

## PREFACE

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, we witnessed a spectacular attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, and the rapid disintegration, in the face of U.S.-coordinated offensives, of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq. At a certain level of generality and without collapsing the crucial difference between Al Qaeda as a decentered association of flexibly structured groups and the United States as a nation-state, we can see how these events involved extensive planning and coordination among peoples situated in different countries and among networks of finance and military resources linking various transnational institutions. Those who planned and carried out the attacks on September 11 were students from, immigrants to, and citizens of several different countries;<sup>1</sup> those who executed military operations in response to September 11 had to develop, through negotiation, a coalition of nations and institutions to facilitate the launching of a war on Iraq; and those who played crucial roles in shaping post-invasion plans for stabilizing Iraq included Iraqi exiles living in numerous countries.<sup>2</sup> In many ways what these events dramatized was not the disintegration of the nation-state in an era of globalization but the fundamental paradoxes generated by globalization—the complex interweaving of national concerns with international events; the dense overlapping of locally shaped micropolities with large-scale collective efforts; the concentration of awesome power in individuals who could launch massive strikes against long-established nation-states; and the centrality of intercontinental migration in effecting profound demographic and cultural shifts in territories over which the nation-state struggles to regain

control. At the same time, however, in the run-up to the U.S.-Iraq War of 2003, the large-scale demonstrations against the United States across the world underscored how much a single nation's activities have become a matter of concern to so many peoples and communities. It seems America is on everyone's mind these days, and the more the world thinks about America, the more America is compelled to think about the world.

This sense of the United States entanglement with the world has also become acutely manifest in the realm of economics. Just as U.S. foreign policy was a centerpiece of the 2004 U.S. presidential elections, the phenomenon of “outsourcing”<sup>3</sup>—the flight from America to India and China of white-collar, service-oriented jobs requiring specialized skills in information technology—compelled candidates Bush and Kerry to take public positions on protecting “American” jobs. Both of them were frequently bombarded with the question, how can non-Americans take American jobs and what will you do about it? The question raised the specter of “America” and the politics of belonging in the realm of economics—what makes a certain job an American job and how can we make sure that what “belongs” to us stays with us and what belongs to the world stays with the world?<sup>4</sup>

Another dimension of the world's increasing involvement with the United States is the tremendous increase in immigration to America. The 1965 Immigration Act, which signaled a shift in emphasis from a European-oriented immigration policy to an Asia- and Latin America-friendly policy, has, in the new century, resulted in a demographic shift of seismic proportions. According to the 2000 census report, the Latino or Hispanic population, at 35.3 million, was close to surpassing the African American demographic of 36.4 million. By July 2003 the Latino population had increased to 39.9 million, a growth of 13.0 percent, over four times the 3.3 percent growth of the total population,<sup>5</sup> thus making Latinos the largest minority group in the United States. This is, Nicolás Vaca notes, a “Latino tsunami” that is “sweeping across the nation.”<sup>6</sup> What will happen to the black-white divide, as both a model for social analysis and a Manichean binary manifest in social and cultural forms

and behaviors, that has dominated America ever since its emergence in 1776 is a question whose import we are only beginning to grasp. But the issue is more complicated than one minority group replacing another. When “Hispanic” as a racial category is further subdivided into “White Hispanic” and “Black Hispanic,” the categories “Hispanic,” “Black,” and “White” as signaling different “races” become redundant.<sup>7</sup> As race and ethnicity become imbricated in complex ways, we are compelled to question what is often presented as a sociological fact, that is, Hispanics overtaking African Americans to become the largest minority group in America. With the idea of race as a reliable sign of social identity becoming leaky, how to define and identify an “American” is turning out to be a vexatious exercise. Even as America extends its military and economic reach in the nethermost parts of the world, the world is settling down inside America’s cities, countrysides, barrios, and ethnic enclaves, making it difficult to divide the world into first, second, and third. All these worlds are tending to grate against each other from within and without as they become more intertwined, more implicated in one another’s politics, and more hybridized in their forms of social and cultural interaction.

Literature and culture are other spheres of activity in which the meaning of America and the problem of American identity are being thoroughly contested and modified. For instance, consider Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. It was written by a woman who grew up in Iran, studied in America, returned to Iran and taught American literature at the University of Tehran, resigned her professorship in the 1990s, came to America, and at the time of publication of the book was affiliated with the Johns Hopkins University. The memoir narrates the experiences of a few Iranian women who meet in Nafisi’s house at considerable personal risk to read, talk, and exchange views about American literature. But it is not just about Iranian women reading American literature. It is also about reading a book written by Vladimir Nabokov, a Russian immigrant to America; about Humbert Humbert and his relationship with a girl-child, Lolita, the object of his perverted fascination; and about that book being read and taught by an Iranian woman

who had studied in the United States, has returned to Iran, and teaches *Lolita* to her students there. Profound dislocations are at work here: no longer can we rely on a comparative methodology that takes us back to the United States on the assumption that the “original” novel, Nabokov’s *Lolita*, should first be perspectivized in its nationally localized contexts prior to its insertion into transnational frames. Nafisi and her female students in Tehran are not reading “our” American text. As “global transit extends, triangulates, and transforms its meaning,” and as the memoir becomes a “new semantic template, a new form of the legible, each time it crosses a national border,”<sup>8</sup> we become dispossessed readers and dislocated subjects. We are not asked to use the America of *Lolita* as the first and final measure of the text’s ability to translate itself into a foreign register; instead, we are forced to come to terms with “*Lolita* in Tehran, how *Lolita* gave a different color to Tehran and how *Tehran* helped *redefine Nabokov’s novel, turning it into this Lolita, our Lolita.*”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, what emerges as “America” in the memoir hinges not only on U.S.-Iranian relations and east-west economies but also on the conceptualization and periodization of Iranian modernity, the Islamization of national, patriarchal desire, and the othering of women and America.

Complicating matters further, here I am, a reader of *Lolita* in India and *Reading Lolita in Tebran* in America, born and raised in India, now living in Westbrook, Maine, and teaching American culture and literature for a living at the University of Southern Maine. Nabokov moved from Russia to America, Nafisi shuttled between Iran and America, and I have migrated from India to the United States. Although we are linked in this context by a shared interest in American literature, this shared interest was possible *because* of the global migration of literatures, cultures, and peoples. And when texts migrate, especially across national borders and continental divides, as Edward Said perceptively notes, they move from a point of origin, a “set of initial circumstances in which the idea comes to birth”; they traverse a distance, “a passage through the pressure of various contexts”; they negotiate a new a set of conditions that impinges on them; and as they are read and consumed in different locations, they produce new meanings.<sup>10</sup> What links Nabokov,

Nafisi, me, and you, the reader, located as you may be in Bangalore, Lima, Buenos Aires, Albuquerque, Chicago, Toronto, London, Frankfurt, Hong Kong, Damascus, Dubai, Singapore, Kabul, Tokyo, or Sydney, or in the borderlands of Kashmir, the occupied territories in Palestine, or the U.S. Southwest and northern Mexico, is not our reading and responding to something called American literature that is available to us all in its elemental substance, its core ideas, themes, and myths intact and artfully encoded in textual artifacts. Reading *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in America, reading *Lolita* in Tehran, and reading *Lolita* in India produce very different ideas and meanings about what constitutes American literature because the dynamics of migration—of peoples and cultures—linking America to Iran, Iran to India, India to America are simply not the same. Our responses to it are shaped not only by our individual dispositions towards things artistic but by complex processes of transnational cultural translation set in motion by the migration of texts along global circuits.<sup>11</sup> Migration, border crossing, and the dynamics of cultural translation force American literature to become out of joint with itself, alienated from its long-established myths and cherished points of reference: America as a “city on a hill,” a New Jerusalem, a tabula rasa upon which Europe would write a brand new chapter of universal history, the War of Independence, the Civil War, the American Renaissance, turn-of-the-century modernism, World Wars I and II, the civil rights era, post-1960s America, and so on. The narrative threads that bind them together are fraying and fragmenting; these events themselves are being made susceptible to all kinds of odd permutations and new hermeneutic exercises. On what basis something can be called American literature and at what point a text becomes American are not easy questions to answer. Is American literature produced only by Americans? Can literature written in Norwegian or Hindi be called American literature?<sup>12</sup> Indeed, who decides who Americans are, what their color is, what their language is? Can non-Americans write American literature? How does the identity of the reader and the writer determine the “Americanness” of a certain text or work of art? These questions lead us to examine what Charles Bright and Michael Geyer refer to as the

“grids of action and interaction that both constituted the United States in a global space and entangled it in the history of globalization,” which also prompt them to ask, “Where in the world is America?”<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, where is America, who is an American, what is American literature, and what is American culture? Militarily, economically, socially, politically, and culturally, the more America is becoming caught up in the affairs of peoples and communities outside its national borders, the more its internally generated ideas of cultural identity and historical continuity are being contested. Because “the relation between historical time and national entity has begun to fracture,”<sup>14</sup> the boundaries between outside and inside, America and the world, are becoming harder to delimit, police, and sustain. This is why, as Paul Giles astutely notes, it is imperative to delineate and engage with the “*interference between text and context*,” thereby disturbing the tautological assumptions that would seek to explain individual events through metanarratives of American consciousness.<sup>15</sup> We are unable to abstract the politics of American identity (who we are and profess to be) from the politics of worldly location (where we are situated in the world and positioned in society). As we find ourselves at the jagged borders of a new millennium, these questions compel our attention with heightened urgency. One way to respond to these questions, as this book argues, involves reworlding America—a form of discursive contestation that places migration, border crossing, transnational exchange, cultural translation, and colonial modernity at the center of debates and discussions regarding American literature and culture. But what does “reworlding” mean?