

**Toward a New Geoliterary Order?
A Critical Agenda for 21st-Century American Literature**

Thank you, Professor Borbély. It's a great a pleasure to be here and speak before you and your colleagues. I might disclose that Professor Borbély suggested I talk about planetarity and literature, and, by and large, I am happy to oblige. I should tell you upfront, though, that, given my subject, my presentation is going to be a tad on the dense side. So thank you for bearing with me.

So: Especially in the wake of the 2016 U. S. Presidential elections, it bears reminding ourselves that a distinct, *world-oriented* geopolitical imaginary informs post-Cold War-era U. S. literature and culture in general and twenty-first-century American fiction in particular. This imaginary underpins the world-picture painted by major U. S. writers of a whole range of backgrounds, from Joseph O'Neill, Colum McCann, Michael Chabon, Chang-rae Lee, Suki Kim, Sahar Delijani, and Jonathan Safran Foer to Junot Díaz, Karen Tei Yamashita, Mohsin Hamid, Yelena Akhtiorskaya, Dave Eggers, Ruth Ozeki, Jhumpa Lahiri, Alexandar Hemon, and Gary Shteyngart. This is the shorter version of a much longer list that also features prose authors who belong to generations different from O'Neill's, authors who are, much like him or Hamid, associated with American literature in non-conventional, sometimes *multi-affiliational* ways, and who, like Don DeLillo, can be said to have illustrated this *worlded imaginary* and to have established themselves during the Cold War already. But even if older and more canonical figures such as DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, Charles Johnson, Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Bharati Mukherjee were not part of

this cluster, the case could be made, as I am here, that the combined, cross-generational output of such writers has reached *critical mass*. Further, the sheer bulk, coherence, cultural-theoretical relevance, and, urgency of this body of work render a number of interrelated questions about how we do our job as critics of American literature quite pressing. Answering them, I suggest, should make up the bulk of Americanists' agenda on the threshold of the third millennium.

Laying out this critical program, however, involves at this juncture formulating more questions than answers. Why is it, for instance, that, for so many contemporary American authors, writing entails, terminological distinctions aside, "earth-," "world-," or "planet-writing," regardless of what else they may be writing about? Put otherwise, why do world geography, geopolitics, and geopolitical borders captivate writers so intensely? More basically still, why are novelists so fascinated by political boundaries, national jurisdictions and territories, and their cartographic representations? How do twenty-first-century American writers themselves map out our worlding world and America's place in it? Where and how do contemporary artists locate their country in this world *and*, vice versa, the world in their country? Furthermore, and most significantly, in asking about a literary "trend," about what seems to emerge as a tendency, symptom, or trait, one also asks implicitly about criticism's ability to pick it up and account for it—about our own critical maps' "sensibility" about it. Therefore, in the prevailingly theoretical considerations that follow, I will dwell on the transforming impact of the expanding *world network society* on post-1989 American letters, mainly fiction but also—and in response to this paradigm shift inside and outside literature—on the need to take stock of our own, critical paradigm and perhaps fine-tune our instruments as critics, literary historians, and theorists to tackle this literary production.

To wrap our minds around these writers' aesthetically configured world ontology, the *metaquestions* implicit in our musings and perplexities about what contemporary U. S. literature does *qua* earth-writing must explicitly ask what contemporary commentators *should do* to catch up so as to make sure their own cartographies of this writing provide accurate descriptions. Thus reformulated, such questions might sound something like this: How are we, critics and literary historians, to orient ourselves on these authors' symbolic maps? How do we deploy our own interpretive topologies as we focus on our time's literature? That is, how do we "place" this aesthetic production? How do we find a place (or places) for it in this world, but also a time (or times)? How do we inscribe this new literature into the traditionally—and territorially—bundled narrative also known, in emphatically nationalistic terms, as *literary history*? In the same vein, what does it mean to have or to reclaim such a history, tradition, or patrimony? And just one such "elucidating" lineage or context? Also, what does it mean to be claimed, to be interpellated by it or them if you are an author—to recognize and affiliate yourself with a literary evolution and its genetic space but also to *be* recognized, categorized in a specific fashion, pressured to belong, minded by audiences and critics in a certain way and thus *placed* willy-nilly in a certain geography of the world and of the mind, located and "handled" physically and intellectually?

That these questions are urgent is an understatement. Today more than ever, a major job of American critics, I argue, is to locate—better yet, to *relocate*—American literature. To paraphrase Homi Bhabha, the problem *vingt ans après* no longer is the location but the relocation of culture—the world relocation of national culture or, as Rebecca Walkowitz recycles Bhabha in the title of a 2006 article, "the location of literature" in the age of "the transnational book. For, we realize now more than Bhabha could have in 1994, literature and culture are less and less where material objects, places, or politics lie in our travel guides, road atlases, and on the world's

political map, where countries are so discretely—so neatly and, yes, so “unaesthetically”—marked out. In fact, and especially as far as national entities go, a physical map and a novel are becoming increasingly *discrepant world cartographies*. It is this geocultural discrepancy, this defining twenty-first-century asymmetry that prompts us to try and *resituate* American fiction, and America through it, in the world, to look, if you will, for a new “situation” for the country, its literature, and those of us keen on belonging to either. Nor is this just the U. S. “situation”: Julian Rubinstein, American author of the superb 2004 docunovel *Ballad of the Whiskey Robber: A True Story of Bank Heists, Ice Hockey, Transylvanian Pelt Smuggling, Moonlighting Detectives, and Broken Hearts*, draws a fictional *and* non-fictional map on which Hungary and Transylvania, and Romania with it, are, at long last, woven into the same geoliterary unit.

Back to the only apparently less contentious, American situation: this is, I propose, a matter of place *and* structure. It does activate the word’s etymology, the Latin *situs*, “position” or “site,” but this site also pertains to the status, state, or stage of American letters today. In this case, too, ontology is a function of topology, as it were: what things are and what they signify to you hinge on where they are physically, where you see them, basically as it may sound. So, no less basically, we might also ask: “*Where* is American literature?” “Where ‘in the world’ is American literature today”? What I am implying—what I am calling for—in posing these questions is an act of *critical geopositioning*. But this is not just something the critic does, a reading decision. This is, once more, what a sizeable segment of late-global-era American literature itself has been undertaking in the first place *and in order to take place*, to come into being, positioning itself in a space that, most notably, no longer coincides with the U. S. territory (if it ever did). The problem is what kind of world positioning—and world behavior—are we to read for and perhaps to encourage in this “deep” or “long” space?

For, even though this worldly inscription, this positioning, is not new, there have been some notable shifts of late in American and other literatures, “big” and “small,” “central” and “peripheral” to the world-system, and these processes point to cultural-spatial changes worth examining. I have been busy over the past couple of years working out a methodology for mapping out this evolving, shape-changing location—a *geomethodology* that comes in handy when one is confronted with what critics have labeled “worlded American literature.” To reiterate, this literature is shaped by a characteristic imaginary or, better still, *geoimaginary*. A way of seeing the contemporary world not so much as one already but as inching gradually, oftentimes inconsistently and violently, toward some kind of unprecedented integration, this *geoimaginary* can be in turn viewed as a pattern of representing individuals, ethno-religious groups, communities, polities, discourse, identity, and the human generally as tied loosely, or more loosely than in the past, to particular, territory-bound formations, principally to nation-states understood institutionally and, especially, territorially. Instrumental to this schema is a characteristic, textual and cultural management of physical distance, which no longer solely keeps apart but also brings together and, as such, is seminal to a new or newly intensified human togetherness. An unstable, culturally and politically still ambiguous synthesis of expansions, contractions, displacements, and relocations of life, capital, information, and affect across space, this novel proximity designates a redeployment as well as an ontological hallmark of humanity, for it both reallocates the human across the world by relocating our whereabouts and shows how the human is, i.e., under which modality we can be said to be in the world. Under the sway of this twin redistribution-redefinition of the human, its culture, and their relation to place, a wholesale planetary remapping of the human has been under way, and to this remapping American writers have responded strongly.

Lagging behind both the world itself and its writers, the world maps currently in use in fields as diverse as politics and literary criticism have, by contrast, lost much of their guiding effectiveness when it comes to orienting us across America, its literature, and culture in the third millennium. This is because the fundamental, in-progress *decoupling* and unorthodox *recoupling* of discourse and place—national location, more precisely—is enacted by literature itself, which both resonates to fresh geolocational reconfigurations and anticipates them. “The republic of [the] imagination,” to quote the title of Azar Nafisi’s latest book, does *not* overlap, geographically and otherwise, with the actual Republic. The map unfolded by the literary imagination, the map of imagined America, is one thing; the territory under internationally recognized U. S. administration, as well as the expanse covered by what we variously identify as U. S. world “presence,” “influence,” “might,” or “empire,” quite another.

So where is American literature, then? To answer, let me begin by calling attention here, as I have elsewhere, to the lexicon of worldliness fast accumulating around our subject matter in the wake of intertwined developments such as the spread of the “one-world”—whether neoliberal or ecocritical—argument, the cognate appeal of Heideggerian ontology’s lingo of “worlding,” and, world-systems analysis in the Immanuel Wallerstein line, and, most consequently, Goethean *Weltliteratur*’s return in, and reinvigoration of, the putatively “dying” discipline of comparative literature as World Literature. This worldly rhetoric has accrued, as I have pointed out repeatedly over recent years, a certain cachet across specialties, discourses, and publication venues. Moreover, not only is the recently minted terminology of U. S. worldliness common in casual conversation, in the popular media, in diplomatic parlance, and in the humanities, but it also points to a commonplace: America’s world presence—material and cultural, military and literary—has amplified in the post-Cold War epoch steadily and

spectacularly. The question, of course, is what the upshots of this “situation” are for America in general and for its literature in particular.

The exceedingly amorphous field of global studies and its disciplinary subsidiaries and partners known as transnational and (neo)cosmopolitan scholarship, (new) comparatism, and (new) World Literature have not ignored this question. And yet, the multiple, often contradictory implications and ramifications of the corporate, political, territorial, military, philanthropic-humanitarian, and literary-cultural being-in-the-world of the United States still evade their pursuers. This is not unexpected. The issue we are facing here, as well as the history behind it, is quite daunting and must be recognized as such in all its complexity. I would insist, in fact, on this recognition, on acknowledging the full gamut of the socioeconomic and cultural factors involved in the reshaping of America, of the world with it and, I hasten to add, of the world *within* it, of the world that has transformed—indeed, worlded—the United States and its society, politics, policies, and cultural practices, be these collective or individual, public or private. This is, actually, a major preoccupation of novelists like O’Neill: the world inside us (U. S.) and what this world stands for, with and after September 11, 2001—a glimpse into the frightening Real, a threat, a fracture, a wound to heal, or an opportunity. For, in the Cold War’s aftermath, more and more Americans demonstrably think, dream, and write in the language of the bigger world that, as President Obama reminded Americans on April 18, 2015, neither ends nor begins at North American shores. *Much like economy proper, literary economy is less and less coextensive with territory.* I submit that this is far clearer now than during the Cold War and truer of the world poiesis, of the “world-building” typical of a lively segment of contemporary, world-minded, world American, or American world literature. At play in some of the best writers of our time from DeLillo and Chang-rae Lee to Lahiri, Hamid, Arthur Phillips, and O’Neill, this geo-rhetoric

of stylistic delimitations and cultural-imaginary *unlimitations* opens up, inventively and provocatively, America and the world individually and to one another, greatly stretching their mutual and transforming reach in time, space, and meaning.

Markers of these new, temporal, spatial, and semiotic extensions are few and far between on our “official” political and critical maps, and this is largely because, as Jacques Derrida would tell us, these maps register separations, supposedly static geopolitical units, and cultural patrimonies rather than the encounters, passages, onto-expressive fluidity, *bricolage*, and relations that give birth to, and sometimes are obscured and obstructed by, said territorial demarcations, differentiations, communal idioms, singularities, and ethno-cultural entities in the first place. However, to be in the world is, today more than ever, a relational proposition. It is to be with, in, or on the way to an elsewhere or to be with an other and to depend on this unstable, fungible, yet culturo-genetic adjacency for your livelihood as a commoner as well as a writer whose education, training, tradition, inspiration, intertextual repertoire, publisher, audience, lay reader, and professional critic are de- and extra-territorialized too, with respect to you *and* themselves, occupying that elsewhere and bodying forth its ethnographic otherness. The challenge here is obvious also, and picking up the gauntlet forces us to pose another set of tough questions: What do we have in mind when we attach the modifier “world” to “American literature” or, conversely, “American” to “world literature”? In what way—internationalist, cosmopolitan (classical or “from below”), ethical, imperialist—is “American” modifying and fashioning the world, and, vice versa, how is the world worlding America? What is the formula, the discursive and cultural protocol of this dynamic? In what sense are the novelists listed at the outset *our* (U. S.) writers? And, if we agree that they are, which are our agreement’s bearings on

the world, on the postcolonial world (still with us? behind us?), on “global Anglophone literature,” and, last but not least, on American literature and its history?

All these questions are important, but the last stands out insofar as it cuts across the others, combining as it does concerns of national territory, sovereignty, citizenship, collectivity, tradition, and the like. Consequently, it is worth dwelling more systematically on what it means to write literary history not only after “the transnational turn in literary studies,” to quote the title of Paul Jay’s 2010 book, but also after such mutation has occurred in the worlding world of the late 1980s. The quick—if not rushed—answer is that this history simply cannot be written any more. Alongside others, I have been advocating, instead, a *comparative approach* to American literature and its history. This approach rests on a reading framework mindful that the tiny, the local, the particular, the one-of-a-kind, or the one so perceived, as well as the seemingly cloistered, isolated, and indigenous *have always been* lodged at the crossroads of the world, and so they are world intersections, overlaps of territories, communities, culture and style patterns. These mark places where paradigms and patrimonies dovetail and mix rather than separate, discretely territorialized sites of human life and expression. But the scope and bearings of dovetailing, the overlaps, the wavelike flux of discourse across statal borders and post-Westphalian territorialities have never been wider and more world-transforming, more de- and re-territorializing than at our moment in history. Therefore, neither the state-sponsored epistemology embedded in traditional literary history nor the institutional territorialization of literature studies, according to the ethno-linguistic-territorial principle, into national literature fields and departments is up to the challenge of the post-Cold War years. This provocation is massive, and it concerns our *critical creativity*; the implication is that critics’ imagination is lagging behind writers’ imagination. At issue here, then, is our ability to reconsider how our

critical gaze constitutes its literary object; how this object aggregates as we scan it; and how its aggregation jibes with extant aggregation units such as those coalescing around practices of faith, labor, finance, and nationhood, where the latter have been, throughout modernity, the most consequential, the most territorializing spatially and cognitively by far.

Complicating the separatedness- or statal paradigm-based model shaped by the center/margin, “in here”/“out there,” our culture/theirs, and other similar *disjunctions* typical of coloniality, postcoloniality, and the earlier stage of multicultural awareness, the critical and literary-historical model I am envisaging and the methodological agenda that might work it out are moving toward a *conjunctive* or *relational* model. This model is informed by cross-cultural, cross-geographical, indeed, world-scale contacts, juxtapositions, and borrowings. Simply speaking, what it all comes down to is a relational dynamic wherein local, seemingly standalone, and autonomous units become more apparently that which they have been, if less extensively and conspicuously, all along: “attachments,” relations, anchors in the elsewhere. This is a transnational dynamic that calls for a comparative approach, specifically, for a de- or, better still, trans-territorialization of literary histories themselves. As appendixes to various national histories and in that still indebted to a nineteenth-century mindset, these histories have been territorialized—have been defined and confined in terms of coverage—on the model of national history, that is, on the model of the nation-state. But the genetic itineraries and living ramifications of culture already extended to, and distinguishable between, the lines of Twain, Thoreau, Melville, Emerson, Whitman—not to say Eliot, Faulkner, Pynchon, DeLillo, Morrison, Díaz, or Charles Johnson—cut across and reach far beyond the U. S. territory, through other countries and continents literally and metaphorically. The last sentence is, of course, a reference to Dimock’s 2007 book, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time*. In

“Scales of Aggregation: Prenational, Subnational, Transnational,” Dimock’s introduction to the 2006 *American Literary History* special-topic issue on new models of historical analysis, and more extensively in *Through Other Continents*, she underscores the “diminished sovereignty of the nation-state” and the bearings of this process on the twentieth-century humanities. Obviously, national borders, jurisdiction, and political leverage continue to exist; states have not fizzled out, and some of them lays worrisome nationalist and imperialist claims. But the way scholars like Dimock map artistic phenomena overlaps less and less with the nation, more precisely, with the nation-state’s territorially paradigmatic identity and imperial ambitions. Thus, competing scales of aggregation—pre-, sub-, and transnational—defy the classical paradigm of national territoriality. In other words, where U. S. literature “is,” where it “comes from,” where it occurs, where it evolves, and, more and more today, where it is disseminated, read, responded to, where “it makes a difference,” and where it may spawn imitations, rejoinders, parodies, perhaps whole fashions and “traditions,” may differ from the geopolitical location and leverage of the American nation. Thoreau, shows Dimock, already was “on three continents.” In Charles Johnson’s novel *Middle Passage* Louisiana is geoculturally closer to West Africa than to Illinois, for this is the kind of network the novelist’s *oeuvre* is—and it is because, in turn, it participates in other, broader webs of text and context, which do not coincide, spatially and otherwise, with U. S. territorial jurisdiction. The same goes, for E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* and German literature: the former is the greatest late twentieth-century response to Heinrich von Kleist and so belongs to German literature and inhabits the German world in no negligible degree and in ways that challenges us to rethink location and to what degree being situated somewhere is bound up with belonging, representativeness, and membership. With writers like Mukherjee, O’Neill, Shteyngart, and Hamid things are getting even more complicated—and more exciting, too.

What this new, cross-territorial, cross-cultural, and cross-linguistic scalarity helps visualize cartographically and appreciate critically is how much these writers and U. S. culture with them—pretty much like any other culture—have borrowed from world cultures and, accordingly, how much of the nation’s cultural fabric consists of patterns, threads, strains, thematic-stylistic investments, and “credit lines” from elsewhere. But this appreciation does not come easy in a critical culture still beholden to what German sociologist Ulrich Beck dubs “methodological nationalism.” In territorializing and thus limiting to statal territoriality the creative-interpretive play and overall domain of literary-cultural and humanistic discourse, the centripetal pressure of the state jars with the actual cross-cultural/cross-territorial scenarios through which this discourse comes into being, grows, spreads, is received, and is mapped by scholars. A serious test of critical instruments designed to do the bidding of national and nationalist epistemologies, this discourse demands from us a radical methodological update. There is no question that most if not all of the younger writers mentioned above remain difficult to pin down, place in series, and read, especially when one does so through nation-state-oriented interpretation procedures. Most disconcerting, for instance, is that reading charts ordinarily pressed into service to gauge a writer’s place in U. S. literature and even his or her “Americanness” do not work in such cases. In many ways, to take up O’Neill one more time, he *is* an American author. His latest novels do “belong” to American literature, and they hardly ignore American issues. But, in his 2014 novel *The Dog* even more than in his 2009 bestseller *Netherland*, the American identity of the writer and of his writings are not couched in terms—plots, narrative structures, settings, cultural habits, or membership rites—a reading informed by the traditional paradigm would spontaneously register as sites and encodings of Americanness. The latter’s thematic, imaginary, and stylistic signifiers abound in O’Neill, but not in locations

and forms in which one would expect them; some of them at least are, thematically and stylistically, elsewhere. What is more, O’Neill himself appears to belong somewhere else. A citizen of Ireland *and* the U. S., he is the author of one of the quintessential post-9/11 American novels—*Netherland* was praised by President Obama himself—incidentally, the other quintessential novel is by *Frenchman* Frédéric Beigbeder. At any rate, O’Neill is a formerly British, now American, writer of Turkish-Irish descent who grew up in the Netherlands and other countries and is currently residing in New York City. “Worlded,” his oeuvre canvasses a zone outside and across the U. S. and other national territories. His characters are cosmopolites at ease in English, Dutch, French, and Urdu. Expats, migrants, and refugees, they call Brooklyn, London, Dubai, and Beirut home, often simultaneously. Their familial, erotic, and professional commitments and fantasies remind one of Friedrich Nietzsche’s “ice-filled streams” overflowing nations’ “banks.” In O’Neill and other writers like him, these yearnings, re-affiliations, and trajectories open up spaces quite distinct from that contoured by the national-territorial definition of the U. S. and its literature. With one word, all these longings and imaginings *territorialize*—situate and map—America and Americanness differently. They re- and trans-territorialize U. S. individual and collective identity by restaging it in conflict with the nation-state’s sociocultural “constrains” and geographic-epistemological jurisdiction. This is how, with O’Neill and writers like him a new, aesthetic sovereignty comes into being during the post-Berlin Wall decades, which are “atomistic” geopolitically *and* epistemologically, foregrounding the nation-state’s deepening crisis as an administrative and intellectual map. This period has witnessed the nation-state’s deepening predicament as a sociopolitical apparatus *and* explanatory grid—as an instrument to manage a community’s affairs in the face of one *transnational* crisis after another and, at the same time, as a master framework for organizing, ordering, and otherwise making

sense of aesthetic and cultural practices whose scope, structure, and meanings lend themselves, similarly, less and less to readings primarily if not exclusively subtended by national and sometimes nationalist categorizations and tropes of sovereignty, territory, community, culture, tradition, and citizenship.

Thus, rising outside, athwart, and sometimes against this ordering agenda of nation-state-beholden modern literary history and criticism is another, *geoliterary order*. Making up the latter is a rapidly swelling cluster of recent fictional narratives that, in U. S. and other literatures, feature plot structures, settings, situations, and characters that, together, build communities, carve out shared spaces, move around, and interact in ways that trace itineraries and map out cultural zones less and less overlapping with or limited to national territories. The life stories told by these novels run along coordinates suggestive of another, fluid geography, of another world configuration of place, passion, and material culture, in which, indeed, Louisiana draws closer to West Africa, as in Johnson, and the Tropic of Cancer and its Mexican landscape cross the Rio Grande, as in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*.

An urgent task of American critics is to map this order and geolocate U. S. literature in it. This order or world-picture has come into being through narrative games with (and against) existing national borders and maps, as well as with national (sometimes nationalist) claims about territorial jurisdiction, authorial identity and belonging, tradition, patrimony, and literary-cultural history. And, because these games have been so instrumental to literature's new geopolitical imagination, they should be a central focus of our scrutiny. To that effect, critics should examine, specifically, how such geoimaginary plays variously entail an "earth-writing" that programmatically rewrites—transgresses, redraws, reimagines, and otherwise plays with—extant political maps, borders, territories, and the nation-state's political, cultural, and epistemological

authority over them; how these cartographic games and the imagination driving them are currently undergirding a whole spectrum of novelistic forms, stylistic patterns, and cultural themes; and how the literature coalescing around such forms, patterns, and themes calls for a systematic approach; how this approach, as noted earlier, has been hindered by the crisis of statal jurisdiction in matters economic and political as well as aesthetic, cognitive, institutional, and so on; how the new cartographic imagination calls for a reading model that encourages a new way of thinking about classifying literary texts and their authors, as well as about how we do (American) literary history; how and why reading charts ordinarily pressed into service to gauge a writer's place in U. S. literature and even his or her "Americanness" fail to work in such cases; how the lives of both fictional characters and their authors (O'Neill, Hamid, McCann, Hemon, Akhtiorskaya, and countless others) are marked, on the one hand, by "atomizing" phenomena of disintegration and disaffiliation from national polities, traditions, and citizenship conventionally defined and, on the other hand, by integrations into supra- and trans-national sodalities, institutional assemblages, associations, and places where multiple and frequently conflicting affiliations come into play; how, accordingly, the entire issue of authorship, of an author's identity, residence, political allegiance, citizenship, and so forth would have to be reconceptualized so as to be brought in line with geopolitical and geolocational processes that scatter more and more American authors across the world while bringing the world into their books. Thank you.