

Roots, Rhizomes, and the Rebirth of Comparison: American Studies after Cosmodernism

I. As is well known, a radical paradigm shift occurs in the humanities around the late 1980s: the turn to cross-disciplinarity. What exactly does this mean? It means, I suppose, different things to different people, but it essentially implies that subjectivity is constructed around “otherness.” This is precisely what cultural studies sets out to uncover: how the subject, *in* literature and other media, is actually put together *across* discourses, in dialogue with discourses other than literary, for example, how the theme of perception and self-perception in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* may occur in a novel but is developed in conjunction, conflict, and overall dialogue with the same theme in a range of contemporary cultural forms and ideological formations from TV news and cereal boxes to historiography and risk analysis. Accordingly, representation obtains at the cross-roads. It is fundamentally liminal. It calls upon us to rethink the limits and categories of discourse, Nietzsche’s columbarium of knowledge, and, as such, is a matter of esthetics, epistemology, as well as politics.

Now, what cultural studies tries to accomplish cross-disciplinarily, American Studies—more precisely, American Literary Studies, my focus here—pursues cross-nationally. Simply put, with cultural studies we move away from “text” to “culture.” With late 20th-century American Literary Studies, we switch from “culture” and “place,” to “cultures” and “places,” from an area study (and a territorial area no less) deployed around one national culture and tradition to a larger and unstable zone where the inquiry object is lodged at the intersection or intersections of

nations, national territories, and their national traditions. This is the era of comparative, trans-nationalist, or, as John Carlos Rowe calls it, “post-nationalist” American Studies, both symptom and academic vehicle of the “global age.” For cultural studies, discursive boundaries are the issue; for “new” American Studies, national—geopolitical—boundaries. Marking out a body of work by following the existing political cartography of the U. S. body politic will no longer do in a discipline where Immanuel Wallerstein’s “world-system” and Manuel Castells’s “network society” are displacing the territorialist paradigm of the nation-state to become the new orienting concepts.

But what exactly is happening? Well, let us see what is happening “inside”—and inside the quotation marks of the term. “Inside,” national literature—to stay with literature as an example—is turning into literatures, with a very large spectrum of “hyphenated” traditions from the already established (African American, Jewish American) to the more recent (Iranian American). We are talking more and more about American literatures; in fact we are talking about Native American literatures. I am using quotation marks to designate what is going on “inside” because the very division inside versus outside has become problematic—more exactly, it has been so all along, but late globalization has made us more aware of it. For instance, “New Southern Studies” tends to tackle the literature of the South as part of a “Global South,” to include the Caribbean, Brazil, and even Western Africa. Likewise, Native American literatures are seized as a hugely diverse continuum for which the southern and northern borders of the U. S. are arbitrary conventions. After Michael North and Paul Gilroy, transatlantic studies centering or not on black literature and culture has found it impossible to confine itself to either side of the pond. Chicana and Chicano writers like Gloria Anzaldúa and Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Japanese Americans such as Karen Tei Yamashita, African Americans like Charles Johnson are among the

many authors who have made borders and their crossings *the* subject matter of their works. In fact, border crossing (by now a cliché) has been such an effective trope of American literature and criticism since the early 1990's that critics like Giles Gunn have come to question the very meaning of border within this continuum where everything has turned into borderland and all zones are or are becoming contact zones.

In any event, to do justice to these works, to read them ethically, one must place them in supra-national contexts, look at how they interface with other traditions—literary no less than religious, political, and so on—and with these traditions' own material contexts. Time and again, contemporary “mainstream” and not so mainstream writers learn—as did writers before them, if less conspicuously and systematically—that their tradition is not one but many and it ties into others, “across the border,” even across continents. A new concept of tradition thus comes to the fore, and getting a grip on it has become a top priority of American Studies. Responding to this urgency, American Studies, American Literary Studies included, in North America and elsewhere, has become, or re-become, comparative. Since the 1990s, American and English literature and culture faculty, English departments in general have been taking on the demanding task of comparative work, picking up, for better or worse, where Comparative Literature departments left off. Of course, it is good or bad that the Heath anthology has replaced the Norton (at least for some of us), it is good or bad that we have made certain “radical” (some would say, over-the-top) canonical and curricular changes and that the politics of hiring has been reflecting these changes—it is good or bad depending on whom you are asking. If you ask me, I will say that we are moving in the right direction. Furthermore, I am pleased to see these changes impacting the study of other national literatures and even other humanities.

What I think this paradigm shift does is bespeak the advent of a still insufficiently articulated, oftentimes still utopian yet definitely expanding *neocosmopolitan ethos* in the world at large. In what follows, I want to spend some time by clearing up this notion. I will do it, first, by turning to an example discussed at length in my 2011 book *Cosmodernism*. This “case study” will then give me an opportunity to cast some light on the new notion of tradition, on a new geometry or topology of cultural lineages, filiations, and affiliations, which, as I have been arguing repeatedly and programmatically in recent years, moves away from “roots” and the “rooted” (tree) model toward a more mobile and complex configuration of the “rhizome” type. The reader will observe, I am not shying away from a certain “utopian” tone—or better put, “aspirational.” Nor is the picture I will paint quite free from broad brushstrokes. But such risky moves come with the territory in more than one way; and this territory is shifting, also in more way than one.

II. *Cosmodernism*, as some readers may be aware, zeroes in on self and other, here and there, inside and outside, culture and community, time and space, especially the time and space of reading under globalization. More broadly, what interests me these days is how these parameters of contemporary life shape, in the U. S. and the larger world, what I call the new “cultural imaginary.” I will come back to this concept a little at the end, but let me tackle it first by way of a discussion of a recent African American novel shaped by this imaginary and implicitly by a notion of cross-cultural, trans-national tradition that, I contend, cannot be dealt with other than supra-nationally and comparatively.

The novel is Alice Randall’s *Pushkin and the Queen of Spades*,¹ which came out in 2004. The plot revolves around African American Vanderbilt professor Windsor Armstrong and her

son, a pro football player named Pushkin X, or “Push.” In this book, Randall builds up the reputation of a “literary meddler”² she earned a few years ago with *The Wind Done Gone*, a polemical and controversial retelling of *Gone with the Wind*. *Pushkin* is equally meddlesome. Among other things, it features a spunky, hip-hop rewriting of Alexander Pushkin’s unfinished story “The Negro of Peter the Great” but only to make a more sympathetic, subtler point. Randall “meddles” with a work and largely speaking with a tradition in which she and her own tradition are inherently “mixed up with,” and here etymology is quite relevant: “meddling” presupposes “being “mixed in”; the “meddler” is in the “mix” already, one of its ingredients.

This is actually the crux of her novel’s entire argument and also that which vindicates Randall’s Pushkin “remix”³: since Pushkin’s great-grandfather was African, the writer is “Afro-Russian” (*Pushkin*, 4), so Randall’s borrowings from and plays on Pushkin are not unwarranted; moreover, they are part of a whole African and African American tradition in its own right, without which black literary and cultural history, in the United States and elsewhere, would be unthinkable—the tradition of Signifyin(g); through Windsor, her fictional alter ego, Randall actually mentions Signifyin(g) as well as its most prominent critic, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and those moments foreground indirectly her Signifyin(g) novel’s “poetics,” how her text operates and comes to be what it is, as well as the novel’s “thematics”—what the text talks about, more precisely, Randall’s cosmopolitan dilemmas and politics of identity. This is how *Pushkin* legitimates itself twice, as form and content. As form, it represents, beginning with its very title, a dialogue with Pushkin. Further—and here we see how form and content are quite inseparable—the intertextual conversation and appropriation are not inappropriate because Pushkin’s life and work embody and speak to multiple identities, unfold both this side and the *other* side of the self/other divide. Pushkin’s African Russianness, the “Africanness” of his

“Russianness,” makes him compatible—albeit not identical—to Pushkin X’, a befitting namesake, a verisimilar “relation.” Randall builds on this plausibility quite ingeniously—again, intertextually—by mining the Russian writer’s biography and *oeuvre* for episodes and texts that, smartly *maneuvered*, throw light on the conflicts and trials in Windsor’s and her son’s lives. Coming full circle, these lives cast light on Pushkin, the not-so-stranger other, and in so doing span the gap between sameness and otherness by reenacting situations and tensions from the Pushkinean biography and bibliography. This does not make Randall’s characters mere footnotes to Pushkin’s. Instead, the other is the magnifying glass through which the novelist puts up a psychologically and culturally authentic drama of identity that plays itself out credibly as it speaks through another’s torments. For not only did the other have African ancestry. Pushkin also had identity anxieties that many African Americans had and have, Randall suggests, so his life and fictions, which have couched these concerns and quandaries in memorable language, have a lesson to teach, a commonality of plight to share, the same uncertainties and tough choices to go and think through—as many reasons Randall’s “meddling” in Pushkin’s texts is neither farfetched nor abusive.

So, deeply steeped in her black heritage as she is, Randall equally thinks and writes “in the margins” of the other’s thoughts, texts, and tradition. But, one more time, her own thinking and writing come both after and before her “source” for they are derivative and original at the same time. Randall may be following Pushkin but—like Windsor, her narrating protagonist, “scholar of Afro-Russianness,” and Pushkin specialist—only to “shelter” in the “shadow of W. E. B. Du Bois” (7). She then goes back to Pushkin and reads him through Du Bois’s racial-cultural theory from *The Souls of Black Folk*, which forefronts a cosmopolitan mindset that in hindsight has proved even more ahead-looking than that embedded overtly in the anticolonial argument of

Color and Democracy forty odd years later.⁴ Thus, she finds in the Russian, first, what Du Bois tells her about the complexity of African American psyche, then, tied into this complexity, a strong cross-racial and cross-cultural proclivity, a unique ability to step across the self/other rift and provide the other with a culturally unique perspective on his own otherness “from the inside”—from the very “insides” or “bowels” of the other’s culture, from what Du Bois calls the “entrails” of this otherness. Here, Pushkin has a lesson to teach his African American readers; his work is deeply “instructive.” It is an act of what Du Bois identifies as anthropological “clairvoyance” to describe his own purchase on the “other” American psyche in his 1920 essay, “The Souls of White Folk.” “Of them” [the white Americans], Du Bois writes,

I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language. Mine is not the knowledge of the traveler or the colonial composite of dear memories, words and wonder. Nor yet is my knowledge that which servants have of masters, or mass of class, or capitalist of artisan. Rather I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. (*Writings*, 923).

Searching into the other’s soul from a positioned of otherness, Du Bois makes out capital truths about the other as well as about the self, “the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century,” as he puts it in the opening of *The Souls of Black Folk* (359). Pushkin has similar insights and, looking into his tormented soul, so does ultimately the Pushkin scholar, who feels that Pushkin has something to say—at once obliquely and straightforwardly, from the advantageous “points of vantage” of Pushkin’s kinship/foreignness—about herself and her son, about being black and white at the dawn of the 21st century no less than across centuries and

continents, life and death, Russianness and Americannes. Du Bois and Pushkin reassure Windsor that the hybrid structure of the Afro-Russian or African American psyche itself is ground for alliances, friendship, and community across all kinds of “Walls” and “Veils” rather than a hurdle, that the inner “split” of racial identity and the famous “double consciousness” presumably anchored in it can heal splits and close gaps outside itself, between here and there, self and other.

I find it instructive that Windsor does not quote Du Bois’s later work on “The Riddle of Russia,” a chapter of *Color and Democracy*,⁵ the more “explicitly” cosmopolitan Du Bois,⁶ but *The Souls of Black Folk*’s chapter “Of the Training of Black Men.” Here, Randall writes, “he concludes, if I remember correctly, ‘I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls’” (*Pushkin*, 7). The quotation (accurate, actually) ends here. But in the original Du Bois goes on to round off his cosmopolitan vision: “From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil.”⁷ The vision is rationally founded on “Truth,” hence the reference to Aristotle. In turn, this truth, the self-evidence of basic human rights, reveals itself transcendently, from a supra-local, non-“cloistral” perspective possible only outside Plato’s cave as people rise up and “soar” above the twice enslaving ground of oppression and ignorance. But Du Bois is not advocating some kind of free-floating, metaphysical rootlessness. His “located” cosmopolitanism censures, rather, the “negative” rootedness that tied the blacks down to Georgia’s “dull red hideousness”⁸ by spawning, on the one hand, the “counter-bond” of bondage outside the self, between self and other, slave and master, and a pseudo-relation within the self, of the self to his or her own self, a false relation because steeped in ignorance, in that

which closes self-knowledge out. Endorsing this cosmopolitan project of overcoming rationally a multiply confining locality without leaving behind the physical place and its people is the author of *Meditations*, a pivotal text in the history of cosmopolitan thought. Like Aristotle, if more eager to listen to “the reason that embraces all things”⁹ and look over the *polis*’s walls, Marcus Aurelius heeds Du Bois’s invitation. “Observe,” Windsor comments on Du Bois’s “summoning” of his cosmopolite friends, “one of the little-recognized habits of the oft-unrecognized African American intellectual—the making of friendships across the chasms of death, particularly the friendship of authors, especially white authors.” “Somehow,” she adds, “friendships with dead white poets and novelists and theologians feel less disloyal than friendships with living ones. I shared with Pushkin [her son] my passion for Emily Dickinson. Have I disclosed that once upon a time I considered Emily to be one of my best friends? Did my love for Emily somehow prepare Pushkin to love Tanya?” (7)

“Clearly, this subject is deranging me” (7), Windsor concludes. What troubles her, and accounts for her ambivalence, is the historical ambivalence of interracial bonds itself, and derived from it, the potential for pain, anguish, and disappointment embedded in friendships across Du Bois’s “Veil.” In other words—Jacques Derrida’s now—a whole “politics of friendship” is in play—and “nags” her—here. In *Politics of Friendship*, the French philosopher turns to the famous section “On Friendship” from Montaigne’s *Essays* to suggest that we can reach out to the other, especially to other writers across time and space, above the chasms of life and death, and thus “make friends,” as it were, in the friend’s absence.¹⁰ For we can “travel in books”—in our friends’ books—as Kwame Anthony Appiah intimates, as we befriend the friends’ texts and, through them, cross over to the other(’s) side while waving the other over to ours. But again, the subject is “irritating,” is political in another sense: if Du Bois’s wedding to

the “Truth” imparted by the cosmopolitan company of Aristotle and Marcus Aurelius warrants Windsor’s love for *Eugene Onegin*’s author, for Dickinson, as well as the less “bookish” relationships with her lovers—the Russian lover’s first name is, like Pushkin’s, Alexander—Windsor’s infatuation with these “others” may have triggered her own son’s love for Tanya, a Russian stripper.

In Tanya, old worries beleaguer Windsor along new ones, and she cannot but feel ambivalent toward her son’s matrimonial designs. Detailing her misgivings about the impending wedding, the novel has been read as “one long apologia from Windsor to her son.”¹¹ Yet nested inside the apologetic rhetoric lies an earnest attempt to come to terms with a conflicting situation outside the limiting context of older miscegenation anxieties, and here the Russian namesake proves helpful again. Pushkin’s life and work, too, Windsor realizes, bespeak this attempt. That is to say, he had been where she is now, in the hot seat of historically justified apprehensions and difficult choices. In her reading, he becomes retroactively her ancestor not only because Pushkin’s name is also an homage to her father—“I was trying to be like my father when I named you Pushkin” (*Pushkin* 103), she tells her son—but also because her problems turn out to be ancestral, old, “unoriginal,” furthermore, issues that he, on *his* side, too, had to deal with, and like those, related to ancestry, to African background and therefore *this* side of Windsor’s inquietudes. But, at the same time, her cosmopolitan ancestor placed himself the others(’) side. *Ruslan and Ludmila*, *Boris Godunov*, and *Tales of Belkin*, which features the famous “Queen of Spades,” had been published before Gogol’s first volume, *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* (1831), and more than one critic has pointed out that if realism, Dostoevsky’s included, came out of Gogol’s “Overcoat,” Russian literature, its genres (poetry, the novel, the short story, drama), its language—Dostoevsky’s, too—sprang out of Pushkin. He “fathered” them all while in his

turn finding inspiration in Byron, which got him the name of “Byron of Russia,” and in “our father Shakespeare,”¹² so much so that he became “the black Shakespeare” (*Pushkin* 203) himself. But he “invents,” as Windsor suspects, not only modern Russia’s language and literature:

No one outside Russia read Russian before Alexander Pushkin. European nobles learned Russian to read Pushkin, to read *Eugene Onegin* and *Boris Godunov*. Later, Hemingway wrote, “First there are the Russians.” . . . Can you imagine the dimensions of [Pushkin’s] mind’s geography? Pushkin had a mind as vast as Russia. Father Pushkin. . . .

Push, does the vastness of you, the immensity of the territory covered by your speed and strength, have anything to do with the vastness of Pushkin’s brain, the vastness of the Siberian plain, the vastness of my body undisciplined?

Why is Pushkin not enough? Pushkin has fed us and clothed us and housed us for many more years than football and far better than most fathers.

Do you remember that his mother’s father’s father was a slave given as a present to Czar Peter the Great? Do you remember that the czar, impressed by the intelligence of the slave, raised him to the nobility and gave him a noble wife? And that wife bore him a son, who was educated in France and in Russia, and that son’s daughter spawned Pushkin? And Pushkin invented the modern Russian language and fell in love and married. But he feared that his wife did not love him. Feared that she could not love his kinky hair, inky skin, and broad nose. He believed that she was unfaithful. He challenged the man he thought was her lover to a duel. Pushkin was shot in the duel and took days to die. (22; 55-56)

Windsor talks to her son about his “namesake” (222), sliding into the writer’s biography, then out of it and into her son’s, draws parallels between the two and plays on their names, fearing that actual, conspicuous similarities might bring about more ominous if less obvious commonalities, in other words, that the black American’s life might rehearse the torments in the black Russian’s. This is the troublesome amphibology of Pushkin’s “invention”: he “invented” not just a whole tradition, Russian no less than American, as Hemingway implies; he also reinvented, both in his life and work, Othello’s plight for the modern era (276-277), picking up where “father Shakespeare” left off and, Windsor worries, passing Othello’s anguish on to his namesake, the football player. With Pushkin, a whole literary culture originates but also a culture of suffering. Bound up in Windsor’s and her son’s background, these cultures are simultaneously enriching and portentous. Pushkin bodes well and ill at the same time, makes up for an inheritance to honor yet hardly for a prophecy to fulfill. Rewriting Pushkin, Randall aims to “correct” his life and fictional narratives of gloom and doom, to recast the Russian genius and his “heir,” Tanya—who comes from his village (6)—in a story of hope thus bound to run, and read, counter to Pushkin’s.

There is, first, the story *in* the story, Randall’s own version of Pushkin’s “The Negro of Peter the Great.” Letting out his racial apprehensions in this unfinished novella, Pushkin, Randall writes, “doubts his own humanity” (107) and worries that the interracial marriage of his protagonist Ibrahim—a character based on Pushkin’s African ancestor, Abraham—might be hurt, as Korsakov, his “confidant” puts it, by Ibrahim’s “passionate, pensive and suspicious nature, . . . flat nose, thick lips, and coarse wool” (Pushkin, *The Poems, Prose and Plays of Alexander Pushkin*, 782). Given racial prejudice, chances are the matrimonial future may only confirm Ibrahim’s station of “a man alone in the world, without birth and kindred, a stranger to

everybody” (778). Randall/Windsor does not hesitate to rewrite the story, “preemptively.” As she tells Push, “I would rewrite God if it would make you feel better” (*Pushkin* 223). Her “audacious” (223) rewrite (228-264), which explicitly works into its verse rendition of the story Pushkin’s own biography, “fixes” the original (222), completing and ending it on a far more encouraging tone. Instead of hoping to “die before the consummation of the odious marriage” (*Pushkin, The Poems, Prose and Plays of Alexander Pushkin*, 786), Natasha “taste[s] eternity” beside her husband Abraham.

Likewise, the broader story, the novel as a whole, revisits critically “The Queen of Spades” to “prevent” Tanya from doing to Push what the game card did to Pushkin’s unfortunate Hermann. The novella “signifies” (187) to Windsor glaringly. As she reads the text, the text reads her own life back to her, “announce[s] the deal life had dealt me,” tells of Pushkin’s romantic hero no less than of Windsor and her family—“Lena was my Queen of Spades; the Queen of Spades was my mother” (187), who, she feels, did not think twice before hurting people. Windsor’s reading does not give much hope: “[“The Queen of Spades”] is the story of a woman who is apparently giving assistance but is in fact sealing doom. A woman who makes relationships to effect damage. Suddenly I knew why I was born. The Queen of Spades signifies secret ill-will. Lena had me to have someone hurt. If my daddy didn’t understand this, Pushkin did” (190). But as the novel progresses, she discovers that neither history nor story, neither Pushkin’s life nor Hermann’s need repeat itself. Therefore, Randall’s story does not “restore” (rehearse) Pushkin’s. In other words, Tanya, fictional “mother” and, before long, actual daughter-in-law, is not a queen of spades—does not mark the meaning of blackness in the dawning of the new millennium, does not bring Push misfortune. Pushkin’s fate—Abraham’s, Ibrahim’s, Othello’s—does not repeat itself in Push’s because Tanya herself proves able to carry

on—“repeat”—Pushkin’s cross-cultural legacy, emulating not the plot of his stories but the generous spirit behind them. It is this kindred spirit that Windsor eventually discovers in her, the rap lover who declines to turn out a gold digger, not a dooming queen of spades but more like a “spade,” and since “spades are black people, people like Spady and me” (187), more like her, equally “audacious” (268) because, Windsor admits, “no longer white” (271). “Pour[ing] blackness in [Tanya’s] ear” (277), Randall’s/Windsor’s manuscript—the “modified” Pushkin—“blackens” Tanya’s mind (271) so that the Russian bride’s decision to read a Countée Cullen poem to her groom during the wedding ceremony no longer seems contrived. Tanya can appreciate, from “inside,” the beauty of the poem as much as she can see Push’s own beauty (269). Windsor is certain that her text “changed” Tanya culturally and racially, modified her racial matrix, but Randall reminds us constantly that the text of race has never been “pure.” Pushkin’s “heir” and invention in more than one sense, Tanya has always been more complicated than Windsor has assumed. And Windsor’s “rewriting” of Tanya into “understanding,” “sympathetic” blackness, no less than the multiple Pushkinean rewrites throughout the novel just reinforce the subtextual and intertextual complications already in play in the “original,” furthermore, end up *rewriting the rewriter herself*. This is possible because Pushkin’s text, the tradition Pushkin represents, already has a cosmopolitan texture, and inscribed into it, the promise of a “profound communion” across traditions and backgrounds. Pushkin reading has already transformed the reader, and the transformation is parallel to Tanya’s, will not happen because it already has: written into the text of identity, like in Pushkin’s own identity and texts, then reinforced by his reading, is already the possibility of crossing over to the other(’s) side and embodying his side, his “version” of being. Says Windsor:

And I will be Russian. I am Russian. It seems to me so clear now how it has come that my own son chose a Russian woman. I fed my soul bites of Pushkin's poetry and prose. When I supped on the syllables of Pushkin, it was a profound communion. When I sipped the syllables of Pushkin, I drank the blood of Mother Russia. In the water and the wine Christ appears. In the water and the wine Christ is present. In the poetry and the prose, in the syllables of the sound, Russia arises from the past, vast and languorous, snow-covered and thawing. When I was small and the world grew too complicated, when I, the daughter of a refugee from Montgomery, Alabama, discovered myself to be exiled from Motown, from Detroit City, discovered myself shipwrecked on the Potomac, when I stopped longing for a home that was lost, destroyed, exploded, . . . when I stopped hearing my own heartbeat, I heard Pushkin. I had Pushkin. It was almost all I had. (272-273)

"Perhaps I am more Russian than you," Windsor confesses to Tanya (273) at the end of this hymnal, recapitulative self-reading of sorts, with Pushkin's work as a magnifying glass through which her life one more time unveils its *other* cohesion and meaning, obtained under the aegis of the other. For, this time around, it is not just a matter of internal coherence, of authentic relation to her self. What Randall highlights is also an enriching relation to other selves, a Whitman-like—no less, she notes, than Langston Hughes-like (280)—cosmopolitan embracing of the world.

III. This dynamic of self and other is what I have been pursuing in my recent work. In *Cosmodernism* and elsewhere, I explain that this project intersects with—and critics, from the

perspective of an ethics of difference—the cosmopolitan revival in the arts and theory for a number reasons. Let me take them one by one.

First, my cosmodern project focuses on what I call the turn-of-the-millennium imaginary obtaining primarily in scenes of cross-cultural reading such as those acted out in Randall.

Second, not only do these scenes engage with the world’s ongoing cosmopolitan dynamic; these scenes recur abundantly and symptomatically across a much larger, virtually global spectrum of discourses and national traditions.

Third, and in conjunction with this scope: I purport to do justice to my object methodologically. In other words, my approach is broadly comparative. Nor can it be otherwise, I think.

Fourth, my “cosmodern” enterprise bears witness, again, critically to the novel cosmopolitanism or neocosmopolitan formations arising against the backdrop of post-Cold War globalization. These formations, the whole “New Cosmopolis” coming on the heels of the “network society,” suggest that since 1989—rather than since the late 15th-century travels, as the partisans of the *longue durée* “world-systems” model would claim—we have entered an epoch of unprecedented interactions, exchanges, and flows of people and material as well as symbolic goods. If modernity and early postmodernity witnessed the rise and fall of empires—of most of them—this “terminal” or protractingly agonistic stage of postmodernity is taking us past the colonial and postcolonial post, into the late-global era. The colonial—with which older cosmopolitanisms were often aligned—and the postcolonial themselves prepared the paradigm shift we are going through right now, although, I hasten to add, there are places where the past tense is not warranted in that neither have all colonies and colonial forms undergone decolonization nor have all empires and imperial propensities become extinct. But, by and large,

we are fast moving away from a geopolitically and geoculturally *disjunctive* model informed by oppositions such as us/them, in here/out there, metropolis/colony, and so forth, a model characteristic of the colonial and early postcolonial moment, toward a *conjunctive* model shaped by cross-cultural, cross-geographical, indeed, world-scale contacts, juxtapositions, interchanges, and barterings.

If modernity's defining cultural venue, imaginary site, and self-defining epistemology were centered around the nation-state and the national tradition of imperial nations and traditions, then of the nations and traditions empires could no longer suppress, recent postmodernity registers the rise and then the quasi generalization of diasporical, transnational, postnational, and, as David Hollinger says, "postethnic" venues, structures, institutions, sodalities, alliances, cultures, and subcultures. These are forms and places of shared emotions and passions, ideas and ideals, texts, representations, and reading models thereof, where people discover themselves in relation to others and other ("not-here" or "not-from-around here") topologies. The modality of life in the new planetary environment is *relationality* and its arena a new, both physical and non-physical, at-a-distance proximity, a culturally woven immediacy with self and other, *hoc* and *nunc*, "my" culture and "your" culture growingly in dialogue, intermingling and giving birth to new configurations or remaining distinct yet more and more mutually dependent because less and less separated by actual distance and effective or effectively enforceable borders. Initially *gemeinschaftliche*, as Ferdinand Tönnies notes, a *community* premised on face-to-face, daily dealings, modernity gradually turned into a more impersonal and "distant" society, *Gesellschaft*. Riding the late-global wave, taking advantage of networks where they exist and creating them where they do not, the new cosmopolitans—travelers, nomads, migrants, pilgrims, NGO and TNC personnel, workers and intellectuals, readers and writers—work, unsystematically as they

may still be, toward a new, *cosmodern togetherness*, toward a new *Mitsein* where face-to-face is again possible, where I can see the other's face more and more clearly, more closely than ever before, and where that is still impossible, another kind of interface may be tried out instead. Thus what an ethical version of the network society may foster as we come closer to one another inside the new proximity is an unforeseen *visibility of the other*, a global *reading matrix* within which we all are legible objects, available to the other's hungry gaze.

Fifth, it is clear that prompted by globalization's "time-space compression," the new world and its cosmodern envisioning or imaginary are equally hindered by it. That is, this novel, worldly visibility of peoples, texts, and cultures, can both help and hurt people, texts, and cultures. For, on the one hand, globalization speeds up and multiplies communication and travel, certainly for some of us more than others, weakens the state and its borders, and so opens up not just economies but also cultures—it opens them up and out onto other cultures, simultaneously creating new, worldwide common themes, concerns, worries, and interests. On the other hand, the global undermines new cosmopolitanism because all too frequently globalization is "allergic," that is, phobic to *allogoi*, to others. It tends to level out the world's cultural field by reducing the other to the same, hence bringing about planetary "homogenization."

In response to this worrisome tendency, my cosmodern argument forefronts what I identify as an *ethics of collegiality* sanctioning the new geo-sociocultural formations in general and, in particular, the readerly encounter between self and other in the reading matrix of the network society. That is to say, like the cosmodern and directly flowing from the structural obligation I have toward the other, this ethics is sometimes a reality and frequently something still to be achieved. Given the homogenizing pressure of global processes, cosmopolitanism, when driven by this ethics, can provide, in its cosmodern form, a counter to globalization, a

critique and an “other” to it. Very briefly, cosmodernism works out this alternative, this new paradigm of human interaction by replacing modernity’s rationality with a moral type of relationality, thus setting the stage for a new, ethical sort of self-other interface. Post-Hegelian scripts of this cultural and epistemological drama time and again give us a picture that above I call “allergic”: in relating to an other, in attempting to know and deal with him or her generally, the Western self threatens to co-opt, assimilate, reduce, rationalize, and thus make him or her fit the self’s preset epistemological mold, theories, patterns, categories, or stereotypes. Drawing from Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida, and others who have thought through the “allergic” quandary of the knower and the known, I suggest that the cosmodern reading scene provides new hope for an ethical dynamic of “us” and “them” in, and often against the grain of, uniformity-inducing globality. In this light, I find helpful especially Levinas’s discussion of the Other’s face and, in conjunction with it, the “conversationalist” theory developed in *Totality and Infinity*. When applied to today’s cross-cultural encounters and to the literary-historical model needed to deal with them, this theory can be particularly illuminating for it helps understand, for instance, why self and other can relate to one another, be in relation, be with each other in the modality of relationality without rationalizing, “colonizing,” and assimilating each other. It is con-versation, not con-version, that is or should be in play here. Grounded in this kind of relationality, cosmodernism comes about not despite the other’s “differential” identity, mores, and values but precisely via them and as a way of honoring them. Dialogue, con-versation, turning your face to your interlocutor become possible and work *because* he or she speaks a language different from yours, wears a skirt, writes from right to left, or drives on the left side of the road. Even if self and other discover what they have in common, as Windsor and her Russian “ancestor” do, they still have to strike up this conversation, face each other in a dialogue across

yet not against what they are not, which is what Windsor and Tanya ultimately manage to accomplish. To put it otherwise: it is this critique of rationality's schemes and predictabilities that prevents this cosmodernism from being old universalism's new hat, another unacknowledgedly local and sectarian extrapolation—that is, a global-age version of classical cosmopolitanism.

Why is this an ethics of collegiality? But first, what is a colleague? To answer, I need to remind us that this ethics comes along and becomes a model, perhaps an ideal model, within the network society's reading matrix. This ethics is an ethics of reading. It alludes to reading and instruction in Jewish and Christian traditions, in which *reading with the other*, being paired up with another, being assigned a *colleague*, has been common practice. In fact, this is what “colleague” means etymologically: a person you “read with,” from the Latin *con-legere*. With time, reading, proximity, and intimacy, reading with and reading next to, interacting with, conversing, close to the other's face and reading it as much as her face is reading her book—all these become one. In the network society's reading matrix, this collegiality is about to become a defining practice and an ethos. Or, if it has not become yet, it strikes me as an ideal worth pursuing.

I would like to offer this collegiality as an ideal blueprint for the cosmodern dynamic, a script for what goes or should go on in the global reading matrix—repeated scenes of reading in which self and other take each other in, represent each other, and try to accommodate each other, driven by history if not by their hearts into each other, “colleagues” reading each other, each other's books and world inescapably together. Stemming from this reading-induced togetherness, their collegiality implies a duty, a law of mutual treatment: *legere* refers to “reading,” *lectura*, as well as to “law,” *lex*. This togetherness cannot be preserved and honored other than through a

certain way, principle, or law of being together, of *Miteinandersein*, which “reads” (“legislates,” stipulates) that reading and by the same token self and other cannot go on, cannot keep reading if, as they interface, as they read each other’s books, see each other’s movies, eat each other’s food, are not careful not to deface each other, not to dis-figure each other’s faces and figures, rhetorics and idioms. In surveying, then, the cosmodern scene of reading and arguing for an apposite critical-historical and comparative model of dealing with it, I also look into a practice of reading and caring: on the one hand, I cast light on how people read with one another, side by side or from different computer terminals, how they read each other, again, in one another’s proximity or from a distance. On the other hand, I also foreground a code of worldly conduct, showing how some of us at least, read “with” others morally and epistemologically, not only next to them spatially but also with them in mind even as we read ourselves.

In her first novel, Randall was anything but Margaret Mitchell’s “colleague.” She is Pushkin’s, though. In turn, he is a colleague, too, whom and with whom she reads, and who becomes the reader’s tradition, rewritten and written into the African American tradition of pain, resistance, and Signifyin(g). In the process, African Americans like Randall and countless others working in—and across—a range of “ethnic” traditions, from Chang-rae Lee to Azar Nafisi to Jhumpa Lahiri, recast the very concept of tradition in a new mold. Traditionally, tradition has been modeled after a sort of *Blut-und-Boden*, blood-and-native soil paradigm. By and large static, unified if not monolithic, “organic” and “growing” according to an unacknowledged, more often than not fictitious teleology, this is tradition as “root,” staple product of and homage to the nation-state. With the new, cosmodern writers, and hopefully with their critics also, we are moving away from the root model toward—well, toward something else. The best analogy I can come up with is the poststructuralist alternative to “root,” that is, the rhizome, as theorized by

Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* and recently recycled by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in *Empire*. For I discern in the rhizome a complex, mobile, and dynamic structure, an intertextuality of traditions and traditional “nodes” calling out to each other, claiming each other, and intermingling—without merging. They do so either at a distance longer than ever before—and this is possible due to new communication technologies—or closer to each other than ever before, more and more locally, as traditions discover themselves “thicker,” more and more heterogeneous, more indebted to others and their traditions. Anthony Giddens and other critics of globalization point to displacement, “disembedding,” and uprooting as prime “consequences of modernity” and major risks Ulrich Beck’s *Risikogesellschaft*—risk society—must deal with. This explains, too, I suppose, Negri and Hardt’s ambivalence toward the rhizome.

As far as I am concerned, not only does this fluid, multi-relational structure of spliced-up, con-versing racial, ethnic, and cultural stories and histories overall account for what happens in Randall’s novel and in a whole range of texts and discourses across media and traditions right now. But it also carries on an older, anti-nationalist, anti-tribal, and anti-parochial resistance to “roots” and their often troublesome paradigm. In his famous 1927 indictment of the *clercs*, a Jewish-French cosmopolitan like Julien Benda lashed out at the intellectuals of the time for not tolerating thought that was not *French*, discourse that did not spring from of the “native soil” of *France*, produced as it was, they thought, by *déracinés* authors.¹³ And, as Guy Scarpetta shows in his own “archeology of rootedness” from *Éloge du cosmopolitisme*, Benda was right to take the rhetorical upsurge of “roots,” “soil,” and “blood” in Maurice Barrès’s time as an ominous sign. And yet Randall does not uproot herself either. This is not what the defining writers, critics, and literary historians of our time—comparatists them all, wittingly or unwittingly—necessarily do or need to do, geographically or culturally. They teach us, instead, how to rethink the root

along rhizomic lines; how to see a multiplicity and heterogeneity, a collage and intertextuality of traditions and places, instead of one tradition and place, talking to each other inside and across each other, inside and outside communities and rhetorics, turning to each with method, curiosity, and empathy. I welcome this complication of tradition, patrimony, and location, and I think that our methodologies must be fine-tuned to it without delay.

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Notes

1. Alice Randall, *Pushkin and the Queen of Spades* (Boston. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).
2. Lizzie Skurnick, “Menace II Russian Society,” *The New York Times Book Review*, May 23, 2004, 8.
3. Skurnick, “Menace II Russian Society,” 8.
4. In his study of contemporary cosmopolitanism, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), Timothy Brennan places W. E. B. Du

Bois's later work in the context of post-World War II cosmopolitanism. I welcome the attempt despite the critic's wrongheaded assessment of the role played by socialism in general and in particular by the defunct Soviet Union, a ruthless empire in its own right, in worldwide decolonization. See *At Home in the World*, 28-31.

5. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Color and Democracy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1945), 114-122.
6. See Brennan's comments on the "Riddle of Russia" chapter of *Color and Democracy* in *At Home in the World*, 30-31.
7. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Writings* (New York: The Library of America), 438.
8. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Writings*, 438.
9. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*. A New Translation, with an Introduction, by Gregor Hays (New York: Random House, 2002), 112.
10. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, translated by George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), 251.
11. Skurnick, "Menace II Russian Society," 8.
12. Lillian Herlands Hornstein et al., eds., *The Reader's Companion to World Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 1984) 436-437.
13. Julien Benda, *The Betrayal of the Intellectuals* (La trahison des clercs), trans. Richard Aldington. Introduction by Herbert Read (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 8.