history of resistance in Native communities. In describing the people of the fictional pueblo of Walatowa in his novel *House Made of Dawn*, N. Scott Momaday writes, "They have assumed the names and gestures of their enemies, but have held on to their own, secret souls; and in this there is a resistance and an overcoming, a long outwaiting" (53).

Though Momaday's writing is not usually regarded in this way, I would argue that this passage reveals a strong link to a Native version of nationalism, a term that remains constitutive in much of contemporary Native American studies. Native scholars often make a case for engagement

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