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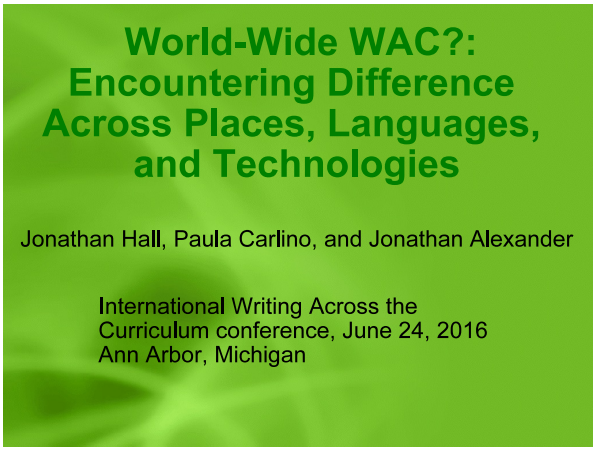


The title of our panel, and of my piece of it as well, is ENCOUNTERING DIFFERENCE. Now in English, “encounter” often signifies unexpected difficulty, even hostility–as in “we’ve encountered a problem,” or “violent encounters between protesters and police”–but, to anticipate my translingual theme a bit by situating myself between languages, I like to think of it more in the sense of the Spanish verb encontrar–which means to find, to meet, to get together, to uncover, to feel, to be situated. To encounter difference then–o encontrar las diferencias–is not to avoid difference or to paper over difference or to regard difference as a problem to be solved; rather difference is something to be met, to be discovered, to be experienced, to feel the situation in which one finds oneself with another, with difference.

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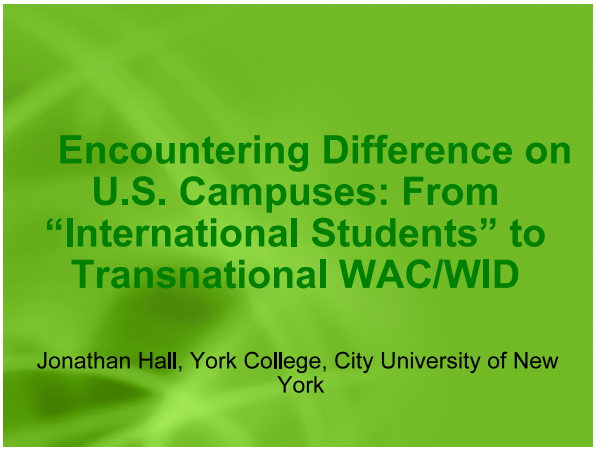


My starting point is the starting point of most of us in this room [1]: the U.S. campus. And the question here is: how do we encounter difference? We could frame this question as: how do we address the intellectual question of difference–or, to borrow translingually from yet another language, différance in the sense proposed by Jacques Derrida–in our curricula and in our actual classrooms? We could ask how we address the question of difference–of racial difference, of difference in gender identity or sexual orientation, of difference of social class and of economic background–in our admissions procedures and again in our curriculum. But I choose today to discuss members of our student bodies whom we do not always consider as full members, whom we consider as perhaps not fully present, or only temporarily or provisionally present, or who will at some deferred time in the future be present, once they have been "fixed," once they have been acculturated to our campus, once difference has been defeated, solved, overcome. I want to focus on what we have tended to call, problematically, "international students."

"International" is a word that has largely been superceded by terms such "global," or, as I'll be arguing today, "transnational." "International" now properly applies mostly to agreements between governments–and "international students" are in fact a subject of negotiation in trade agreements such as the General Agreement on Trade in Services (Ruby). And of course they are big business on our campuses, with 64% paying full tuition with no financial aid. In business, an "international" company is basically an import/export entity–separate operations in different countries, connected only by a transaction. So when we think, for example, of our "International Writing Across the Curriculum" conference, we have to ask ourselves: have we truly transcended an import/export mentality? Have we learned how to ENCOUNTER difference?

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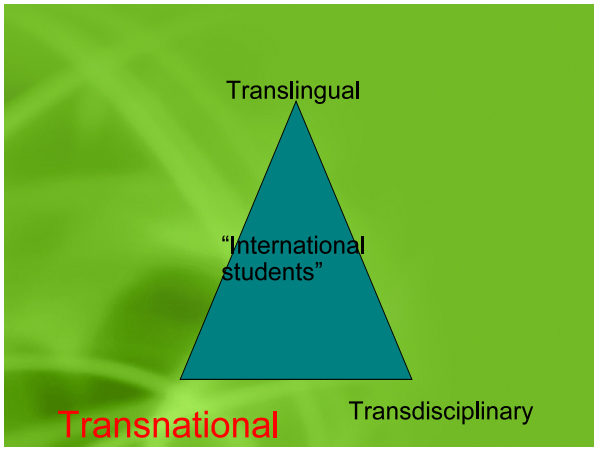


I would like to problematize the question of "international students" by situating it within a matrix of theoretical challenges that have in common an impulse to uncover difference rather than papering it over or trying to solve or resolve it. Our original impulse as academics is to regard difference as a fire and to try to put it out, but transnational, translingual, and transdisciplinary approaches counsel us to run toward the fire, and to embrace it as our friend, as a necessary partner in meaning. Rather than building a wall along the border, we seek to explore a sustained liminality, and we have to begin with those who are already living there, in the margins, often segregated off from the supposed mainstream.

This triangle, then, represents three ways of thinking about "international students," or rather of re-thinking them, but in my brief time today I'll concentrate mainly on one challenge to the way that WAC/WID thinks about "international students": what if we think of them as "transnational students " rather than "international"?

So what is this prefix "Trans"? From its Latin roots we can associate trans* with the meanings "across," "beyond," "through," "changing thoroughly," "transverse," or "on the other side of." But for me the basic thing that all these "trans*" approaches have in common is that they rely on a deconstruction of a dichotomous relationship. A translingual approach deconstructs the bright-line separation between languages, and between languages and dialects. National borders try to define through separation; a transnational approach regards borders as porous, fluid, as lines which connect more than they divide. Academic disciplines, too, attempt to divide up academic territory, but their boundary work collapses, as well, under the centrifugal forces of transdisciplinarity.

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So what do we mean by "transnational." a term that originated in sociology. Here's one definition:

> ... many contemporary migrants and their predecessors maintained a variety of ties to their home countries while they became incorporated into the countries where they settled. Migration has never been a one-way process of assimilation into a melting pot or a multicultural salad bowl but one in which migrants, to varying degrees, are simultaneously embedded in the multiple sites and layers of the transnational social fields in which they live.... (Levitt & Jaworsky 2007, p. 130)

A transnational approach rejects the notion of an immigrant without a past fully assimilated into a new national identity; instead of identities defined by national borders, a transnational perspective focuses on the complex relationships that transnational migrants maintain both with the culture of wherever they are physically, and with wherever else they have ties of family, heritage, birth, language, interest, curiosity, or affiliation.

So what does a transnational approach to the question of "international students" have to offer us as WAC/WID professionals? It teaches us or reminds us that the U.S. conception of an "immigrant" is and always has been a rather simplistic one: U.S. cultural mythology tends to focus on the future, on starting over, on second chances, on leaving the past behind.

But this emphasis on the future leads us to think of immigration as a one-time and final act, a burning of bridges, a blind and irrevocable leap into the unknown. We still think of immigration the way that the Irish did in the wake of the 19th-century famine, when the custom of an "America wake" arose: whenever a young person was emigrating to America, they would hold a party that resembled a funeral (Diner 212).[2] Now, in the digital age, we're all in multiple places at the same time, and technologies of transportation and communication have made the "America wake" obsolete: it's no longer teary ballads about mothers who will never see their children again; rather it's "Got to go, Mom, see you on Skype tomorrow." Thinking of "international students" as transnational migrants can help to restore a sense of a two-way flow of influence and information and ideas. Our students are nodes on multiple intersecting networks of language, culture, and identity.

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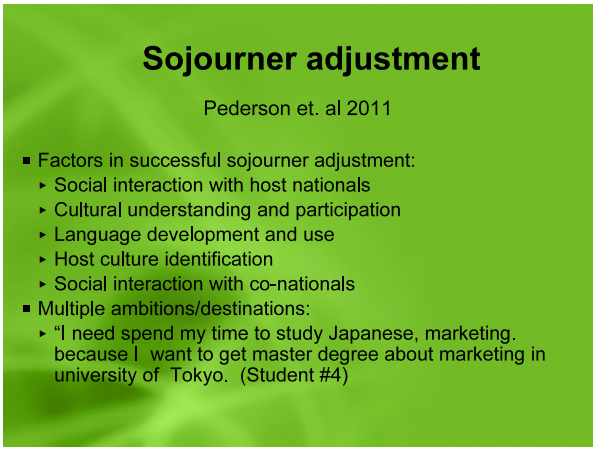


A transnational approach complicates our sense of what "immigration" means–but "international students" are not immigrants, at least not according to the U.S. government. Their official status, as defined by an F-1 student visa, is that they are supposed to leave the U.S. after completing their studies and "optional practical training."

For some students, this is an accurate description of their plans and their eventual actions: they go back home to pursue their careers in their original country, or elsewhere (one Chinese student in our study planned to go to graduate school not in the U.S. or China but rather in Japan).

Using a label that has mainly been applied to Americans abroad, such students might be called "Sojourners." Studies of "sojourner adjustment" have concluded that the biggest danger to a personally successful sojourner experience is remaining detached from the host culture, living in an enclave and not advancing cultural understanding and participation.

But what about that host culture, that host campus? What defines a successful sojourner experience from the prevailing point of view among many U.S. administrators and some faculty? I suggest that U.S. campuses have mostly taken the attitude that an ideal sojourner experience would be: a student arrives from another country but has native-like control of English, does not require any additional support services or curricular adjustments, and fits in seamlessly with the larger student body of the institution. A student who does not require us to change. That's not an encounter. With declines in funding, an obvious temptation for cash-strapped colleges is to view "international students" simply as cash cows. I don't want to be too cynical here, but the full extension of this attitude would be that the additional expense of providing adequate support services for such students could defeat the purpose of having their tuition subsidize the rest of a university's operations.

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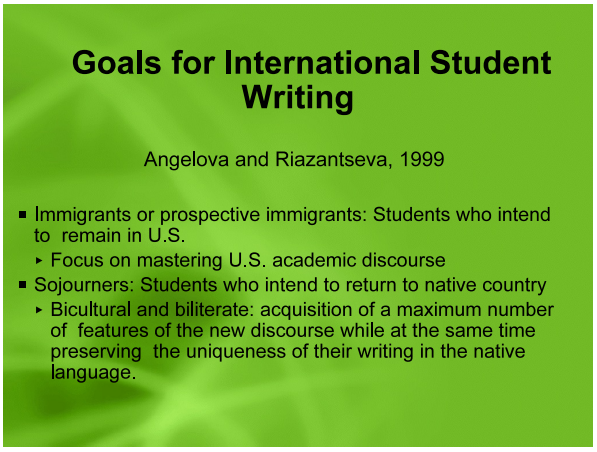


The presence of transnational migrant students on U.S. campuses raises the question: what should WAC/WID do when the world comes to us and we are not ready for it? One key question need to ask is: how should we think about writing goals for "international students"? Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) suggest that students who intend to remain in U.S. should "focus on mastering U.S. academic discourse" while students who intend to return to their native country should aspire to become "bicultural and biliterate: acquisition of a maximum number of features of the new discourse while at the same time preserving the uniqueness of their writing in the native language."

But even this ambitious goal doesn't go far enough, because it assumes that the two cultures involved are stable, and that they don't influence each other. If, however, we go beyond the status of either a permanent immigrant or a temporary sojourner, if we define the experience of transnational education not by duration in time, but rather by the quality and authenticity of the ENCOUNTER between cultures, languages, beliefs, identities, ideas, during the students' experience, then the transnational migrant model forces us to confront our own cultural insularity. Obviously transnatonal students adjust to U.S. conditions, but we have a responsibility to adjust our classroom practices as well.

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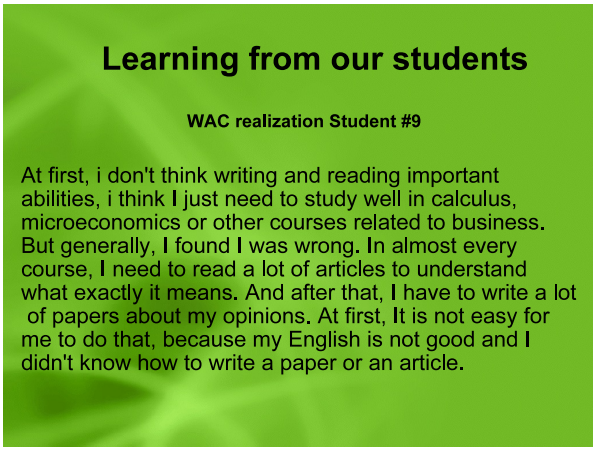


From the point of view of U.S. institutions and specifically, here today, of WAC programs, the question that has, oddly, not been asked is an odd one: "what's in it for us?" We're happy to take their tuition money, but what ELSE is in it for us, besides dollars?

"International students" come with significant cultural capital and language capital. They are the products of a different system of education, of a different political system, of a different set of family and religious and cultural values. They have, that is, different perspectives to offer. Yes, they want to learn about us, and they want to learn what we have to teach. But do we want to learn about them and what they have to teach?

The idea of learning from our students is one that should not frighten those of us in WAC/WID programs, though it goes against the grain of teacher-centered pedagogies that WAC/WID has worked for decades to modify and replace. We can imagine multiple ways to draw upon the language capabilities of transnational students: for example in making use of digital archives in history courses. We can encourage them to experiment with alternate essay structures that do not merely reproduce a U.S. model.

Discussions about writing with international students often take an immediate turn toward WAC/WID issues:

> At first, i don't think writing and reading important abilities, i think I just need to study well in calculus, microeconomics or other courses related to business. But generally, I found I was wrong.... (Student #9)

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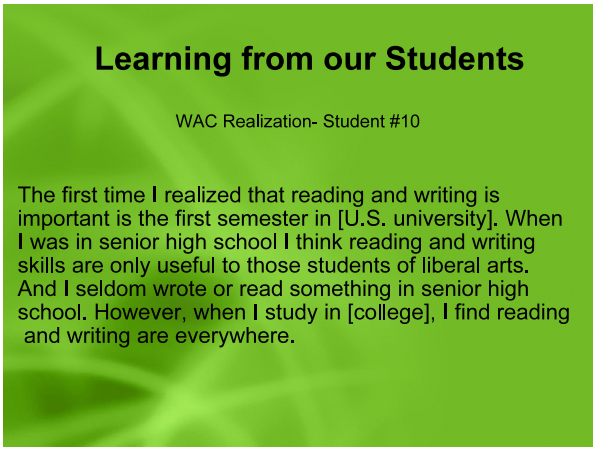


or

> The first time I realized that reading and writing is important is the first semester in [U.S. university]. When I was in senior high school I think reading and writing skills are only useful to those students of liberal arts. And I seldom wrote or read something in senior high school. However, when I study in [college], I find reading and writing are everywhere. (Student #10)

So transnational students are already on board with the idea that "writing is everywhere" in their education. We don't have to convince the transnational students that writing is a part of their passport to the future; the audience we need to convince is our colleagues, who may have bought into WAC pedagogy for U.S.-based undergraduates, but still want to send "international students" to some other course, hopefully run by some other program. WAC/WID professionals need to take the lead in advising our colleagues: teach who you have. Don't teach some nostalgic notion of a classroom full of people who are just like you. Our message should be: pedagogy that is inclusive of transnational students is good pedaogy. Period. With a homogenous group that shares the same educational and cultural background, an instructor can get away with some pretty sloppy pedagogy, because the students can fill in the blanks from their own experience and shared assumptions. With a more diverse classroom, there is much less margin for pedagogical error.

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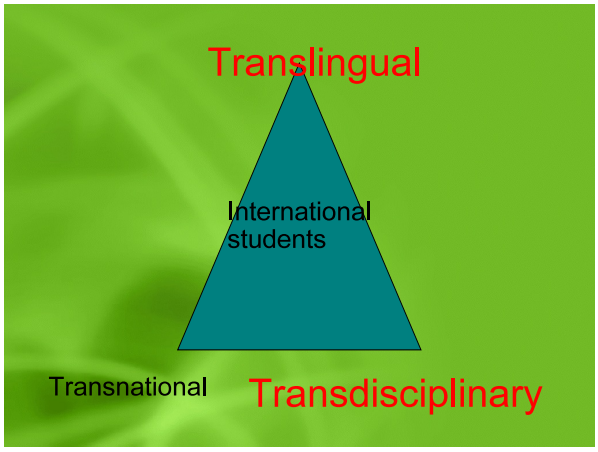


When U.S. higher education DOES think about international students, it tends to ONLY think about language, and only ONE language, as in, how can we get their English up to speed so that they can then take our "regular" courses–which we then do not have to change at all, and so that they will not cause annoyance to our "regular" faculty–as opposed to some sort of ancillary program sponsored, perhaps, by the International Students office or the "ESL" program. The myth of transience in relation to language proficiency is alive and well in U.S. academia, and not only with relation to international students. A translingual approach challenges us to consider students' total communicative repertoire, enouraging students to engage with all their knowledges, and challenges us to encounter alternate structures of writing, alternate modes of expression and investigation.

And transdisciplinarity breaks down boundaries of jargon and academic turf. In the last few years, of course, WAC/WID has engaged more closely with disciplines that study language, focused on the issues of pedagogy and assessesment raised by students who are learning academic registers of English at the same time that they are adjusting to new linguistic and cultural contexts. This engagement with language issues has been an important development for WAC/WID. A transdisciplinary approach ensures that we do not essentialize or exoticize those cultures: all Chinese students are not alike, just as all American students are not alike.

Further, we must be attentive to the "dynamic, shifting, and ever-changing nature of cultural practices" (Paris 96). That is, transnationalism is not a state of having one foot in two cultures while those cultures remain the same. Rather, those cultures are always in motion, and the transnational student is always in motion between them.

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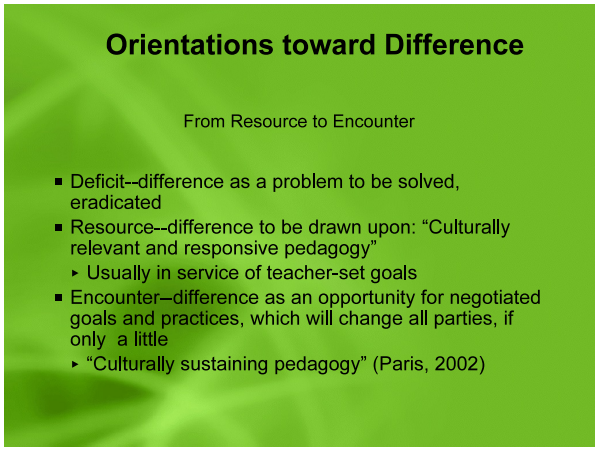


As I've been arguing, the transnational critique is a subset of the question of how we should deal with difference–differences in language, in nation of origin, in race, in class. We could:

a) Regard difference as a problem to be solved, as a temporary aberration. This orientation has several names: difference as deficit, the myth of transience

b)"Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy" tries to design classroom materials in such a way that they build on what students already know. But the limitation of this approach is that this emphasis on relevance and responsiveness is always in the service of our pre-set objectives in the classroom. It is a change in educational tactics only. In writing pedagogy, they are more likely to write the way we want them to write if we start from the ways that they have written before. But the goal is still to make them write the way we want them to write.

c) Django Paris (2002) argues that this "Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy," while a marked improvement over deficit orientations, doesn't take the idea of culture and language as resource far enough. Paris argues for a move from relevance and response to a culturally SUSTAINING pedagogy.[3] Paris was writing in the context of K-12 U.S. schools, and the cultures that he was mostly focused on were minorities within the U.S. population. But what I want to suggest today is that a pedagogy of ENCOUNTERING difference is just as important for higher education and specifically for "international students." Rather than making them write like us, we should focus on what is the best way for THEM to write in the contexts that they will be writing in–including, but not limited to, U.S. academic contexts. Transnational students are not tourists in our classrooms, and in the future they will be writing in contexts that they know better than we do. Our writing courses should be a place where they negotiate their previous writing experience and their future writing ambitions as they work on their present assignments

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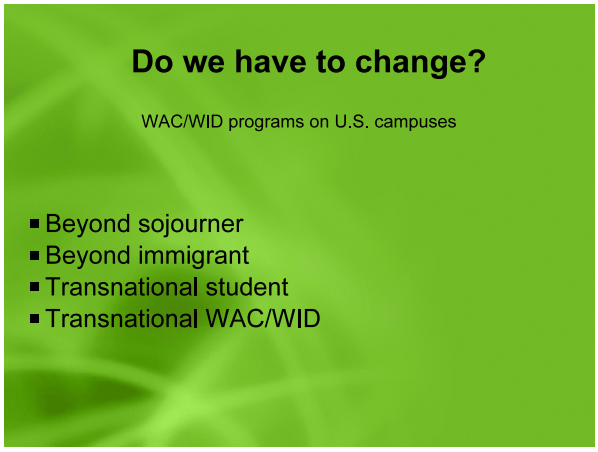


-The educational process does not end when transnational students leave our campus, and one part they take with them will be what they encountered in our writing courses. How will they remember us? How did we think about them, implicitly? How did our pedagogy address them? Did it ignore them, and simply think of them as not-yet-Americans? Did it, on the contrary, patronize them with misguided assumptions based on stereotypes about their personalities and their cultures? Or did their instructors, perhaps partly as a result of a WAC/WID development experience, labor to find ways to engage not only who they really were before they got here, but who they are in every present moment becoming? Did their writing instructors–in their choice of assignments, in their feedback, in their assessment procedures–find way snot only to RESPOND to their evolving notions of themselves and relation to their equally dynamic multiple cultures, but to ENCOUNTER that difference? That's the hope and the challenge.

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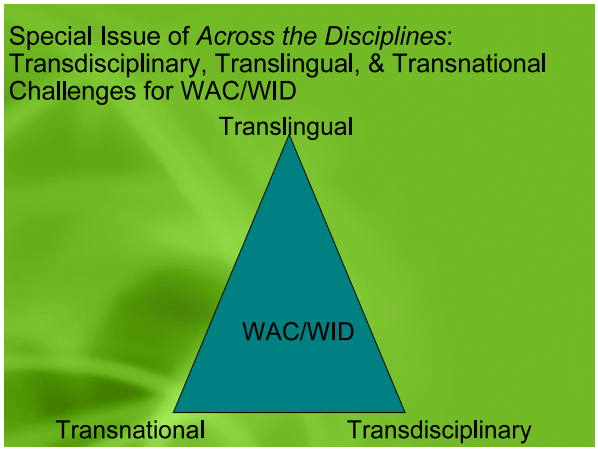


I'll conclude with a brief advertisement for a special issue of Across the Disciplines that I'm co-editing with Bruce Horner. It uses the same transdisciplinary, translingual, and transnational triangle, but puts WAC/WID in the middle of it, inviting proposals that investigate challenges for WAC/WID.

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NOTES

1. A later plenary at IWAC 2016 analyzed the program to show that 92% of attendees were from U.S. institutions.

2. As Hasia R. Diner notes,

> the highly charged send-off that resembed the preparation for a funeral as much as a farewell party. The inner logic of the "America wake" assumed that this would indeed be the last time that parents would see their children, and mournful music dominated the rite, the event that marked emigrants' last hours on "the ould sod." (212)

Numerous tearful emigration ballads supported this view that the decision to go to America marked a separation as final as death: And when I am bidding my last farewell / tears like rain will blind, / To think of my friends in my own native land, / and the home I'm leaving behind" ("The Shores of Amerikay")

Yet even here, Diner argues that the Irish in America never fully assimilated and always thought of themselves as exiles (211)–and of course they sent money home to Ireland–that was always a key part of the transaction–along with letters. So if even the 19th-century Irish emigrant, lamented in song and mourned as dead, and with returns to Ireland limited by existing technology and the cost of a journey, can be seen as maintaining some degree of transnational identity, what of today's global flows of what we still call "immigration," facilitated by much more advanced transportation and communication technologies?

3. Shondel J. Nero argues that these issues apply not only across languages but across multiple Englishes and dialects.