America as Network: Notions of Interconnectedness in American Transcendentalism and Pragmatism

REGINA SCHOBER

ABSTRACT

The network represents a prevalent figure of thought in U.S. American culture. This essay argues that American Transcendentalism and Pragmatism, as precursors to current network theories, share a particular mode of “networked thinking” that relies on concepts commonly associated with “America” or “Americanness” such as decentralization, informal associations, mobility, adaptation, and distributed power relations. The reading of some exemplary texts by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, William James, and Gertrude Stein examines the various ways in which they propose and negotiate visions of interconnection in relation to notions of the self, creativity, and geographical/cultural space. As a more or less explicit conceptual model, the network allows these texts to explore epistemological, aesthetic, and political questions in relation to conceptions of the U.S. as a constantly shifting, yet integrative configuration.

The network has become one of the favored metaphors and conceptual models of our age. It serves to describe an increasingly complex social, economic, and cultural environment of a global information age, representing a visually inspired, multilateral and highly convoluted figuration of thought. Yet networks have always existed, whether in trade relations or social configurations, or in communication and ecological systems. As a metaphor, the network may have gained particular prominence in the last decades but it has infused Western thought in more or less indirect ways at least since the early-nineteenth century (Böhme; Emden; Gießmann). American philosophy and literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, in particular, have drawn on the network model to conceptualize and reflect interconnected thinking, self-definition, and creativity; with a strong emphasis on decentered processes and distributed agencies, they rely on concepts commonly associated with the network, such as interconnectivity, reciprocity, processual dynamics, decentrality, and collectivity.¹

In my essay, I will trace the figure of the network within some of the key texts of American Transcendentalism and Pragmatism as well as literary works associated with or inspired by these schools of thought. In applying a network perspective, I intend to re-read these texts in view of their capacity to instigate an epistemological tradition within U.S. American thought that is based on relational, transitional, and adaptive processes. I regard American Transcendentalism and Pragmatism as parts of a continuous tradition in which notions of “networked thinking” are related, while displaying individual qualities. I thus aim at historically contextual-

¹ See Ulfried Reichardt’s essay in this issue for a systematic introduction to the usages and functions of the network model in American literature and culture.
izing the network model by examining conceptual connections, correlations, developments, and discontinuities in these two successive, yet distinct philosophical movements. I suggest that the network allows the authors I discuss here to reflect on the relationship between self and environment, not only on the levels of the individual and the world, but also on the level of cultural/national identity. The texts create visions of interconnectivity to explore processes, possibilities, and limitations of thinking, imagining, and writing within and about the U.S. as a main frame of reference. America is conceptualized in relation to and with the help of the network model to test the conceptual boundaries of physical and imaginary territory. In exploring the heuristic potential of the network model for American Transcendentalism and Pragmatism, I thus place these two movements within the context of a particularly American tradition of self-reflection and self-exploration that embraces transitional, open-ended answers and questions.

Epistemological Visual Shapes: From Circles to Networks

American Transcendentalism and Pragmatism share a particular notion of process-oriented thinking, marked by a sense of evolution and a strong focus on relational thought. According to Herwig Friedl, “the cultural and political world which we call America can be philosophically interpreted as owing itself to a specific mode of the dispensation of Being” (132). This ontological premise manifests itself in an anti-essentialist, experimental, dynamic, processual, pluralistic, and therefore fundamentally democratic conception of the self, the environment, and the nation (136-37). Similarly, Jonathan Levin calls this “distinct American intellectual and literary inheritance” a “poetics of transition” (x). Neither Friedl nor Levin, however, relate this common ontology to the figure of the network but instead to another visual shape, the circle. For Emerson, in particular, the circle embodies the ideal “transitional form” in which “the straight lines of chronology and teleological purpose are replaced by the circles that indicate a multipurposeful, multi-intentional eternal return” (Levin 35). “The circle”, Levin holds, “is Emerson’s figure of figures, collapsing the eye and its horizon, a life and the world that includes it, the forms of pleasure […] and the forms of art and politics. It is a fundamentally dynamic figure” (39). Friedl notes accordingly that “The image of the expanding and proliferating circles helps to visualize this ontological event,” namely the “constant ecstatic self-overcoming and […] the ultimate and radical evanescence of all singular beings” (142). In fact, Emerson makes much more frequent and explicit use of the circle metaphor than of the network, most plainly in his essay “Circles.” In pointing out this central figure of thought in Emerson’s writing, Levin emphasizes the non-linear, impermanent, and ultimately holistic dynamics of his Transcendentalist epistemology. He furthermore observes that the Transcendentalists as well as the Pragmatists “adopt a similar transitional dynamic whereby the coherence of available rational forms runs up against the recognition of the limits of those forms and the impulse to reimagine them and so establish new intellectual and moral paradigms” (7). Levin quotes Henry James’s famous passage on the art of the novel, in which the circle becomes a figure that
does not represent the process of thinking but, instead, the selective framework within which writing is possible: “Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so” (H. James qtd. in Levin 10).

Intriguingly, Henry James’s comment shows that the circle is mainly a function or a model of yet another imaginary figure: the network, which, in capturing the general interconnectedness of all things, seems to represent another key figure for both Transcendentalists and Pragmatists. “Everything exists in relation” (35), Levin writes about Emerson in correspondence with James’s observation that “relations stop nowhere” (10). The network also lurks in Friedl’s conception of Emerson’s and Dewey’s “Being,” which he considers to be “radically temporal. It arises out of the “unquestionable Present”” (139). Such evolving versions of truth, which arise spontaneously like branches of a network, pave the way for a pluralistic, thus democratic, form of society: “Democracy, in the way Dewey reads Emerson, is the mode or way or dispensation of Being that makes proliferating versions of democratic realization possible in their essentially unforeseeable variety and plenitude” (Friedl 140). These pluralistic dynamics result from the crucial mode of Transcendentalist and Pragmatist belief that “[e]xperiencing opens a world in which humans and things exist in ongoing relations,” producing “constant processual differentiations of Being” (152).

As a figure that suggests an endless degree of interconnectivity and processual variation, the network becomes intertwined with circle imagery in both Emerson’s and James’s writing. Both the circle and the network are structural models that appeal to Transcendentalist and Pragmatist thought due to their implications of non-linearity and processual continuity. In what follows, I would like to complement Levin’s and Friedl’s observation by proposing the network as an alternative visual shape in these writings. Alluded to by the Transcendentalists and more explicitly mentioned by the Pragmatists, the network represents a structural figure which allows us to re-think these two American traditions of thought within a larger historical framework of modeling and understanding complexity. Contrary to the circle, the network emphasizes the relational, reciprocal, and adaptive qualities of knowledge and inquiry. Moreover, it addresses the problem of pluralism versus monism on a different level, one which does not enclose and therefore delimit the whole from “the other” but which, rather, suggests the (possibility of) simultaneous concurrence of these (seemingly) paradoxica concepts. The network captures the inevitable entangledness of thoughts and objects. At the same time, networks provide ways to conceive of, and thereby model, such processes. Networks are both concrete objects and abstract constructions of systematic relations (Böhme 1). As such, the network thus resides somewhere in-between, and therefore dissolves the boundary between the ontological and the epistemological, both constituting as well as modeling “reality.” Due to its intermediary position, the network figure thus brings up questions of how the world, as we perceive it, is structured around and through ourselves, while also evoking questions of representation and creativity—two fundamentally interwoven realms in both Transcendentalism and Pragmatism.
The Network as an American Model of Thought

When I speak of the network as particularly constitutive of American philosophy and literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, I do not mean to deny the universal appeal and applicability of the network model, neither do I wish to succumb to an exceptionalist or essentialist view on America as fundamentally “networked.” Rather, I want to explore how features associated with networks—such as relationality, reciprocal interaction, decentralized self-organization, and emergent dynamics—have been used to describe processes and structures related to what are considered “American” phenomena in particular and how these features play a crucial part in national, cultural, and political processes of self-reflection and -identification in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Notions of America as network pervade texts of this time to negotiate concepts such as democracy, spatial expansion, and individualism.

Thinking in and about networks can be historically and culturally contextualized in relation to debates on social, political, and cultural interconnectedness, decentralization, and self-organization. As a historically contingent, yet pervasive conceptual model, the network both determines particular lines of thought from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, while also displaying specifically Romantic and Early Modernist characteristics. The network thus shapes historically distinct notions of (spiritual) interconnectivity, the self, and national unity. In the course of the nineteenth century, the network became an increasingly prevalent cultural, philosophical, and aesthetic model, in response to the emergence and growing presence of technological network structures, such as the railroad, the telegraph, and electricity. These material networks affected individual experiences of space and time relations, rendering perceptions of the world and of America increasingly complex. The network both reflects a sense of increased interconnectivity while providing a coherent model for grasping the overwhelmingly pluralistic and emergent dynamics of an increasingly industrial, urban, and global social environment. In managing to include both the particular and the universal in their shifting relations, the network model proposes not only a new epistemology of interaction, but also generates a sense of coherence at a time in which America underwent the transition from fragmented republic to emerging superpower. It is exactly the flexibility and openness of the network which makes it such an appealing figure of thought in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, uniting seemingly paradoxical notions of self, environment, and nation within one of the prolific metaphors of modernity.

Perhaps no other concept of American Transcendentalism has been appropriated, modified, and misunderstood more frequently than Emerson’s concept of self-reliance. Urging man to believe in “the power which resides in him” (“Self-Reliance” 155), Emerson does not postulate self-liberation from any kind of bond in terms of an egotheistic “self-culture.” Such a simplistic reduction of his self-reliance has given rise to “a discourse that promoted an American exceptionalism based on self-interest” (Gura xv). On the contrary, Emerson’s self has to be understood as a “networked self,” uniting the seeming paradox of (social, cultural) independence and (spiritual) interdependence. As Barbara Packer has noted, Emerson’s writing contains an underlying conflict between a certain belief in “connectedness” of individual and Universe (393) and his Transcendentalist “dislike of all forms of association” (460). These two forms of connection, the spiritual-ideal and the material-social, are integral parts of Emerson’s conception of a self that is both independent from and integrated within a larger spiritual context.

Although Emerson demands self-liberation through self-trust, to “believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men” (“Self-Reliance” 150), a fundamental requirement to attain self-reliance is to connect to the universal network of spiritual nature: “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events” (151). Self-reliance, as opposed to social conformity, disconnects the individual from the corruptive “conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” (153) and, instead, situates them within the divine framework of Providence, which he describes as an immaterial network, “the connection of events” (151). Yet, to rely on oneself means to interact with others through the intricate flows of the Over-Soul.

Emerson believes that individual experience is metaphysically linked to universal experience through a sense of divine interconnectedness. This notion of a “spiritual network” is based on the notion of divine inspiration that materializes through intuitive knowledge. A fundamental belief in both European and American Transcendentalism was that reality cannot be explained by observing the material world only. Both schools drew on German Idealism and its skepticism towards a purely rational worldview, especially on Kant’s metaphysics, which assumes the existence of “a priori conceptions” based on intuition and determined by phenomenological experience. Kant concludes “that our faculty of cognition is unable to transcend the limits of possible experience […] The estimate of our rational cognition a priori at which we arrive is that it has only to do with phenomena, and that things in themselves, while possessing a real existence, lie beyond its sphere” (xxx). Kant’s concept of intuition appealed to Romantic philosophers as it granted the imagination an important role in perceiving reality and accessing truth. In other words, the individual was no longer perceived as connected to the truth through empirical observation, but through an intuitive, in-built percipience required to “transcend the limits of experience” (xxx). According to Kant’s understanding, this a priori conception is rooted in “reason, isolated and transcending the limits of experience, as an object of mere thought” (xxx).
While Kant emphasizes the power of the mind over the senses, American Transcendentalism regards this connection to an a priori knowledge more within the spiritual realm. The ultimate foundation of nature, the self, and all action is considered to be “that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct” (Emerson, “Self-Reliance” 160). American Transcendentalism follows the pantheistic belief that God is present in all appearances and people, that “the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed” (160). According to Emerson’s concept of self-reliance, each individual is inherently situated within an interconnected framework of self, nature, and divine spirit. “We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles,” Emerson notes in his essay “Over-Soul,” maintaining that “within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE” (176). However, this notion of a spiritual network is not an entirely horizontal one, since references to a common beginning and a single ‘source,’ suggests a hierarchical rather than a rhizomatic structure. Within this transcendental network, there is a strong sense of central authority which materializes in the form of a metaphysical truth, from which all other connections emanate, and to which they ultimately lead back.3

### Walt Whitman’s Spider Web and Transnational Visions

Among his contemporaries, Walt Whitman most explicitly drew on the concept of the network, taking up and extending Emerson’s notion of spiritual interconnectedness. Whitman ascribed to networks the power to connect humanity and to create a sense of universal community while celebrating the creative power of the individual. While some of Whitman’s poems make direct reference to the term “network,” others implicitly address the notion of personal, cultural, national, and spiritual interconnectedness. In the following, I will focus on two of Whitman’s poems, each of which reveals a rather distinct approach to notions of interconnectedness: “A Noiseless-Patient Spider” and “Passage to India.” In slightly different ways, these poems show how Transcendentalist notions of the network are incorporated and developed aesthetically, creating utopian visions of America and the American self as expanding, open, and democratic. Whitman’s poem “A Noiseless Patient Spider” explicitly takes up Emerson’s notion of a spiritual network. Whitman uses the prevalent metaphor of a spider web to illustrate the universal interconnectedness between material and spiritual world.4 The spider, isolated but highly productive in its weaving, represents the ideal of the Romantic poet, as described in Emerson’s essay “The Poet.” Whitman’s spider is disconnected from

---

3 See my article “Transcending Boundaries: The Network Concept in 19th Century US Literature and Philosophy” for a lengthier discussion of Emerson’s concepts of self and self-reliance as “networked concepts.”

4 The spider web has been a frequently used image in American literature. For a survey of literary references to spider webs, see Franz Link, “The Spider and Its Web in American Literature.”
the outside world. In accordance with Emerson’s notion of self-reliance, it remains “noiseless” and “patient” (line 1), self-sufficient and unobtrusive, yet receptive to whatever may come.

Although it looks like it stands “isolated” (line 2), the spider is in constant exchange with its environment, “explor[ing] the vacant vast surrounding” (line 3). The spider, in the center of the surrounding web, does no more than to create connections. The poet, though isolated, maintains a central position in the network. Despite continuous action, the spider neither moves nor tires but remains completely at ease with its seemingly simple action: “It launch’d forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself” (line 4). The threefold repetition of the noun ‘filament’ emphasizes the incessant action of creating connections. Through this textually performed repetition, a virtual web is created in the reader’s mind analogous to the spider’s web. At the same time, the reader increasingly identifies both with the speaker, who closely observes the miracle of a spider building its web, and with the spider itself. The reader thus becomes one with subject and object, uniting two opposing perspectives in the act of reading.

This double perspective is then extended by the poem’s move to the metaphorical level. The second half of the poem relates the (experience of a) spider weaving a web to the soul, which is, similarly, “[s]urrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space, /ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them” (lines 7-8). What the speaker calls “you O my soul” (line 6) may not exactly correspond with Emerson’s notion of the Over-Soul, yet the phrase does express a sense of spiritual self-perception. Since the speaker addresses his object as “my soul,” the reference appears more personal than in Emerson’s Over-Soul. However, the soul does not remain exclusively attached to the individual but also connects to the spiritual realm. Again, the ceaselessness of the perpetual reaching out is performed on the material level of the poem. This time, the repetitions of part one are even intensified and thus continuously enacted by a list of synonyms for the verb “to connect”: “Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres, to connect them” (line 8). Consequently, in contrast to the first part, the emphasis here is on the process of connecting rather than on the network as a structure built of such connections. Conveying the incessant energy of the process and thus gaining momentum in both the speaker’s as well as the reader’s imagination, the virtual network created in the reader’s mind has become vivid and effective.

Like the spider, the speaker’s soul is simultaneously “surrounded” and “detached, in measureless oceans of space” (line 7), expressing the Transcendentalist dichotomy between separation from the external, material world and a spiritual interconnection with the endlessly creative system in which the soul is embedded. Again, the actual process of connecting is not an active one, but one which occurs through an invisible and indefinable power. The soul perpetually casts its strings “till the ductile anchor hold, /Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere” (lines 9-10). In complete balance between (active) disposition to connect and (passive) hook, the soul exerts a patient, yet powerful and poised attitude. Nothing in the process of weaving is described as being forced or directed. Rather, the metaphor of a fragile spider web with its delicate threads suggests that the quality
of individual links is frail, ephemeral, and almost imperceptible. The workings of the spider require close observation, patience, and receptive attention from the observer. The speaker of the poem thus becomes one with the spider/soul by undergoing the exact same processes of attentive reflection. Both spider and observer are united within the common experience of waiting.

Consequently, the spider represents more than a metaphor for the speaker’s soul. As an object of nature, it is already considered as inherently present within the speaker. It becomes a Transcendentalist symbol which, in line with Emerson’s concept of nature, corresponds to a spiritual and thus universal truth: “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact,” Emerson claims in *Nature*, and “[e]very appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture” (28). This line of thought, based on a necessary connection between natural appearance, individual state of mind, and iconic symbol, is reflected in Whitman’s spider image. Through the act of looking at the spider, the speaker (re-)evokes the hitherto hidden link, enacting the union between subject and object. At the same time, the process of observing the spider leads the speaker to a universal spiritual experience in which weaving is only one manifestation, albeit a highly symbolic one. The speaker virtually connects with the spider and thus transforms the feeling of isolation into one of alliance and self-empowerment. Or, as Eldrid Herrington maintains, “the poem’s form and manner work against what is being said and claim an answer to the loneliness depicted” (131). The dichotomy between self and nature, between solitary and communal experience, determines both the poem’s form and function, even if “isolated” (line 2) does not necessarily express a sentiment as negative as Herrington claims. The subsequent notions of attachment turn the Romantic concept of isolation into an ‘embedded’ form of Emersonian self-reliance. In addressing, and concurrently dissolving, this divide, the poem both conjures up and resolves the conflict present within the speaker. The transforming power of the imagination thus becomes one of the fundamental agents in bridging the structural difference, in connecting the diverse objects in the subject’s environment.

Whitman’s “A Noiseless Patient Spider” portrays the contemplation of nature as a spiritual act, one which connects the individual to nature and, simultaneously, to universal human experience. Its main theme is the process of the individual connecting to ‘the other,’ whether to the spider, to nature, to the soul, or to other individuals through communal experience. By doing so, the individual changes perspective and function, turning from observer to active participant within the spiritual network. The transcendence of boundaries between subject and object as well as between material and spiritual takes place not only within the experience of the speaker, but, similarly, also within the reader who is simultaneously connected to the process of self-transformation by engaging with the text. Meanwhile, the notion of the network, which serves as a key figure for illustrating the process of accessing spiritual unity, is also evoked as a visual image within the reader’s mind, mainly through the direct reference to the spider’s web, but also through frequent use of vocabulary associated with the network, such as “space” (line 7), “connect” (line 8), “bridge” (line 9), or “thread” (line 10).
Semantically, this creation of a visual network is reminiscent of traditional connotations of the web as fabric, as material texture, as text. And like any other text, the poem itself, which James P. Warren has called “a web of description and analogy” (388), represents a linguistic web, a fabricated net-“work” of connotations, references, and allusions. The term ‘web’ lends coherence to the notion of “text” as emerging from a highly unstable and fragmented process of writing, publishing, and revising. “A Noiseless, Patient Spider” is one of Whitman’s poems which was substantially rewritten before being published in the 1881/82 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, having existed in various draft forms before (Folsom and Price 136). Whitman’s poem thus creates unity on various different levels: It produces a “semantic web” around the network image, instilling the notion of network as central concept underlying the poem. At the same time, it establishes a cohesive unity between different levels of connotation. Most overtly, this process of relating diverse concepts with each other is achieved through the metaphorical joining between nature and spirituality, a union which, through the act of reading, proceeds from analogy to convergence. The concept of network conveyed here suggests the potential of universal interconnectedness inherent in the transforming power of imagination which results from the human capacity to connect to the environment. One of Whitman’s shorter poems, “A Noiseless Patient Spider” is a complex yet concise text which performs its network aesthetics not through elongated lists, as would be more typical of Whitman, but instead through addressing the idea of interconnectedness on the level of a succinct, almost imagist, analogy.

The duality between natural and material expansion is perhaps most explicitly expressed in Whitman’s poem “Passage to India.” As indicated by the title, the poem is a response to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, connecting Europe and Asia by sea, a voyage that had hitherto only been possible by circumnavigating the African continent. The poem euphorically celebrates “the great achievements of the present, / Singing the strong light works of engineers, / Our modern wonders” (lines 2-4) before establishing a conceptual link between this man-made spatial connection in the Old World and similar technological developments in the New World which “by its mighty railroad spann’d, / The seas inlaid with eloquent gentle wires” (lines 6-7). Both the railroad and the telegraph are set in analogy to the Suez Canal, connecting people and continents, transforming spacial and temporal relations within early processes of globalization.

As much as the poem is about physical connections and passages, these are deeply intertwined with more abstract notions of the network. “Passage to India” correlates the transcendence of spatial and temporal boundaries. Modern technology is not regarded as obliterating the past but, on the contrary, as providing access to it. “[f]or what is the present after all but a growth out of the past?” (13). This continuity between past and present is mainly regarded as a product of organic growth and evolution. Again, notions of technological progress are situated within a semantic environment that suggests ‘natural’ development. At the same time, technology facilitates travel, both physical and spiritual. The opening of the Suez Canal and the construction of railroads in America are praised both in their practical and spiritual functions of enabling border crossings:
A worship new I sing,
You captains, voyagers, explorers, yours,
You engineers, you architects, machinists, yours,
You, not for trade or transportation only,
But in God’s name, and for thy sake O soul. (lines 36-40)

The speaker explicitly addresses human actors involved in the technological revolution, giving these material developments a personal identity rather than evoking anxieties of technologically induced effects of dehumanization. The professions that are listed differ in rank and function, but they are all democratically joined in the project of expansion, which transcends both space and nationality:

Lo, soul, seest thou not God’s purpose from the first?
The earth to be spann’d, connected by network,
The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,
The oceans to be cross’d, the distant brought near,
The lands to be welded together. (lines 30-35)

To think America means to re-think America as a transnationally expanding nation. The vicinity of “network” and “God’s purpose” is noteworthy, since Whitman bestows spiritual significance and legitimacy to the material process of globalization, thereby rendering the imperialist tendencies of the young Republic in highly positive, if not naïve terms. Not only is America’s interconnection through the railroad, but also global processes of spatial densification are associated with American ideals of democracy and unity in diversity. Unity is achieved through acts of passing, “crossing” (line 60), “marking through” (line 61), “[b]ridging” (line 62), and “tying” (line 63). While the poem often uses verbs that indicate processes of ‘connecting’ in their future participle form, thus suggesting a necessary and inevitable teleology: “The earth to be spann’d, connected by net-work” (line 33). This passage makes deliberate use of the gerund to imply dynamic processes that are continuous and on-going. The network is in the process of becoming rather than representing a stable structure. The passage to India is at once metaphor and metonymyn for such acts of global border crossing, representing an exemplary instance of forming connections. Likewise, the material construction of canals, railroads, and telegraph connections is regarded as a tangible prerequisite for enhanced interpersonal, cultural, and spiritual interconnection while being understood as a metaphor for such immaterial processes of border crossing. The network functions as a central image on various levels in this poem. It describes a physical reality of technologically induced interconnection that alleviates transportation, trade, and communication. Concurrently, these material processes of interconnection are closely related with processes of spiritual transcendence.

Given the global dimension of the poem, opening with the image of the Suez Canal, it may be a bold claim that the network, as a central image in Whitman’s poem, is staged as uniquely American, especially since America is presented as one among many “[l]ands found and nations born, thou born America” (line 78). Although the poem’s scope is unmistakably global, there are concrete references to America, such as Columbus’ voyage and “discovery” of America in 1492 “with its awaken’d enterprise” (line 140). References to America, such as this one, are presented in terms of awakening and organic birth, “[s]omething swelling in hu-
manity now like the sap of the earth in spring” (line 141). Significantly, the process of rebirth is not only considered an American phenomenon, but one that concerns humanity as a whole. From an American perspective, connecting Europe with India gives the Old World access to the “old” Old World, thus also opening up passages for America to form global connections and access supposedly primal origins: “Back, back to wisdom’s birth, to innocent intuitions, / Again with fair creation” (line 169-70). Yet, the poem is first and foremost about America, about its (central) position in the world. Even if America’s birth is conceived of as relying on its connections to the past and to other nodes in the global network, it is from the viewpoint of America that the speaker perceives the world and thus creates transnational connections.

American identity, the poem suggests, is fundamentally interconnected. It is based on forming relations both internally and externally, embodying the image of an organic network that spans across its own territorial boundaries while at the same time epitomizing “the vastnesses of Space” (line 207). Consequently, the poem’s final assertion “Passage to more than India!” (line 220) lends a sense of closure, extending the singular to the plural, widening the scope, and allowing for alternative passages. “More than India” refers to both, to America but also to the extension of the spiritual. That Whitman encourages the “brave soul” (248) to “farther, farther, farther sail” (249) at once closes and opens the poem, virtually extending the dynamics of passage beyond the textual limits of the poem and beyond the limits of imagination. Representative of a world still largely un(dis)covered, America, as the unfilled space, is to be farther explored, constructed, and connected. This open ending exemplifies both the limitlessness of space as well as thought: as a continually and dynamically developing network, America knows neither concrete beginning nor end, its growth is certain yet organic. “Passage to India” transcends the dichotomy between material and immaterial, technological and spiritual, physical and cultural, creating a highly optimistic vision of the world as universal network by employing an all-encompassing notion of unity that transcends existing boundaries and therefore lends identity, perspective, and prospect to a largely fragmented and disunited nation.

“A Network of Attachments”: Pragmatism and Relational Experience

The metaphor of the spider web, central to Whitman’s notion of an interconnected creative self, was also employed by one of the major proponents of literary Pragmatism. In “The Art of Fiction,” Henry James writes that “[e]xperience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue” (34-35). In contrast to Whitman, James grants agency to the network rather than to a central human being: experience is created through a contingent interplay, through what William James would call “a rich and active commerce” (“What Pragmatism Means” 36) between consciousness and environment, rejecting the notion of directed and autonomous (human) action. The network continues to be a powerful metaphor
in American philosophy throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—even more powerful perhaps than in Transcendentalism, since it is alluded to much more explicitly, representing one of the central figures of thought to illustrate the complex processes and entanglements of experience, associations, and thought. William James, in a talk to teachers on the process of learning, evokes the concept of “a network of attachments,” a precursor to later notions of neural networks and connectionism:

But it may occur here, just as in other gelatinous substances, that an impression will vibrate throughout the brain, and send waves into other parts of it. In cases of this sort, although the immediate impression may fade out quickly, it does modify the cerebral mass; for the paths it makes there may remain, and become so many avenues through which the impression may be reproduced if they ever get excited again. And its liability to reproduction will depend of course upon the variety of these paths and upon the frequency with which they are used. Each path is in fact an associated process, the number of these associates becoming thus to a great degree a substitute for the independent tenacity of the original impression. As I have elsewhere written: Each of the associates is a hook to which it hangs, a means to fish it up when sunk below the surface. Together they form a network of attachments by which it is woven into the entire tissue of our thought. The “secret of a good memory” is thus the secret of forming diverse and multiple associations with every fact we care to retain. (Talks to Teachers on Psychology 122)

James’ highly modern insistence on “networked thinking” is based on Charles S. Peirce’s notion that thought is always relational or, as Michael Bacon calls it, “inferential” (19). Cognition, according to Peirce, is to be conceived of as a process which operates on the scientific logic of validation through relation: “This is no other than the process of valid inference,” Peirce observes, “which proceeds from its premise, A, to its conclusion, B, only if, as a matter of fact, such a proposition as B is always or usually true when such a proposition as A is true” (30). Such an interdependency of ideas and conclusions, as postulated by Peirce, not only assumes that “there is no such thing as non-relational thought,” that there is “no intuitive, or immediate, knowledge” (Bacon 19), but also that thoughts interact with each other in a closely-knit web of cross-dependencies. The Pragmatists’ focus on an “inductive logic of relations, rather than [on] pre-determined thought learned through some objectified knowledge source” anticipates a connectionist concept of thinking as the result of “creating architectures that shapes new information as it comes into the network” (Glassman and Kang 1412-13).

For William James, such architecture of thinking resembles a network structure in which different segments of experience form momentary intersections, before connecting with new sets of associations. Experience, for James, is, “a member of diverse processes that can be followed away from it along entirely different lines. The one self-identical thing has so many relations to the rest of experience that you can take it in disparate systems of association, and treat it as belonging with opposite contexts” (“Does “Consciousness” Exist?” 481). That for James, “relations stop nowhere” (Preface to Roderick Hudson; qtd. in Levin 10) and that they form an intricate system of interrelations evokes the notion of a complex network of associations. Agency, in this “spider-web of consciousness,” does not reside within a single entity. Such a view radically challenges traditional notions
of who or what determines our thoughts within inferential and reciprocal systematics. Contrary to the Transcendentalist notion of spiritual networks in which the Over-Soul functions as a sort of “universal source,” Pragmatism assumes that agency is necessarily and ultimately distributed. Dismissing the Cartesian notion of an autonomous and fully rational will as well as any sort of teleological purpose, Pragmatism favors the notion of relational thinking in which “truth” is constantly (re)generated through a complex interplay of different verification processes. Truth is not ontologically given but, as James maintains, “made true by events” (“Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth” 87). James’s notion of “events” is another word for “practical consequences of the verified and validated idea” which change over time and are therefore constantly reconstituted. Action, however, always occurs as “interaction,” since our ideas “lead us, namely, through the acts and other ideas which they instigate, into or up to, or towards, other parts of experience with which we feel all the while [...] that the original ideas remain in agreement” (87). Accordingly, thinking occurs in a self-organizing network in which thoughts interact to form interim stages of “truth settlements” while constantly readapting themselves to their environment.

It is exactly this potential coexistence of different truths that makes the network such an alluring metaphor for Pragmatism. Networks embody the seeming paradox of “The One and the Many” which is the title of another one of William James’ talks. The philosophical problem of such conflicting notions as monism and pluralism is an ideal showcases James’s decidedly pragmatist solution: The world should neither be viewed as one or as many, but as both: “What our intellect really aims at is neither variety nor unity taken singly but totality,” James argues. “In this, acquaintance with reality’s diversities is as important as understanding their connexion” (“The One and the Many,” 59). Unity, according to James, does not necessarily exclude variety but is constituted by an endless number of single entities held together by “innumerable kinds of connexion that special things have with other special things; and the ensemble of any one of these connexions forms one sort of system by which things are conjoined” (59). As an example for such relational unity, James alludes to “a vast network of acquaintance” through which “men are conjoined” (61). For James, the pluralism-monism dilemma dissolves on the level of conceptualization. To think both, the one and the many, means to rely on a systematic model that traces and maps complex relations between seemingly disunited entities. The network does this exemplarily, providing a sense of interconnected unity while acknowledging particular identity.

James urges us to think of the whole “only as far as its parts hang together by any definite connexion,” while remaining “many just so far as any definite connexion fails to obtain” (W. James, “The One and the Many” 69). This juxtaposition between ‘one’ and ‘many’ has particular relevance for conceptions of America which have traditionally rested on the principle of e pluribus unum. For John Dewey, in particular, it is no coincidence that a notion of the “world as being in continuous formation” has its birthplace in the United States, corresponding

---

5 See Wendy Hui Kyong Chun’s essay in this issue for a discussion of networks’ tracing and mapping.
to the “unstable character of American life and civilization” (“The Development of American Pragmatism” 39). Ascriptions of Pragmatist thinking as ‘genuinely American’ often focus on Pragmatism’s transitional tendencies and, especially for Dewey, its emphasis on democracy as constant negotiation of pluralistic positions. However, there have also been more critical voices in relation to such an analogy. For George Santayana, as Levin remarks, America is even at odds with Pragmatist principles: “For all America’s vaunted freedoms, freedom in America is universally conditioned by this quasi-moral purposefulness. Nowhere, Santayana suggests, do “people live under more overpowering compulsions”” (qtd. in Levin 111). Richard Rorty remains similarly skeptical about drawing too close connections between American Pragmatism and American politics. For him, the only link between Pragmatism and American nationalism lies in the principle of ‘hope’: “For all that,” Rorty admits, “Dewey was not entirely wrong when he called pragmatism “the philosophy of democracy.” What he had in mind is that both pragmatism and America are expressions of a hopeful, melioristic, experimental frame of mind.” America, Rorty continues, “has always been a future-oriented country,” thus embodying Pragmatism’s value of processual and pluralistic thinking (24). Although, arguably, one cannot claim that America has completely incorporated Pragmatist politics, traces of Pragmatist thinking have at least infused American discourse and, what is perhaps more relevant, have shaped notions of America both from within and from without. The very attempt to place Transcendentalist and Pragmatist thinkers within a continuity of “networked thinking” already suggests that conceptions of America have been closely related to the notion of democracy and pluralistic thinking.

For William James, Pragmatism bears significant political and epistemological implications. Echoing Emerson’s call for a reawakening of American intellectual culture by reconnecting with nature, James evokes the notion of natural purification: “It means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality and the pretence of finality in truth” (“What Pragmatism Means” 29). That James proposes a “natural” way of thinking along the lines of Transcendentalist organicism suggests that thoughts follow an evolutionary, ramified course of development. An inquiry of truth itself, for James, “is a very ticklish subject, sending subtle rootlets into all kinds of crannies” (“Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth” 85). Truth’s inherently complex, processual, and highly evasive nature renders every description of it endlessly branched out. Peirce, contrarily, compares the process of thinking to the emerging technology of electricity. For him, thinking occurs in a network of “cables.” He holds that, “reasoning should not form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link, but a cable whose fibres may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected” (qtd. in Bacon 20-21). Peirce’s cablemetaphor is reminiscent of mid-nineteenth-century discourses on the emerging technology of electricity. As Paul Gilmore demonstrates, in the nineteenth century, electricity is conceived of as both material and transcendent, being “simultaneously and variously conceived of as a material fluid, as a spiritual medium, as a disembodied force.” Electricity thus “seem[s] to bridge the spiritual and the material, the natural and the technological” (6-7). Constituting the transient flows of energy both for humans and machines, electric-
ity represents a universal network of “life,” which “resists the systematic differentiation of nature and culture” (Böhme 1; my trans.), stimulating and enabling both the physical and, as Gilmore argues, aesthetic foundations of experience (8).

To consider experience in analogy to electricity implies that thinking occurs according to the binary logic of activation/non-activation. Importantly, causal connections are not completely dismissed by Pragmatism. The belief that experience operates within a network structure rather than in a linear way, that it “follows a zigzag; and to keep it straight, one must do violence to its spontaneous development” (W. James, *A Pluralistic Universe* 396), only relativizes the importance of causal connections, yet does not deny their existence. As Ulfried Reichardt notes, “pragmatism argues that knowledge has to be reconceived as a sequence of rivaling descriptions of the world which gain ascendancy because they work better than other ones rather than being closer to truth” (265). Consequently, change and disagreement are inevitably inscribed into sequential reports. Seriality, as a function of networks, can only be understood as a “sequence of discontinuity” rather than of continuity. The line itself becomes obsolete as an isolated figure of thought but has to be thought of in relation to other, intersecting lines. James holds that in every series of real terms, not only do the terms themselves and their associates and environments change, but we change, and their meaning for us changes, so that new kinds of sameness and types of causation continually come into view and appeal to our interest. [...] Not that one might not possibly, by careful seeking (tho I doubt it), find some line in nature along which terms literally the same, or causes causal in the same way, might be serially strung without limit, if one’s interest lay in such finding. Within such lines our axioms might hold, causes might cause their effect’s effects, etc.; but such lines themselves would, if found, only be partial members of a vast natural network, within the other lines of which you could not say, in any sense that a wise man or a sane man would ever think of, in any sense that would not be concretely silly, that the principle of skipt intermediaries still held good. In the practical world, the world whose significances we follow, sames of the same are certainly not sames of one another; and things constantly cause other things without being held responsible for everything of which those other things are causes. (A Pluralistic Universe 396-97)

This self-reflexive passage shows what it purports to tell: that the supposed consistency of our experiences and thoughts depends to a large extent on which “line” we follow, corresponding with James’s belief that truth is “an affair of leading” (“Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth” 90). What the convoluted syntax of James’ writing shows through its own writing is that every line of thought is connected with another line of thought, thus constituting a text which mirrors what he calls a “vast natural network” (*A Pluralistic Universe* 396). Thoughts trigger other thoughts in a seemingly endless way and in interlocking networks of sentences. The qualifier “natural” is significant, suggesting a certain inevitability of adopting such a network approach, conflicting with the Pragmatists’ refusal of making any essentialist truth claims. In natural networks, according to James, links are implicitly there, but, in order to become relevant, they need to be activated. Ex-

---

6 For the relationship between network and series, see Sabine Sielke’s contribution to this issue.
perience arises and is continuously shaped out of the liminal space of potentiality, the in-between of ephemeral possibility and enacted existence.

This connectionist principle, already alluded to in relation to neural networks, is explicated in “The Will to Believe,” where James distinguishes between “live” or “dead” hypotheses. Depending on whether a thought makes an “electric connection with your nature,” an idea can be “live,” meaning that it triggers a high “willingness to act” (187). James suggests that thoughts are part of a system that reacts to external stimuli by activating links in various degrees—depending on the density and adaptability of the internal network. Circulating through intricate pathways and channels in an equally elusive way as does electricity, knowledge is conceived of as a fundamental source of life that is both part of nature and of culture. Anticipating cybernetic models, systems theory, and complexity theory, James considers nature, technology, and the human mind as parallel (and interconnected!) systems which, together, form part of a greater ecosystem of consciousness (cf. Reichardt 267).

In “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy,” John Dewey explicates the correspondence between natural sciences and epistemology. For him, thinking occurs along the same evolutionary principles as does nature. Dewey proposes that both nature and knowledge develop on the basis of adaptation and variation rather than in relation to a preordained “purpose.” Since everything is in constant transition, Dewey argues, we can only grasp momentary truths, we can only rely on “particular intelligences which things are even now shaping”; thus “the sole verifiable or fruitful object of knowledge is the particular set of changes that generate the object of study” (11). Like nature, knowledge is in constant transition and can never be final. What is more, Dewey claims that knowledge is always related to concrete experiences and objects; it is always specific and can never be general or universal. Concrete experiences constitute nodes in an epistemological network and acquire agency. However, Dewey is careful to emphasize that even though agency is distributed, responsibility lies within those who acquire knowledge. Adapting an evolutionary concept of knowledge means to discard any sense of transcendental authority. Instead,

if insight into specific consequences of ideas is possible, philosophy must in time become a method of locating and interpreting the more serious of the conflicts that occur in life, and a method of projecting ways for dealing with them: a method of moral and political diagnosis and prognosis. (“The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy” 13)

It is important to note that for Dewey and other Pragmatists the idea that knowledge emerges and develops from complex structures conceptualized as networks does not mean that it cannot be “managed” or “directed.” Accordingly, Bacon considers the Pragmatists “naturalists” with the reservation that “they attend to the normative dimension in human life by seeing humans not only as natural but also as cultural beings” (4). To acknowledge the world’s complexity is only the first step—to work with it in any way is another one. James promotes such an “‘instrumental’ view of truth” (“What Pragmatism Means” 33) according to which to think means to act. While, for Dewey, such a call for action often has political implications, Pragmatism has also brought about a fundamental shift in conceptualizing creativity in art and writing.
Acting on the assumption that “experience is a matter of the interaction of organism with its environment” (Dewey, “The Human Contribution” 251) and that everything new is the result of adding something to already existing things (W. James, “What Pragmatism Means” 33-34), creativity is regarded first and foremost as a process of adaptation rather than as a completely unprecedented instance of inspired originality. Creativity is the constant outcome of complex interaction in a network of humans, material, language, and associations. Most Pragmatists distinguish between a general notion of creativity and art/writing in particular. For Dewey, the specific direction of complex associations in a more linear way is what he calls “communication” and what he deems to be “most fully manifested in literature” (“The Human Contribution” 249). Literature, Dewey holds, has the particular ability to both express “new modes of experience” while at the same time making them explicit, thus giving “body and definiteness to the experience” (249). What Dewey alludes to is literature’s function to represent and reduce complexity at the same time. Levin describes this capacity of literature, which both Transcendentalists and Pragmatists build on, as “a means of cultivating life’s possibilities, in full view of the contingent, historical conditions that shape those possibilities” (89). Literature bridges the paradoxical dilemma that, as Levin puts it, “when we name a thing, we typically ignore the network of events and consequences for which the name stands” (Dewey qtd. in Levin 99). Such an abstraction, according to Dewey, is necessary in order to “share vividly and deeply in meanings to which we had been dumb” (“The Varied Substance of the Arts” 248). Accordingly, literature paradigmatically responds to the essential double function of experience and/or knowledge as network: it transcends the ontology/epistemology divide in both representing and creating the relational complexity of the world while also constituting a sense of order in which certain ideas and experiences become activated and generate structures, patterns, and moments of coherence.

“Being a relation is one thing”: Gertrude Stein’s Mutable Connections

The experimental nature of much modernist literature provides a testing ground for exploring the relationship between thinking, knowing, and writing the world, and recognizing and creatively dealing with complexity, dynamic patterns, and shifting relations. Influenced by Pragmatist thought, Gertrude Stein’s ambitious The Geographical History of America, or The Relation of Human Nature to Human Mind (1936) shall serve as an example of how literature negotiates Pragmatist notions of knowledge in terms of continuously evolving networks. What makes this later novel of Stein’s particularly interesting is its explicit focus on a (possible) connection between America’s geography and questions of epistemology, thus linking the mapping of geographical and knowledge territories. In this regard, Stein follows Whitman in recording the spatial and conceptual boundaries of America by expanding on its numerous connections and implications. While The Geographical History of America has been predominantly read as a self-reflexive contemplation on the fluidity of self in the context of self-expression (Curnutt; Vanskike), I want to suggest that it mainly deals with
a particularly American network of experience, objects, and the self in the making of our world.

The title is already programmatic for the whole piece: Stein creates a connection between two seemingly unrelated things that in themselves consist of internally linked concepts. While the relationship between human mind and human nature or between America’s geography and history may appear an obvious matter of interest, the connection between America’s geographical history and a supposed human mind/nature dualism seems more remote, if not constructed. And yet, as Stein demonstrates, there exists a possible connection; the conjunction “or” suggests that the two are indeed two versions of the same thing. Stein’s text then exemplifies a whole potential universe of possible links and cross-links between these concepts—if only constituted by the fact that the act of writing has established them. In the course of the text, links shoot off associative branches in all possible directions, while simultaneously mistrusting and deconstructing them and thereby enabling the emergence of new connections.

“No the relation of human nature to the human mind is this,” the speaker states at the beginning of the text, offering what seems a comprehensible explanation: “Human nature does not know this. / Human nature cannot know this” while “the human mind can. It can know this” (367). The defining difference between the philosophical dualism “human nature” and “human mind” is the faculty and awareness of knowing. Such a definition alludes to the distinction between rational and intuitive knowledge. However, not only does the “this” which the human mind knows remain relatively vague, but also the initial distinction between human mind and nature becomes increasingly blurred, since both are continuously associated and put in relation to abstract concepts ranging from age, memory, and annoyance to sorrow, excitement, etc. “Has this to do with human nature or the human mind?” (372), the texts asks programatically, leaving unresolved whether for instance “the age of any country” (372) is a matter of material ontology or consciousness (or both). As soon as any of these connections are established, they are discarded as arbitrary and potentially meaningless, as for instance, “What is the relation of communism individualism propaganda to human nature what is the relation of it to the human mind or is there none” (377). Stein’s “definitions” of the human mind, as Elliott L. Vanskike points out, are “descriptive rather than prescriptive,” since what seems like definitions are, in fact, a catalogue of attributes (160). More often than not, these attributes contradict each other and thus dissolve an assumedly clear-cut distinction between two ideas, while rendering culturally and ideologically charged abstractions exhausted. Yet continuously pondering the possibility of a connection between human mind and nature, the text seems to investigate the proposition that it is the human mind which is more interesting than the generic, evolutionary concept of human nature, which “is not interesting any longer and so it might just as well stop being human nature any longer” (378). The human mind, on the other hand, “when it is altogether the human mind what a pleasure to me” (374).

The human mind, for Stein, is the human function that says, knows, and writes. However, and this is crucial, the human mind is not to be confused with the rational mind. Instead, the defining attribute of the human mind is that it connects:
“To understand a thing means to be in contact with that thing and the human mind can be in contact with anything” (380). Potentially the human mind is what James calls a “function” of experience which is “knowing” (“Does Consciousness Exist?” 478) and which defines itself only through the objects it experiences and connects with. Definitions are to be understood as relational, constituted, and activated only temporarily by the subject-object relationship. Due to this transitory nature of “truth,” Stein’s writing abounds with supposedly contradictory statements such as “there is no relation between the human mind and human nature there is a relation between human nature and the human mind” (376).

On its own, the reiterated question of “what is it” can only be answered by its inversion “The human mind is” (376). This notion of “pure” being, however, remains an abstract impossibility, since the mind is constantly connected to something, as the expansive text with its endless associations literally demonstrates. Notably, the answer is placed before the question, constituting not the end but the beginning of a circular process of follow-up questions. Answers are never stable but fluid and provisional. They can quickly change, as they constantly (re-)adapt to new contexts, thus resulting in a sequence of additive, often contradictory statements in endless variations with ever-new nuances and insinuations.

This relational quality of definitions also concerns the notion of self. That identity is neither the same as the human mind nor anything stable, is made clear from the beginning, since it is introduced as “[t]he question of identity” (401; italics added). In one of the most often quoted passages of The Geographical History, identity is defined as follows: “I am I because my little dog knows me” (401). For Kiric Curnutt, this statement exemplifies that for Stein “there are two selves: an external “I,” whom a pet may recognize as its master, and an interior “I” that exists independent of observation” (291). However, I would challenge Curnutt’s distinction between “external” and “internal” self, rather suggesting that there is an endless number of selves constituted by the interplay between internal and external or between subject and object. The self only becomes defined through the relationship to another being. That Stein chooses a dog and not another human being expresses a posthumanist challenge of the notion of the human as the only creature capable of knowing and thinking. Not only does the dog “know” its owner, but the dog also has identity. Then, again, the human mind becomes so entangled with human nature that the human self is by no means a rational, autonomous, and consistent entity. Self-definition is not a conscious, self-directed process, but is dependent on (other) things. For Stein, the mind is in no way different from or superior to objects. In a self-referential manner, Stein refers to children or dogs who “play tag they tag each other that is they touch each other to start” (373), describing the process of triggering associations, of activating chains of thoughts. Anything, according to Stein, can activate such links, whether humans, animals, or objects. Writing itself is such a thing, taking on a dynamic of its own. Action is both the trigger and outcome of distributed and interrelational network processes.

If, for Stein, “[t]here is always a relation between one thing and any other thing” (394), this is mainly because the mind constantly creates these connections through thinking and, more concretely, through writing. Stein’s writing exemplar-
ily demonstrates this principle of unedited, timeless flow. Since “[w]ritten writing should not be led” (471), it should freely follow its own course, always remaining in the present, in the unstructured here-and-now: “Writing is neither remembering nor forgetting neither beginning nor ending” (428), Stein proposes, adjoining ideas without punctuation in an only scarcely edited way. In doing so, Stein’s writing displays a radical form of “networked thinking,” since it is built on the notion of constant adaptation and serial growth without devices that suggest any sort of hierarchy or internal structure. For Stein, “both thinking and language are life forms, subject to the same laws as other life forms” (Richardson ix). Writing is a self-organizing network that continuously creates new linguistic and conceptual connections, thus persistently expanding, altering, and adapting the loose configuration of associations. Although writing naturally has to follow a linear development, in that it is written on a page, the ideas presented are so intricately interconnected with each other that it resembles a textual web with a high density of associations, allusions, and internal references. These cross-references occur on a variety of different levels: through repetitions of words, phrases, and even paragraphs; through syntactic parallelisms; through exact, slant, or eye rhymes; through homophones, homonyms; and through conceptual associations—however, each repetitive structure opens up another path. This complex web of seemingly endless semantic, phonetic, and grammatical interlinkages makes the experimental text challenging to read, yet it literally performs the convoluted process of “networked thinking” by explicitly refusing any sort of linear coherence in favor of constructing highly complex web of associations and relationships.

Stein conceptualizes this way of writing in a concrete visual analogy—that of America’s flat geography, which, in its vastness, has “places in it [in which] there are almost not any animals or flowers at all” (377). This flat landscape, as Vanskike remarks, “represents an unsegmented, flat expanse that utterly resists being historicized or labeled with a static identity” (152). Yet, for Stein, America’s flat land is more than a “powerful metaphor” (Vanskike 152). America functions as a model which can teach us “[t]o see anything as flat” (Stein 450). Stein’s flat ontology also functions as a programmatic call for a new way of seeing and understanding the world. Inspired by her experience of flying in an airplane, she suggests to “see the way the land lies” (371). Seeing things from an elevated perspective allows her to see connections rather than single objects, endless stretches of space rather than confined elements, abstract patterns rather than concrete entities. All these things suggest a focus on the present and on relational structures. America is literally conceived of as network in which “everything is [just] there as it is” (385), without any “markers that render the landscape temporal or try to label it” (Vanskike 162). The mind, according to Stein, adopts such a birds-eye view as if looking down on America’s flat landscape:

I know so well the relation of a simple center and a continuous design to the land as one looks down on it, a wandering line as one looks down on it, a quarter section as one looks down on it, the shadow of each tree on the snow and the woods on each side and the land higher up between it and I know so well how in spite of the fact that the human mind has not looked at it the human mind has it to know that it is there like that, notwithstanding that the human mind has liked what it has which has not been like that. (387)
To think, according to Stein, is to visualize an internal map consisting of a carto-
graphical network in which, links leading in all directions emanate from “a simple
center,” forming patterns and geographical sections, and providing a total, yet end-
lessly transforming structure. Seeing is related to what James calls “pure experi-
ence” (‘Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” 478), an unfiltered way of perceiving the
world in a more holistic, immediate sense than in a purely rational, linear mode.

Conclusion

What connects Stein’s endless feedback loops, Emerson’s circuitous reflec-
tions, Whitman’s expansive lists, and William James’s serial thoughts is what
could be considered a particularly American tradition of thinking about think-
ing—one which is both about networks and which is written in networks. The
Transcendentalist and Pragmatist writers discussed here respond to spiritual
and epistemological problems of perceiving and defining the relationship be-
tween self and environment, between thinking and writing, as well as between
the U.S. and the world in a decidedly undecided manner, responding to an
awareness of the elusive complexity inherent in their object of inquiry. The net-
work, as an underlying figure of thought in all of these texts, lends itself to such
a feeling of ambiguity, since it has neither beginning nor end, concrete shape
nor purpose, yet it suggests a sense of alternative, more informal and flexible,
cohesion and identity. While for Emerson’s Transcendentalism, the network
functions to illustrate the seemingly paradoxical spiritual unity of the detached
self, James’ and Dewey’s Pragmatism proposes a notion of thinking as network
in which a constant interaction of subject and object produces interrelational
collaboration and feedback processes. Most visibly, networks materialize in the writings of
Whitman and Stein, who make the philosophical theories productive in their
own creative ways. In all writings, networks are more or less explicitly related to
notions of American geography, history, and culture. The U.S. is conceptualized
as an ever-expanding, horizontal, and progressing network. To imagine the U.S.,
accordingly, means to explore new modes of “networked thinking and writing,”
which reflect the expansiveness, openness, and processual dynamics of the vast
and constantly shifting territory. Above all, however, the U.S. is a site of philo-
sophical and literary production for these writers, the “partial members of a vast
natural network” (W. James, A Pluralistic Universe 396). Loosely connected
through shared epistemological concerns, the writings of Emerson, Whitman,
James, Dewey, and Stein form intertextual webs engaged in the ongoing and
ever-shifting attempts to think the U.S.⁷

⁷ For the concept of “thinking America” in relation to Transcendentalism and Pragmatism,
see Friedl.
Works Cited


