

SARIKA CHANDRA, *Dislocalism: The Crisis of Globalization and the Remobilizing of Americanism* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2011), 312 pp.

Since the 1990s, scholars in American Studies have tried to come to terms with the challenges globalization poses for a field traditionally organized around the nation-state. If transnationalism has seemed to turn this identity crisis into an opportunity for a fresh start—now the United States must be studied all over, this time in a decentered manner—it has seldom tried to answer, or even systematically tackle, the underlying analytical problem of how the relation between transnationalism or globalization and the nation-state ought to be conceptualized. Indeed, the investment in transnational flows has tended to divert attention from the question of what has happened to the nation-state. Has it become obsolescent? Has it adjusted to globalization? Is globalization (and, by extension, transnationalism) another name for Americanization and thus the form aspired to by the American nation-state?

In *Dislocalism: The Crisis of Globalization and the Remobilizing of Americanism*, Sarika Chandra does us the service of moving these queries to the center of debate. This alone makes her book a valuable contribution. But what promises to be a truly critical study impatient with the facile romanticization of transnational border crossings ultimately turns out to be marred by a methodology of ideology critique conceptualized too narrowly. Chandra convincingly sets out to describe globalization (which, in her study, is largely synonymous with transnationalism) simultaneously as historical process and ideological discourse. However, she pays attention almost exclusively to ideology. Focusing on “the rhetorical, discursive, metanarrative dimension of [the] ideology [of globalization]” (3), her main thesis contends that this ideology is propelled by a contradictory dynamic: while it seems to celebrate the transgressions of national boundaries and, more generally, the transcendence of everything local, it at the same time reconsolidates the centrality of the nation and the local. This double strategy Chandra calls “dislocalism.” Her neologism is intended as a pun that captures the essence of the tension she describes: the word itself never lets go of the letters that spell ‘localism,’ even if ‘dislocalism’ seems to signify its negation

(cf. 6). Chandra’s exploration of the intersection of the global and the local has particular relevance for American Studies in so far as it purports to explain the link between globalization and Americanization. Indeed, Chandra claims that globalization, understood ‘dislocally’, is identical with Americanization: “The effects of globalization, due to the leading U.S. role in its institution [sic!], are themselves identified as Americanization” (8). In making this point, she sidesteps the question of what Americanization actually means in the practical reception and negotiation of American culture abroad. She criticizes critical work by John Tomlinson and Jan Nederveen Pieterse on this issue for regarding globalization as a “*fait accompli*” (236) and thus buying into the ideology of globalization.<sup>1</sup> But it is Chandra herself who becomes open to this charge: throughout her book, the identification of globalization with Americanization appears not just as an effect of ideological discourse; rather it is presupposed by Chandra herself.

Her take on the coalescence of the global and the local could have been made clear without coining a neologism—it would have been perfectly sufficient, for example, to stick to David Harvey’s notion of the “spatial fix,” which Chandra invokes repeatedly to clarify her concept (e.g., 13, 20, 74). The term “dislocalism” becomes a rhetorical necessity, however, because it is burdened with providing coherence for her book. Chandra divides her chapters into four exemplary areas in which she sees “dislocalism” at work. These include management theory, recent scholarship on immigrant fiction, travel writing, and food writing. Critiquing these four areas as ideological sites of “dislocalism” may be the book’s gravest problem. Aiming to reveal the same ideology in these four very different realms of writing, Chandra presupposes that ideology operates in the same manner in each of them. However, not all of these fields try to smuggle covert nationalism into overt globalism. Some of them unabashedly flaunt American exceptionalism.

Chandra is most convincing, therefore, in her chapter on transnational literary studies.

<sup>1</sup> John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999); ---, *Cultural Imperialism: An Introduction* (London: Continuum, 2001); Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Globalization and Culture: Global Melange* (Lanham: Roman Littlefield, 2009).

Here she performs what ideology critique does best: she unearths ideological commitments that run counter to the field's self-understanding and thus helps to demystify the subfield of transnational American Studies concerned with immigrant fiction. As case studies, she scrutinizes criticism on two recently canonized ethnic novels, Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003). Alvarez's novel, Chandra argues, has served critics, such as Lucía M. Suárez, Pauline Newton, and Maribel Ortiz-Márquez, to draw a picture of multiculturalism that subtly reaffirms spatial, temporal, and genre divisions between the Dominican Republic and the United States by invoking the logic of trauma and the genre of *testimonio* (cf. 106). Chandra shows that in the essays she discusses—which she holds to be “anything but atypical of current scholarship in ethnic and immigrant literary studies” (107)—“the space of the real,” which contains terror and trauma, is identified with that outside the United States (in this case, the Dominican Republic), while after immigration to the United States, “personal trauma and terror can safely be worked through in therapeutic, ‘testimonio’ fashion” (107). As a result, these readings reconsolidate American exceptionalism, while deflecting from “broader global socio-historical conditions” that do not fit into the framework of identity politics underlying “U.S. literary paradigms of localized ethnic identity” (114).

In a similar vein, Chandra makes the case that recent readers of Diana Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent* (she focuses on Carol Fadda-Conrey) bracket off “the cultural and historical complexities and specificities [...] in favor of establishing an ethnic identity so as to facilitate their inclusion within an American literary canon and curriculum” (125). As incisive as Chandra's critique is in this chapter, it seems premised on a one-dimensional view of American power. For when she suggests her alternative approach to reading *Crescent*, we get a better sense of what her vague vocabulary of “historical complexities and specificities” comes down to. Americanization, we learn, has already infiltrated the rest of the world and seamlessly interpellated anyone who has come in touch with American culture. Thus, when the male protagonist of *Crescent*, a young Iraqi, struggles to negotiate his awareness of American imperial power with the liberating effects of his education in

a U.S.-sponsored school in Cairo during the 1970s (an education which made him “obsessed with just anything cultural—literature, painting, drama,” but which also awoke his interest in “theories about economics and foreign policy” and drove him into the underground resistance against Saddam Hussein),<sup>2</sup> Chandra resolves the character's ambivalence in a gesture she believes to be critical: his “decision to study American literature could [...] be inferred as something directly linked to American foreign policy, given the U.S. State Department's long history of funding American studies programs around the world and supplying these programs with publications that frame American literature as one great espousing of universal values” (135). International American studies, Chandra seems to think, mindlessly regurgitates the official views of the State Department. Evidently, it has not occurred to her that her own type of anti-imperialism may be the best example of “dislocalism.”

Chandra's other chapters largely miss the critical edge of trying to demystify what is hardly mystified. No doubt, travel writing, such as Robert Kaplan's *The Ends of the Earth* (1996), Mary Morris's *Nothing to Declare* (1989) and Paul Theroux's *Hotel Honolulu* (2001), frequently contends that travel in times of globalization no longer allows for errands into the wilderness. But neither do these authors adopt a cosmopolitan ethic that declares travel to be an anti-nationalist practice. Chandra insists that “dislocalism is called forth to solve the contradictory task of proclaiming the crumbling of borders while simultaneously reconsolidating them through the act and the discourse of travel” (155). But the crumbling of borders for these writers simply does not put America into question. In a sense, Chandra's critique here merely states the obvious. The same is true for her chapter on food writing, in which she rehearses lengthy close readings of pieces from the magazines *Gourmet* and *Food & Wine* and episodes from Anthony Bourdain's TV show *A Cook's Tour*, in order to show how a self-professed cosmopolitan food culture reinforces American identity. Thus, she quotes a writer from *Food & Wine* according to whom eating at the New York fusion restaurant “66” “is like traveling to Shanghai without leaving New York City”

<sup>2</sup> Diana Abu-Jaber, *Crescent* (New York: Norton, 2003): 291; 292.

(202). For Chandra, this demonstrates how the global tastes of fusion become “a tacitly American mode of consumption” (199). But there is nothing tacit here at all. Not having to leave New York City is part of fusion’s marketing strategy.

More interesting, although also more deeply problematic, are the opening chapter and some passages of the conclusion that discuss academic and popular work in various branches of management theory. Chandra makes two discoveries. Firstly, management theorists respond to neoliberal flexibilization by looking for guidance from postmodern theory and even fiction. Secondly, management gurus give expression to a certain anxiety about globalization, evidently fearing that “the centrifugal forces of globalization” (48) might make management obsolete altogether. In Chandra’s view, her two observations are immediately linked. Thus, she sets out to show how management theorists distort postmodern theory until it serves the conservative end of giving “closure to management’s narrative of obsolescence” (48) and how fiction gets construed as providing a “spatial fix” (58). Chandra concludes from this that “*both* the humanities and the business disciplines legitimate

themselves and—in actual practice—reshape their own objects of study *with respect to each other*” (28). However, it seems mistaken to argue that just because the business disciplines eclectically absorb postmodern theory they legitimate themselves “with respect to” the humanities. Chandra constructs a false parallelism that equates management’s requirement to adjust to capitalist innovation with the systematic onslaught of utility-free inquiry in the humanities. One part of her argument is quite acute: she makes the point that as long as the humanities complain about their irrelevance, they will remain unaware of how they help articulate neoliberal practices in business. However, Chandra takes this insight to mean that economics and the humanities are equally under pressure. This is a drastic misreading, which is perhaps the final outcome of her decision to set side by side such disparate entities as literary studies and management, all for the purpose of critiquing—and thereby construing—a unified ideology of globalization. Chandra practices a type of ideology critique that ironically blinds itself to actual imbalances of power.

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