Reimagining the heart of American literature

Professor Paul Giles describes the trajectory of his research into the international interconnections that helped to frame classic American writing, from which he challenges the arbitrariness of institutional arrangements as well as conventional delineations of culture in nationalistic terms.

What inspired you to study American literature?

When I completed my first degree in English at Oxford University in the late 1970s, the curriculum, from Chaucer to Ted Hughes, consisted almost entirely of works written by white men. I was uncomfortable with the assumptions of this conservative tradition, in part, because my Irish Catholic background meant that I could not readily subscribe to its implicit values of an Anglican ‘golden mean’ – the middle ground between religious authority and individual liberty. American literature offered a radically different perspective. Oxford’s optional final year paper on this subject gave me the opportunity to experience my first sustained encounter with American authors.

Could you briefly outline the overarching objectives of your research?

My research typically involves reconsidering academic subjects from unorthodox positions, thereby suggesting how certain kinds of institutional norms have become established in conventional approaches to cultural topics. My early work interrogated American literature from transatlantic perspectives, examining the New York poet Hart Crane in the light of European surrealism and then rereading the broader trajectory of American literature in relation to cultural Catholicism, rather than (as in most US scholarship) the legacy of Puritanism.

Can you explain transnationalism as a method of enquiry?

Transnationalism involves a conceptual juxtaposition of national narratives with the forces that cut across them, and so focuses upon those discursive areas where the national encounters the global. In earlier centuries, transnational encounters frequently involved the circulation of religion and trade across oceanic space in ways that disrupted the protectionist borders, which upheld the home-grown status quo. Today, we see all kinds of controversy, in Australia and elsewhere, about the impact of globalisation on the national way of life, not only in relation to literature and culture but also Internet sales, sports team ownership, the availability of pharmaceuticals, newspapers and so on.

How does transnational scholarship differ from more traditional ways of studying American literature?

Transnational scholarship has opened up ways to study how America has been traversed by cultural influences from elsewhere. In my recent book, *Antipodean America*, for example, I examined how the image of Australia has been a constant spectre throughout American literary culture, implying the kind of country that the United States might have become if its revolution against Britain in the 1780s had not happened. Transnational scholarship thus explores how American literature does not just involve stories of immigration and assimilation, but also bilateral movement, with writers moving backwards and forwards between different locations, literally or figuratively.

By examining how and why certain authors become part of an educational ‘canon’, transnationalism casts a quizzical eye on how discursive networks construct and consolidate their regimes of power across a variety of social and political locations. Unlike the Marxist model of opposition to capitalist development, transnationalism tends to be more neutral in tone. It aims to reconceptualise these global dynamics through an alien, analytical eye, rather than seeking to implement any specific programme to amend them.

Is globalisation impacting American studies?

This is a difficult area, because while Americans like hearing accounts of their own influence overseas, they are usually not so keen to acknowledge how global forces impact reciprocally upon their own domestic circumstances. Nevertheless, as electronic communications develop further, American Studies in the 21st Century finds itself needing to pay more attention to how American goods interface with other parts of the planet. ‘America’ may no longer be synonymous with its own geographical borders; instead, it acts as a global signifier for transnational corporations such as Apple or Amazon. This can bring about all kinds of frictions, both within and between nations. It is precisely such points of stress that transnational American studies seek to illuminate.

To what extent is American literature linked with other English language-based writing?

American literature has always been symbiotically intertwined with other literatures in English. The first American poets of the 17th Century were religious reformers who exiled themselves from England. In my book *Atlantic Republic*, I looked at how the example of US political independence shaped the work of a wide range of British writers, from Richard Price in the 18th Century to Byron in the 19th and Isherwood in the 20th. What is odd, however, is how little such transnational engagements have entered into official accounts of national literatures.
The myth of great American writing

Research at the University of Sydney is examining American literature using a transnational lens and reinterpreting American writing in the light of colonial legacies, marginalised historical events and 21st Century globalisation.

ACROSS THE WORLD, educational institutions treat the national identity of authors as a framework for education, offering courses specifically tuned into African, American, Australian, English or Irish literature, alongside the usual English language programmes. Yet literature written in English has a long history of internationalisation, in terms of the cross-cultural richness of its narrative. Through colonisation and migration, English-speaking diasporas and ‘new worlds’ have spanned the globe. Consequently, literary themes such as displacement, exile and the redefinition of identity are characteristic markers of postcolonialism and internationalisation, and they permeate even the most established of national literatures.

Dr Paul Giles, the Challis Professor of English at the University of Sydney, explores the conventions that underlie nationalistic agendas to study culture. Applying a transnational approach to literary writing, his analyses highlight what he calls the ‘pedagogical clichés’ that bolster the teaching of literature along nationalistic lines, particularly in the popular academic realm of American Studies. Giles’ work shows how American and other Anglophone nations’ cultural histories have impacted on one another for centuries; they have always been so closely interconnected that attempts to demarcate their individual boundaries can be seen not only as counterproductive, but as a form of arbitrary intellectual protectionism designed to simplify their conceptualisation and analysis.

TRANSNATIONALISM AS A MEANS OF INVESTIGATION

Giles sees transnationalism as a different methodology to comparative literature. Rather than seeking simply to transcend national borders, it uncovers implicit assumptions and ideologies that form a particular national identity by investigating literature from an international perspective. He also believes that for transnationalism to render real value, literary and cultural analyses should pay particular attention to the tensions that emerge when the national and the international meet or when aesthetics and social practices collide in uncomfortable ways. In this way, the definition of what lies ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ any given national space becomes creatively confused.

In his 2011 book The Global Remapping of American Literature, for example, Giles explores the shifting nature of American writing, contextualising it within the constantly changing environment of politics, events and culture in the 300-year history of America – from the moral works of 17th Century Puritan minister Cotton Mather to contemporary novelist William Gibson’s speculative science fiction. Giles pinpoints the establishment of American literature as a nationalist construct as a by-product of the US Civil War, shows how this only changed after the election of Ronald Reagan, and discusses how it is now evolving in different directions under the impact of globalisation in the 21st Century. In this way, he argues that American literature as a nationalist phenomenon enjoyed only a relatively limited lifespan, from the 1860s to the 1980s.

CHALLENGING US EXCEPTIONALISM

Tolerance, inclusiveness, diversity and multiculturalism are touted in American Studies courses, which now sometimes include works written in the languages of immigrant populations. However, inequality, enmity and conflict are longstanding forces that have
consistently generated tensions throughout American history, and they work against the utopian impulse of such communities. When Giles applies his transnational perspective to illuminate the postcolonial strain in American literature, he uncovers how authority and power have shifted over time and space in response to such intercultural connections at home. He relates these developments to events in America’s political history, such as the country’s independence from the British Empire.

However, especially in studies of early American literature, Giles has uncovered a reluctance to acknowledge the consequences of European immigration. Postcolonial tensions are so evident in some of the most powerful American writings – even those published within the last century – that to ignore them amounts to a deliberate airbrushing of America’s past. Giles argues that a transnational methodology addresses these issues and entertains the idea that America is not exempt from characterisation as a postcolonial entity, one shaped by its continuing disengagement from British imperial power. “Transnational scholarship has helped to redefine American literature (and other national literatures) as turning on a global axis, engaged in two-way conversations with the rest of the world,” he says. “This has undermined the rhetoric of exceptionalism that informed traditional US scholarship, where America was regarded as inherently different from other cultures.”

**ANTIPODEAN INFLUENCES ON AMERICAN WRITING**

Antipodean America: Australasia, Colonialism, and the Constitution of US Literature is Giles’ latest book and is a thorough review of how Australia and New Zealand have shaped American writing since the 18th Century. In this publication, Giles discusses how influences from these countries have infused the work of classic American authors like Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville and Edgar Allen Poe. He also addresses how colonial ventures impacted the writings of Enlightenment figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Victorians such as Mark Twain, and how global forces of racialism, socialism and warfare have helped to shape American writing.

Additionally, Giles reveals how the newly independent America feared that the establishment of a new British-Australian colony in the 18th Century would undermine its standing and influence in the Pacific region. Indeed, he argues that old inter-colony envy still resonates in the American consciousness.

**CROSSING TIME AS WELL AS SPACE**

Giles regrets that teachers and students of American Studies still appear to harbour romantic fantasies about what American culture means, citing the recent resurgence of interest in the ‘beat’ novels and poetry of the post-World War II era, when being young in America appeared to offer a vision of freedom from repression and want. Additionally, he notes that the pervasiveness of American culture, products and services today ought not to escape the attention of the brightest students in their understanding of American literature and culture, since they penetrate into most aspects of modern life. Rather than seeing America as a distant utopian horizon as it came to appear in the 1950s, he argues, today’s students witness American influences in every aspect of the media world that they inhabit on an everyday basis.

He also believes that for transnationalism to render real value, literary and cultural analyses should pay particular attention to the tensions that emerge when the national and the international meet or when aesthetics and social practices collide in uncomfortable ways.

Giles is now extending his essentially geographically focused review at the intersections of American and other cultures with a study that he describes as ‘crosstemporal’: “I am exploring how American conceptions of time – often inflected by an individualistic confidence in a better future, or by a millenarian vision of a redemptive apocalypse – differ from the temporal understandings internalised within other cultures,” he explains. “This involves thinking about how various forms of a temporal unconscious manifest themselves across different national cultures and historical periods.”