

Reflection on 2013 Hughes/Robbins Transatlantic Seminar:

Cooperative Literature and Transatlantic Discoveries

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Prior to beginning my courses at TCU, I mentally categorized literature in separate compartments. My experience with Spanish literature belonged in one area of my head, my interest in British literature embodied another place, and American literature had its own nook. I knew these literatures could share similar elements, but I never thought about how they might engage with one another. My fragmented approach to literature almost immediately changed after I read “On Not Knowing Any Better” by Susan M. Griffin. I can refer to the exact line that granted me permission to read literature transatlantically, for Griffin notes that she “suggested that reading American novelists through their British literary mothers would allow us to perceive classic American texts in new ways.” Griffin’s statement encourages me to build relationships among literatures that I once viewed as separate entities. However, as a new student of transatlanticism, initially, I was not sure how to begin my adventures in making international literary connections.

Quite honestly, I did not make a genuine transatlantic association until I read Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* along with Henrietta O. Barnett’s “THE BEGINNING OF TOYNBEE HALL” and excerpts from *Twenty Years at Hull House* by Jane Addams. I had always read *Hard Times* as a novel that details the harsh lives of English mill workers and the sad childhood of the Gradgrind siblings. I wondered how Stephen Blackpool and the Gradgrinds could possibly correlate with the special friendship that Barnett and Addams shared. I could not fathom how cooperative living arrangements would relate with *Hard Times*. Unbeknownst to me, I was reading more than just a Dickensian plotline and stories of charitable deeds. I was learning about difficult social conditions on both sides of the Atlantic. Addams, Barnett, and Dickens promoted a common goal: social progress. I did not fully realize the cooperative nature of these transatlantic writings until I thought about the role of the circus in *Hard Times*. I noticed that the circus performers are migratory, value human relationships, and maintain a supportive community. As I read details from Addams and Barnett, I noticed shared similarities in the residents of their respective institutions and the characters involved with Sleary’s Circus. As an example, each writer presents a communal living arrangement that primarily includes migratory residents. In addition to the obvious link established between Addams and Barnett, I could incorporate Dickens within the same network. Regardless of the national and cultural boundaries with which Addams, Barnett, and Dickens identified, I could envision these individuals as contributors to an effort not entirely positioned within a nation-based context. I could position them as individuals who supported community-based, social reform.

In the future, I plan to integrate topics related to social progress and reforms in my teaching and research endeavors. Since human trafficking and individuals who suffer from various forms of slavery (child laborers and sex slaves, as examples) are global concerns, I foresee assigning texts that address these issues. A particular claim that Paul Gilroy provides in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* has made a bold impression on me. In his analysis of Margaret Garner and Frederick Douglass, Gilroy concludes that death provides a freedom from slavery and “It supplies a valuable clue towards answering the question of how the realm of freedom is conceptualised by those who have never been free. This inclination towards death and away from bondage is fundamental” (68). In my future study of slavery and slave-related matters, I will likely incorporate Gilroy’s theory in my analysis of how individuals under various forms of slavery perceive freedom.

As a side note, I have begun to see how Gilroy engages with a transatlantic work originally written in Spanish. In a previous class, I studied a nineteenth-century novel titled *Sab* by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda y Arteaga. Initially, I found this to be a Cuban novel because the plot takes place in Cuba and the author was born there. However, I now have a transatlantic appreciation of the novel since the author relocated to Spain, and she addresses a Cuban slave who has interactions with a wealthy

Englishman. I have also discovered that Sab, the protagonist, conceptualizes freedom through death. In turn, *Sab* echoes Gilroy's scholarship.

With regard to my larger research agenda, I find myself becoming more enthusiastic about applying a transatlantic frame to my interests. In their "Introduction: Tracing Currents and Joining Conversations," Dr. Linda Hughes and Dr. Sarah Robbins find that

If the growth of scholarship on transatlantic literary culture represents one highly positive impetus for teaching within this burgeoning tradition, another factor encouraging such work goes beyond the humanities disciplines to the shift in mission so evident in many institutions of higher education today—that is, the call for universities to align their curricula with a 'global' vision.

As a future educator and hopeful researcher, I must learn to teach within a global context. When I think about larger research possibilities, I am drawn immediately to Charles Dickens. My initial curiosities lean toward Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. I begin to think of the references to the grocer, French plums, and Spanish onions. I am unsure where these foods are grown. My thoughts then travel across the Atlantic to Mr. Hobbs, the grocer in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. I wonder if the oranges and figs that Mr. Hobbs sells are locally grown or imported. I grapple with how the grocers in both works might help their communities keep local traditions and celebrations alive. Furthermore, I wonder what insights that grocers in other novels may provide. I question what effects foreign food might have on region- or nation-based traditions? Would imported food negatively impact the authenticity of a celebration that traditionally involves domestic dishes? As I ask these food-related questions, I consider Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. As Appiah notes, "Cultural purity is an oxymoron. The odds are that, culturally speaking, you already live a cosmopolitan life, enriched by literature, art, and film that come from many places, and that contains influences from many more" (113).

It seems that I could support my literary food inquiries by consulting Appiah's argument. I also recognize that my foreign versus domestic food concerns are similar to my original understandings of nation-based literatures. I might have originally tried to keep foreign and domestic literatures from influencing one another; I now recognize that this thinking is unproductive. Had I never had the opportunity to mingle readings of Addams, Barnett, and Dickens, I would not have learned about their approaches to social progress. As a result, I would not have developed a social-reform focus for a future teaching opportunity, and I would not have learned how to extend my literary knowledge toward a more global network. While I am not certain that my food curiosities will inform my future research, my transatlantic experiences this fall have encouraged me to consider topics related to food imports and exports in nineteenth-century literature. I look forward to seeing where the path may lead.