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The Transnational and Global Perspectives of American Studies in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Reacting to the “Brexit” vote, Rachel Donadio declared in the *New York Times*: “Britain’s Flight Signals End of an Era of Transnational Optimism.” The 2016 Presidential Campaign in the United States revolves around similar themes: with the backlash against international trade agreements, as well as cultural pluralism, on at least one side of the political binary, it seems clear that the “era of optimism” is over, and whether that must hail the end of “transnationalism” seems to be on the ballot come November. If the transnational era is being declared dead, we might need to conduct a post-mortem of when and what it was to begin with. American Studies scholars are uniquely poised to do so, in that they bring decades of analysis to this field; they might also reflect self-critically on the ways in which their own “transnational era(s)” have paralleled the kinds of political discussions and institutional configurations under siege. Given the urgency with which the field has argued for the importance of transnationalism, scholars might raise concerns about its foreclosures, and suggest alternative ways in which transnationalism(s) might still have something to offer – even optimism. By and large, the popular press seems to use the term in its neo-liberal contexts, as one closely allied with global trade, but “transnational” has a rich cultural provenance that extends beyond frames of capitalism and state power, and can offer alternative perspectives on their discontents.

What possibilities are we opening up and foreclosing when we talk about “the” transnational and global perspectives of American Studies? The definite article “the” seems limiting in that it is a defining and unifying gesture. Yet the definitive article also suggests that there are other perspectives than just “the” transnational and the global. It usefully indicates that these perspectives are one component of American Studies, while leaving room for others. We do not talk about American Study

in the singular, but about studies in the plural. Positioning the United States “between” transnationalism and interculturality opens a space of communication, wherein something is shared “between” different entities. To be in between can mean to inhabit a third space that is in dialogue with but not defined by either category of its constituent binary. That space is not necessarily comfortable; it can be a place of friction, and falling “in between” can come at a loss. There is a spatial dimension to the “between” but also a temporal juncture that it signals. To move from the twentieth to the twenty-first centuries can suggest a *telos*, a form of Whig historiography that advances us from one moment to the other. Yet “between” opens up an alternative and layered time, an overlap between what Raymond Williams described as residual and emergent forms of culture (121). “Between” is “the space of uneven development,” to borrow Mary Poovey’s useful phrase. In this article, I argue that transnational and global perspectives position American Studies “between” historical and geographical frames and thereby enable us to be attentive to the uneven developments in our objects as well as our methodologies of scholarly study. Reviewing the development of the field, I gesture towards emerging directions for how we can link heteroglossic Americanism and environmental issues, and rethink transnationalism beyond a focus on state formations.

I begin with a reading of my article’s title for two reasons: one, I have outlined some of the central issues that will concern me, and two, I have performed something that I see as a key component of American Studies, and that is an exercise of self-reflection and self-critique. Both can amount to forms of navel-gazing, and certainly that means there are blindspots in my approach, especially where I brush up against the limits of my training and expertise. Still, the “transnational and global perspectives” are part of a self-reflective and often self-critical attention in American Studies that, despite all its insufficiencies, is important to note at the outset. Transnational and global perspectives are, among other things, a self-critique of American Studies, both in its historic formation and its current iterations.

But what is the “self” that is being critiqued? How is it constituted, and by what mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion? Does it exist *a priori* or emerge *a posteriori*, as itself the product of the reflective process? These, too,

are questions at the heart of my endeavor to shed light on the transnational and global perspectives of American Studies. While American Studies as an academic formation emerged in the twentieth century, transnational and global perspectives are much older than the field that is now recovering them. By some accounts, the discipline that emerged after the Second World War neglected transnational dimensions in its construction of a unified national and nationalist narrative. By other accounts, transnational and global perspectives have all along been integral to, yet written out of, the field of American Studies. To sort through the question of how the scholarly objects and the academic discipline of American Studies relate to one another, I focus on three moments: one, the transnational turn of the late 1990s; two the Cold War history of field formation; and three, how a reorientation towards multiple geographies might complicate those genealogies, where the transnational and global locate and dislocate one another. In conclusion, I gesture towards what in my mind are two related challenges, as I have elaborated more fully elsewhere (2016), namely the need for an increased attentiveness to matters of globalization in a linguistic as well as environmental sense.

The Transnational ‘Turn,’ ca. 1996

As Priscilla Wald explains, American Studies took a turn towards the transnational around 1996, when the American Studies Association (ASA) convention alongside the fall issue of *American Quarterly* – the journal of the ASA – had impressed on scholars the need to “rethink the ‘American’ in American studies in the context of globalization,” and to produce a “critical internationalism” that reoriented scholarship towards situating the United States within global contexts (199). Wald pointed out that such a call was not new, and identified a similar moment in the late 1970s when Doris Friedensohn had noted critically that exceptionalism continued to dominate the field in its perpetuations of “the myth of an autonomous America” (Friedensohn 375; qtd. in Wald 200). Friedensohn argued that a “massive effort is required to draw us out of our often chauvinistic, culture-bound shells: to make us confront American culture in the harsh light of

world interdependence,” and to overcome “the crippling impact of our ethnocentricity” by adapting “the tools of comparative culture studies and the vision of global ecology studies to correct the distortions in our American lenses” (375). The call for greater inclusion and diversification of perspectives was thus not a new call as much as a constant refrain by the time of Wald’s writing, as she herself pointed out.

The way to accomplish such a shift was by no means clear. Wald described how the proliferation of keywords such as “*critical internationalism, globalism, transnationalism*” demonstrated that scholars were “still in the process of trying to understand how to theorize” the desire to think beyond the U.S. (201). According to Donald Pease, the transnational turn has since then “effected the most significant reimagining of the field of American studies since its inception,” and the term itself has largely prevailed, leading Pease to worry that the term ‘transnational’ has exercised a monopoly of assimilative power that has enabled it to subsume and replace competing spatial and temporal orientations to the object of study – including multicultural American studies, borderlands critique, postcolonial American studies, and the more general turn to American cultural studies – within an encompassing geopolitics of knowledge (1). Pease’s point about transnationalism’s encompassing potential is well taken and raises questions concerning whether we can generate alternative geographies, politics and genealogies for American Studies without falling into this trap. For instance, we might wonder whether indigenous cultures offer other frameworks for conceptualizing cultural contact without relying on modern notions of the nation-state, as Anna Brickhouse recently argued.

The question reminds us of the necessity to keep other terms in play not just as synonyms but also as alternatives to “transnational.” Thereby, we can put pressure on the term so as to keep active our ability to use it not only descriptively but also critically. That is not always an easy balance to strike, because the term pivots between wanting to be descriptive of cultural formations, geographical encounters, and historical occurrences that are not accounted for or subservient to the frame of the nation state. One of the discrepancies that we see – and one of the ways in which shortfalls and critiques of transnationalism arise – is in the difference between the term’s descriptive uses and analytic aspirations.

Problematic as that difference may be, it might nonetheless be a good thing that the term has “not as yet added a coherent order of intelligibility to the field” (Pease 3). Pease explains that “‘the transnational’ bears a family resemblance to ‘globalization’” in that it spontaneously breaks with the historical particulars that would locate it within a specific socioeconomic context and produces for itself the status of a quasi-universal axiom”(3). Evan Rhodes explains that “certain books...prefer the term *transnational* over *global* in conceptualizing the United States beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, and the two terms, of course, can signal methodological differences. To focus on questions of transnationalism is often understood as a way to critique or speak back to U.S. state power. Using the term *global* can signify a less fraught relationship with U.S. power and the value of globalization theory in situating the United States within multilateral flows of information, goods, and people” (Rhodes 900).

Given these concerns, we might trope on Frederick Jameson’s dictum to “always historicize” (ix), and say “always specify.” That would be one way also of redressing what Paul Giles has called the ‘radical dehistoricization’ that was involved in producing a nationalist framework in isolation from its transnational connections (qtd. in Bannett and Manning 8). Rhodes also points out that the term transnational invokes the concept of the nation even in attempts to move away from national approaches. For Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick and J. T. Way, the term performs an analysis and critique of the nation – they argue that “‘transnationalism’ is the sign under which a critique of the nation has been underway” (abstract).

A significant and different way of reading the transnational in relation to the national emerges in Kandace Chuh’s work. She points out that transnationalism is not just self-descriptive, but can function as a deliberate form of othering. As she makes clear, the concept of transnationalism has strategic uses for nation-state securitization. Focusing on the internment of the Japanese in the Second World War, she demonstrates how the nominal justifications for that egregious breach of *habeas corpus* grew from a description of Japan as a transnation, and one whose transnational reach threatened the U.S.

Deep ties between transnationalism and nationalism emerge in Benedict Anderson’s account of nation-formation. In Anderson’s account,

the earlier distinction between metropolitans and creoles gives way to the rise of nationalism, but also speaks to the deeply transnational origins of nationalist movements (60). The national replicates yet rejects its transnational origins. Anderson ties nation-formation to the rise of print cultures – and there are many questions that can be and have been asked of his approach, such as how it relates to non-print cultures like oral cultures or how the focus on the relationship between Creoles and the metropole might obscure other salient contexts and draw our attention away from the cultural and ethnic complexities of other local populations. In some ways, though, Anderson’s work might answer these questions by its ability to show how nation-formations are tied to and constitutive of particular imaginings that hide or obscure their origins and their multiple contexts.

One reading along these lines emerges in the work of Eva Bannet and Susan Manning. They point out that the emphasis on nationalist frameworks in literary studies “encouraged scholars to focus principally on the uniqueness, originality, and development of a particular nation’s literature and to emplot it in exceptionalist and nationalist terms” (8). The turn to the transnational enables other kinds of emplotment. To understand what those alternative emplotments might reflect and perform, we need to grapple with the crucial term that Bannet and Manning use, namely that of exceptionalism.

As these different definitions and assessment indicate, transnationalism functions as a way for scholars to describe at least four things: one a stage in scholarship; two, a stage in world and political history; three, an alternative to the nation form; four, a dimension of the nation, often disavowed. The term transnational should not be a self-explanatory term, but one that invites the question: transnational in what sense? The term has neither uniform nor transhistoric meaning. As a theoretical concept, it carries its own complicated politics, history and economics. The term is descriptive of a range of processes that do not cohere into a concept but that operate in a space of dialogue. The transnational in this sense is not definitional but procedural. It is not an “ism” – as in transnationalism – and perhaps not even to be used as an adjective – as in transnational turn – but most useful as a verb – when we reflect on attempts to transnationalize. If we

think about it as a verb, to transnationalize our approach to American Studies is an ongoing activity rather than a fixed field delineation or a fixed methodology. It is participatory, contested, active and ongoing.

As such, it also promises to be radical. Janice Radway proposed in her 1998 Presidential Address to the American Studies Association that transnationalism couldn't just be a turn in the field of American studies, but challenged the discipline as such. Pointing out that the nation had served to legitimize a scholarly enterprise, she argued for a methodology premised on the *noncoincidence* between the nation and the field of study, imagining the "Americanist" field as distinct from the nation. The past from which Radway was proposing to depart calls for further examination. How was that nominally national past produced in the first place?

Cold War Exceptionalism and its Critique

In the very act of proclaiming a transnational turn, there is an erasure of all those working in transnational circumstances. In that sense, the transnational turn risks – as Marc Chenetier points out – replicating the nationalism and exceptionalism from which it claims to depart. Taking its origins in the immediate aftermath of World War Two and the Cold War, American Studies arose in global contexts.

Those global contexts had been understood as transnational since the early 20th century. The first critical use of "transnationalism" emerged in response to the Great War which we now refer to as World War One while the term "transnational" was coined in 1916 by Randolph Bourne to celebrate the complex ethnic, racial and national affiliations of American immigrants" (Boggs, 2007: 4). Alfred Hornung points to Randolph Bourne's concept of a "Trans-national America" and describes Bourne's desire to counteract "the patriotic Americanization campaign during World War I," as well as the "concept of America as a melting pot according to Anglo-Saxon ideas" (Hornung 72). Bourne wanted to replace these ideas of nationality with a "concept of 'trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors'" (qtd. in Hornung, 72). The world wars disrupted such aspirations.

A number of scholars have demonstrated how the immediate aftermath of the Second World War led to the formation of American Studies, in gatherings such as the Salzburg Seminar (Redding), and was then solidified in the Cold War, in part through efforts funded by the United States government (Saunders). Successful at the time, it is perhaps the ongoing impact of these efforts that we see when we look at how American Studies is geographically distributed and how it is currently represented internationally. One metric we might use are the existing journals of American Studies. The ASA dedicates a portion of its website to American Studies Journals, a directory of worldwide resources, and lists 54 journals in 25 countries (<http://www.theasa.net/journals/directory/>; accessed November 4, 2015). According to my count, the geographic distribution looks as follows: North America 14 journals, including “Journal of Transatlantic Studies” and “Journal of Transnational American Studies”; South America 1; Europe 31; Asia 7; Africa 1 and Oceania 1. This listing is selective and partial – for instance, for North America journals such as *American Literature* or *American Literary History* are not listed, presumably because they are Americanist without being explicitly American Studies. Nonetheless, it is striking that Europe is represented even more strongly in terms of existing journals than the United States.

As the guiding paradigm of the field from the 1940s through the 1960s, exceptionalism both acknowledges and erases those contexts. Paradoxically, exceptionalism is inherently comparative in that it is impossible to proclaim an exceptionalism without having something else that functions as the non-exceptional. Yet, exceptionalism erases that comparative dimension in the act of claiming uniqueness. That erasure in and of itself is an act of imperialism.

What I am gesturing towards with these comments is, of course, not an account of American exceptionalism, but a recap of its critique, which emerged in the processes of the field’s decanonization and under the pressures of new historicism. In his 1979 essay “Paradigm Dramas in American Studies,” Gene Wise identified the symbol-myth-image school of scholarship as having given pedagogical coherence from the 1930s to the 1960s to the study of American literature. Wise saw the decline of that school as enabling cross-cultural work, though he remained unsure of what the methodological frames for that work would be.

Evan Rhodes suggests that “arguably no moment in the history of American studies has been so shaped by an anti-exceptionalist position as its current transnational turn” (899). This shift crystallized in landmark publications such as the edited volume *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993), *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (2002), *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (2002), and *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: from the Revolution to World War II* (2002). There were key shifts in terms that came along with this move towards anti-exceptionalism, especially a shift from an emphasis on individualism, freedom, and democracy to an understanding of the structures of empire. This inquiry also impacted areas of scholarship that engage with America but are not American studies per se, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s work on *Empire* (2000).

This interest in empire also took the form of interrogating whether the United States had become a postcolonial nation by separating its political ties from Britain. Most recently, Kariann Yokota has described a process of *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation* (2011). Lawrence Buell suggested in a 1992 article that we read “American Literary Emergence as a Postcolonial Phenomenon,” and developed his claim by drawing, as Gesa Mackenthun sums up, “transnational analogies between the literary texts of recently decolonized countries in Africa, India, and the Caribbean and the early national literature of the United States” (34). Yet, this “approach denies the previous and ongoing existence of indigenous cultures in America,” leading Mackenthun to describe America’s relationship to postcoloniality as “troubled” (35). The suggestion that we can read American cultural formations as postcolonial has met with significant skepticism and concern. As Brian Edwards and Dilip Gaonkar have argued, anti-exceptionalism is not yet a transnational or, to use their term, globalizing approach, and they fault some of these key texts for themselves participating in the exceptionalism they set out to critique. According to them, anti-exceptionalism risks replicating exceptionalism rather than replacing it with alternative analyses.

Especially in the light of work that rethinks American Orientalism in geo-political terms (Edwards; Egan; Berman), we may question to what extent our reading of American Studies as a Cold War phenomenon oriented towards and in some ways emanating from the relationship with Europe forecloses other genealogies and other field formations. In his

recovery of C.L.R. James's work, for instance, Donald Pease has resituated Cold War contexts. C.L.R. James performs a fundamental reorientation of a seemingly canonical American work, *Moby Dick*, towards the transnational dimensions and territories of containment, deportation, and liminality that occur not just "in" America or "in" Europe or "in" their relation to each other, but in spaces that are themselves complicated in their marginalized and transnational complexity, yet related and subject to structures of state governance and articulations of Cold War exceptionalism.

The Caribbean takes on a key function as a transnational site that does not fit easily with exceptionalist or nationalist paradigms in the work of Joseph Roach (1996), who conceptualized a circum-Atlantic cultural geography in his reading of New Orleans, and most recently in Elizabeth Dillon's conceptualization of a "commons" in the region's performative cultures (2014). One distinctive and important contribution that these studies make is that they break through the mold of so-called area studies. While the exact nature of American Studies as an area has been a subject of debate, both approaches in the past shared in common an understanding of areas as fixed. The understanding of areas as themselves mobile, transnational, multicultural, complexly lingual, and historically layered shifts the paradigm for how spatial analyses work. Following the lead of post-colonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha, scholars have pointed out that focusing on geography and history as categories of analysis is insufficient for understanding the rich cultural contexts that exceed both (Wald 206).

Other Genealogies, Other Geographies

The Cold War genealogy risks being Eurocentric. The scope of ongoing transnational work does not engage U.S. relations to Europe, and the forms of transnational field formation that it reflects and enables. It is also important to assess other orientations and other genealogies of transnational work and transnational American Studies – such as hemispheric studies, oceanic studies, and pacific studies – as transnational turns whose genealogy looks quite different. This raises an important question about the locations or even the geographies of American Studies. We need to ask "where" transnational American Studies occurs, both in terms of its

scholarly locations but also and perhaps even more pressingly in terms of what it studies.

One important component is a reorientation in terms of geographies – instead of turning from the United States east towards Europe, how does American Studies look as a field and as an enterprise when you look north, west and south? This turn to alternative geographies is important; it also asks a broader question about what counts as geography when we no longer assume the nation state as a unit of analysis. I have already hinted at some concerns a geographic approach might raise. Here I will take the concern that a turn to geographies might replicate an area studies logic that is closely tied to structures of state securitization.

Transnational American Studies generated a viable alternative to area studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s when it turned to reconceptualizations of the exceptionalist “frontier” as an intensely multilingual and transcultural “border.” Complexly raced, gendered, communal, multilingual and experimental, border studies called into question the tacit assumptions of a field that it challenged to not define its subjects as white, male, self-reliant, English-speaking, and straight. The field of border studies developed in the American Studies context through two landmark works, namely Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), with its key conceptualization of the so-called contact zone, and with Gloria Anzaldúa’s theorization and illustration of what such contact zones meant in terms of lived experiences in *Borderlands = La frontera: the new mestizo* (1987).

In 2004, when Shelley Fisher Fishkin argued in her Presidential Address to the American Studies Association that the field had become transnational, she began her remarks by invoking and commemorating Anzaldúa, then recently deceased. Anzaldúa’s title impresses on us that geography is one alongside other sets of coordinates, namely temporality, race and ethnicity, gender, state formation, politics, structures of affiliation, language and environment, to name some of the most salient. As Wald explains, one important element of the interest in transnationalism has come from feminists, who have drawn on Immanuel Wallerstein’s notion of global systems theory to show the enmeshment of the so-called center with the so-called periphery. Mae Ngai has emphasized the interest in diaspora developed in Afro-American and Africana as well as Chicano/a

Studies and Asian American Studies, and the reorientations – geographic and methodological – those fields accomplished (59). For Ngai, a key contribution of the interest in transnationalism is that it “foregrounds human agency” in a way that enables the figure of the “other” to be recognized as a “social actor” (59). Her analysis makes a strong argument about how we might conceptualize the locations or the spaces of the transnational; to put it crudely, it argues against an eagle eyed view that spans the globe and demonstrates how the local is (or can be) intensely transnational.

This approach to localize the transnational is alive and well in many different contexts –as recently demonstrated by the editors and contributors to the *European Journal of American Studies*’ 2014 Special Issue: “Transnational Approaches to North American Regionalism.” As Florian Freitag and Kirsten Sandrock explain in their introduction, the volume sought to explore “how the global and the hybrid intersect with the local” (3). Explaining how scholarship in the United States and Canada has long held on to Northrop Frye’s distinction between region and nation, they reject a “binary nation-region dichotomy,” and instead develop a “comparative perspective that offers an opportunity to consider regions, regional writing, and regionalism in contexts that transcend the nation or, rather, the national construct” (Freitag and Sandrock 3). In offering a transnational perspective on North American regionalism, they hope to facilitate “the inclusion of previously marginalized voices” (3). For them, this means turning from a geographical designation of the region to one based on the human beings inhabiting that space, and giving rise in turn to “‘cultural’ or ‘imaginary’ regionalism” (4). This raises for them thorny questions about the attribution of identities to people living in regions and the imposition of uniformity onto them.

Anzaldúa usefully addresses this concern in her emphasis on the mestiza and her ability to generate cultural forms that resonate with what Gilles Deleuze describes in his discussions of Kafka as “minor” literature – a term he does not use dismissively though he shows the dismissals created by the “major.” For Deleuze, the “minor” is an intensely transnational, transcultural, translational mode of writing that exceeds majoritarian national literatures. The concept was expanded by the contributors to the edited volume *Minor Transnationalisms* (Lionnet and Shih). Border studies, along the lines developed by Anzaldúa, function as a minor transnationalism,

in dialogue with and in relentless opposition to the major transnationalisms that would absorb it. Insistently pointing to the excess – including the excess violence of the border space – Anzaldúa makes clear that this space can neither be appropriated by national nor transnational structures of empire, even though both have profound impacts. Borders or regions do not just create an alternative to the nation, but also to the transnation; the border can function as a *tertium quid*, or third thing. As Priscilla Wald has pointed out, “In effect, the concept of the third time-space yields an analysis of US culture as an extended (and extensive) borderzone”(207).

Border Studies and Hemispheric Studies are examples of landed transnationalisms; a vibrant area for the field has been the maritime, which brings with it the advantage that it already seems to have the physical characteristics of fluidity, movement, and multiplicity that much scholarship values in moving away from area studies and in articulating a mobile, network model of transnationalism. Crucially, this work concerns itself with reassessments of the transnational dimensions of race and ethnicity. The oceanic has spawned two vibrant versions or subfields of transnationalism: the transatlantic and the transpacific. They reorient American transnationalism towards the Pacific in one instance and the Atlantic in the other.

A recent issue of *American Quarterly* was dedicated to “Pacific Currents” and set itself the task of “work[ing] at the intersections of Native Pacific studies and American studies” (Lyons and Tengan 547). The editors are especially interested in drawing on Native Pacific studies to avoid the trap of viewing “the Pacific through Asia-Pacific or American-Pacific frameworks and theoretical models” (550). This work provides a different perspective to the assessments of U.S. Pacific imperialism formulated over the past decades in that it adds an important native perspective to these critiques of imperialism and hegemony – thus, again, as Ngai had pointed out, making subjects central. The special issue engages, among other things, with questions of climate change, but is also critical of the ways in which this environmental devastation is being narrativized, pointing out that “One might ask who and what it serves to again think of Islands as symbols of dying worlds, avatars of dying institutions and toxic (eco) systems” (561).

In 2003, Lawrence Buell observed what he described as transatlantic “boom times” (qtd. in Rezek 791). In a 2014 review article, Joseph Rezek usefully identifies three subcategories of transatlantic scholarship: “Atlantic Modernity,” “Literature in English,” and “The Atlantic as Conduit and Context.” Arguments about “Atlantic Modernity” took shape in the late 1980s and early 1990s, advanced especially by Paul Gilroy’s landmark publication *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and its theorizations of emergent, diasporic modernities in the middle passage. Rezek’s second category, “Literature in English” contends “that Anglo-American literature coheres through shared aesthetic qualities, common ideological investments, and transatlantic reading practices” (793), which also speaks to the transatlantic’s function as “Conduit and Context.” The underlying logic of such work derives from the “old category of literature in English,” which – according to Amanda Claybaugh – has made a resurgence (14). While operating under the rubric of transnationalism, this approach relies on English as a *lingua franca*, and produces a kind of monolingualism that haunts all too many approaches to transnational American Studies.

One indictment against transnational scholarship may in fact be that it launches a critique from a position of complicity in terms of how scholars are trained. The “English only” version of American Studies might be the last hold-over of earlier field formations: it remains possible to earn a graduate degree in American Studies without demonstrating proficiency in any language other than English. There is still an implicit linguistic exceptionalism that adheres to the field’s formation and the training it offers. We may question the extent to which monolingualism delimits.

And yet, Shelley Fisher Fishkin drew on Anzaldúa as an exemplar for the kind of appeal American Studies had and has held for her, as a scholarly field defined by “capaciousness,” an “eschewal of methodological or ideological dogma, and its openness to fresh syntheses and connections” (19). For Fishkin, that centrally involves inquiring into “the multiple meanings of America and American culture in all their complexity, and especially at times of “Manichean oversimplification” to deliver “the nuance, complexity, and historical context to correct reductive visions of America” (20). Fishkin was writing explicitly in the context of George W. Bush’s presidency, but also in response to the field’s previous incarnations. She expresses her rejection of “overarching generalities about the United

States” (20). Combined with her comments about methodology, there are two important approaches that emerge from her address, namely a diversity of methodologies paired with a specificity of study. This approach might read like a description of representative democracy in a federal system with strong state governments, if we transpose this emphasis into political terms, and sound like one way of describing American democracy as well as discourses about American democracy’s role in the world after the Second World War. The difference, surely, is that Fishkin’s comments are in explicit opposition to sovereign state power as exercised in the early millennium and highly critical of imperial structures.

Given these different orientations – the border (landed or maritime), transatlantic, hemispheric, transpacific/oceanic, and importantly indigeneity – Joseph Rezek makes a significant observation: “Critics of US exceptionalism long ago abandoned the triumphalist national rhetoric that had for generations defined American studies. The transatlantic threatens to reproduce such triumphalism by offering to fulfill a misguided scholarly wish: the “‘dream of the perfect scale,’ as Lloyd Pratt has memorably phrased it” (795).

One place we might see that “dream of the perfect scale” manifest itself is in the idea that transnationalism has now become central to the field. In her Presidential Address, Fishkin repeatedly expressed this idea when she asked what it would “look like if the transnational rather than the national were at its center” (21). Emphasizing the importance of Anzaldúa alongside Jose David Saldívar, she highlights border studies, and expands her comments to fields of race and racism studies (23), as well as immigration and migration studies (24). Yet, this approach should give us pause. If one of the accomplishments of the transnational turn has been to engage peripheries, centering the transnational turn might come at a cost. It seems important to maintain a keen understanding of the power that nation-formations still have, and of the centering they themselves perform, at times by strategically using transnationalism. Although she is careful to indicate that the transnational should not become a litmus test for the field, a repeated refrain in her language becomes the centering of transnationalism in American Studies. That centering move is perplexing, since it speaks to a consolidation that is counter-productive to the necessary decentering of American Studies. As Mae Ngai rightly points out in her response to

Fishkin, transnationalism “need not be at *the* center of American studies, where it runs the risk of overgeneralization or marginalizing other subjects. But it can still offer methodologies (e.g., a healthy suspicion of nationalism, attention to human agency) that might be productively put to use by us all” (64). Yet even in Ngai, there is the return of the “us,” amplified by an “all,” which seems to replicate the problems it addresses. Recognizing the “privileged position that U.S.-based scholars and publications enjoy in the field of American studies” (Fishkin 36), and reflecting at length on the vibrant scholarship, research, and publication landscapes of non-US based American Studies, Fishkin nonetheless addresses the ASA as a national organization, a “we” that does not yet include its transnational others. Marc Chenetier has been critical for the way in which this “us” excludes and erases scholars based outside the United States. Who is the “we” that has been unwelcoming to such approaches? Or, to repeat Gene Wise and Priscilla Wald’s set of questions, “Who are *we*?” “Where are *we* headed?”, and “*Who* is authorized to ask?” (emphasis added). Those questions remain as vital now as ever.

Conclusion

Has Fishkin’s 2004 vision of a change towards inclusion, dialogue, and field transformation yielded fruit in the decade since her address? How does the field look now, a decade later in different locations? Even this essay’s enumeration of multiple approaches runs the risk of producing a kind of additive or syncretic model. Portraying different transnational and global approaches to American Studies needs to remain an incomplete enterprise so as not to amount to an act of imperial gathering and expansionism. It is not just as a field that American Studies demonstrates uneven developments; we also need to keep active the question of the unevenness by which scholars enter into the fields of American Studies.

There are two areas that seem to me particularly productive for examining where transnationalism stands now, and where it can lead us if we hear in it a rallying cry to enact transnational American Studies NOW. Those two areas are translation and the environment. In turning to

transnational American studies, we need to think about the Anglophone as one among other salient contexts, and even within the Anglophone context uncover the heteroglossia that Mikhail Bakhtin taught us to place at the center of cultural dialogics. And second, as I have indicated, we need to think about the environment in ways that do not merely refashion the nation state in relation to its border zones, but instead create a viable transnational ethics of engaging with, for instance, transnational American sites impacted directly by environmental changes; I elaborate on both approaches elsewhere (Boggs 2016).

I began this essay by reflecting on my title, and I want to end by revising that title, in the wake of my discussion. To the current title I would add one word: “the transnational and global perspectives of American Studies NOW.” It is a playful addition, in that NOW functions as an acronym for “nation or world.” It also captures a temporality of the “here and now.” But that temporality is not one of presentism, rather, it is an attempt to think in historically informed ways about the present. It is also a call for action, a demand for transnational and global perspectives NOW. Without imposing a *telos*, it expresses a sense of the transnational and global approaches needing to be developed now; and the project is ongoing and incomplete. NOW is a call for further action. It is one that tropes on chants of labor (“what do we want ... when do we want it: NOW!”) as well as gender struggles – after all, NOW is an acronym for the National Organization of Women, and until we understand that the temporalities, geographies, languages, and environments of American Studies topics and methodologies are gendered, classed, and ethnically complex, we will have delimited their scope, as Gloria Anzaldúa has taught us to understand. Especially if we have reached the “End of an Era” (to return to Rachel Donadio *New York Times* article), when it comes to the broader political landscape, the transnational field(s) of American Studies have much to offer in their ability to critique constructively global frames and imagine them beyond their current discontents. The claim that transnationalism was an “era” seems problematic when we recognize both its deep-seated cultural structures, and the idea that imbrications between nations might, in the end, open up possibilities for new versions of transnationalism, perhaps even ones that resurrect a sense of optimism.

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