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Introduction: The Challenges of Transnational American Studies

Since the early 1990s, American Studies scholars have found themselves confronted with new challenges linked to the discourse of internationalization. Although the concept of “transnationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors”¹ was by no means new to the discipline, it did not gain momentum before the end of the Cold War. At this time, the premises on which the field of American Studies was based were changing decisively; new parameters were developed to critically explore US culture and discuss the role of America in a changing world order. Since then, American Studies scholars have rethought and redefined the political and theoretical tenets of their discipline, particularly by utilizing postnational and comparative approaches. Among other currents, three aspects of American Studies have moved into the foreground: 1.) cultural hybridities and border discourses (new structures of self-formation linked to changes in the cultural fabric of America), 2.) diasporic identities (the Black Atlantic as a counter-movement to modernity), and 3.) transculturations (the Americanization of European culture and, vice versa, the Europeanization of American culture).

Today, the transnational and its siblings comparative, international, and postnational American Studies are often deployed to express an (un)conscious desire to transcend the national paradigm which has returned with a vengeance in America’s cultural imaginary. In his presidential address at the ASA’s 2006 annual conference, Emory Elliott puts transnationalism as “genuine inclusiveness and broad international collaboration” at the center of the American Studies Association’s future agenda.² Such a move, coming from a US scholar at the beginning of the twenty-first century, aligns the current trend towards the transnational with the discipline’s traditional concern with itself, namely the urge to identify personal and, in effect, political involvement as a source of scholarly

¹ Randolph Bourne, “Trans-national America,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 118 (1916): 86-97.

² Emory Elliott, “Diversity in the United States and Abroad: What Does It Mean When American Studies Is Transnational? – Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004,” *American Quarterly*, 59.1 (March 2007): 6.

motivation.³ Elliott allies himself with former ASA President Amy Kaplan by proclaiming “radical hope” as the motivation for transnational American Studies, thereby echoing George Lipsitz’s belief in historical transformation in times of utter despair:⁴ “I look with radical hope to US history, to the turns of events that can occur –that have occurred– when courageous people have challenged the dominant ideology and risked their lives, careers, and personal freedoms to join movements to end slavery [...]”⁵ The need for transnational American Studies, then, seems motivated by an approach of “the-personal-is-political,” defining much of the work done by US American Studies scholars today. Thus, Elliott’s agenda for American Studies establishes a consensus model based on the teacher-scholar’s political ideals: “How can we, through our teaching and research, more effectively generate developments that will lead to thoughtful citizenship and a more humane future?”⁶ A similar agenda for academic resistance can be found in Günter Lenz’s fervent appeal to enact “the transnational and intercultural discourses in real dialogues and debates among scholars from different parts of the world”⁷ Thus conceived, American Transnational Studies can be used, in Alfred Hornung’s words, to foster a “reciprocal process of Transcultural learning.”⁸

Recent years have seen a number of important academic events at which the issue of “American transnationalism” was discussed controversially, sometimes passionately. The 2005 international symposium at the John F. Kennedy Institute in Berlin on “European Perspectives in American Studies: Histories – Dialogues – Differences” that constituted the point of origin for the essays collected in this volume stood in a prominent line of other meetings on the subject, namely the ASA conferences in 2003, 2004, and 2006, with ground-breaking presidential addresses by Amy Kaplan, Shelly Fisher Fishkin, and Emory Elliott.⁹ This

³ See, for example, Leo Marx, “On Recovering the ‘Ur’ Theory of American Studies,” *REAL*, 19 (2003): 3-18; Paul Lauter, *From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park: Activism, Culture, and American Studies* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001).

⁴ See Lipsitz, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001).

⁵ Elliott, “Diversity in the United States and Abroad,” 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Günter Lenz, “Transculturations: American Studies in a Globalizing World – The Globalizing World in American Studies,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 47.1 (2002): 98.

⁸ Alfred Hornung, “Transnational American Studies: Response to the Presidential Address,” *American Quarterly*, 57.1 (March 2005): 69.

⁹ Amy Kaplan, “Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today – Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, Hartford, Connecticut, October 17,

collection then gathers essays from both sides of the Atlantic and explores the stakes of transnational American Studies by turning to its relationship with Europe, portraying local or demanding “outside” practices of American Studies (Guinzbourg, Lewicki, Holcomb, Kroes, Rowe), and addressing, or rather, challenging, the stakes of transnationalism by providing interhemispheric, cosmopolitan, planetary and transatlantic perspectives on transnationalism (Ellis, Claviez, Davies, Pease); positioning transnational American Studies in the history of the discipline and the humanities (Fluck); interrogating transnationalism through interdisciplinary approaches, such as ecocriticism (Bergthaller), media theory (Schinko), history (Hölbling) and cultural interrelations between the UK and the US (Giles). The essays gathered here are also a result of the collaborative and interdisciplinary work done in and by the German research network “The Futures of (European) American Studies,” initiated by Elisabeth Schäfer-Wünsche, Katrin Amian, Michael Butter, and Ingrid Thaler, for which the symposium served as a kick-off event.¹⁰

As Winfried Fluck has noted in his response to Elliott, just because one is not an American does not mean that one automatically brings an outside or comparative perspective to American Studies.¹¹ The essays collected in our anthology reveal and discuss the different ways of approaching and teaching American Studies in Europe and the US but are also selected to highlight the differences in the practice, methods, and goals of doing American Studies in Europe and the US rather than engaging in the desire for a political-scholarly consensus model.¹² Instead of pitting Europe against the US, the anthology reveals the differences within American Studies in Europe, particularly between Western and Eastern European approaches to the symbol of “America,” but also explores the possibilities of transnationalism as international collaboration.

Many essays in this anthology make a passionate case for intense collaborations and coalitions within the discipline, particularly between the US and Europe. In his essay on the emergence of “literary

2003,” *American Quarterly*, 56.1 (March 2004): 1-18; Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies – Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004,” *American Quarterly*, 57.1 (March 2005): 17-57; Elliott, “Diversity in the United States and Abroad,” 1-22.

¹⁰ For more information on the research network, which is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), see <<http://www.americanstudiesnetwork.de>>

¹¹ Winfried Fluck, “Inside and Outside: What Kind of Knowledge Do We Need? A Response to the Presidential Address,” *American Quarterly*, 59.1 (March 2007): 25.

¹² See also Dana D. Nelson, “ConsterNation,” *The Futures of American Studies*, Eds. Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman (Durham: Duke UP, 2002), 559-579.

extraterritoriality,” Donald Pease encourages us to explore alternatives to what he calls, referring to Wai Chee Dimock, our “planetary order,” exemplified by the “Global Homeland State.” These alternatives, Pease argues, are encapsulated in the fates of Trinidad-born British thinker C.L.R. James and Russian poet Osip Mandelstam.

Likewise, John Carlos Rowe’s essay “European Lessons in Imperialism: A Letter to America,” addresses the current refashioning of the nation in the US by positioning an “outside” or a new US expatriate perspective for US American Studies scholars in creating political coalitions among intellectuals and artists outside the US. Particularly by turning to Europe, Rowe argues, alternatives to the nation-state can be imagined. As Rowe espouses a notion of “world-citizenship” and new cosmopolitanism in order to internationalize American Studies, he turns to the contributions of European American Studies scholars, the transnational European Union, and recent work by Jürgen Habermas and Etienne Balibar. In the comparative study of Europe and the US, Rowe suggests, “a new ‘counter-force’ to US globalization” as “models of transnational viable governance, of transitional situations, and their histories, of polylingual and multicultural collectivity, and of economies with at least some significant component of social care for humans less fortunate than us” can be developed.

In his essay, Winfried Fluck argues that there is no fundamental opposition between theories of American culture and transnational American Studies, since transnational approaches also seek to gain insight into American culture. The history of American Studies, Fluck suggests, has always been closely linked to one specific project, namely the possibility of resistance, an issue which it shares with other fields within the humanities. In his view, transnational American Studies represent yet another way of going beyond “the dead-end analysis of cultural radicalism’s power analysis.” To qualify transnational American Studies as a renamed comparative theory is consequently misleading, since comparison is only one method that helps us to transcend the narrow field of national identity and thus to enable new possibilities for resistance.

A similar desire for global(ized) alliances bound by political and academic affinities (and not by national interests and citizenship) is articulated in Rob Kroes’s discussion of recent anti-Americanism. Using as his starting point *Le Monde*’s sweeping statement immediately after 9/11 that “we are all Americans,” Kroes investigates the ways in which this newly-found sense of solidarity has been absorbed in the past five years into a rhetoric of “unbridled Americanism.” While catering to an increasing anti-Europeanism among Americans, Kroes demonstrates, this rhetoric is

rather designed to establish new barriers than lead to a truly transnational consensus.

The terms *cosmopolitan* and *planetary American Studies*, used by Donald Pease, are also employed in Thomas Claviez's essay on aesthetic and ethno-politics. While pointing to the potential pitfalls of such terms, lying in their often universalist claims, Claviez proposes a distinction, as well as an interaction, between an "aesthetic" cosmopolitanism infused by the modernism of Henry James and Gertrude Stein and an "ethno-political" variety, as it is embodied in the works of W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke. What role, Claviez asks, has Europe played in the production of American views on cosmopolitanism?

Paul Giles, in his piece on Emerson, Longfellow, and the *Longue Durée*, moves in a similar direction, interrogating F.O. Matthiessen's notion of the American Renaissance as a literature characterized by its investment in the national project. Giles shows that "American medievalism," the Gothic in particular, of the antebellum period questions national genealogies by reconfiguring concepts of history and time, espousing "a much more extensive, unstable relationship between national identity and transnational cultures" instead.

In the following essays by Carsten Schinko, Jude Davies, and R.J. Ellis, transnational and inter-hemispheric approaches are used to provide comparative methodologies in American Studies. In his essay on "America as Medium," Schinko compares Winfried Fluck's approach with the now dominant cultural radicalism represented by Paul Gilroy's work on the black diaspora. Schinko thereby sheds light on the ways in which "culture" has to meet its conceptual others, "media" and "society." Davies's essay maps the ideological forms of "stupidity" in US politics and media culture from the 1980s to the 2000s exemplified by the figures of "stupid white men" such as Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Michael Moore, and the protagonists of films such as *Wayne's World*, *Forrest Gump*, and *Three Kings*. Developing Avital Ronell's distinction between "stupidity" (stupidity as plenitude) and "idiocy" (stupidity as lack), it argues that, while the identification with stupidity-as-plenitude has reinvigorated conservative forms of white male subjectivity for the public sphere, stupidity can also be performed in alternative ways. Ellis's paper shows that the "new" American Studies never possessed a homogenous approach, instead constituting itself as a broad coalition and abandoning the "grand narrative" aspirations of the so-called myth and symbol school for more comparative foci. As Ellis proposes, it is now possible to make distinctions within this broad field, differentiating between three – although overlapping – perspectives on transnational America: intra-hemispheric

studies; contingent hemispheric studies; and (albeit more tentatively) global studies. Comparing Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* and Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice*, Ellis identifies the diverse strategies in which these films explore the reductive paradoxes and inter-hemispheric lines enshrined in the phrase, 'East Is West' (the title of Manoj Kumar's 1970 Bollywood movie).

Many of the essays, as they seek to outline what "outside" perspectives in American Studies could be, or, indeed, if "outside" perspectives are actually possible, are intensely personal narratives in which the engagement with American Studies is informed by a sense of political activism with which one has been attracted to American Studies. The final five essays by Walter Hölbling, Lioubov Guinzbourg, Zbigniew Lewicki, and Hannes Bergthaller stand for the growing interest within American Studies in interdisciplinary approaches. Walter Hölbling discusses exemplary literary, cultural and political texts by Mark Twain, Norman Mailer, and others, delineating three peculiarities in American thinking: a.) what on the American side is seen as justified defensive rhetoric in the face of an imminent external threat often comes across as an aggressive attitude outside the USA; b.) the rhetorical figures and images employed in this rhetoric are often out of sync with actual historical realities; c.) especially in times of national crises, this usage tends to gain a life of its own and may actually create the situation it supposedly tries to avoid. One aspect Eastern European scholars seem to share with US American scholars is their intensely personal-political attraction to the field of American Studies. Lioubov Guinzbourg, for example, introduces us to specific views on the US in the former Soviet Union, post-Soviet Russia, and other East European countries, stressing fears of US hegemony in a free market economy. In her essay, she describes a diverse, creative and idealistically-inspired circle of Americans who maintain their obstinate dissident traditions "*in the shadow of silent majorities.*" Zbigniew Lewicki, on the other hand, envisions a transnational utopia of consensus from a decidedly Eastern European perspective. He asks us to reconsider the consensus model for a Eastern European American Studies perspective: "Being familiar with both types of experience: as citizens of Europe, Eastern or Western, and as scholars of America, we should be more engaged in debates on issues that are of common interest to both cultures." Gary Holcomb, in contrast, who has repeatedly been to Romania as a Fulbright scholar, presents a US perspective on the developments in Romania. Holcomb poses the question whether the field American Studies may enter the higher educational domain of translating the New in countries like Romania while at the same time re-collecting the *lived*

modern, *re-membering* the Old (Left) when it was the new. Bergthaller's piece outlines how a rapprochement between American Studies and ecocriticism, such as it has perforce occurred with the arrival of ecocriticism outside the United States, can benefit both disciplines by highlighting their respective blind spots. In Europe, Bergthaller explains, ecocriticism has arrived as a branch of American Studies – a development which reflects the fact that US ecocriticism relies mostly on U.S. literature for its textual base. It is thus deeply invested in precisely those national myths which have formed the primary object of criticism within American Studies proper.

This collection of essays testifies to a statement made in the March 2007 newsletter of the American Studies Association, according to which Transnational American Studies can be used to overcome the “institutional amnesia” of the global past promoted by commercial mass media and state education,” bringing “academics and activism” closer together.¹³ The collection attests to the multiplicity of approaches and concepts circumscribed by the term transnationalism when practiced as a conscious transnational and transatlantic project. “This concept of transnational American Studies,” Alfred Hornung adds, “is by definition political.”¹⁴ It remains to be seen if the transnational project within American Studies will be able to maintain this politicization in convincing scholarly fashion. A transnational American Studies approach can only justify its politicized agenda if it continues to show that the assumptions of an American exceptionalism are untenable. Thus, it needs to ground its political aspirations in a further development and modification of its theoretical and methodological framework. This collection seeks to contribute to this challenging task.

¹³ “March 2007 Newsletter: Final Report of the 2006 Program Committee.” Official website American Studies Association. 24 April 2007. <ASAhttp://www.georgetown.edu/crossroads/AmericanStudiesAssn/newsletter/archive/pdf/ASA_%20March_2007.pdf.>

¹⁴ Hornung, “Transnational American Studies,” 69.