



COSMOPOLITANISM, TRANSLOCALITY, ASTRONOETICS

A Multi-Local Vantage Viewpoint
(Introduction)

The world in which we live is crisscrossed by multiple flows of people, information, non-human life, travel circuits and goods. At least since the 16th century, the Americas have received and generated new social, cultural and product trends. As we see through the case studies presented here, modern literature and dance, the industrialization of food and the space race cannot be historicized without considering the role the Americas, and particularly the United States, have played in all of them. We also see, at the same time, how these flows of thought, art, science and products emerged from sources outside the Americas to then take root in and beyond the United States. The authors in this volume of *RIAS* devise conceptual tools to analyze this multiplicity across continents and also at the level of particular nations and localities. Concepts such as cosmopolitanism, translocality and astronoetics shed light on these complex intersections, giving us new ways to look at the intricacy of these distance-crossing flows. India, perhaps surprisingly, emerges as an important cultural interlocutor, beginning with the idealized, imagined versions of Indian spirituality that fueled the romanticism of the New England Transcendentalists, to the importance of Indian dance pioneers in the world stage during the first part of the twentieth century and the current importance of India as a player in the race to space.

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This issue of *RIAS* is based on the notion that, as people say in Spanish, “el mundo es un pañuelo” (“the world is a handkerchief”). This saying alludes to the fact that the world is crisscrossed by relations between people and between ideas, and everyone is connected to everyone else around the world through a few people in between. Thinking this way, it would be very difficult to isolate what is precisely ‘American,’ what is ‘European’ or ‘Asian’ in our world today. What we see here in all the essays is that ideas underpinning the same type of cultural development have been similar around the world through the decades because of the constant movement of people, things and ideas. From the articles collected here we see that it was as early as in the 1800s that many cultural movements were already based on general tenets that trespassed local, regional and national borders—and that they developed at an increasingly rapid pace. During the 1800s and the 1900s what we have come to take for granted as dance, literature, sciences, and even ‘outer space’ were in the process of being consolidated as recognizable fields of human endeavor. This happened, as the papers here show, out of a cross-fertilization among different realms of human life, and across continents. The Americas are now integral part of everywhere and, just as much, literally *everywhere*, in the form of people, animals, viruses, cultures, and even soils and sands coming in, has found its way and made its home in the Americas.

The order of the feature articles in the issue follows the internal chronology of their narratives, starting with the times of the New England Transcendentalist movement and ending with current events related to the race for space in Mexico. In reading the papers sequentially we see how each of these broad cultural movements related, sometimes in surprising ways, to later cultural movements at apparently remote locations. What the stories told here have in common is that their protagonists took the entire world (the planet and even “the cosmos”) as their unit of thought and action. They all felt and some of them still feel connected to other people in many nations, and perhaps to beings outside our planet. The New England Transcendentalists’ cosmopolitanism and ideas of “planetary conviviality,” associated with romantic

*One World
The Americas
Everywhere*

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modernity already presented us with scenarios of conceptual fluidity and transnational breadth. While cosmopolitanism is here one of the categories of analysis, related to the Transcendentalist movement, this issue of *RIAS* also offers articles inquiring into translocality and cosmopolitics, concepts which could have resonated easily with the Transcendentalist movement led by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau (Brodrick).

As a philosophy, American transcendentalism, discussed in Albená Bakratheva's article, emerged in New England during the first half of the 1800s. It coalesced into a group of people that held periodic meetings and between 1840 and 1848 published their own journal, *The Dial*. This philosophical movement was based on the ideas that people, including men and women of all colors and places in society, should be seen as individuals, who were able and should strive toward changing their own destiny, nature was unitary, and humans were part of it. Also, the human ways of knowing went beyond the senses, and in this sense transcended the things we could perceive directly. The New England Transcendentalists proposed that nature, including humans, were sources of power and authority; humans could and should build their own world. All humans had it in themselves to strive for a better life and a better world. Because of this, the Transcendentalists were part of the anti-slavery and women's equality movements, and founders of an early commune. Their ideas were as much influenced by European as by Asian philosophies, and by American Unitarianism. The latter was a religious philosophy that considered the divine as unitary, and not a trinity as in Catholicism. The Transcendentalists extended this idea to conceive of all nature, including human beings, as unitary. Their philosophy, the Transcendentalists thought, could help usher "planetary conviviality" (Goodman 2019; Walls 2012).

Gabriela Vargas-Cetina and Manpreet Kaur Kang, the authors of the articles on the modern dance scene and on Bharatanatyam, dwell on the modern and neotraditional dance movement of the end of the first half of the twentieth century. This movement, which started to coalesce at the end of the 1880s, was driven by a search for beauty, harmony and romanticism. Transcendentalist ideas were part of its conceptual toolbox. Important

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figures who helped consolidate dance as a worthy spectacle fit for world stages, in Europe and the Americas, included Isadora Duncan, Rabindranath Tagore, Ruth St. Denis, Uday Shankar and Leila Roy. Isadora Duncan believed that she was a “spiritual daughter” of Walt Whitman, one of the poets most influenced by the New England Transcendentalists. Ruth St. Denis, in turn, often found in Ralph Waldo Emerson inspiration for her thoughts and choreographies (Shelton 1981: 97). Important figures of ballet, such as Mikhail Fokine, Anna Pavlova and Vaslav Nijinsky also contributed to the consolidation of modern dance, as we can glean from the autobiographies and biographies of the early modern dancers (Duncan 2013; Krasovskaya 2017; menaka-archive; Shelton 1981). The new styles of dance generated new ideas and dance techniques by delving into the local art styles around the world, drawing from philosophical concepts and views, and developing systematized steps, step combinations and performance formats modelled after classical ballet.

It is easy to see the attraction that Transcendentalism, among other philosophical traditions, held for the modern dancers around the world: many of the new figures of modern and neotraditional dance were women, at a time when world affairs were almost completely dominated by men, and they all were out to make their own destiny. Also, they all looked for inspiration and emotional sustenance to forms of spirituality, which they believed infused dance in general and their own dance in particular.

A different aspect of translocality is analyzed by Steffan Igor Ayora-Díaz, who demonstrates that the industrialization of food that accelerated around the world in earnest during the twentieth century went along the industrialization of the most productive processes in culture. Sea travel first and then air travel helped greatly to make industrially-processed edibles available far and wide. Ideas of modernity, convenience, portability, longer shelf life and urban sophistication, all ably advanced by commercial advertisement, helped convince consumers to accept them. They have now entered household pantries everywhere, generating new ways of thinking surrounding cooking, availability and economic affordability. In cans, jars and plastic containers, packaged food has generated new dishes, but it has also allowed local special-

ties to reach new consumers in places very far from those where the products originated. Also, the animals and plants are now grown in industrially organized and run establishments, so that today's diet resembles little the fare of pre-industrial times (Oddy and Drouard 2013).

The race to space, which Anne Warren Johnson approaches here through its national repercussions in Mexico, originally took place between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). However, it soon enticed many other nations within the then 'Eastern' and 'Western'-aligned countries to join in the exploration and possible commercial exploitation of space. There is no question that both 'East' and 'West' were looking at each other, trying to either steal or buy secrets related to their space programs and in general conducting space-related research. The groups of scientists on both sides of the world had full knowledge and awareness of each other, and for a long time there were only two nations monopolizing the production of technical knowledge directly related to outer space. It is obvious, however, that the bases of knowledge underlying the mathematics, physics and engineering that made space travel possible were shared by scientists around the world, but they had to be put together in particular ways for the launching of spaceships to be possible.

Recently, the fact of a widely shared basis of knowledge on which space-related technology had to be built was mockingly explored by film director Ziga Virč. His 'docufictional' movie *Houston, We Have a Problem* (2016) proposed the existence of a Yugoslav space program that at the end of the 1950s would have predated the North American Space Agency's efforts to send astronauts to outer space. Today we have international treaties regarding outer space exploration and possible exploitation, other nations besides the United States and Russia are sending human-operated vehicles into space and working in space stations, and our lives would be very different without the many satellites providing us with digital communications.

The New England Transcendentalist movement, the modern dance movement, the Indian classical dance movement, the industrialization of food, and the race to outer space all resulted from the process of what David Harvey has called "time-space com-

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pression” (1989). When the Spaniards began their colonization of the New World, it took months to cross the Atlantic Ocean. During the 1800s, however, the world saw an increased frequency of transatlantic ocean travel and, in the first half of the twentieth century, the proliferation of trains, automobiles, ferries, yachts, and other small watercraft made it possible for people, books, and ideas to travel around the world with relative ease and increased speed compared with previous times. More recently, we have seen the COVID-19 pandemic spread in a matter of weeks from China to all countries of the world. Viruses and diseases also became highly mobile, accompanying people, animals, plants and even the moving vehicles themselves.

The new ease of travel has resulted in novel ways of thinking and finding oneself in the world. Gender, religion, society, science and art were refigured as realms of thought and human praxis. Romantic nationalism, a philosophy that tried to find the national roots was, at the same time, nationalistic and cosmopolitan: it sought to find the “true essence” of the nation in local folk knowledge and art, while using the tools of international academia and art. Also, it sought to find the nations’ borders in the knowledge of each nation being one among many such others.

INDIAN CONNECTIONS

As Said remarked, “The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture” (1978: 9), and India has been one of the main sources of the imaginaries of The Orient in the Americas and Europe. Transcendentalism, which is described by David Boersema as “the first of several major traditions to characterize philosophical thought in [the United States of] America’s first full century as a nation” drew on European and Asian thought. Indian sources were highly present in their work, including the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita. Writing about Emerson and the Transcendentalists, Riepe says that the Transcendentalists of New England were the first group in the United States that paid close attention to Indian thought, which Riepe thinks was attractive to them because it was deep but not gloomy (1967: 116).

Also, there is no question that the contribution of Indian dance stars and perhaps especially of the writer, philosopher and dancer

Rabindranath Tagore was important for the emergence and consolidation of modern and neoclassical dance. Tagore's prestige was firmly established by his being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Artists in the Americas and Europe looked up to him because of his ideas of spirituality, which dovetailed with and was perhaps infused with Transcendentalist ideas and with the belief that art was as important as science in helping humans develop fully. Tagore met with many internationally famous figures during his life, including world leaders, scientists, academics and artists. He made a point of meeting and learning from artists wherever he went, and of sending his collaborators to investigate the arts throughout India and in faraway places in order to improve and widen the curricula at his education institutions in Bengal (Banerjee 2011; Haq 2010; O'Connell 2010).

India has been an important region for the emergence and consolidation of processed foods of commercial value at least since the invention of sugar balls, possibly in what today is the region of Bengal, sometime before 500 A.D. (Mintz 1985: 23). Furthermore, as Keay shows, spices, many of which had to be obtained either from within India or through India, were a major justification for the transatlantic voyages that resulted in the European colonization of the Americas (2008). The road from the constitution of modern diets, which probably started in the Renaissance, has been long and difficult. Ayora-Díaz points out in his contribution to this collection that food items of different types may appear side by side on our tables, but they all rest on unequal power relations. In the case of sugar, this has been extreme, since up to the second half of the 1800s much of its cultivation relied on slaves, most of whom were of African ancestry. As Andrea Stuart put it in her review of Abbott's book on the history of sugar, this sweetener was the first super-commodity, and "It was one of the building blocks of the British Empire, silting up vast colonial wealth [...]" (2010). Dalby, in turn, reminds us that the taste for spices has always been dangerous, for those who develop a craving, but perhaps even more so for those who then become the often forced providers of each spice. The 'conquest' of the Americas shows how dangerous the taste for Asian, and particularly Indian, spices became,

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in the end, for people who, before the year 1400, had no contact with such European cravings.

The industrialization of food has changed forever our ways of eating and tasting, but it also has had important repercussions regarding work, labor and capital accumulation. Interestingly, sugar and many of those spices that Europeans were seeking to obtain through the Indian Spice Trade Circuits when they came upon the Americas, continue to be featured prominently in processed food around the world. This includes the food industrialized in Yucatán by Yucatecans. These themes are beyond the scope of Ayora-Díaz' paper or this issue of *RIAS*, but they should be kept in mind when thinking about food everywhere.

Regarding the ongoing space race, India has been a full competitor since the 1960s. The Indian National Committee for Space Research, founded in 1962, which became the Indian Space Research Organization in 1969, is one of the six most important participants in the exploration of space. As Anne Johnson points out in her article, India is one of the few nations which have launching capabilities. The ISRO website lists 101 spacecraft missions, of which 72 have been launch missions. Space-related research today has India as one of its main referents.

Through concepts ranging from cosmopolitanism to translocality and astronoetics, the articles in this collection reflect on the criss-crossing relations between realms of human life, as industry, commerce, culture and imagination came and continue to come together in philosophy, literature, dance, gastronomy and dreams of space travel. They also show how, during the 1800s and 1900s, personal and commercial relations contributed to make the world in which we now live one of intricate, multiple connections. From this observation angle of shifting multiplicities, the Americas were as much a place where things were and are being created, as a place that resonates with ideas, culture and things coming from elsewhere, especially Europe and, in these particular examples, India. We hope that through the articles included in the "Features" section of this issue, we are contributing to American Studies through a multi-angled and multilayered perspective.

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