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# Transatlantic Stories and the History of Reading, 1720-1810: Migrant Fictions, by Eve Tavor Bannet

## **Keywords**

eighteenth-century fiction, history of reading, immigrant, migrant, transatlantic literature

## **Author Biography**

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In *Transatlantic Stories and the History of Reading, 1720-1810: Migrant Fictions*, Eve Tavor Bannet explores the history of a number of texts consumed and recirculated by readers on both sides of the Atlantic during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Within the context of Bannet's three-part study, the book's subtitle, *Migrant Fictions*, thus refers to a number of interrelated phenomena that characterized the dynamic, frequently volatile transatlantic print culture of the period. It refers, first of all, to texts that themselves "migrated" across the Atlantic in one direction or another, assuming different forms and different meanings for readers in England and America. This subtitle also refers to texts about migration—particularly the migratory experience of the poor and marginalized in the transatlantic world of the eighteenth century. Through focus on those texts, it therefore also refers to the myth of heroic (white male) economic individualism that represented the dominant migrant "fiction" of the period, and which those texts often complicated.

In order to demonstrate how those texts did this, Bannet must establish the inadequacy of a couple of our own myths to the historical period under consideration. The first of these myths is the myth of romantic authorship, and its accompanying fiction of the stability and originality of literary texts. To this end, the first chapter of *Transatlantic Stories* focuses on the ways that various authors, printers, and booksellers revised and reimagined perhaps the most famous literary argument for such heroic individualism in the Atlantic world: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. As Bannet argues, "our post-romantic emphasis on originality has fostered denigration and exclusion from 'literature proper' of works resulting from practices of imitation, extraction, compilation, versioning, abridgement and epitomization which were all fundamental forms of eighteenth-century writing" (10). *Robinson Crusoe* in particular became subject to repeated retellings in the form of "Robinsonades." By examining a number of the most popular of these Robinsonades, Bannet shows how many authors made revisions to the story to make the portrayal of Crusoe less heroic, and often make the story's other, non-European characters more central. This chapter sets the stage for the rest of part one, in which Bannet shows how writers like Penelope Aubin, William Rufus Chetwood, and Pierre Longueville represented a more multicultural Atlantic than that of *Robinson Crusoe*. Through a rich contextualization of the publication history of all of these texts in both America and Britain, Bannet also examines the different rhetorical purposes to which such texts were put by the publishers and booksellers who produced them.

Part two, "The Servant's Tale," examines the purposes toward which a different fiction was employed: the fiction of the "authentic voice" of African, Native American, or illiterate white narrators telling the story of her/his own life. Bannet writes, "Eighteenth-century lives and histories were often co-authored, ghosted, edited and/or 'corrected' by more literate men or women" (13). Thus, we should not forget that, "in reality, the narrative was only an artful, persuasive and unstable rhetorical device" (13). This rhetorical device, as Bannet contends, was

employed to both collapse the distinctions between forms of servitude—indentured servants and women could be shown to have more in common than slaves than we tend to imagine—and critique the social institutions that produced those forms. To this end, Bannet places texts about white servitude, like Edward Kimber’s *History of the Life and Adventures of Mr. Anderson* and Elizabeth Canning’s *Virtue Triumphant: Or Elizabeth Canning in America*, alongside slave narratives like James Gronniosaw’s *Narrative of the Most Remarkable particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawksaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince* and the Native American writings like those of Samson Occum to show that “transatlantic *Lives* by and about servants, slaves, Native Americans, convicts, maids and wives demonstrate an obsessive recurrent concern with methods of escaping, if they cannot reform, the dominant patriarchal mode of domestic government” (113).

Of course, domestic government was not the only form of government under scrutiny during the period under consideration in Bannet’s book. Part three thus addresses the implications that the practices of circulation and recirculation of texts had for the political culture of the period (Bannet refers to the patterns created by these practices as “printscares” [187]). She does this through an examination of the career of Robert Bell, a Scottish immigrant to America “who has been described as an American patriot, as America’s first literary publisher, and as the founder of the American reprint and book auctioning trades” (188). Bannet examines Bell’s publication of a number of abridgements, reprints and collections of English texts to demonstrate the ways that those publications worked to make arguments in favor of American Revolution. As Bannet argues, “Bell’s reprints of [Samuel Jackson] Pratt’s *The Pupil of Pleasure* (1778) and of [William] MacKenzie’s *Man of the World* (1782),” carefully collected, abridged, and presented with a series of paratextual “guides” to readers, served “to warn readers against the deceptive allure of aristocratic European manners and to promote simplicity, the integrity of family and ‘the politeness of the heart’” (190, 192). Similarly, Bell reprinted Pratt’s *Emma Corbet* and Mackenzie’s *Man of Feeling* as a way of “model[ing] the ‘new man’ and ‘new woman’ who would be needed for the peace” after the revolution was complete (210). Bannet calls her examination of Bell’s career a “case study” in the way that such “printscares” could affect the larger political landscape. She is thus careful to avoid reaching too sweeping a conclusion from her analysis, as she recognizes that “reprints could be selected for a variety of different purposes and used within a publisher’s overall output in different ways” (17). Rather, she offers her examination of Bell “to show the potential interest of an area where relatively little has been done” (17).

Indeed, Bannet’s strategy in part three is part of a larger refusal to create what she variously calls an “encompassing master-narrative” and “all-encompassing metanarrative” out of the individual chapters and parts’ respective analyses (18, 228). And while this can be somewhat frustrating for a reader looking for such a narrative, it is in fact one of the book’s greatest strengths. As Bannet contends, her method is new enough and there is a great deal more work to be done in this vein before such a narrative could be offered. I would argue, however, that given the way these chapters collectively challenge the master narratives that have played such an integral role in both British and American national identities and the study of literary history, such an “all-encompassing” counter-narrative would ultimately be inappropriate. Rather, Bannet’s attempt “to explore shared British and American stories and genres” (18) represents an important step

toward rethinking the way literary history can address the shifting—and often contested—literary and print culture of the colonial period.