Transamerican Transformations and American Literatures

Continental Divides: Remapping the Cultures of North America
by Rachel Adams
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The "transnational turn" in American Studies is often traced to the early 1990s, when the impact of postcolonial studies and global perspectives was being felt even within the reputedly isolationist realms of American Studies. Seminal pieces such as Carolyn Porter's "What We Know that We Don't Know" and influential essays and collections by Donald Pease, José David Saldívar, Doris Sommer, Amy Kaplan, and John Carlos Rowe, among others, articulated the growing awareness that "America" did not stand by, or even for, itself, even if most scholars in the field (at least in the US) seemed to have assumed so. Decentering the United States in descriptions of "America" has of course been precisely the point of much scholarly and cultural commentary across the Western Hemisphere, at least since the nineteenth century when US domination became increasingly palpable and inescapable. As José Martí famously noted, the American "octopus" was already looming over "*nuestra América*" ("Our America") by the mid 1800s and showed no signs of slowing its drive for economic and political domination of the continent.

Well aware of these historical and political genealogies, Rachel Adams has taken up the baton of comparative American Studies in a lucid and elegant new book. Offering a valuable corrective to some of the already-solidifying archives and habits of thought that have come to characterize the emerging field of study and cultural production focusing on the Americas, Adams's book announces its ambitions in a title that turns out to be impressively precise: *Continental Divides*: *Remapping the Cultures of North America*. There is nothing accidental about either Adams's emphasis on "continent" or the active process of "remapping," and she mines even seemingly static terms such as "cultures" and "North America" for their

significance to a project that works from the outset to set itself apart from the mainstream of Americanist scholarship. As her introduction repeatedly notes, Adams hopes that the frame of the continent of North America will underline how nation-states, their borders, and even the continent itself are imagined places: i.e., the somewhat arbitrary products of a history of contingent and politically charged events and turns. In defamiliarizing the continent as a figure in world mapping (as opposed to perhaps more standard interrogations of the "nation" in American Studies), Adams raises interesting conceptual questions that draw on an influential line of hemispheric thought including Edmundo O'Gorman on "the invention of America" (9) and the "world systems theory" (10) of Anibal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein. In setting up these various threads and sources, the introduction to *Continental Divides* offers a comprehensive overview of transamerican thinking and indicates how the history of such thinking informs the more specific readings that follow.

The nation provides the main target of Adams's announced desire to grant "new centrality to people and places that have been marginalized by official histories of conquest and nation building, thus bringing a new repertoire of texts and subjects into view" (7). Similar interrogations of the nation-state have been, by many estimations, the most transformative angle brought to American studies by transnational approaches. Adams's introduction does an admirable job of explaining how and why her continental frame shifts and critiques the reliance on the nation as the primary rubric of literary and cultural analysis, even as she highlights the neglect given to marginalized national entities—Mexico and Canada, especially in relation to one another—in most critical studies of North America. The overall organization of *Continental Divides* thus involves a series of texts and conceptual questions that highlight the ambivalent status of national borders in North America, where they function as political and affective fictions and/or limits. Adams discusses an array of literary and cultural contexts that in some way span or transgress traditional national borders. These contexts include indigenous contestations of national boundary lines and the regional imaginary of key Native writers in the US and Canada (Chapter One), the critical geographies of fugitive slave narratives written in Mexico as well as the US and Canada (Chapter Two), the perspectives on mainstream "American" literary movements such as modernism and the Beats made possible by a transnational or non-US-based optic (Chapters Three and Four), comparative readings of

detective fiction from the US, Canada, and Mexico (Chapter Five), and, finally, the reorientations of identity terms such as "Latino" required by more comprehensive inclusions of Canadian perspectives (Chapter Six).

The tracing of Cascadia as a Northwest border region that straddles the US and Canada, which Adams juxtaposes with the more expected inclusion of Aztlán (the mythico-political homeland of US Chicanos), exemplifies the book's emphasis on transnational regions and collectivities. It also shows how *Continental Divides* consistently emphasizes Canadian examples and routes of hemispheric exchange and literary output, arguably the book's most important contribution. This shift to the north of the continent offers a welcome intervention in the US-Latin American dyad that too often defines comparative American Studies. Adams also contrasts her methodology of "mapping" (7) and its "consistent investment in place" to more established but "geographically inchoate rubrics such as globalization and diaspora" as well as to nation-based models of American cultural studies. While some readers might protest that a term such as "diaspora" offers a salutary attention to movement absent from optics organized around fixed geographical entities, Adams does explore the transnational nuances (historical, legal, political, and cultural) that would be all too easy to miss while attending to the seemingly more "fixed" locales of a continent. In particular, the book tries to illuminate what Adams calls "counterfactual geographies," or mappings that follow criteria not necessarily encoded in official national maps, treaties, or histories.

As Adams's early chapters on indigenous writers and slave narratives indicate, this perspective highlights the contestations of legal and national discourses by minoritarian or marginalized subjects—often not even citizens—whose relationship to one nation or another is ambiguous and/or ambivalent, as is the case for both Native Americans and slaves at distinct points in US history. These chapters and their subsections contain original and relevant interventions into the disciplinary field imaginaries of even "transamerican" versions of American studies. Adams's close attention to the work of Canadian First Nations author Thomas King and Canadian legal and political structures dealing with indigenous peoples, for example, challenges key assumptions about both border studies and Native American writers and their cultural and national desires. Here and elsewhere, the book highlights the work of several artists and writers who are probably not well known to many readers, including some specialists in the field of

hemispheric American Studies. With its detailed close readings of a variety of texts and authors, *Continental Divides* adds significantly to the archive of comparative American Studies, thereby expanding the go-to options, the emerging canon, of the field.

Chapter One, "Before the Border: Indigenous Geographies of North America," exemplifies the strengths of Adams's approach. In addition to providing an informed introduction and interpretation of King's work and the US-Canadian context of Chippewa history, Adams incisively shows how the 1853 Gasden Purchase (which secured a large chunk of what is now southern Arizona and southwest New Mexico for the US) recast conventional understandings of the relationship between indigeneity and the nation-state. Adams then observes that the contemporary predicament of the Tohono O'odham tribe of Arizona and Sonora, Mexico illustrates that "the problem is not competing national understandings of indigeneity but changing requirements for citizenship and border crossing" (37). Extending this insight to the US-Canada border region and the work of King, Adams argues that many North American Indian groups have experienced this conflict between dominant versions of national territorial sovereignty and questions of land tenure and occupancy predating the colonial nation-state. Her historical documentation and comparative analyses offer fresh information and perspectives on disciplinary and methodological ideas about "border studies" and its relation to Native American contexts, particularly by highlighting alternative legal genealogies that demand wider and more informed readings of law and cultural history.

Adams also addresses the controversies generated by transnational visions like King's and Leslie Marmon Silko's (the other author discussed in Chapter One), authors Adams aligns—correctly, I believe—with Arnold Krupat's "cosmopolitanism," and whose views have been countered by other critics' and writers' calls for more specific tribal/national literary perspectives and representations. Such controversies have erupted in many of the sub-fields of comparative and transnational American studies, so the close attention that Adams gives this quintessentially transnational debate is also generally instructive. Aggregating several of King's novels, Adams notes that he seems to correlate mobility and border crossing with success, favoring itinerant characters as opposed to those who remain "stuck in a place" (41). Thus for King, Adams argues, "the border serves as a vivid national symbol of [indigenous peoples'] confinement, as well as their

marginality in the eyes of the nation-state." Adams here turns the tension between tribal identity and nation-state citizenship that has been central to Native American studies to account for American Studies more generally, while highlighting how the Canadian "border" context diverges in key ways from the questions of militarization and surveillance at the US–Mexico border. In particular, she argues that the Canadian state's neglect "is emblematic of a more general attitude on the part of the Canadian government" in which "abandonment by the Canadian government is etched deep in the very geography of the Bright Water Reserve" (43). She thus contrasts Canadian First Nations' history of starvation and devastating invisibility with the Indian Removal Act and other state-run genocidal policies in the US. This chapter concludes with Adams's reading of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* as a simultaneous critique of border imaginaries and projection of a contemporary pan-indigenous America.

Another powerfully original contribution comes in the second chapter, "Fugitive Geographies," which brings together US, Canadian, and Mexican slave narratives and neo-slave narratives. Here, Adams establishes an original context and a strong argument for further study in transamerican literary and cultural studies. Drawing from Diana Taylor's work, the chapter begins by arguing for an encrypted "performative repertoire of Afro-Mexicans" (62) who escaped slavery in the United States but who were not literate (or did not have literate audiences) like their counterparts who fled north into Canada. These comparisons generate an exciting frame for revisiting representations of US slavery. Adams's conscription of literary fiction into projects of historical re-imagination recalls the influential discussions initiated by Toni Morrison's *Beloved* while also transforming dominant geographical and historical paradigms. Particularly interesting are her twin moves to connect "the borderlands to the Black Atlantic by demonstrating the unacknowledged importance of Mexico to the history of US slavery and black diaspora" (64) and to focus on Canada's role in the transatlantic slave trade.

Other key contributions include Chapter Five on detective fiction that compares US, Mexican, and Canadian examples of this genre, with especially close attention to Mexican *neopoliciaco*. This comparison explores the important literary work being done in Mexican cultural production on the contemporary impact of nation-state institutions, political and legal corruption, and violent histories, thus offering uniquely Mexican perspectives on the current "media event" (particularly in the

United States) of Mexican violence and political unrest. Chapters Three and Four revisit two canonical moments in US American studies—modernism and the Beat era—in order to shift the vantage point from which we understand both. Relocating the cosmopolitan core of twentieth-century modernism to Mexico City, Chapter Three uses the life stories of figures such as Katherine Anne Porter and Tina Modotti to highlight a transamerican genealogy embedded in high modernism. Adams's emphasis on Latin American *indigenismo* and the impact of gender issues and feminism on the careers of her key figures helps to enrich the overall picture of American modernism, though a more critical analysis of the interrelations of these elements might also be useful.

Likewise, the following chapter on Jack Kerouac explores his Canadian heritage as a camouflaged but important element in the genesis of the Beats' rebellious zeitgeist. By linking the Latin American youth-oriented rebellions of La Onda to Canadian sensibilities, and to the Beats' idealization of Mexico as locale of freedom, Adams again emphasizes a north-south traffic of influences and artists throughout the twentieth century. This emphasis on surreptitious circuits of transamerican exchange becomes a key component of Adams's overall argument and intervention. Through these case studies, her work uncovers important but previously unremarked transnational relations of influence and dissemination and underlines a history of hemispheric cultural exchange that often circumvents the United States altogether. The advantages of such decentering also become a key point in the last full chapter on Latino/a writers in Canada. As in the discussions of Kerouac and the Beats, one of the central points in Adams's account of artists working in the "Latino/a Canadian Diaspora" is to challenge the dominance of the United States in both the production and the interpretation of cultural life in the Americas. To explore that possibility in Chapter Six, Adams focuses almost exclusively on the work of Argentine-Canadian author Guillermo Verdeccia and his challenge to given ideas about latinidad (particularly in terms of class and national positionings).

Sometimes the examples Adams uses to illustrate her methodology—Aztlán, tribal identities, modernist cosmopolitan artistic enclaves—recall, for the informed reader of other fields of study, the rather long history of literary and critical work that has been done on similar archives and to similar purposes, even concerning the Americas and North America specifically. Also the dominance of cultural and geographical contexts in

Adams's readings can sometimes provide what feels like a narrow or undertheorized vantage on complex literary and artistic projects—leaving unexplored, for example, the insistent Marxist critiques of Euro-American modernity that pepper Silko's epic text. In this way, the laudatory wide-brush comparative perspective of *Continental Divides* sometimes forecloses the promising potential of individual readings, with the result that the reader misses an argument that goes beyond established ideas in individual fields or that convincingly ties the various archives and examples together in a more incisive overall thesis. For example, Adams ends her first chapter with the somewhat unsurprising claim that for the writers and artists she discusses, the borders of the nation-states of the United States, Canada, and Mexico do not constitute the only or decisive markers of indigenous politics or identity, but that taken together, her examples highlight "the routes and roots established by people who inhabited the land long before the first European arrivals" (59).

But while Adams sometimes seems to elide or gloss over the contributions made in recent years by academic critiques of nation-state configurations and advocates of transnational American methodologies, she does contribute to both the archive and the methodology of what she calls the "production of counterfactual geographies" (3), a project that, she notes, "can be a tactic for challenging received understandings of history and imagining alternative futures." Both amusing and incisive, for example, is her critical use of mainstream perspectives on "mapping" the Americas, particularly her discussion in the introduction of "the burst of cartographic revisionism that took place in the aftermath of the 2004 U.S. presidential election" (6), including television images of "Jesusland" and "The United States of Canada." Adams here gives mainstream media a signficant role in the project of remapping that has dominated academic contestations of American Studies for over two decades now, thereby expanding the archives already put in place by ethnic, postcolonial, Latin American, transnational, feminist, and other scholars.

Adams also alerts her readers to the inevitable ambivalence of national borders and their "limits," while identifying the ways in which such ambivalence can be productive and useful to those minority citizen-subjects with an uneasy or critical relation to the hegemonic nation. Noting that writing *Continental Divides* has "made me aware of the crucial role of culture in *maintaining* national borders and the ongoing salience of the nation for understanding the cultures of North America" (22), Adams de-

votes subsequent chapters to outlining a more specific and less celebratory perspective on transamerican circuits. Particularly when she introduces legal and historical archives that illuminate her key texts, her discussions offer a model of comparative work that adds greatly to the field. If the reader sometimes misses a more sustained theoretical discourse that might give some pattern to the function of both nation and culture in specific literary examples, these occasional omissions are minor in comparison to the book's achievements.

As a whole, *Continental Divides* thus exemplifies the possibilities and the challenges of comparative work when done in the context of North America. It addresses the need for rigorous analyses that can link diverse but historically related contexts and archives to one another, challenging the organizing rubrics and ideas (about history, literature, national identity, transnational connections, the role of artistic production, etc.) that often define what it is to be "American." But the very diversity and necessity of such a wide inclusion can challenge coherent or more meta-level conceptualizations of how these disparate contexts and traditions can be understood together (and how they could be expanded—into Caribbean or Central American contexts, for example). It is to Adams's credit that she emphasizes how a critical perspective on national borders and differences will not produce easily harmonized or unified ideas. Adams insists, quite rightly, that such dissonances and fragmentations of purpose and critique convey important information about borders and identities, be they cultural or national. Nonetheless, these dissonances can also leave the reader seeking a more categorical sense of the terrain being explored by Adams's array of close textual analyses. For example, the chapter on detective fictions explores in detail the work of three specific writers—Rolando Hinojosa (US), Paco Ignacio Taibo III (Mexico), and John Farrow (Canada)—but does not offer much of an overview of how the questions each author addresses (about genre, about national culture, about political and legal justice, etc) might be understood in relation to the projects of the others, or in a more general (national and/or global) context of detective fiction.

That is, while the inclusive and expansive context of *Continental Divides* and its close attention to a number of under-studied but important writers and regional-national contexts are clearly powerful contributions to the field of comparative American Studies, there are times when a

stronger explanation of why and how the continent of North America remains the book's overarching rubric would be helpful. Perhaps I raise this complaint only because with its precise and elegant introduction, clear and accessible writing, and ambitious archive, *Continental Divides* could easily be a key text for teaching at the advanced undergraduate and introductory graduate levels the emerging discipline of transnational American literary and cultural studies. Nevertheless, it's a strong contender for being exactly that important a wide-ranging introduction to this emerging field: *Continental Divides* explores new terrain in American studies and also suggests crucial directions for further theorizing the relations between a transnational comparative frame and the local, particular meanings that emerge within it.