

The Geoframe: Pedagogy for Education Abroad

Kahn, Hilary E., ed. 2014. *Framing the Global: Entry Points for Research*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

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What is “the global”? How is it framed, what are its entry points for research, and how does it relate to education abroad (EA)? In *Framing the Global: Entry Points for Research* (2014), Hilary E. Kahn initiates a conversation based on these questions, which are central to this issue of the *GSLR*. For many practitioners of EA, the relationship between the global and EA is obvious. The seemingly global nature inherent in the student act of crossing national borders is enough to lead educators and administrators in international education (IE) to equate the global with EA. Yet, as scholar-practitioners seeking to engage the intellectual side of our field, a reexamination of the assumptions bound up in this equation invites us to consider not only how theory accounts for the relationship between the global and EA, but also how that relationship might in fact be *driven* by theory. In turn, recognition of such a theory-driven relationship opens EA to new pedagogical opportunities. New concepts of the global inform programming designed to illuminate the dynamic interplay between material and textual worlds. As these worlds bleed into each other, awareness of a new theoretical frame forces meta-level reflections that transcend understandings of the global and EA as merely border-crossing pursuits.

Kahn’s edited volume provides 14 discrete theoretical portals into “the global” from scholars committed to an empirical approach. Each contribution resists “a formulaic framework for global research” in favor of Kahn’s preference for encouraging “scholars to develop their own entry points, work through series of provocations, and create their own framings for the global however and wherever it is made manifest” (2014, p. 6). If “this is our intellectual space for grounded global studies” (Kahn 2014, p. 6), then the contributions of the geocritical school of literary theory, along with Alan Liu’s views on “local transcendence,” should be brought into the conversation, with less of a premium on Kahn’s empiricism and more emphasis on her provocations.

In this respect, Liu’s methodological considerations of the global in *Local Transcendence: Essays on Postmodern Historicism and the Database* (2008) dovetail nicely with the headway made by the geocritical school (as pioneered by Bertrand Westphal in France and spearheaded in the United States by Robert Tally, Jr.) in framing the global. Liu’s recent work interrogates the relationship between literature and history in a way that brings new historicism to bear on new forms (such as the database) culminating in “postmodern historicism.” As a method, postmodern historicism can also be described as a way of exploring that interplay between textual and material worlds, as text and materiality coevolve. The geocritical school does exactly the same thing, albeit with a different vocabulary. For geocritics such as Eric Prieto, it is only through

“the referential force of literature – the ability of the fictive imagination to interact with and meaningfully shape the real world in which we live – that we can understand the essential function of true literary creation” (2011, p. 20).

By putting Liu in conversation with the geocritical school, a new frame for the global emerges. In the literary establishment, this push toward framing the global in terms of local(ized) phenomena suggests that sets of literature can be read and mapped from particular geographic sites, which reverses the traditional practice of mapping the geographic sites by way of the texts. In the introductory chapter of Robert Tally’s *Geocritical Explorations* (2011), for example, Prieto cites “Joyce’s Dublin” as a classic example of the pedagogy that would have *Ulysses* move the analysis of a study abroad program centered around Dublin, whereas the geocritical school prefers that “the geographical space [of Dublin] itself will become the focus of attention and the texts of Joyce... will be brought into dialogue with as many other texts as possible that deal with that space” (p. 20). But this geocritical push always returns to a focus on interplay, and it speaks to issues within Kahn’s volume (notably Rachel Harvey’s “persistence of the particular in the global”), and by extension, to issues implicit in EA practice (such as the tendency on the part of faculty leaders to privilege either text or space as predominantly informative of the other). In an effort to connect the literary conversation with Kahn’s social science and with EA practice, I propose a fifteenth theoretical portal for engaging the global and relating it to EA; I call it the geoframe.

Heresy at the Altar of Context

To geoframe the global is to meditate deeply on context. Or, to spin it around, to geoframe is to ask: How do the contexts of geography and geology frame the global? Kahn acknowledges that context is a primary point of entry into global research and theory. She opens her introductory synopsis of her contributors’ essays, for example, with a nod toward Deborah Cohen and Lessie Jo Frazier’s attempt to “historicize the moment in which the world begins to think globally” (Kahn 2014, 8). The fact that she pulls Cohen and Frazier’s piece out of an otherwise linear summary of contents in order to kick-start the conversation is symptomatic of how contextual, historical, and scalar approaches dominate today’s intellectual climate. Kahn’s telling decision to frame *Framing the Global* in this way galvanizes Alan Liu’s observation that

[i]ntellectuals today worship few things they will admit to, whether beautiful or true. But they worship cultural context, which thus becomes the ark for whatever works, creeds, identities, ethics, and so on still retain the root sense of the *cult* in *culture* that Walter Benjamin called ‘aura’ and that cultural criticism renders through microauras of detailism, anecdotalism, subculturalism, and other nanohistoricisms that dedicate themselves to the universal by way of the holy local (2008, p. 5).

Applying Liu’s observation to Kahn’s introduction highlights that even attempts, such as Rachel Harvey’s, to “seek what is left out (of dichotomies, for example) and what gets caught between scales” (Kahn 2014, p. 9) inevitably calls attention to these very dichotomies and scales that she and Harvey hope to transcend. By “dedicating” historical artifacts to “the universal by way of the holy local” (Liu 2008, p. 5), we dichotomize the holy local and the universal—or, the global—which is something that Kahn herself warns against when she suggests that the categorical

distinctions between “global and local, the general and particular, the micro and macro” are divisions “that we have been working to move beyond” (2014, p. 5). Indeed, even though much work has gone into moving beyond established dichotomies, which are now as out of fashion in the social sciences as they are in literary studies (if not in EA), the overwhelming tendency today is for empirical scholars to erect arks of cultural context to carry the cargo known as works, creeds, identities, ethics, and so on. Any reaction against that tendency tends to overcompensate with passé formalism.

By combining Liu’s postmodern historicism with geocriticism, and bringing this new framework to bear on EA, a new point of entry for the global opens on a pedagogical possibility. My goal is to transcend these dichotomies and scales in the way that Kahn and Harvey productively gesture toward, but without accentuating, and therefore privileging them in a circular or self-defeating process. I hasten to add that, dogmatic as context may be, my heresy at its altar is not an attempt to undermine either the local or the global, but to seek a methodology that truly captures “what is left out” and “what gets caught between scales” (Kahn 2014, p. 9). Certainly literature points to, and from, both the local and the global at different times and in different ways, and this is something I recently called the direction of the virtual projection within a condition of literature (*c.f.*, Frank 2014).

So the geoframe is not an allusion to the direction of the projection, not even a subversive one. It is a different sort of heresy at the altar of context, in that it is an attempt to bring form and content into transcendent proportion with each other. It is the search for that sweet spot, that unnamed interplay between textual and material worlds in which we can discover and name emergent realities even as they enter “in tension with established categories,” as Saskia Sassen puts it in her foreword to Kahn’s volume (p. xii). The focus of the geoframe, then, is on the tension between, the tension’s creative energies and outputs, rather than on the nodes or the poles with their static emblems.

Geoframing the Global

To see the effects of geoframing in action, let’s consider William Carlos Williams’s all-embracing *Paterson*, a poem named after a particular geographic site in New Jersey. This geographically-centered poem illuminates an interplay between textual and material worlds—that is, it reflects *and* generates realities. Encounters with the preexisting realities of life and the creation of new objects, events, and relations are all fundamental concerns of what Williams would call his inventive word machine. Insofar as the machine mimetically processes realities, *Paterson* “frames” the global; insofar as the machine creates new realities, the output exceeds framing devices altogether. While reflected and created realities both inhere in *Paterson*, the former is a means to the latter. *Paterson* demonstrates that it is a mistake to think of the two options as mutually exclusive, as invention depends on what already exists. Ultimately, *Paterson* seeks to create a new and unfamiliar reality by reconfiguring encounters with the world as it exists in life, apart from the containments of art. Yet, in recognizing that the world can be just as much a frame or delimiter as formal art, it ultimately challenges form-content relationships wholesale, and suggests liberation from framings-in of any sort by allowing form and content to be each other, rather than to insist that one informs the other.

Book Two (1948), opening with “Sunday in the Park,” describes that

Outside
outside myself
there is a world...
which I approach
concretely
(Williams, p. 43)

Williams acknowledges not only the importance of concrete objects—things, worlds, context—but of the uninvented objects that already exist “outside himself.” “Approaching the world concretely” and “saying it in things” are mimetic methods, and their results are life reflected through art. This is *Paterson’s* premise.

Williams continues the notion of art’s reliance on this outside world by opening *Book Three* (1949) in much the same way as *Book Two*, but in a way that reverses the art-life relationship. In “The Library,” for example,

The province of the poem is the world.
When the sun rises, it rises in the poem
and when it sets darkness comes down
and the poem is dark
(Williams, p. 100)

Here the poem performs the literal function of framing the sun, since the sun rises and sets within the poem, illuminating and darkening the formal parameters of the poem itself. By the same token, Williams allows the framing device, the poem, a coequality with that which it contains or describes. In these same lines in which the poem contains the sun (that is, in which art attempts to contain the world), it is the “world” that contains the “poem,” since the poem dwells within life’s prefabricated frame. It is the world, then, that contains the art.

Williams’s interest in interrogating the traditional art-life and form-content relationships seeks not to trivialize globality by framing it, reflectively, as a formal art, which explains the formal experimentalism. But it is just as serious about not letting globality minimize the art, since this is tantamount to saying that a poem can be coequal with the universe, transcendentally exceeding frames and ever expanding. Even though invention depends on what already exists, art is not limited by context, nor can it fully explain or map the ever-shifting waters of context.

Global Transcendence, or, The Holy Global

In *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2011), David Mitchell writes that “This world...contains just one masterpiece, and that is itself” (p. 452). The world itself is transcendent, but so is all that it contains. But are we worshipping a “nanohistoricism,” or the cargo that it carries? How would a student of global commerce visiting Dejima in 2016 read *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*? How would a faculty leader teach it? Is Mitchell framing the global, or is the global framing Mitchell?

When students visit Dublin on a faculty-led program, will they worship Joyce's Dublin, or Dublin's Joyce? Will the syllabus be limited to Joyce, or will it include Samuel Beckett, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, U2, and The Dubliners?

When students pay homage to the Mirabal sisters on a lonely mountain pass in the Dominican Republic, will they worship the revolution as imagined by Julia Alvarez, or will they condemn the real-life Trujillo dictatorship?

Intuitively, EA practitioners will answer, "yes" and "yes," but in doing so, they are likely to relapse into a framework of established dichotomies and hang each yes on a static pole. The geoframe is designed to illustrate that between the poles, a tension crackles with creative and unnamed possibility. Discovering and naming these interplays between poles is to explore the virtualities of the universe, the excluded excesses and mysteries caught between our conventional categories. Teaching and studying these requires a flattening of the field to allow form and content not only to interact with each other, but to become each other. This should be an explicit learning objective and outcome in humanities-based EA syllabi.

Walls and bridges, it needs to be taught, are the same distracting things. The Berlin Wall teaches this lesson in a way that greatly helps students abroad frame their own globals. As educators, we have the chance to demonstrate the world's most hated symbols are perceived as walls that will stand forever, but also that these walls serve framing purposes, for without them, we won't know who we are anymore. Try to tear them down, and we might as well be building bridges. Remove the emblems, and contend with what they stifled. The global depends on vehicles and mediating structures, sure. But these structures also imply a global transcendence that frames local suns. There is a holy global out there just waiting to be rendered through microauras of detailism, anecdotalism, subculturalism, and other nanohistoricisms, and to be dedicated to the secular local.

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