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The Imaginary and Its Worlds

An Introduction

LAURA BIEGER, RAMÓN SALDÍVAR, AND JOHANNES VOELZ

This collection of essays is dedicated to conceptualizing the imaginary as a critical tool for the study of American literature and culture after the “transnational turn.” Without a doubt, the “transnational turn” (a term coined by Shelley Fisher Fishkin) is here, and here to stay: the field of “transnational American studies” is growing with breathtaking rapidity, generating work on a wide range of cultural, political, and economic configurations that reach across national boundaries and change our views of what is situated within them. Even objects of study that once required a national frame of analysis now seem to demand a focus that does justice to regional, hemispheric, and global connectivities. The objective of this volume, however, is not to contribute to the scholarship of particular transnational formations, or to the mapping of the transnational turn. Rather, we are concerned with the concept of the imaginary, which the transnational turn newly urges us to recognize as a methodological and conceptual problem, and which takes different contours in a world conceived in transnational terms.

Transnational American Studies and the Problem of the Imaginary

It is surely no coincidence that the concepts of the imagination and the imaginary have called forth a great level of renewed interest at the very moment when the transnational turn is transforming fields of inquiry once bound by national boundaries and exceptionalism. A wide range of scholars and activists, from David Graeber to Anthony Bogues and Robin G. Kelley, have invoked the “radical imagination” as the political act of thinking into existence alternative worlds that have not yet been granted social sanctioning or recognition. Indeed, the “radical imagination” has become something of a rallying cry for all kinds of political movements working toward social change. David Graeber, for instance,
has praised the Occupy Wall Street activists of Zuccotti Park as creating a realistic chance for breaking “the 30-year stranglehold that has been placed on the human imagination” by the regime of free-market neoliberalism (Graeber). These appeals to the concept rest on what Arjun Appadurai has described as the “projective sense” of the imagination: “the sense of being a prelude to some sort of expression, whether aesthetic or otherwise” (Appadurai 7). The imagination (which is never quite identical with the term imaginary: we’ll come to the distinction shortly) here refers to the appearance of new possibilities of social organization and political action, which are not yet spelled out as concrete utopias, and which—thanks to the vagueness of the pre-expressive—provide a source of hope for change.

But the imagination is also what creates the possibility for collective formations to recognize themselves as such, and it is here that the link between the transnational and the imagination/imaginary comes to the fore. The realm of the transnational is generally understood not as a set of stable social units spanning across national orders but rather as a constantly changing ensemble of formations-in-formation. The transnational is frequently described as a world that is in the process of becoming, and that shares with the imagination the sense of the preliminary. From the perspectives of transnational subjects, this means that the imagination takes on a more central role in everyday life, moving it out of its traditional, delimited cultural spaces like myth and ritual. With Appadurai we can argue that the transnational world, consisting of diasporas and spatially dispersed communities of all sorts, “bring[s] the force of the imagination, as both memory and desire, into the lives of many ordinary people, into mythographies different from the disciplines of myth and ritual of the classic sort. The key difference here is that these new mythographies are charters for new social projects, and not just a counterpoint to the certainties of daily life” (Appadurai 6).

The conceptualizing project undertaken in this volume stems from a particular conversation about the critical merits of the transnational turn, and about recent developments in American studies more generally. In this ongoing debate a group of Americanists from Europe (primarily Germany) and the United States have taken to heart Winfried Fluck’s call to take the project of transnational studies truly seriously, which means “that scholars outside the U.S. do not just mimic the latest U.S.-American developments, but are self-confident and independent enough to develop their own perspective on them” (Fluck 2007a, 70). One such difference in perspective is the different intellectual traditions from which the con-
tributors draw. We may broadly describe these traditions as “European” or “continental philosophy” on the one hand and “poststructuralist” or “postcolonial ideology critique” on the other. In staging acts and axes of this particular conversation, this volume does not return to the familiar cold war geography. Instead it seeks to capitalize on the confrontation of those different traditions, whose evolution resists being mapped onto national territories while being, at least in substantial part, traceable to particular locales and nodal points.

The immediate occasion out of which this book has grown was a conference hosted at the John-F.-Kennedy-Institut of the Freie Universität Berlin in the summer of 2009 in honor of Winfried Fluck. For over four decades Fluck has influentially intervened in international debates within the field, articulating disagreements between European and U.S. approaches to American studies. Having drawn on a range of philosophical and critical traditions, including reception aesthetics, pragmatism, phenomenology, and sociological theories of modernity, he has critically interrogated the plausibility of the premises suggested by what has become a largely unquestioned canon of poststructuralist and post-Marxist thought. Building on this critique, Fluck has also questioned dominant variants of the transnational reconceptualization of American studies. As he has argued repeatedly, transnational American studies should not do away with the nation-state but should contribute to the effort of theorizing American culture with the goal of gaining a more adequate understanding thereof. In his analysis, however, transnational American studies practitioners have fulfilled this task only implicitly—and, in fact, without much awareness of it. From his perspective, the impetus of many current Americanists to move their objects of inquiry beyond the borders of the nation is best described as the latest scholarly enterprise in a search for spaces of resistance. While Americanists of the myth-and-symbol school hoped to find a space of resistance in nonconformist aesthetics and values embodied in the masterpieces of the American Renaissance, later scholars described the aesthetic realm as thoroughly co-opted by ideology and instead believed themselves to have found spaces of resistance in the margins of a multicultural society. Seen in this light, transnationalism is a logical extension of this very trajectory, for now the potential spaces of resistance appear no longer at the social margins but beyond the nation’s physical borders. In Fluck’s reconstruction of the Americanist project, Americanists have increasingly described American culture as being controlled by various forms of ideological power, yet they have also continually construed the meaning of American culture as a function of its
potential to resist (Fluck 2007a). Since World War II, the forces of power that were seen to demand resistance have quickly changed. What did not change was the goal of resistance itself.

A common way of evoking this potential to resist has recently offered itself by turning to the concept of the imaginary. As we outline momentarily, the concept of the imaginary is philosophically much too complex to be reduced to a longing for resistance. But much in line with the aforementioned appeal that the “radical imagination” has for political movements, the striking lure of the imaginary for Americanists may be attributed at least in part to the fact that as humanists we have been trained, and compelled, to search for spaces of resistance. Even the suggestive compounds in the titles and subtitles of several monographs by contributors to our immediate debate attest to this. To name just three, we point to the “transnational imaginary” (Ramón Saldívar), the “environmental imagination” (Lawrence Buell), and the “transatlantic imaginary” (Paul Giles).

At a closer look, the imaginaries invoked in the titles of these studies are of two kinds. In the more neutral version, the imaginary amounts to the widely shared common sense of a given society, or a “constellation of conflicting ideologies” (Moya and Saldívar 5). In its more emphatic variant, however, the imaginary brings forward a world that is less exclusionary and exceptionalist, more porous, overlapping, and cosmopolitan than traditional worldviews based on national boundaries had led us to presume. This notion of the imaginary does not present its “better worlds” as radically utopian; rather, it draws attention to the potentials—unrecognized by official discourses—slumbering in a given social formation. But if the imaginary is deemed crucial in both binding and transgressing social realities, its implicit or even unarticulated nature makes it not just an evocative but also a challenging object of study.

Literary and cultural studies are particularly drawn to the concept of the imaginary since it allows them to claim a privileged role for fiction, and cultural texts more generally, in the unfolding and assessing of these potential worlds. Fiction, according to the implied logic of this claim, is a forerunner in creating, articulating, and shaping these worlds; in giving them imaginary substance it can, in turn, affect the substance of the world beyond the text. Fiction thus becomes the province in which we can experience other versions of our actual world. This also means that the concept of the imaginary is immensely capable of lending relevance to the humanities, and literary studies in particular. Interpreting literature can, from this perspective, be conceived as an act of social and cultural
criticism since it is in a privileged position to envision and articulate social alternatives. The imaginary thus becomes the touchstone of any political aspiration of literature and literary criticism. In ascribing this potential relevance to literature, literary studies implies a notion of the imaginary that highlights its generative capacities; it implies the imaginary as a productive force.

Even from such a rudimentary sketch it becomes clear that the imaginary is not separate from reality, an addendum or a surplus, somehow less important than the world “out there.” Rather, the real itself depends on the existence of an imaginary. We cannot understand the reality of the real without mediating it through the imaginary. Whatever is real is accessible to us only if it is imagined as real. It becomes real not as an individual act or as the result of an individual faculty—the imagination—but by drawing on already existing forms and patterns—imaginaries—that have an important social function. Imaginaries provide communities with the glue that makes their members stick together. In their capacity of adjusting to changing social formations, these imaginaries not only give coherence to a collectivity but also enable and condition subjectivity. Imaginaries are thus structurally Janus-faced: they are generative processes that bring forth what does not yet have a social correlative, but they also have the power—indeed, it is their function—to fix, delimit, and reproduce collectively organized subjectivity.

Currently, this two-sidedness of the imaginary is in a process of complex readjustment. Globalization, in its recent intensification, exposes former modes of cultural cohesiveness to the centrifugal forces of disjunction and fragmentation. Yet at the same time it enables formations of imaginary belonging beyond the borders of the nation. A series of presidents of the American Studies Association, among them Amy Kaplan (in 2004), Shelley Fisher Fishkin (in 2005), and Emory Elliott (in 2007), have dedicated their presidential addresses to spelling out an agenda for an American studies that leaves behind the epistemic and methodological nationalism that has organized the study of American literature and culture since its inception.

If, however, the imaginary provides the forms and patterns that structure individual acts of imagining, a transnational turn in American studies urges us to explore a crucial complex of questions that has been neglected so far: How do the centrifugal forces of globalization affect the cultural and social productivity of the imaginary? Considering that transnational ways of belonging do not simply replicate the structures of collective imaginaries through which national communities cohere, nor
have imaginaries been far from unmoored from the nation, how are we to reconceptualize the imaginary in a globalized world? More specifically, how do we theorize the function of the imaginary as a relay between the individual and its multi-scaled forms of social belonging, from the local to the global? How does the transnational framework alter the imaginary’s work of interlacing interiority and exterior conditions? What are the effects of the transnational turn on the imaginary’s interdependent constructions of mental and social space, as well as social space and social structure? Does transnationalism really give more prominence to the imagination in everyday life, and does that change the imaginary’s role of relating the emergence of the as yet unsanctioned to the culturally prescribed? These questions provide the frame for this collection of essays as it sets out to consider the usefulness and potential of the imaginary in a globalized world. We want to use the remainder of this introduction to spell out some of the theoretical underpinnings of this endeavor.

Theoretical Perspectives on the Imaginary

Today, most literary scholars associate the imaginary with the work of Jacques Lacan, whose concept of the imaginary has, in fact, a highly productive dimension. At the very core of his notion of identity formation, its interplay with the symbolic order is instrumental in turning the individual into a social being. But the Lacanian imaginary gains its productive force by acts of misrepresentation: the individual identifies with its specular image in the mirror, though this image suggests a degree of coherence that the individual does not in fact possess. For Lacan, the specular image situates “the agency of the ego . . . in a fictional direction” (Lacan 2). Understood as fiction, this agency is more than a mere illusion: the ego begins to orient itself according to this fiction; it lives by it. Nonetheless, the specular image remains the basis of an alienating misrecognition: the self identifies with what it is not and cannot be.

Hal Foster has insightfully commented on the implicit yet rarely acknowledged historicity of this model of the self-alienated subject, pointing out that even though Lacan

does not specify his theory of the subject as historical, and [it is] certainly . . . not limited to one period, this armored and aggressive subject is not just any being across history and culture: it is the modern subject as paranoid, even fascistic. Ghosted in his theory is a contemporary history of which fascism is the extreme symptom: a history of world war and military mutilation, of
industrial discipline and mechanical fragmentation, of mercenary murder and political terror. In relation to such events the modern subject becomes armored—against otherness from within (sexuality, the unconscious) and otherness without (for the fascists this can mean Jews, Communists, gays, women), all figures of this fear of the body in pieces come again, of the body given over to the fragmentary and the fluid. (Foster 226)

If the Lacanian model of the imaginary, in generalizing a subject not only split between self and image but also armored inside and out, prescribes a radical state of non-belonging out of historic circumstance, the many applications of this model tend to reiterate this state for the sake of its seemingly ahistorical premises about self-alienation as a sine qua non of subjecthood (and often at the risk of tautological argumentation, in which this “master condition” features as both premise and result). It seems to us, however, that matters of belonging adhere to different forms and patterns of imagining subjectivity and collectivity after the transnational turn—a social imaginary that pays tribute to both the lasting presence of the nation and the centrifugal forces of globalization. The Lacanian model, with its strong bias of the imaginary’s productivity toward self-alienation, might not be the best model for the task at hand.

Lacan’s enormous influence in cultural and literary criticism must in part be attributed to his reception by structuralist Marxists like Louis Althusser, who used the Lacanian notion of the imaginary to explain how ideology works. In the act that Althusser calls “ideological interpellation”—the transformation from individual to subject through hailing—the “I” is propelled by precisely the kind of imaginary misrecognition theorized by Lacan. Upon being hailed, the subject accepts the ruling ideologies of its society and does so in a particular manner: by imagining—and misrecognizing—itself as an autonomous subject, that is, by misrecognizing how it relates to “the conditions of existence.” In Althusser’s diction, “It is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that ‘men’ ‘represent to themselves’ in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there. It is this relation which is at the centre of every ideological, i.e. imaginary, representation of the real world” (Althusser 164). For Althusser, imaginary representations are ideological representations; what is present in the imaginary is an ideologically tinted (even inverted) version of the real conditions of existence. Misrepresenting “the relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (162), the imaginary remains dependent on these conditions. In the tradition deriving from Lacan and Althusser, the
imaginary is a category of reflection, and is thus incapable of producing anything new or socially unmarked. It ultimately stands in the service of reproducing existing power relations.

This point is relevant not simply because the Althusserian heritage has played a major role in shaping a theoretical common sense for U.S.-based literary and cultural studies. By providing a model for conceptualizing the imaginary as a force of social reproduction, the Althusserian tradition also intersects with approaches to the imaginary that may not be Marxist at all but that have become canonized points of reference in interdisciplinary discussions of the imaginary. The most striking example of this kind is the work on “social imaginaries” by Charles Taylor. Taylor’s work has been taken up in literary and cultural studies in part because it ascribes to cultural texts the role of articulating what binds a given social entity together. Taylor draws explicitly on Benedict Anderson’s theorem of “imagined communities” in order to trace historically the constituent elements of the “modern social imaginary.” For the present discussion, these historically specific elements are of less interest than his conception of the social imaginary itself, which he conceives not as a specific set of ideas but rather as “what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society” (Taylor 91). For Taylor, the term imaginary refers to “the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. . . . I speak of imaginary because I’m talking about the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, and legends” (106).

Taylor’s definition seems very plausible; surely it must be the case that members of a social unit share some deep assumptions on the basis of which they come to an unspoken agreement on how to live together. Through this claim, however, Taylor’s concept of the imaginary becomes a rather one-sided affair: this type of social imaginary is always already in place. While modernity develops its own distinct social imaginaries—in Taylor’s analysis they center on the economy, the public sphere, and popular sovereignty—imaginaries have an integrative function and thus bind the individual to what is shared by a given society. For Taylor, the imaginary is the end result of a process of the popularization of theory. Explicit ideas are first introduced by philosophers; from there they stand a chance of seeping into images, stories, and legends of “ordinary people.” Thus some theories become shared in imaginary rather than theoretical form.
by all members of a society. Taylor’s imaginary is therefore not productive but derivative: it does not articulate the previously unimaginable but rather represents what has moved from theoretical and conscious deliberation to an uncontested consensus.

This allows us to spell out the often unacknowledged premise of literary and cultural scholarship that draws on Taylor: literary texts and other cultural artifacts are seen as materials worth studying insofar as they contain those elements that glue together a social body. In a manner not so different from the Althusserian tradition, reading for the imaginary under Taylor’s precepts turns into a practice that treats texts as reflective mirrors for their social contexts. While for Althusser what is reflected (and imaginarily obscured) are the “real”—economic—conditions, for Taylor the social imaginary prestructures an individual’s worldview so that this individual’s expression (or an individual work of art) reflects the antecedent social structure of mind.

In his argument Taylor adopts central assumptions from Benedict Anderson’s seminal *Imagined Communities* (1983), which, like Taylor’s recent writings, has more to say about the historical specificity of the modern imaginary than about the concept itself. Anderson initially emphasizes its productive dimension: the imaginary brings forth communities, not as illusions but as realities. In order to emerge, collectives need to imagine themselves as such: “In fact, all communities other than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined” (Anderson 6). But because such imaginations are collective, the productivity is limited to the collective dimension. From the perspective of the individual, what is imagined is already shared and therefore given.

For Anderson, modern nations imagine themselves as limited (the imagination rests on a distinction between self and other), sovereign (it is the idea of freedom that sets the nation, in its self-understanding, apart from divinely ordained, dynastic rule), and communal (in the national imagination all members are equal, independent of actual power inequalities) (see Anderson 7). Taylor’s key characteristics of the modern social imaginary (economy, popular sovereignty, and public sphere) refine and revise the dominant traits laid out by Anderson (limitation, sovereignty, and community). But while it is tempting to engage with Taylor and Anderson in a discussion over the usefulness of their suggested characteristics, it is perhaps even more central to turn to the consequences of their respective approaches. For both Anderson and Taylor, imaginaries correspond to finite social bodies that develop an imagination about themselves. Ultimately, a community that imagines itself appears as a com-
community with clear-cut boundaries. For Anderson and Taylor, nations exist because the imagination changes at the national border (though social or national imaginaries will be structured along parallel lines).

As the anthropologist Claudia Strauss has aptly pointed out, Anderson’s and Taylor’s theories are a seamless fit for “cognitive anthropologists’ conception of cultural models, which are similarly shared, implicit schemas of interpretation, rather than explicit ideologies” (Strauss 325). She writes despairingly about her own field that “the application [of these theories to anthropology often] is shallow, with ‘imaginary’ or ‘the imagined’ used . . . in a context where, 20 or more years ago, ‘culture’ or ‘cultural beliefs’ would have been used instead” (331). We have to wonder whether Strauss’s dissatisfaction with these applications in her own field does not in part go back to a limitation within Anderson’s and Taylor’s concepts. Where the imaginary designates a shared corpus of background assumptions, it may indeed come close to reviving anthropological notions of “culture” that stand at the center of literary and cultural studies as well.

The most obvious problem of such a tacit exchange of imaginary for culture would be that while postcolonial studies, border studies, and, increasingly, American studies have worked hard to conceptualize cultures as fluid, hybrid, overlapping, and so on, the turn to the imaginary would reinstate, as a parallel discourse, a reified notion of culture once again. The imaginary, from this perspective, would appear as a concept strikingly unproductive for theorizing phenomena of a global or transnational reach. Even if, however, Anderson and particularly Taylor tend to overemphasize the imaginary’s function of providing a common set of background assumptions for the members of a bounded collective, this should not lead us to give up on the potentials of the concept. As we pointed out before, the imaginary is inherently Janus-faced. It does not simply designate what binds us together; it also points to the generative work of the imagination. No theorist has been more intensely concerned with this productive dimension of the imaginary than Cornelius Castoriadis.

For Castoriadis, the imaginary does not represent but rather makes present. It is a radically creative force that brings forth ex nihilo the new and indeterminate. Castoriadis’s study The Imaginary Institution of Society (1975) was leveled at both orthodox Marxism (to which he often referred as functionalism) and structuralism. From his own position, steeped in a nonstructuralist Marxist variant of psychoanalysis, “creation” is a process that happens on the level of individual and society. On the level of the psyche, what he calls the “radical imagination” gives
presence and form to an undifferentiated undercurrent of being. Analogously, on the social level, the “radical imaginary” brings forth, in an indeterminate manner, meanings and significations that form the basis of institutions. Castoriadis calls this the “instituting imaginary.” Despite this emphasis on creation, Castoriadis shares with Anderson and Taylor the view that societies need to establish a set of background assumptions that provide the grounds for the creation of new meanings. Castoriadis calls these background assumptions “imaginary significations.” His favorite example of an imaginary signification is God: “God is perhaps, for each of the faithful, an ‘image’—which can even be a ‘precise’ representation—but God, as an imaginary social signification, is neither the ‘sum,’ nor the ‘common part,’ nor the ‘average’ of these images; it is rather their condition of possibility and what makes these images ‘of God’” (Castoriadis 1987, 143).

In a broader sense, imaginary significations provide societies with both a self-image and an accompanying world-image. “World-image and self-image are obviously always related. Their unity, however, is in its turn borne by the definition each society gives of its needs, as this is inscribed in its activity, its actual social doing. The self-image a society gives itself includes as an essential moment the choice of objects and acts, etc., embodying that which, for it, has meaning and value” (Castoriadis 147). For Castoriadis, the imaginary thus encompasses two sides that initially may seem very much at odds with each other. On the one hand, societies are constantly in the process of constructing a self-image for themselves. This act of imaginary social self-construction can be understood as the social or collective version of the generative power of the individual imagination. In both cases, something without prior existence is posited imaginarily. But on the other hand, these social acts of imaginary creation also produce social meanings (imaginary significations) that are in turn the condition of possibility for social imaginary creation. In Castoriadis’s theory, the imaginary thus refers both to the act of creation and to what has been created.

Castoriadis describes this two-sidedness through the terms “instituting imaginary” and “instituted imaginary.” These contrasting terms may seem antagonists in an epic struggle of autonomy against heteronomy. But for Castoriadis, the instituting and instituted imaginaries are both essential to society’s capacity of autonomous creation. Jeff Klooger explains how Castoriadis links instituting and instituted imaginary as two elements of autonomous social creation: “Since all determination is limitation, the self-determination of an autonomous subject is necessarily a
self-limitation. . . . Self-creation inevitably involves both a striving for
determination and against it, the establishment of boundaries as well as
their rejection, the struggle to escape and transcend them. This dichotomy
merely represents twin aspects of one and the same activity: self-creation
as a perpetual mode of being” (Klooger 29). In other words, the back-
ground assumptions of the instituted imaginary are flexible and more-
over functional for the process of perpetual imaginary creation. Their
necessary presence presupposes their own decomposition.

From Castoriadis’s perspective, acts of the imaginary are at once so-
cially embedded and inherently transgressive. It is because of this trans-
gressive force that the imaginary projects, on the basis of imaginary signi-
fications, what can be called a social avant-garde. According to Wolfgang
Iser, whose work has been most substantial in thinking about literature’s
relation to the imaginary, the realm of the literary broadens the possible
range in which the imagination can come into play. Building on Casto-
riadis’s notion of the radical imaginary, he stresses the special importance
of fictionalizing acts in mediating between the imaginary and the real.
In drawing on the frames, discourses, and world pictures of the given
world (“reality”), the fictionalizing acts of literature give the amorphous,
inarticulate stream of the imaginary their Gestalt. Because they are not
bound to pragmatic use, fictionalizing acts can go to extremes in artic-
ulating aspects of the imaginary. Iser’s approach may be the strongest
theoretical explanation for why literary studies is a particularly pertinent
field for exploring the functions of the imaginary. If literature assumes a
privileged role in making us understand particular imaginaries, critical
readings can engender avant-garde movements by bringing to the fore
meanings that are not yet within the realm of the sayable or thinkable of
other social settings.

The Imaginary and the Spatial Turn

The “transnational imaginary” can be understood as precisely such an avant-
garde intervention. “The transnational” is an act of imaginary Gestalt-
giving. In making present something that could not be articulated be-
fore, the transnational imaginary engenders a creative rethinking of the
relation between social structure and space. If transnationalism thinks in
terms of networks, flows, and dynamic relations, such as the juxtaposed,
the near and far, the side-by-side, or the dispersed (see Foucault 22), space
is no longer a stable entity on which processes of historical change act. In
this sense the transnational reminds us that our conceptions of the imagi-
nary must begin to grapple with this recently “discovered” dynamism and productivity of space, and with the complex and contested ways in which it is socially produced (see Lefebvre, Soja, Massey). As Doreen Massey aptly stresses:

Social relations always have a spatial form and spatial content. They exist, necessarily, both in space (i.e., in a locational relation to other social phenomena) and across space. And it is the vast complexity of the interlocking and articulating nets of social relations which is social space. Given that conception of space, a ‘place’ is formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location. And the singularity of any individual place is formed in part out of the specificity of the interactions which occur at that location (nowhere else does this precise mixture occur) and in part out of the fact that the meeting of those social relations at that location (their partly happenstance juxtaposition) will in turn produce new social effects. (Massey 168)

But if we take space to be produced through social interaction, it also, inevitably, becomes subjected to the transformative maelstrom of the imaginary. The transnational, in encountering and reenvisioning modes of spatial production and social organization, urges us to rethink the relation between the imaginary as a transformative force and the imaginary as a spatiotemporal agent of fixity and institutionalization. Drawing substantially on Castoriadis and Iser, Winfried Fluck has dedicated much of his work to assessing the scope in which the productive force of the imaginary pervades and conditions social action and formation (Fluck 1996, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2007b). His reflections have also taken him to the issue of space. As Fluck points out, in order to assess one’s surroundings, a recipient has to bind and make cohere the “physical particles and sense impressions [of a perceived space] by means of an ordering principle, that is, a principle that provides it with some kind of meaning (if only that of representing a ‘chaotic’ world). Or, to put it differently: in order to gain cultural meaning, physical space has to become mental space or, more precisely, imaginary space” (Fluck 2005, 25; emphasis added). Turning to literary and cultural representations of space, he goes on to argue that they too “create not only a mental but an imaginary space; even where this representation may appear life-like, truthful or authentic, its actual status is that of an aesthetic object that invites, in effect, necessitates a transfer by the spectator in order to provide meaning and to create an aesthetic experience” (34).

While we think that this point is perfectly apt in stressing the indispen-
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The function of the imaginary in the creation of space, its impact on the social production of space can be pressed even further. On the one hand, literary and cultural representations of space have the effect of fictionally “doubling” the mechanisms and processes of their production since fictional world-making reenacts the reality-conditioning imagination of space. Within the fictional world of the text, this process thus becomes an object of aesthetic experience; beyond its borders, on the other hand, these representations become effective as a social practice that—through the fictional doubling that feeds the aesthetic experience—partakes in the productivity of Lefebvre’s third pole of spatial production. It creates imaginary maps of the social relations that constitute space and thus vitally define—and challenge—the very frames in which this space is used and lived (Lefebvre 1991).

The Essays

Two main trajectories are opened up by these reflections that are to serve as our starting point. One is to explore the imaginary in relation to a number of dominant facets of globalization, among them transnational flows of ideas, practices, and goods; an increasingly mediated life; free trade economies; and de-territorialized state powers. The other takes globalization’s challenge to the imaginary as an invitation to rethink the concept itself, generating new perspectives on the role of the imaginary as a crucial force in shaping modernity; on the very notion of collective cohesiveness; on the attempts of power to permeate the imaginary in order to set in place binding imperatives and foreclosures; and on the potential for the transgressions occurring at the interface of individual and collective imaginaries to effect the transformation of social orders.

The first section of this volume, “Literary Imaginaries,” opens with the theme of transnational imaginaries and explores their articulation in U.S. literature through a sample of texts spanning three centuries: contemporary ethnic fiction, the tradition of the Bildungsroman, and literary modernism. Stressing the task of integrating formerly unacknowledged voices and collectives, Ramón Saldívar’s essay, “Imagining Cultures: The Transnational Imaginary in Postrace America,” approaches the imaginary from the perspective of critical race studies. Saldívar focuses on the topic of race and narrative theory in relation to the question of literary form and history in Junot Díaz’s Pulitzer Prize–winning novel The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2007). Saldívar addresses the poetics of genre and the generative power of generic hybridity in classic narrative
forms in order to show how versions of aesthetics, as well as conceptions of history linked to the historical novel in their modern and postmodern versions, are being fundamentally reshaped by contemporary American writers of color. Exemplary in staging a collective imaginary that attempts to consolidate the geographically disparate and troubled sites of Dominican American identity by means of fiction, Díaz’s novel becomes a test case for reframing and re-creating the shattered imaginaries of diasporic communities in the form of “imaginary history.”

In “The Necessary Fragmentation of the (U.S.) Literary-Cultural Imaginary,” Lawrence Buell explores fragmentation and cohesion as two opposite thrusts that work on national imaginaries in the age of transnationalism. In order to trace historically how these forces have operated in U.S. culture—and literature in particular—Buell focuses on what he describes as the “American dream narrative,” which he places in the transnational context of the *Bildungsroman*. Concerning the U.S. national imaginary, these narratives of self-realization oscillate between reaffirming American exceptionalism and fragmenting the national imaginary for its imposed limits on the self, especially if they belong to the “ethnic *Bildungsroman*. In Buell’s account, this history is not just indicative of the genre’s function to mediate between the contradictory forces within the collective imaginary of U.S. national culture; it can also be used as a matrix to study the shifts, mostly induced by revisionist scholarship, within the “field imaginary” (Donald Pease) of American studies. In light of Buell’s argument, transnationalism emerges as the particular field imaginary that can achieve both an affirmation of fragmentation and the necessary degree of disciplinary cohesion.

In “Imaginaries of American Modernism,” Heinz Ickstadt breaks up the established linear account of American modernism that celebrated aesthetic innovation as America’s modern coming of age. Instead he places American modernism in a hemispheric and transatlantic network of conflicting and overlapping imaginary worlds that articulated culturally wished-for and yet-to-be realized alternatives. Ickstadt makes out two dominant imaginaries among American modernists that can be distinguished despite their ultimately congruent goals. On the one hand, there are cultural nationalists, like Waldo Frank, Jean Toomer, and several members of the Stieglitz circle, who strove for organic wholeness on various levels of awareness—expressive, psychological, spiritual, and aesthetic. This type of cultural nationalism did not praise the U.S. nation-state but, as exemplified by Waldo Frank’s embrace of “Our America,” aligned itself with Rubén Darío’s and José Martí’s visions of pre-Columbian, pan–Latin
American transnationalism. Ickstadt contrasts the cultural nationalists’ organicism with the particularism of William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and others, which emphasized an anti-symbolic literalism, yet ultimately also envisioned a transformation of the shattered modern world through the capacity of the letter to reach an experience of higher unity.

The second section of this volume, “Social Imaginaries,” addresses matters of normativization, exclusion/inclusion, and space production through the lens of Jamesian pragmatism, figurational sociology, Castoriadis’s notion of the imaginary, and systems theory. Herwig Friedl opens the section by critically interrogating the very notion of a social imaginary. His essay, “William James versus Charles Taylor: Philosophy of Religion and the Confines of the Social and Cultural Imaginaries,” critiques sociocentric tendencies that he traces from nineteenth-century philosophers like Ludwig Feuerbach to twentieth-century theorists such as Émile Durkheim and Charles Taylor. For Friedl, Taylor’s concept of “social imaginaries” epitomizes the neglect characteristic of sociocentrism of those dimensions of being that transgress what is already socially scripted. Friedl links the theoretical debate of the imaginary’s social determination to the question of the religious. He contends that the religious, if it is not reduced to a Durkheimian functionalism, poses a challenge to the totalizing force attributed to the social and cultural imaginary. In order to stage a confrontation between the religious and the social imaginary, Friedl contrasts Charles Taylor’s *Varieties of Religion Today* (2002) and *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2004) to the work to which Taylor paid critical homage: William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). Friedl wholeheartedly defends James’s insistence on a “trans-human Logos” that forms an inextricable part not just of religious experience but of experiencing per se.

Christa Buschendorf, in “The Shaping of We-Group Identities in the African American Community: A Perspective of Figurational Sociology on the Cultural Imaginary,” traces the construction of African American collective imaginaries through Frederick Douglass’s and W. E. B. Du Bois’s writings and rhetoric. These imaginaries challenge Benedict Anderson’s and Charles Taylor’s models, according to which modern national imaginaries are built on ideas of fraternity and equality. Drawing on Norbert Elias, Buschendorf reconstructs African American imaginaries as growing out of figurations constitutively organized by power differentials. In Douglass’s and Du Bois’s writings, we witness how the condition of marginality and violence produced an African American
imagined community that adds to the identification with the national community an identification with universal networks. African American “we-identities” thus transform their socially ascribed outsider position into imaginaries of global connectedness and thus significantly move beyond the self-limitations characteristic of the imaginaries of established groups.

While Buschendorf shows how African Americans’ imagination of the global and universal grew out of their national domination by white Americans, Lene Johannessen, in “Russia’s Californio Romance: The Other Shores of Whitman’s Pacific,” explores a different way in which collective imaginaries contributed to the “experience of globality” (Peter Hitchcock). She focuses on the encounter of Nikolai Petrovitch Rezanov, envoy of the Russian American Company, with José Joaquín de Arrillaga, governor of Nueva California, and Don Luis Darío Argüello, commander of the Presidio, in San Francisco in 1806. From her reconstruction emerges a process of transnationalization that is quintessentially palimpsestic. Transnationalization adds and overwrites layers of imaginaries—in her case study, Russian, Spanish, and American—each of which operates as an enabling frame. Johannessen, in effect, extends Charles Taylor’s notion of the imaginary. Just as in Taylor’s view, for Johannessen the imaginary enables a group to grasp and perform an understanding of its own practices. But in doing so, the imaginary also becomes a trace in a palimpsestic process of transnationalization, a process that tears open the seams and confines of the collective identity which the imaginary helps articulate.

Taking yet another approach to the pervasive operation of social imaginaries, Mark Seltzer addresses them from a perspective of game theory and the ways in which the structure and function of games make conceivable—and, one might add, compellingly experienceable—the self-reflexivity of modern social systems. In “Form Games: Staging Life in the Systems Epoch,” Seltzer takes Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory as his point of departure to elucidate how games generate realities that are staged for the sake of their observation. These game realities are “models of a self-modeling world” that serve modern society to monitor reflexively its self-created social realities. Seltzer aligns the imaginary with the distinction between game and world, thought of as an incessant feedback loop between the human senses and the media. Real and fictional reality, Seltzer argues, are continually copied into each other. Games can thus become models “both of the world and in it.” Seltzer’s systems-theoretical approach opens up a new and comprehensive way of

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drawing attention to the crucial role a medial genealogy of the modernizing world has to play in rethinking the imaginary as an overarching critical tool.

The third and final section, “Political Imaginaries,” rounds off this volume by investigating two topics with special importance for the proliferation of the political imaginaries of the future: the challenges of neoliberalism and political romanticism. In his essay “Real Toads,” Walter Benn Michaels examines the contemporary literary imagination, exemplified by the popularity of the neorealist and historical novel, from the perspective of neoliberalism. Michaels has been at the center of a fervent debate focusing on his argument that American multiculturalism has embraced identitarian difference at the cost of eclipsing economic inequality. In his contribution to this volume, he enforces this argument by proposing that this logic, which rests on an “epistemology of pluralism,” is also at play in celebrated novels by Toni Morrison and Philip Roth, as well as younger writers such as Michael Chabon and Colson Whitehead. In embracing the promise of justice entailed in this epistemology’s normativity of difference, these novels fail not just once but twice: in articulating the pressing realities of economic inequality and in foreclosing the possibility of imagining them. In doing so, Michaels asserts, they advance the ongoing process of cementing and legitimizing a neoliberalist rationale that tampers with the democratic foundations of U.S. society.

The two remaining contributions to this section turn to the candidacy and presidency of Barack Obama as generators of political imaginaries. Christopher Newfield, in “Obama Unwound: The Romanticism of Victory and the Defeat of Compromise,” takes Obama’s poor midterm results in 2010 as a point of departure to ask what caused this president so sweepingly elected into office to lose much of his popularity in only half a term. Newfield locates the answer in the political romanticism that drove the 2008 election: Obama’s popularity rested on his ability to tap into the country’s “wounded romanticism” and channel it into the collective longing for a world in which personal desire would be not rejected but realized in a common democratic vision. It began to falter when his “coalition of political sufferers,” coerced by imagining “a non-agonizing common world constituted by political life,” was confronted with a political reality of compromise that not only betrayed the psychic needs of his supporters but also threatened to foreclose the opportunity for laying the real and imaginary foundations of economic recovery in the near future.

In “Barack Obama’s Orphic Mysteries,” Donald Pease offers an alternative reading to this recurring dilemma of political romanticism ver-
sus *Realpolitik*, proposing that Obama succeeded in fabricating a racial counterimaginary that subtended his campaign and election and stabilized his presidency, most notably against the assault of the Tea Party and his controversial foreign policies. Equally rejecting the roles of civil rights leader and illegal alien/Muslim terrorist, this new imaginary “discerned the black messiah/black devil complex as the racist antinomy that underpinned the history of race relations in the United States,” thus deregulating “what was considered possible and impossible for African American political leaders to desire.” The resulting rift was effectively filled, and continuously refilled, by Obama’s plea for “a more perfect union,” the foundational fantasy of his success. This success (if one wants to call it that) is “orphic” in the sense that Obama discerned the structuring antinomy underpinning the United States’ racial imaginary when viewing the film *Black Orpheus* but did not displace it during his presidency. Obama’s desire for a “more perfect union,” Pease thus concludes, may be—like that of the classical Orpheus—made up of “radical hope and audacious despair.”

The volume closes with a contribution by Winfried Fluck that explores the imaginary through the lens of reception aesthetics. In his long-standing engagement with theories of American culture before and after the transnational turn, Fluck has been particularly invested in two projects: he has relentlessly scrutinized the underlying premises of the field of American studies and their impact on prefiguring their object of study; and he has spelled out the process of “imaginary transfer,” which he conceives as foundational to aesthetic experience and as a touchstone for assessing both the field’s metamorphosing object and its method of study. His chapter, “The Imaginary and the Second Narrative: Reading as Transfer,” is the most comprehensive attempt to date to bring these two trajectories together. “Imaginary transfer” constitutes a state in between the fictional and the nonfictional world inhabited by the recipient, as this recipient, in an act of imaginary role play, realizes the fictional world on the basis of his or her experience. When engaging with fictional texts, this act of transfer can exceed and enhance the actual, lived experience of the reader. Expanding on this model, Fluck now introduces the notion of a “second narrative” to designate a chain of analogies drawn by the reader between the world of the text and that of the reader. Because the production of analogies can depart from any element within the fictional world, it radically widens the scope of imaginary transfer, thus helping explain why there are endlessly diverging interpretations of texts, and also why texts with little obvious resonance for our own time still matter to us. The
“second narrative,” Fluck contends, is not determinable by interpellation or discursively produced readers since it consists of multiple positions of identification, opening up ever-newer possibilities of analogy production.

The ramifications of Fluck’s emphasis on “imaginary transfer” for the theoretical discussion of the imaginary are as remarkable as they are controversial: Just as his account of the necessary plurality of second narratives calls into question the assumed goal of communities of interpreters to reach a consensus about a text’s meaning—disagreement, writes Fluck, is a “resource,” not a “problem”—so does the imaginary as a whole appear less a communal or cultural consensus about values and ways of doing things and much more the act of individuals in finding analogies to cultural givens. Because they articulate what hitherto could not find expression, these analogies are never entirely foreseeable; instead they generate the new. This capacity, however, can be activated only in a dialogue with the given, and it is by no means certain that what is generated will or can transpire into a political or collective vision. If this conception of the imaginary is brought to bear on the transnational—a step Fluck leaves to his readers—one might conclude that the transnational as produced by the imaginary is less a site of preeminently political resistance than an aesthetic construct emerging from the analogizing interaction with the world of the everyday. In fact, if the transnational and imaginary interact in bringing forth uncharted worlds, this becomes possible only under the condition of a world that is thoroughly aestheticized.

What is called for, then, is a self-critical account of how Americanists and fellow humanists, in using transnationalism to add a chapter to the long story of the search for resistance, have instituted and mastered an aesthetics of resistance. Such a self-reflexive turn requires a conceptualization of the triangular relation between the imaginary, aesthetics, and politics, a relation that complicates Jacques Rancière’s approach to the irreducibly political dimension of the aesthetic in interesting ways. While agreeing with Rancière that an aesthetics is, in fact, at the core of any politics in the sense that “politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time,” and aesthetic practices distribute the sensible in ways that enact the “delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise” (Rancière 12–13), the imaginary plays into these distributing processes—as a cohering force that is essential to consolidating patterns of distribution and as an articulating force that can substantially alter them. The imaginary is not political per se, just as the concept alone is
not entirely adequate for conferring political relevance on the work of humanists. Yet it is also the case that there can be no politics that does not play on the field of the imaginary.

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