

Traveling Poetry

Jahan Ramazani

Rapid, multidirectional, unexplained—such are the geographic displacements in the famous opening of Ezra Pound’s canto 81, written while the poet was incarcerated in the U.S. Army Disciplinary Training Center near Pisa:

Zeus lies in Ceres’ bosom
Taishan is attended of loves
 under Cythera, before sunrise
and he said: “Hay aquí mucho catolicismo— (sounded catol*ith*ismo)
 y muy poco reliHion”¹

With the help of allusions repeated and elaborated elsewhere in *The Cantos*, we infer that the predawn sun nestling behind mountains near Pisa is being refigured as a Greek sun god lying in the bosom of the fertility goddess Ceres. The cone-shaped mountain that Pound could see from his detention cage is also troped as a sacred mountain in China before the next line returns to Greece—an Ionian island sacred to Aphrodite—and the ensuing passage moves on to personal memories of Spain. Not all poetry travels at such velocity; some poetry dwells in a specific, intricately detailed location. But in the spirit of Edward W. Said’s exploration of “traveling theory” and James Clifford’s of “traveling culture,” I consider what enables *traveling poetry* by Pound and many other modern and contemporary poets to leap across national

¹ *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 517.

and cultural boundaries.² Recognizing the “inextinguishable taint” of the term *travel*—its recreational, bourgeois, European, gendered associations—Clifford nevertheless reclaims the word, using it expansively to describe different “practices of crossing and interaction,” “the ways people leave home and return, enacting differently centered worlds, interconnected cosmopolitanisms” (39, 3, 27–28). How does poetry leave home and return? What makes possible poetry’s differently centered cosmopolitanisms? How does poetic travel differ from global transport by other means?

Poetry travels partly, of course, by means of traveling poets. Pound’s incarceration in Italy reminds us that various expatriates, migrants, and émigrés famously transformed poetry in the first part of the twentieth century. Modern and contemporary poets have been changing places and have been changed by places, from Euromodernists such as W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Mina Loy and Harlem Renaissance poets such as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, to the postwar American poets Elizabeth Bishop, John Ashbery, and James Merrill (analyzed by Robert von Hallberg and Jeffrey Gray as tourists and travelers), to postcolonial and immigrant poets such as Okot p’Bitek, Lorna Goodison, and Charles Simic.³ Along with literal movement, modern and contemporary poetry written in English is also inevitably shaped by the circulation of images and ideas by radio, television, the Internet, and other fleet forms of global mediation.

Poetry also travels because poems travel. During his confinement Pound is elated to find *The Pocket Book of Verse*, edited by Morris Edmund Spere, on a toilet seat—a surprising juxtaposition of the humble commode and poetic transport:

² Edward W. Said, “Traveling Theory,” in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 226–47; James Clifford, “Traveling Cultures,” in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 17–46.

³ Robert von Hallberg, “Tourists,” in *American Poetry and Culture, 1945–1980* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 62–92; Jeffrey Gray, *Mastery’s End: Travel and Postwar American Poetry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005). I explore issues of poetry, transnationalism, and migration in “A Transnational Poetics,” in “Transnational Citizenship and the Humanities,” ed. Wai Chee Dimock, special issue, *American Literary History* 18, no. 2 (2006): 332–59; and in “Black British Poetry and the Translocal,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

That from the gates of death,
 that from the gates of death: Whitman or Lovelace
 found on the jo-house seat at that
 in a cheap edition! [and thanks to Professor Speare]
 (513)

Modern printing and more recent technologies of dissemination help poems by Whitman, Lovelace, and Pound travel via back pockets, iPods, and Web sites, particularly because of poetry's trademark compression. Having only Speare's poetry anthology, a Bible, and an edition of Confucius with him, Pound conjures other poems from memory, and indeed another reason that poems travel is their mnemonic structure: the rhythmic, sonic, rhetorical, and syntactic patterning that led Auden to define poetry as "memorable speech."⁴

Poetry is especially well suited to traveling in yet another sense—that is, the imaginative enactment of geographic movement, as in the rapid-fire transnational displacements in Pound's Pisan canto, and it is this dimension of poetry's travel, albeit interconnected with the others I have mentioned, that is the focus of this essay. Poetry is but one among many kinds of cross-national transit, alongside the people, technology, money, images, and ideas that, as Arjun Appadurai shows, flow across modern national boundaries.⁵ Nor does poetic travel always outstrip travel by other genres and discourses. To the extent that poetry is what is lost in translation, travel writing, fiction, music, cinema, and the visual arts may travel more easily across cultural boundaries. Poetry is stitched and hitched to the peculiarities of the language in which it is written. Moreover, because of its reliance on the line and the stanza as units of organization, poetry may be a less effective means of ethnographic transport than, say, a chapter of a realist novel or an act of a naturalist play. The detailed description of a wrestling match in chapter 6 of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*—unlike fellow Ibo writer Christopher Okigbo's intensely self-reflexive lyric sequences—firmly situates the non-Ibo reader in the lifeworld of a Nigerian village at the turn of the twentieth century. Because of its formal patterning and energetic

⁴W. H. Auden, introduction to *The Poet's Tongue*, ed. W. H. Auden and John Garrett (London: Bell, 1935), v–x.

⁵Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 37.

verbal self-consciousness, poetry typically offers less transparent access to other cultural worlds. Similarly, whereas travel writing, the Odyssean tale, or, for that matter, the travel poem (minus the participial suffix) involves “the *territorial* passage from one zone to another”⁶—that is, a macro-level transition, a mimetically plotted border crossing from home to foreign land—the travel in traveling lyric often occurs at the micro level: swift territorial shifts by line, trope, sound, or stanza that result in flickering movements, oscillations, and juxtapositions.

What poetry loses as a traveling medium that frequently eschews density of social detail, resists translation, and interrupts mimesis, that meditates on its linguistic surface and fractures the spatiotemporal passage from one zone to another, it gains through structural efficiency and compression. Because the line is fundamental as a unit of meaning in poetry, each of the first four lines of the opening of Pound’s canto 81 can turn to a different geocultural space: Greek myth, Chinese mountain, Greek island, memories of Spain. Frank O’Hara’s poem “The Day Lady Died” grounds itself in specificities of space and time—“It is 12:20 in New York a Friday / three days after Bastille day, yes / it is 1959”—yet, as first intimated by the seemingly throwaway “Bastille day,” which superimposes Paris on New York, the jumps across national boundaries, from one line to the next, could hardly be more quick and nimble: from musings about “what the poets / in Ghana are doing these days” to Paul Verlaine and Pierre Bonnard to Richmond Lattimore’s translation of Hesiod, and so forth, before winding up with Billie Holiday at the 5 Spot—a headlong associative movement that, by its elegant fluidity, gives the prosaic details their “poetic” quality.⁷ Such a poem is itself a kind of “contact zone,” in Mary Louise Pratt’s term, a site of migrating and mingling tropes, geographies, and cultural signifiers.⁸ Lyric’s intercultural “contact” tends to diverge, how-

⁶ Brian Musgrove, “Travel and Unsettlement: Freud on Vacation,” in *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*, ed. Steve Clark (London: Zed, 1999), 31. On the travel in travel writing see the other essays in Clark’s collection and in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁷ *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 325.

⁸ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 6–7.

ever, from that of travel writing, a genre satirized by Ashbery in “The Instruction Manual” for exoticizing foreign places and fetishistically dwelling on their particulars, such as those of a dreamily wondrous Guadalajara, conjured up by a worker bored by having to write about the uses of a new metal. As indicated by O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s work, traveling poetry proceeds more quickly and abruptly, through translocational juxtapositions, which by their rapidity and lyric compression typically prevent us from believing that we are entering an alternative space and foreground instead the negotiations and fabrications of imaginative travel.

For other poets, the stanza is a mapping tool that helps efficiently establish location and translocation. The transnational dislocations in Yeats’s “Lapis Lazuli” occur in the gaps between stanzas sited in the British Isles, then Greece, then China. In one stanza of “Vacillation” the Duke of Chou, author of the *I Ching*, looks out on a Chinese field, and in the next a conqueror in Babylon or Nineveh draws rein, both Chinaman and Middle Easterner crying out, “Let all things pass away.”⁹ By the logic of *stanza* as geographic room, the white space in between functions like a doorway between cultural worlds, also linked in this instance by a shared refrain, stanzaic pattern, and use of the *contemptus mundi* topos. Even when not strictly bounding regions by stanza, the stepwise *abab* structure of Archibald MacLeish’s quatrains in “You, Andrew Marvell” helps track nightfall’s westward sweep from Persia to Baghdad and Arabia, to Palmyra, Lebanon, and Crete, to Sicily, Spain, and Africa. Also moving westward, from Brooklyn to California, Hart Crane’s *Bridge* enacts geopoetic migration through sectional divisions that, by shifting among free verse, blank verse, ballad, and other forms, poetically accentuate and propel dislocation. In these and other examples, the traveling reader never fully inhabits any of these spaces but is brought up short by the formal framing and rapid multiple transitions. Deploying sound, structure, and self-reflection, the poet enunciates and plays on the construction of, and movement through, multiple worlds.

⁹ W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, vol. 1 of *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran and George Mills Harper (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 249–53.

Rhyme, rhythm, and poetry's many other forms of sonic patterning also enable imaginative travel. When Melvin B. Tolson sonically links the Christian god ("Great God A'mighty!"), the Greek god of fortune ("the whim / of Tyche"), and an American folk hero ("*The Birth of John Henry!*"), the connective force of rhyme helps his verse cross enormous distances.¹⁰ "Rhyme," Derek Walcott declares in *Omeros*, "is the language's / desire to enclose the loved world in its arms," and in this long poem the rhymes of Walcott's zigzagging terza rima stitch sonic patterns that traverse much of the world's surface, from the Caribbean to the United States, Ireland, and Africa.¹¹ Like such lyricized epics, lyrics per se make use of a globe-traversing weave. The sound patterns echoing across one of the most humorously overloaded short poems of the last century, Wallace Stevens's "Bantams in Pine-Woods," may not move across literal geographies, but the poem's first lines, mocking the chief who turns out to be the solipsistically inflated "ten-foot poet," unmistakably evoke distinct and widely separated places: "Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan / Of tan with henna hackles, halt!"¹² With the help of the repeated phoneme *-an*, a pre-Columbian chief—perhaps Aztec, Mayan, or a conflation of the two—is dressed (from the Persian *khafahn*) and dyed (from the Arabic *hinna*) like a Middle Easterner. At poem's end the phoneme *-an* of "portly Azcan's" pseudo-place-name helps stretch poetic topography all the way to the Appalachian Mountains. Riding the back of such caravans of sound, poetry traverses real and semireal landscapes—perhaps more nimbly than less sonically rich, more prosaically referential forms. Its self-signaling textures foreground the linguistic and imaginative construction of poetic travel. Thomas Hardy's Drummer Hodge has voyaged from a North Atlantic home to a southern African grave, and the rhymes, assonances, syntac-

¹⁰ *Harlem Gallery, and Other Poems of Melvin B. Tolson*, ed. Raymond Nelson (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 279.

¹¹ Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 75.

¹² Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 75–76. See Ann Mikkelsen, "‘Fat! Fat! Fat!’—Wallace Stevens's Figurations of Masculinity," *Journal of Modern Literature* 27 (2003): 106–13; and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908–1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 95–97, which adds another intercultural subtext by arguing that the poem responds to the threat of Vachel Lindsay's racial impersonation in "The Congo."

tic parallels, and alternating four- and three-beat lines both connect and ironically disconnect these vastly discrepant spaces:

Yet portion of that unknown plain
 Will Hodge for ever be;
 His homely Northern breast and brain
 Grow to some Southern tree,
 And strange-eyed constellations reign
 His stars eternally.¹³

Unlike Rupert Brooke's notorious World War I poem "The Soldier," which imperially extends national territory wherever the soldier dies ("there's some corner of a foreign field / That is forever England"), Hardy's poem, while acknowledging some cross-hemispheric fusion, emphasizes the unhomeliness of the deterritorialized English body thrown into a landscape that will remain forever "strange" and "unknown."¹⁴

Sometimes rhythm serves as a way of intertwining disparate cultural spaces, as when Louise Bennett plays with and against the ballad meter she creolizes with Jamaican rhythms or when Gwendolyn Brooks merges the syncopations of African American speech with the norms of a Petrarchan sonnet in "The Rites for Cousin Vit": "Kicked back the casket-stand. But it can't hold her / That stuff and satin aiming to enfold her."¹⁵ In "A Song in the Front Yard" Brooks entwines her iambs with vernacular triple rhythms and subtly inflected African American phrasing: "That George'll be taken to Jail soon or late / (On account of last winter he sold our back gate)" (6). Whether imposed or willingly adapted, meter, rhythm, stanza, and other prosodic elements have always traveled across cultural and territorial boundaries. Consider, for example, the Japanese haiku, famously anglicized by the imagists, or the Arabic ghazal, adapted for over a thousand years into Persian (taking its canonical form in that language), Turkish, Urdu, German, and English, most recently by the Kashmiri American poet Agha Shahid Ali. Despite William Carlos Williams's nativist fulminations against

¹³ *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Samuel Hynes, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982–95), 1:122.

¹⁴ *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke*, ed. George Edward Woodberry (New York: Lane, 1918), 111.

¹⁵ Gwendolyn Brooks, *Selected Poems* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 58.

European prosodic strictures, the “quintessentially American” poet can write a poem that employs a rolling, waltzlike triple rhythm to evoke the dancing of the Dutch peasants in Brueghel’s painting *The Kermess*:

the dancers go round, they go round and
around, the squeal and the blare and the
tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles
tipping their bellies.¹⁶

Sometimes the allure of a rhythm, a formal structure, or a “foreign” aesthetic is stronger than ideological fortifications against cross-cultural contact and contamination.

A figuratively rich discourse, poetry enables travel in part by its characteristically high proportion of figures of thought, as well as figures of speech. Since *metaphor* derives from the Greek “transfer” or “carry across,” it should come as little surprise that poetry’s figurative language enacts geographic and other kinds of movement. “Moving on or going back to where you came from, / bad news is what you mainly travel with,” begins Amy Clampitt’s elegy for her mother, “A Procession at Candlemas.”¹⁷ The mourning daughter associates the vehicles moving westward with her on the highway with examples of “transhumance,” or seasonal migration, in the Pyrenees, the Andes (“red-tasseled pack llamas”), and the Kurdish mountains (22); her tropes for travel travel across three continents in three lines. As Bonnie Costello writes, “Clampitt reveals how poetry might become a guide in developing this nomadic imagination: searching out and crossing boundaries, scavenging, finding value in what has been ignored, setting up formal patterns which she then works to defeat.”¹⁸ Clampitt’s nomadic embroideries might well seem to have little in common with Sylvia Plath’s emotionally eruptive work. But the rapid rush of substitutions in Plath’s “Cut” enacts intercontinental, among other forms of, displacement. Having seen her thumb as a pilgrim scalped by an American Indian, the speaker addresses it as a

¹⁶ *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, 2 vols. (New York: New Directions, 1986–88), 1:58.

¹⁷ Amy Clampitt, *The Kingfisher* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 22.

¹⁸ Bonnie Costello, “Amy Clampitt: Nomad Exquisite,” in *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 118–19.

Saboteur,
 Kamikaze man—

 The stain on your
 Gauze Ku Klux Klan
 Babushka
 Darkens and tarnishes. . . .¹⁹

In these few words the poem's pain-exhilarated metaphorical substitutions arc across vast cultural distances, from the Allied saboteur (French) to the Axis kamikaze (Japanese), from the Klansman's hood to a Russian head kerchief. Plath's figurative leaps, especially from herself to Jews in Nazi concentration camps and Japanese victims of nuclear bombs, have been criticized as too free and indiscriminate; even the sympathetic Seamus Heaney worries about her "rampaging so permissively in the history of other people's sorrows."²⁰ Yet Heaney's poetry, too, shuttles back and forth across divergent spaces—especially, in his early work, across the North Sea to connect the present-day victims of Northern Ireland's atrocities with the sacrificial victims deposited in Jutland's bogs.

Indeed, geopoetic oscillation, as we might term such imaginative movement back and forth between discrepant topographies, is prominent in, though not exclusive to, much modern and contemporary verse. In Ted Hughes's "Out," the lived reality of the Yorkshire farmland is continually sucked under by his father's searing memories of the carnage in Gallipoli: "jawbones and blown-off boots, tree-stumps, shellcases and craters."²¹ In "The Glass Essay" Anne Carson slides between a wintry Canadian landscape and the English moors of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*; in "The Great Palaces of Versailles" Rita Dove's Beulah reimagines the white women who come to Charlotte's Dress Shoppe as variants of the French court ladies of Versailles; and in "Memphis Blues" Sterling A. Brown's bluesman sees little difference between the flood-ravaged Memphis along the Mississippi and "de other

¹⁹ Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 235–56.

²⁰ Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose, 1978–1987* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 165.

²¹ Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 165.

Memphis in / History.”²² Lyric highlights how lines of thought, analogy, and cross-cultural reading—whether strong ligaments or tenuous filaments—connect disparate human experiences. If sometimes the oscillating poem merges landscapes, at other times it plays ironically on the differences between the terrains it shoves together. Walcott’s poem “The Sea Is History,” for example, wryly juxtaposes biblical and Caribbean historical geographies, and Sherman Alexie’s “Crow Testament” sardonically superimposes Bible-scapes on American Indian history and myth:

Cain lifts Crow, that heavy black bird
and strikes down Abel.

Damn, says Crow, I guess
this is just the beginning.²³

Instead of situating themselves imaginatively in the interstices between two geographies, poems by Pound, Tolson, Paul Muldoon, Kamau Brathwaite, Susan Howe, and other poets rapidly spawn and skip amid a multitude of locations. Howe’s “Rückenfigur,” for example, seems to plant its first line unambiguously in Cornwall: “Iseult stands at Tintagel.”²⁴ But within a few stanzas the name Tristan is morphing across cultural landscapes,

Tristran Tristan Tristrant
Tristram Trystan Trystram
Tristrem Tristanz Drust
Drystan . . .
(131)

while Iseult becomes “Iseut Isolde Ysolt Essyllt / bride of March Marc Mark” (131). The seeming stability of a proper name fractures into the improprieties of its variants in a multitude of texts from different times and places, sometimes by means of the shift of a single letter (e.g., “Marc Mark”). Orthographic differences are shown to signify and miniaturize geocultural migrations of names and legends. In poetry, travel—in-

²² *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, ed. Michael S. Harper (Evanston, IL: TriQuarterly, 1996), 60.

²³ Sherman Alexie, *One Stick Song* (Brooklyn, NY: Hanging Loose, 2000), 26.

²⁴ Susan Howe, *Pierce-Arrow* (New York: New Directions, 1999), 129.

stead of being the plot-driven excursus into a foreign land—may occur at the level of a substituted letter, a varied rhythm, or a pivoting line.

This ease of movement by lines and stanzas, sounds and tropes, juxtapositions and morphologies, may not always seem a winning aspect of poetry. Such cross-cultural conflations, forays, and leaps may appear to ride roughshod over significant differences. Alexie's humorous juxtapositions, for example, may risk the very insensitivity to differences between biblical and American Indian narratives that have been catastrophic for native peoples in the Americas—except that he highlights the jarring discrepancies as much as the similarities. Plath may seem irresponsible for linking the Allied saboteur to the Axis kamikaze, the Ku Klux Klan hood to the Russian babushka, and for eliding their political and historical differences—except that her metaphorical connections also underscore the cross-regional and global violence registered and compressed in the poetic unconscious at midcentury. Does Stevens's sonic yoking of the pre-Columbian with the Middle Eastern and in turn the Appalachian repress the regions' historical and geocultural dissimilarities? Perhaps, although part of the burden of his poem is the bantam's rebuke to the grandiose poet for his reductive and idealist insensitivity to specifics, such as those riotously played on by Stevens. Does Clampitt's association of her mournful journey with seasonal migrations in the Pyrenees, the Andes, and the Kurdish mountains trip too easily across inequalities and erase cultural specificities? Maybe, but surely we would not wish to crimp the cross-geographic reach of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century globalized imagination, forcing a poet like Clampitt to ignore connections among migrant mountain populations and limit the range of her associations to the United States. Does Pound's syncretic verse too easily appropriate Chinese, Greek, and Spanish locales and myths and place-names for his self-elegiac purposes? Surely the risk, as in these other poetic examples, is there—a risk that arises in each instance partly from the velocity of the traveling poem, partly from the relative freedom of the aesthetic realm. But such criticisms may assume a too rigid model of identity.

To wag one's finger at these poems' metaphorical, sonic, and structural connections is to presuppose the discreteness and stability of each cultural unit, when each culture is always already thoroughly enmeshed in a multitude of others. It is to impose an ethical and quasi-legal notion

of cultural ownership that is inimical to poetry's radial connections, imaginative leaps, and boundary-crossing ventures. And it is to box creative expression within identitarian preconceptions resisted by poetry's hybridizing, associative force. Surely some poetic maneuvers may be harder to defend, such as William Stafford's foray into Wounded Knee in "Report to Crazy Horse," Robert Duncan's into the primitive and primal Africa of "An African Elegy," and June Jordan's to the same continent in "Poem about My Rights"—poems that may less skillfully and self-consciously traverse uneven cultural terrain. But these risks are inextricably bound up with the characteristic strengths of poetry, as seen in traveling poems by Hardy, Stevens, Pound, Plath, Heaney, Okigbo, Walcott, Howe, and others. Cross-cultural contamination and leakage may well be more congenial to poetry than boundary-drawing orthodoxies of the pure, the different, and the native. Traveling poetry helps foreground how, through imaginative as well as literal mingling and merging, new coinages, new intergeographic spaces, even new compound identities come into being.²⁵

Although examples could be spun out ad infinitum, closer travelogical analysis of poems by an early-twentieth-century African American poet, a midcentury Euro-American expatriate, and a late-century Latino poet may shed light on how, why, and to what effect poetry travels and what the implications are for a poetics of transnational identity. Langston Hughes recounts being inspired to compose "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" while he crossed the Mississippi, a recent high school graduate, en route to see his father in Mexico.²⁶ In a mere four lines his poem crosses four rivers, one in Southwest Asia, two in Africa, one in North America:

²⁵ Among the theoretical works informing this general view of cross-cultural globalism are Salman Rushdie, "In Good Faith," in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (London: Granta, 1991), 393–414; Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 120–57; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1–40; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Clifford, *Routes*, 1–46; Michael F. Brown, *Who Owns Native Culture?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 43–68; and Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006), 101–35.

²⁶ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Knopf, 1940), 55; Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986–88), 1:39–40.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
 I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
 I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
 I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went
 down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all
 golden in the sunset.²⁷

What makes it possible for the poem to cross such distances? By the logic of poetic lineation, each of these end-stopped lines locates itself in a different place, and the gap between one line and the next marks a distance that can be thousands of miles. The disjunctive logic of poetic lineation instructs us not to expect geographic continuity. Each line is a different scene, a different chapter, a different cultural world. Still, the poem's countervailing connections span these dislocations and moderate their effect. The gelatinous, Whitmanian "I" binds together globally disparate experiences. A figure of speech, anaphora also functions as a figure of thought, a trope for the repetitions and replications of diverse human experiences in different times and places. All the rivers are seen as resembling one another, and all figuratively fuse with the poet's blood flow and all-knowing soul.

Although Hughes's poem is often read as an example of what Walter Benn Michaels calls "a commitment to a poetry of identity,"²⁸ specifically an African American or African diaspora identity, the poem's affirmation of a new "Negro" identity is paradoxically enmeshed in, and dependent on, a declaration of transracial, planetary identity: "the flow of human blood in human veins" (*Collected Poems*, 23). The poem's naming of rivers in particular is often described as evidencing the speaker's racial identity, yet two of the four rivers, the Euphrates and the Mississippi, are hardly African, and only one of the remaining rivers is mainly in sub-Saharan Africa. The poem "maps a truly global geography of rivers," as Jeff Westover notes.²⁹ Hughes wrote the poem in 1920 and published it in 1921, when another writer was

²⁷ *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad with David Roessel (New York: Knopf, 1997), 23.

²⁸ Walter Benn Michaels, "American Modernism and the Poetics of Identity," *Modernism/Modernity* 1 (1994): 51.

²⁹ Jeff Westover, "Africa/America: Fragmentation and Diaspora in the Work of Langston Hughes," *Callaloo* 25 (2002): 1221. On Hughes's black internationalism see Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 59–68.

conceiving and composing a poem that juxtaposes rivers on separate continents—the Thames, the Rhine, the Ganges, and perhaps subliminally the Mississippi. Both Eliot’s and Hughes’s poems assert knowledge of rivers represented as distant sites of human origin: the ancient Ganges for Eliot and the civilization-cradling Euphrates for Hughes. The epistemological claims in these poems—to have “known rivers” far and wide, even at the dawn of civilization—brashly overstep the bounds of each writer’s lived experience. But Eliot’s poem seems overburdened with the knowledge garnered by global imaginative travel, while Hughes’s speaker emphatically and exuberantly claims the authority to know. Instead of representing himself as being at the end of an enervated civilization, looking elsewhere for moral and spiritual guidance, Hughes looks backward to look forward, to summon a boldly affirmed power to speak as a “Negro”—a new “Negro,” whose knowledge is both racial (the Congo and the Nile) and extraracial (the Euphrates), both African and transcivilizational.³⁰ Like the trope of the river, the blood in the poem functions paradoxically as a signifier of the speaker’s racial specificity and his shared humanity. The lyric instantiates its dual emphasis on racial and transracial identity in its hybridization of African American and Euro-American cultural forms. Written in a free-versifying and multitude-encompassing Whitmanian voice, the poem also summons the rhetoric and imagery of spirituals, in which to go “down by the riverside” is to seek a site where conflict can be reconciled: “Ain’t gonna study war no more.”

Although racial identity is often conceived in terms of roots, this poem takes multiple routes leading in different directions. Its allusions to slavery—the building of the pyramids in Egypt and Lincoln’s trip to New Orleans—suggest that the poem energetically displaces one kind of travel, the horror of slaves bought and sold down rivers against their will, with the New Negro’s imaginative and literal travel across continents at will. The lyric’s rapid, voluntary, nonsequential movements are thus the reverse of the terrifying constraints of enslavement. Although the poem tracks the sun’s diurnal course, the lyric’s global river travel cannot be mapped as a linear trajectory across historical time: it turns from what was then considered the original site of human civilization,

³⁰ On the poem’s going back to a “pre-‘racial’ dawn” and its avoidance of “racial essentialism” see George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 415.

the Euphrates; to the Congo, where the Kongo kingdom was in place from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries; to the ancient civilization of the Nile; to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mississippi. Nor is a linear spatial mapping possible from east to west, because, again, of the middle lines about the Congo and then the Nile. This zig-zag movement across time and space emphasizes that the verse turns where the speaker wants to turn it (*vertere*), asserting the authority of an unfettered and globe-traversing poetic “I.” From a narrowly identitarian perspective, Hughes may seem to travel too freely and quickly, eliding important geocultural differences among ancient Babylonians and Egyptians, Africans of the Kongo kingdom, and nineteenth-century Americans. Yet his freewheeling poetic travel looks different when seen in the contexts that inform it: the haunting transgenerational memory of forced travel down the river; the claiming of a common humanity historically denied to African Americans; and an understanding of poetry as a discursive space that—by means of place-leaping lineation, cross-cultural symbols, and aesthetic hybridization—affords a remarkable freedom of movement and affiliative connection.

Fifty years later another American poet explores questions of travel, once again staging poetic self-discovery in a global context. Like Hughes’s lyric “I,” the “I” in Elizabeth Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room” (1971) defines itself in relation to other cultures in distant parts of the world. But whereas Hughes’s poem traverses continents to embrace continuities between distant civilizations and the poem’s “Negro” speaker, whose soul contains cross-cultural multitudes in a display of newfound traveling freedom and a newly affirmed (cross-)cultural identity, Bishop’s almost-seven-year-old “Elizabeth” shrinks from the shocking difference-in-sameness she sees in the indigenous peoples pictured in the *National Geographic*. Instead of stabilizing, authorizing, and enlarging the lyric “I,” as in Hughes’s poem, imaginative travel puts the subject in Bishop’s poem at risk—risk that, paradoxically, affords the enunciation of lyric self-consciousness. Recounting, in Mutlu Konuk Blasing’s Wordsworthian phrase, the “growth of a poet’s mind,” the poem explores how the media’s global circulation of images impinges on an individual’s emerging subjectivity.³¹ The young “Elizabeth,” Lee Edel-

³¹ Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *American Poetry—The Rhetoric of Its Forms* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 114.

man observes in an astute reading, discovers that sexuality is hardly natural but artificially fashioned and constrained.³² But the girl's revelation about her common condition as a female human being—akin to both the naked women in the pictures and the heavily clad women in the dentist's office, including her aunt—is no less a revelation about cultural difference:

A dead man slung on a pole
—“Long Pig,” the caption said.
Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying.³³

In Worcester, Massachusetts, in February 1918, the young girl suddenly finds herself traveling imaginatively to a place visited and photographed by the explorers Osa and Martin Johnson. The mass media present to the imagination, as Appadurai writes, “a rich, ever-changing store of possible lives” (53). Elizabeth's encounter with alien bodies and cultural practices shocks her into the recognition not only of sameness but also of difference, destabilizing the naturalness of her own cultural world, which suddenly shrinks into one among an indefinite array of contingent possibilities. Her vertiginous

sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space

is in part due to her initiation into becoming a global subject, once anchored to part of the world by the illusion of its completeness but now unmoored and floating free among cultural and racial differences.

³² Lee Edelman, “The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's ‘In the Waiting Room,’” *Contemporary Literature* 26 (1985): 179–96. For a wide-ranging discussion of imaginative travel in Bishop's work see Bonnie Costello, “Excursive Sight,” in *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 127–74.

³³ Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 159–61.

Falling into the knowledge of her apartness and isolation, the girl confronts a terrifying continuity with the alien other, figured especially as “those awful hanging breasts,” which would normally signify primal connection but here also signify a dialectically constitutive difference. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes of the protagonist of *Jane Eyre*, the “‘subject-constitution’ of the female individualist” takes place through the contrast with the “‘native female.’”³⁴ First World subjectivity, the child’s sense of apartness and her emergence into self-recognition, depends here on the Third World, on both a recognition of continuity with these women and an exoticizing, primitivizing warding off of the cultural other as different from her own, discrete, insular self-identity. The metropolitan female subject is shocked into a differential self-understanding as nonnative, as other than the horrifying other in the magazine. Emphatically defined as a reader—“(I could read)” —Elizabeth is represented in terms of what Spivak calls a “self-marginalized uniqueness” (246), as a reader of images and texts (“Long Pig,” “the date”), in contrast to the sheer viscosity of the Third World bodies she sees. As Elizabeth “articulates herself in shifting relationship to what is at stake, the ‘native female’ as such (*within* discourse, *as* a signifier) is excluded from any share in this emerging norm” (244–45). As for the mature poet, she, like the *National Geographic* and like the Johnsons, reproduces and circulates images of Third World bodies and practices for First World consumption. The extent to which these images represent undifferentiated otherness is indicated by Bishop’s later confusion over their origin, which she referred to as “African” in an interview, claiming that they derived from what has proved a nonexistent issue of the *National Geographic*.³⁵ But Bishop most likely echoes the phrase “Long Pig” and the description of infants’ heads wound with coconut string, as Edelman notes (191), from Osa Johnson’s book *I Married Adventure*, and the Johnsons encountered these cultural phenomena not in Africa but during what Osa Johnson describes as an early adventure in the Melanesian islands of Malekula and Vao, in what was then the New

³⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 245.

³⁵ George Starbuck, “‘The Work!’ A Conversation with Elizabeth Bishop,” in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 318.

Hebrides and is now Vanuatu, among a chain of Pacific islands west of Fiji and east of Australia.³⁶ The encircled heads and necks are cast in a symmetrical relation to each other, an imagistic repetition given sonic emphasis (“wound round and round”), but Bishop’s echoic imagery and language traverse large distances; the Johnsons photographed women with multiple brass and horsehair necklaces in British East Africa, while the bare-breasted women pictured in *I Married Adventure* are Pacific Islanders and so-called Pygmies of the Belgian Congo. Bishop’s simile for ornamented necks—“wound round and round with wire / like the necks of light bulbs”—jarringly yokes together the primitive and the modern, and indeed the First World girl’s lightbulb moment of self-recognition depends on the primitivity against which she defines herself. Bishop’s language of shock and estrangement, “horrifying,” “awful,” recalls the similar affective vocabulary—“horrible looking” (117), “frightful” (120), “terror” (121, 122, 132), “terrifying” (123), “horrible” (131), “horror” (145, 156), “awful” (153)—in Osa Johnson’s descriptions of her encounters with Malekulans.

One way to reconsider the poem’s cross-civilizational shock is to juxtapose the young American girl’s horror of the “awful hanging breasts” with the reverse ethnography of an indigenous village woman in a poem published just five years earlier, the Ugandan Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* (1966). For Lawino, it is the breasts of white women and their non-European mimics that are horrifying. She cries out about her would-be white rival, Tina:

Her breasts are completely shrivelled up,
They are all folded dry skins,
They have made nests of cotton wool
And she folds the bits of cow-hide
In the nests
And call[s] them breasts!³⁷

The poetry of this passage’s hyperbole (“completely shrivelled up”) and circumlocution (“nests of cotton wool”) mirrors the speaker’s estrange-

³⁶ Osa Johnson, *I Married Adventure: The Lives and Adventures of Martin and Osa Johnson* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1940), 151. See also the photographs of heavily necklaced women in Osa Johnson, *Four Years in Paradise* (London: Hutchinson, 1941), plates after pp. 16 and 128.

³⁷ Okot p’Bitek, “*Song of Lawino*” and “*Song of Ocol*” (London: Heinemann, 1984), 39.

ment from a cultural practice—wearing bras—that has traveled from the “developed” to the “developing world.” Just as Bishop’s Elizabeth cannot fathom the binding of heads or necks, as formally signaled by the perplexed repetitions and the troping of ornamented necks as the necks of lightbulbs, so too Lawino is dumbfounded by the strange cultural practices of white women:

They mould the tips of the cotton nests
So that they are sharp
And with these they prick
The chests of their men!

(39)

Whereas the nakedness of the hanging black breasts frightens the young Elizabeth, Lawino proclaims the virtue of the Acoli dancing without hiding anything:

Small breasts that have just emerged,
And large ones full of boiling milk,
Are clearly seen in the arena. . . .

(43)

For Lawino, the object of revulsion is the customary behavior of white women, who cover up their bodies and hold their mates in stultifying proximity, who

prick the chests of their men
With the cotton nests
On their chests.

(44)

Elizabeth associates native women with violence to the body—cannibalism, head elongation, neck binding—whereas Lawino’s language links such violence with white women (“sharp,” “prick”) and the bizarre ways that they treat their bodies and the bodies of men. For all their differences, in both Okot’s poem and Bishop’s, the breast—seemingly the primal locus of mammalian connection—is the bodily site around which the traveling female subject establishes her distinctiveness vis-à-vis the cultural other. For these writers of widely divergent backgrounds, poetry enables the exploration of modernity’s intensified circulation of images and practices, in part because poetic figures can richly evoke the defamiliarization of alienating encounters with cultural others

(whether clothed women with “cotton nests / On their chests” or naked women with necks “like the necks of light bulbs”), in part because the emergence, articulation, and delineation of personal and communal subjectivities have been hallmarks of poetic forms.

In Bishop’s poem Elizabeth’s First World othering of native women is unmistakable, so if Hughes’s traveling poem can easily be attacked for eliding geocultural differences, Bishop’s can be accused of exaggerating differences. Yet what distinguishes the encounter with otherness in “In the Waiting Room” from the Johnsons’ exoticist language and unselfconsciously triumphalist photographs is the poet’s foregrounding the precarious act of self-fashioning in a differential relation to the cultural other (as Okot does in *Song of Lawino*). In Spivak’s account the subject’s civilizational self-construction entails the unconscious suppression of the Third World other, but in Bishop’s poem the poetics of self-definition, including the girl’s fragile dependence on the other to become herself, is front and center. The speaker’s grown-up consciousness frames and drolly ironizes the young Elizabeth’s self-discovery: “I scarcely dared to look / to see what it was I was.” In the crisis moment in which the girl feels on the brink of oblivion, in danger of falling “into cold, blue-black space,” the heightened self-consciousness that has long been a staple of lyric comes to the fore, particularly in Elizabeth’s self-address and self-nomination:

. . . you are an *I*,
you are an *Elizabeth*,
you are one of *them*.

In Rimbaud’s famous declaration, “JE est un autre,” the subject is split, represented as both self and other, as indicated by the doubling of pronouns.³⁸ In Bishop’s quintessentially “lyric” moment of emerging self-consciousness, the vulnerable subject turns to address itself. It individuates itself by seizing on the first-person pronoun and bestowing on that self its proper name, yet it also deindividuates the self, employing indefinite articles that plunge the objectified self-as-other into a pool of resemblances (“an *I*,” “an *Elizabeth*”). The girl thinks to herself, “How ‘unlikely’” it is to be “like them,” and the poem’s play on like-

³⁸ Arthur Rimbaud to Georges Izambard, May 13, 1871, in *Oeuvres*, ed. Suzanne Bernard (Paris: Garnier, 1960), 344.

ness and unlikeness underscores the figurative comparisons between self and other on which self-understanding depends: the “similarities” that “held us all together / or made us all just one.” By virtue of lyric’s heightening of figuration, its self-reflexive framing, and its sharp attention to how trope and image fashion selves, cultures, worlds, the traveling poem illuminates the differential structure through which the globalized subject enunciates and understands itself.

An adequate defense of time-and-space travel by lyric poetry needs to take account of both its connective (Hughes) and differential (Bishop) tendencies in relation to cultural others, since lyrics of cross-cultural sameness and those of cross-cultural difference are equally open to critique. Should a poem, like Hughes’s, travel along vectors of poetic commonality, it may be suspected of eliding differences, colonizing and cannibalizing cultural others, appropriating alterity for self-interested projects cast in universalist guise. Should a poem, like Bishop’s, emphasize difference (cultural) within sameness (gender), it is exposed to the reverse criticism of exoticizing and stereotyping others, of overemphasizing and even manufacturing differences for the sake of propping up First World civilizational identities. Yet the parallels between these critiques—damned if you claim sameness, damned if you claim difference—indicate the dangers of a too stringent cross-cultural policing of literary identities. The metaphorical, lineal, and lyric expansiveness of traveling poetry—readily affording cross-cultural engagement, contact, and contamination—puts into question the adequacy of such limited and limiting models, which are identitarian even when represented as postcolonial, postmodern, or planetary, at least insofar as their logic appears to favor the foot-bound over the fleet-footed poem. Lyric’s nuanced attention to self-enunciation and self-construction in dialogic relation to the other should also give one pause before assimilating the genre to more blindly manipulative forms of global mediation.

While traveling poetry clearly has much in common with other globe-skipping forms, commodities, and discourses, some such poems, though glancing at their complicities with global market circulation, are at pains also to highlight the distinctiveness of poetry. Like Bishop’s and Hughes’s lyrics, a later traveling poem explores points of intersection among widely disparate and globally scattered images, help-

ing reveal further what enables poetry to travel, particularly as this travel has accelerated in the contemporary world and in contemporary poetry. What do Carl Sandburg's face, a plastic surgeon on TV, an American newspaper, signs forbidding laughter in Tiananmen Square, and the poem that records them all have in common?—so asks "Hysteria," by the Cuban-born poet Dionisio D. Martínez.³⁹ Riding the rails of multiple resonances of the figure of the line, this poem moves rapidly and unexpectedly among these disparate sites: the lines on Sandburg's face, the wrinkles that the plastic surgeon claims are caused by all facial expressions, the folds of an American newspaper, the signs in Tiananmen Square, and implicitly the lines crossed and recrossed in writing and "reading the lines" of verse. Yet despite all these similarities, the poem implicitly contrasts its idiosyncratic and nonviolent global shuttlings with a coercive form of epistemological globalism, troped as how each section of an American newspaper "is folded independently and believes it owns / the world." A humorous enjambment that fractures the politically loaded word "inter- // national" figures the poem's travel across topographic, stanzaic, and lineal gaps:

There's this brief item in the inter-
national pages: the Chinese government has posted
signs in Tiananmen Square, forbidding laughter.
I'm sure the plastic surgeon would approve, he'd say

the Chinese will look young much longer, their faces
unnaturally smooth, but what I see (although
no photograph accompanies the story) is laughter

bursting inside them.

Newspapers, governments, and doctors try to hold and even reinforce lines, whereas the poet uses lines to cross, rupture, and question what political and other kinds of normative lines would hold back ("laughter / bursting inside them"). The lyric "I" enables the poet to weave chiastically together both Sandburg's windy Chicago and the prohibitions in Tiananmen Square, both China and North America:

³⁹ Dionisio D. Martínez, *Bad Alchemy* (New York: Norton, 1995), 26–27.

I think of wind in Tiananmen Square, how a country
deprived of laughter ages invisibly; I think
of the Great Walls of North America. . . .

We are back to Hughes's Whitmanian all-encompassing, cross-civilizational, lyric "I," the poet's first-person meditative utterance as omnium gatherum: translocal, binding disparities, forging new and surprising connections in its travel across the globe. We are also back to the tropological exploration of sameness-in-difference in Bishop's poem, the poem as site of cross-cultural global comparison, contrast, and self-definition. Of course, Bishop's and Hughes's poems were already, in their own ways, mediating between these poles, turning between home and elsewhere, between what distinguishes our locational identities and what holds us "all together" or makes us "all just one." As in their poems, in Martínez's lyric and Pound's canto, Plath's "Cut" and Stevens's "Bantams in Pine-Woods," Okot's *Song of Lawino* and Howe's "Rückenfigur," the nimble leaps of cross-cultural figuration and rhythm, the nation-straddling juxtapositions of image and sound, compress, vivify, and illuminate the globe- and identity-traversing force of the traveling imagination.

Jahan Ramazani, Edgar F. Shannon Professor of English and department chair at the University of Virginia, is author of *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (1994) and *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (2001), among other works. He is also coeditor of *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (2003) and "The Twentieth Century and After" in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (2006).