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Re-thinking and Re-making Kinship —a Critical Reevaluation of the Narratives of (American) Modernity: An Interview with Nancy Bentley

Cécile Roudeau and Nancy Bentley

Nancy Bentley is a distinguished scholar of American literary and cultural studies. She received her PhD from Harvard University where she specialized in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature and culture. Her work, including the monographs *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture 1870-1920* and *The Ethnography of Manners*, has combined disciplinary perspectives in original ways, in particular law and literature, anthropology and literature. Her other research interests include theory of the novel, social theory, and cinema and media. The recipient of a Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching, Bentley has also taught and written about the history of American and African American literature, and she is currently writing a book on New World kinship and the American novel, a study of the way the novel has mediated the multiple forms of kinship coexisting in the Americas. We are proud to count her among the members of the scientific committee of *Transatlantica* and very honored that she has agreed to this interview.

CÉCILE ROUDEAU: You are Donald T. Regan Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, and I'd like to start from this title. "English" is at once the language within which the works you study were written and the language through which you articulate your research. At the same time, English has become an international language and no longer points to a specific geopolitical area, or if it does, it goes far beyond the United States, Britain and the "anglosphere." I'm wondering whether the perimeter of "English studies" has been a question that you, or your department, have addressed.

Nancy Bentley: Thank you for inviting me to reflect on these interview questions. And congratulations to *Transatlantica*, and to all who have developed and supported it, on the occasion of your twentieth anniversary.

I know some English Departments have responded to the changing contours of the discipline by revising their name. At Cornell University, for instance, faculty members recently renamed their unit the "Department of Literatures in English." My own department at Penn has not changed its name. But in the past decade or so, our hiring decisions certainly reflect the way "English studies" has become an umbrella term for the study of very different bodies of literature and culture. If you looked at the publications of our current faculty, the list would include not just work on Chaucer and Walt Whitman but studies of things like Ethiopian poetry, Mayan-language texts, graphic novels about Russia, memoirs of South Asian radical women, and even media infrastructure in India. Practically speaking, the labels of "English" and "literature" have been shading into misnomers. This unravels the coherence of our discipline a bit. But to my mind the cross-pollination of English studies with other languages and materials is a net gain.

C.R.: That faculty in an English Department publish on Ethiopian texts, or even novels about Russia, indeed unsettles our inherited categories. This also raises a question about the scale at which literary studies may take place. Is, or should, the national paradigm still be important for scholars in the "humanities"? And, by extension, what does it mean for you to be an "Americanist"? Is this a relevant label for you?

N.B.: I think the skepticism about too closely tying our scholarship to national literatures and national cultures was necessary and salutary. It cut many of the remaining cords tethering humanities scholarship to the more pernicious aspects of

the nationalism of the nineteenth-century North Atlantic world when humanities disciplines were professionalized in the academy. Within literary studies, transnational paradigms have ushered in important scholarship, some of it truly exhilarating. Jared Hickman's *Black Prometheus: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery* comes to mind as a recent example of the rich and surprising connections that a wide-lens study like his can allow us to see. Sometimes, though, it seems our wariness about the national paradigm has operated like a low-level phobia. That kind of reactive avoidance carries its own kind of risks. As someone who studies the literary history of the nineteenth century, I'm persuaded that the place and power of nation-states can't be elided without introducing distortions--there are too many aspects of literary production that you won't be able to see unless you are attuned to the importance of the national paradigm.

C.R.: Yes, the national paradigm is one of these heuristic categories that we cannot get away from but toward which we must remain consistently critical. Other such paradigms have been at the heart of your recent work. I am thinking in particular the paradigm of "kinship."

N.B.: Yes, I don't think you can understand the story of kinship in North America without reckoning with the nation as a form. A writer like James Fenimore Cooper has seen a decline in his stock within American literary studies, in part because his Leatherstocking novels are so emphatically nationalist. For my purposes, though, Cooper's nationalism operates in ways that can tell us new things about the story of kinship on the continent. In *Last of the Mohicans* (1826), he insists that the prospect of a Mohican character, Uncas, pairing off with the daughter of a Scottish military officer is nothing more than the silly delusion of the Native women who view the two as star-crossed lovers. Cooper's historical novel (set in the 1750s) dismisses that notion as an error arising from the backwardness of the Delaware women. Readers are meant to contrast the quaint superstition of the Delaware with a historical "knowledge" that the nation-to-come, the United States, was destined to grow out of the families and marriage practices of the Anglo settler population only.

But Cooper is protesting too much. Historians like Anne Hyde have shown that, at the time of the novel's publication, most of the trade in the trans-Mississippi West was still controlled by multiethnic family associations. These were powerful political bodies that had been created by marriages between European men (usually French but sometimes Scottish or Spanish) and indigenous women, or between European-descended women and indigenous men. The heads of these associations were usually indigenous men, descended from these marriages, who identified most closely with a particular Native nation. Cooper's novel was not rehearsing a truism about the US national history, although he wanted to make it appear that way; he was in effect trying to defeat a rival kinship system that still channeled power and wealth on much of the continent. He was trying to make it seem like an unthinkable alternative. Nationalism here is not a mystification that we should bypass; it is a player in a live contest between "vying empires" (Hyde), both of them derived from colonialism, but only one of them willing to have indigenous people share in directly controlling political and commercial power.

C.R.: Your recent essay on Jewett and Zitkala-Sa, and more generally, your work on kinship is of particular relevance today for a number of reasons. It seems to me that today the delineation of communities matters more and more (I'm thinking of Black Lives Matter, of the urgency in academia to find a place within American studies for subjugated groups and

voices, such as Latinx literature, Native American voices, Asian American texts and others). At the same time, we are increasingly aware of the necessity of opening our analyses to beings that have until recently only been regarded as “others” or even objects (I’m thinking here of “other” species, of Haraway’s notion of “oddkin”). Your work addresses these questions in a compelling way, when you speak of a “fugitive we-ness” for example. Could you tell us more about the choice of this topic and how you have framed your approach?

N.B.: My interest in kinship came in part from what was unusual about my own family background. If you go back two generations, many of my relatives were Mormons who practiced polygamy. Some of them even left Utah to found a Mormon enclave in Northern Mexico where they could escape the punitive reach of the US government. So I had an early and intuitive sense of the fact that people could find very different kinds of family forms desirable.

I think this background made it easier for me to bring a certain skepticism to the standard story about kinship. That story of organic development holds that modern societies emerge at the moment that kinship finds its proper place as a private domain, with no acceptable role for kinship in governance (that would be too “tribal” or too aristocratic) or the marketplace (too nepotistic). Anthropologists have dubbed this story the “essential blueprint for narratives of modernity.” For a long time, literary scholars somewhat reflexively accepted this blueprint. Even when feminist critics lamented that women had been confined to the sphere of the family, that critique tended to reinforce the model of the modern subject who could and should emerge from the dependence of kinship into an autonomous, individuated subjectivity.

But as the “New Kinship Studies” in anthropology has emphasized, this story gets some important things wrong. To be sure, as modernization processes spread—Elizabeth Povinelli refers to the “liberal diaspora”—it is clear that kinship undergoes significant changes. But, for one thing, there was nothing frictionless or inevitable about this history. The apotheosis of the private conjugal family is the result of an aggressive and deliberate process of “de-kinning.” As Talal Asad puts it, it was a large-scale project to impose a “new grammar of subjectivity” that would target the transpersonal we-ness of kinship and shrink it to something largely extraneous to the “individuated being” of the modern, autonomous self. We are not talking about an organic development, then, but about an active struggle, of the kind I mentioned that Cooper was waging against the multiethnic polities in the trans-Mississippi West.

Another problem with this modernization story: the de-kinning process never worked, at least not as advertised. Non-western peoples in particular had to be conscripted into this modern project. And they never surrendered fully to outside models of kinship, showing instead that the transformation of kinship could follow many different paths. But even Western, middle-class cultures never wholly eliminated the lived sense that people somehow share a consubstantial, transpersonal subjectivity with their kin. (Freud’s model of the divided psyche might be said to be one theoretical account of the ways that kin are co-present in each other’s subjectivities and bodies.) My research has been interested in looking at the way American literature has registered the persistence of kinship imaginaries that are at odds with the sealed-off “individuated being” in the modern blueprint. In the essay you reference, for instance, I was interested in the way Jewett’s fiction gradually disassembles a first-person subject (“I”) to uncover a de-individuated subjectivity, a “fugitive we-ness” that makes for a shared life across different bodies.

In the same era, Zitkala Sa, a Dakota writer, uses fiction to try to rouse an uncomprehending white readership into recognizing that the individualized “self” reformers were trying to impose on the Dakota really amounted to reducing them to economic “slaves,” as she puts it.

C.R.: What is particularly interesting about your work is how you create a conversation between those Western models of kinship that have governed our understanding of family, community, nation, even empire, and alternative patterns that remain alive despite their being condemned by “modernity.”

N.B.: I said that literature scholars had largely followed the modern blueprint. But scholars in fields like Black studies, Latinx studies, and Indigenous studies were quicker to challenge what was false about the way that blueprint defined kinship. Modern histories of racialization have delineated racial communities and, as your question suggests, the resulting identities have set the terms for political struggles, as well as for academic fields like Black studies. But scholars in these fields knew that the model of the private conjugal family erased or distorted how kinship was lived by many racialized communities. What Jamaican theorist Sylvia Wynter calls a “metaphysics of productivity and profitability” was imposed to supplant or override many forms of kinship for the purposes of race-making. So the “fugitive we-ness” you referenced is something these scholars have been tracking for some time. Brigitte Fielder’s new book *Relative Races* is a fine example. This body of scholarship that has been vital to my work for the way it has helped illuminate kinship’s enduring potential to foster alternative polities, rival epistemologies, and new socialities.

Kinship, of course, is not the only kind of relationality that can illuminate new social possibilities. But I think it is a powerful lens both for understanding the history of liberal governance and racial capitalism, as well as for thinking about what might be possible in the future. Certainly we’ve seen how the rethinking and remaking of kinship is important in queer communities. And now that the modern blueprint seems less inevitable as a model, kinship may be a fruitful place for thinking not just about ways of linking human subjects, but also ways of binding human and non-human beings, as in the “multispecies kin-making” Donna Haraway explores, or the possibilities for new “geontologies,” to borrow from Povinelli.

C.R.: Your work has been in dialogue with philosophers, anthropologists, and lawyers. Bruno Latour, for example, and what he calls “the ‘purification’ of analytic domains so crucial to the operations of modernity,” seems to have been an influence for you. Your work also challenges the “purification of analytic domains,” or shall we say “disciplines,” especially through combining, for example, the tools of anthropology and literature. In the context of a reflection on American studies, this seems to me a powerful implementation of the methodological inclusiveness of American studies in which humanists and interpretive social scientists succeed in talking to one another—which tends to be less and less the case in the “real” world. Is that something that is important for you?

N.B.: As I began my research, Latour’s effort to undertake an anthropology of “the moderns” was helpful for thinking about kinship. His core contention about “moderns” is that they (we!) have been very stringent about sorting out and purifying the separate domains of Nature and Culture (while relegating Spirit or Divinity to a domain so ontologically different that it can be either upheld or ignored, according to the need at hand). And yet in practical terms, he insists, this analytic separation was really the ground for reshuffling these domains through hybrid

combinations or networks, in ways that favored the power of moderns relative to others.

This is certainly the case, I'd argue, when it comes to kinship. The "metaphysics of profitability" demanded a purifying of kinship, locating its essence in natural law and stigmatizing kinship systems that too overtly crossed the boundaries between humans, gods, and non-humans. Yet the kinship paradigm of the moderns does not finally uphold the nature-culture divide, either. We can get a glimpse of Latour's view with reproductive technologies like in vitro fertilization (IVF). At the point where techniques of human science were able to supplant the autonomous operations of nature, there is really no way to distinguish between biogenetic substance and sociocultural concepts and instruments, and it paved the way for what some scholars call "neoliberal genetics." Part of the appeal of studying kinship, for me anyway, is that it really can't be done without crossing disciplines. It is demanded by the object of study.

C.R.: Such adequation between object and method is paramount, I agree. But interdisciplinarity has become more of a prerequisite for literary scholars than it has for scholars in other fields. I believe literary scholars have made the most of it, but do you find this dissymmetry between disciplines puzzling?

N.B.: It's true that literary scholars sometimes do the heavy lifting when it comes to interdisciplinary study; we tend to draw on the methods and archives of the social sciences more than they borrow from literary studies—something Eric Slauter calls a "trade gap." But one of the gratifying things about contemporary kinship studies is that scholars in other disciplines have recognized the special salience of literary texts when it comes to understanding kinship, and have turned to literary archives for insight and data. I have learned marvelous things from Sarah Gordon, a legal scholar, about antipolygamy fiction. Brian Connolly, a historian, draws striking significance from nineteenth-century popular fiction about incest. An anthropologist, Danilyn Rutherford, has a beautiful discussion of Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* in an essay on kinship and temporality. I can only speculate, but I think the reason for this might be because the momentum in kinship studies has come from a critical reevaluation of narratives of modernity, allowing us to see them as narratives—as conceptual meta-stories that shape the way we make sense of events, historical change, and empirical data.

Doing that work of reevaluation seems to me crucial to understanding our historical present, when the meta-narrative of modernity we've inherited is showing itself to be increasingly inadequate for making sense of the world. New work in kinship studies calls us to think more carefully about how kinship exceeds the domain of private relations, and always has—in good and bad ways. I mentioned before that kinship studies might illuminate hopeful possibilities for grappling with things like environmental ruination. But kinship's force in the world can of course be regressive or troubling. We shouldn't be scandalized, for instance, at the extent to which globalization has accelerated so much oligarchic "family capitalism"; we should instead recognize it as a feature of our modernity, and not a premodern throwback or atavism, so that we can address it as such. We shouldn't be surprised when a President of the United States hands massive governmental power to his daughter and son-in-law and it still seems to count as part of democratic governance. The rising authoritarian and anti-democratic regimes around the world care a great deal

about defining and controlling kinship. They do not mistake kinship for a merely private sphere, and neither should anyone else.

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