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EDITOR'S NOTE

Envisioning Transnational American Studies

SHELLEY FISHER FISHKIN

The *Journal of Transnational American Studies* (JTAS) was founded to provide a home for cutting-edge, border-crossing, multidisciplinary scholarship in American Studies focused on transnational topics that deserved a broad global audience. An open-access, peer-reviewed online journal that is among the relatively small number of born-digital journals selected for preservation by the Library of Congress, JTAS has sought fresh and original work in a broad range of fields from locations across the globe. During the six years it has been in existence, the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* has published 101 peer-reviewed articles (including the pieces in this current issue and in the five Special Forums JTAS has run). The Forward section has published excerpts from 52 recently published or soon-to-be published books and articles. And the Reprise section has given new online life and accessibility to 59 outstanding articles or book chapters that had been previously available in hard copy only.

As Greg Robinson observed at a session devoted to JTAS at the 2014 American Studies Association annual meeting, “In delimiting and defining our subject, we defy established disciplinary as well as national borders.” Indeed, the two are connected. As far as national borders are concerned, our journal is shaped at its core by the assumption that building transnational American Studies requires paying attention to work done outside the US—and engaging it—as much as it involves the substantive work of identifying historical, literary, and cultural connections across borders. Our Editorial Board is composed of scholars working in five countries on three different continents. Among the nearly two hundred pieces JTAS has published over the last six years are works by scholars based in Argentina, Austria, Canada, China, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Lebanon, Morocco, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Russia, Spain, Taiwan, Turkey, and the UK. I will discuss further the

question of reaching out beyond the United States in a moment. In terms of interdisciplinarity, we have featured work by contributors who teach in departments and programs including African and African American Studies; American Indian Studies; American Studies; Anthropology; Arts and Cultural Studies; Asian American Studies; Asian Studies; Communication; Comparative Literature; Education; English; Environmental Humanities; English for Speakers of Other Languages; Ethnic Studies; Film; Foreign Languages; French and Francophone Studies; Gender Studies; German; History; Latin American and Iberian Studies; Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies; Law; Literature; Media and Cultural Studies; Philosophy; Political Science; Religious Studies; Sexuality Studies; Spanish and Portuguese; Sociology; Theatre Studies; Theatre, Film and Television; Visual and Cultural Studies; Urban Studies; and Women's Studies. We have also published work by a political satirist, two poets, a rare-book dealer, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, and a clinical psychologist.

The range of topics engaged in this current issue of *JTAS* suggests in microcosm the diversity of topics and approaches our field encompasses:

- **International Relations.** Relations between the US and Asia, for example, are explored by a close examination of ideas about Chinese and US law that shaped a chapter of US legal history as startlingly hubristic as it is unjustly neglected (Teemu Ruskola); through an analysis of the role played by a Chinese American US senator and a Japanese American US congressman in post-World War II public diplomacy in Asia (Ellen D. Wu); and through the lens of a “postcyberpunk” work of science fiction set in a 22nd-century China-centric world (Christopher T. Fan).
- **Translation.** What gets lost—and found—in translation is addressed in contexts that range from translations of Edgar Allan Poe in Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America (Emron Esplin and Margarida Vale de Gato) to the role played by multilingual vernacular humor in the Turkish protests in 2013 in Gezi Park (Perin Gurel).
- **Religion.** The transnational dimensions of religions that have shaped America are addressed in this issue, as well—but not the usual suspects. There are pieces on transnational dimensions of Mormonism (Scott Hales), Buddhism (Kyle Garton-Gundling), and Islam (Zareena Grewal) that explore a range of American spiritual traditions.

- **Memory.** Transnational cultural memory and memoir are at the center of discussions of war memoirs of the Spanish–American War and Iraq War (Christopher Pierce Wilson), transnational 9/11 monuments and memorials (Ingrid Gessner), visual iconography and collective memory (Udo J. Hebel), Latino autobiography (Isabel Durán), and cultural memory of the Vietnam War (William V. Spanos).
- **Race and Ethnicity.** Several pieces in this issue explore race and ethnicity in global contexts. One probes the impact of US racial and ethnic anxieties and ideologies on the racialization of Japanese Mexicans and Mexican Indians in Mexico during World War II (Jerry García). Another looks at the ways in which the Haitian Revolution spurred the development of ideas of transnational, cosmopolitan, diasporic identities among writers of African descent in the US (Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo). A third deepens our understanding of the history of the representation of Arabs and Arab realities in American cinema during the Silent Era by probing the life and work of a leading American film director who moved to Morocco, made films there, and eventually converted to Islam (Abdelmajid Hajji).
- **Comparative Cultural Studies.** One piece in this issue examines responses in New York and Montreal newspapers to the London trials of Oscar Wilde (Greg Robinson). Another explores the responses to a controversial Hollywood film—*Blackboard Jungle*—in Japan, Germany, and the US, with passing comments on responses in Australia, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, and Egypt (Adam Golub). Another gleans insights into transborder feminism by exploring the formal indebtedness of a contemporary Chicana novel to a largely neglected Mexican precursor (Geneva M. Gano).
- **National Identity.** The nature of national identity and the forces that shape it are examined in two pieces in this issue. One analyzes a contemporary novel set in Greece by an Asian American writer that considers the ways in which the past and present together define the nation (Stephen Hong Sohn). The other investigates the ways in

which ideas of nationalism and national identity figured in contentious debates over American history textbooks in the US in the 1940s and 1990s, periods when the textbook adoption process worked to privilege nationalistic textbooks that taught American history as “self-contained and exceptionalist” rather than setting America’s past “within a larger global context” (Thomas Bender).

The more we learn, it seems, the less we know. Definitions of our field that may have appeared to be clear a few years ago may now appear to be more blurred or porous than we thought. What is our object of study? What methods do we use to study it? As we endlessly debate these basic questions, we sometimes feel we may be further away from, rather than closer to, answering the question, *What is transnational American Studies?*

Jorge Luis Borges wrote in the afterword to *El Hacedor* in 1960, “A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face.”¹ To borrow Borges’s trope, perhaps when the articles, essays, chapters, and book excerpts we have presented to the world are viewed from some point in the distant future, it is possible that the “labyrinth of lines” will strike that future reader as “the lineaments” of our field.

The retrospective spirit that informs the foregoing comments was shaped by three events that took place in November 2014 and for which I was asked to frame informal remarks: a conference at Harvard celebrating the career of Werner Sollors on the occasion of his retirement; an International Partnership lunch at the American Studies Association annual meeting that marked the tenth anniversary of the ASA’s International Initiative; and a roundtable at the ASA about the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*.

The Harvard conference in honor of Werner Sollors, a Founding Member of the JTAS Advisory Board, reminded me of the influence that Sollors’s scholarship has had on my own research and the impact it has had on the field more broadly. His ability, in his book *Beyond Ethnicity*, to tease out parallel moves on the part of authors from very different backgrounds showed the virtues of moving beyond the silos that balkanized American literary studies through the early 1990s²; it served as a model for my own efforts to probe the ways in which black and white voices had melded to shape American literature for over a century. Sollors embraced my book *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* with enthusiasm even before it appeared, introducing me to scholars from France and Italy to whom he knew it would be of

interest.³ Those encounters made me aware for the first time of the valuable work on American literature that was being done outside the US. It was a lesson that would deeply shape the next chapter of my career. His book *Neither Black nor White yet Both* continued to push me beyond familiar borders as an Americanist, underlining the ways in which the comparative analyses of race and racism in the context of particular national and transnational histories can reveal phenomena that strike one society as “natural” and “given” to be, instead, highly constructed and contingent.⁴

But it was *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature*, as well as *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature*,⁵ that truly turned my world upside down, making me recognize the intellectual myopia that redlined from our purview as Americanists anything that wasn’t written in English, a myopia that was as indefensible as the myopia that had produced the segregated view of American literary history that I had challenged in *Was Huck Black?* (and later in “Interrogating ‘Whiteness,’ Complicating ‘Blackness,’” “Desegregating American Literary Studies,” and other works⁶). Sollors’s books led me to seek out critical writing on American literature by writers publishing outside the US and in languages other than English. One result was a volume I edited for the Library of America during the Mark Twain Centennial in 2010, *The Mark Twain Anthology: Great Writers on His Life and Works*.⁷ In that volume I sought out, had translated, and arranged to publish essays on Twain that were originally published in Chinese, Danish, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, Spanish, and Yiddish but had never appeared in English. These included essays by Nobel laureates from Denmark and Japan, by two of Cuba’s most prominent public intellectuals, by Argentina’s most celebrated author, by a leading Chinese writer, by a major Russian poet, and by respected writers from Germany, Italy, Spain, and the Soviet Union. An article on Twain from a Yiddish newspaper in Vilna was a poignant reminder of the vibrant intellectual culture that once thrived in Yiddish-speaking communities in Eastern Europe. And I was astonished to discover in the process of doing this book (surprised because of Twain’s mistrust of and hostility toward the French) that the first book on Mark Twain published *anywhere* was actually published in Paris and in French!

If the celebration of the life and work of Werner Sollors prompted me to reflect on the seeds of my interest in multilingual, transnational scholarship, an invitation from Udo Hebel, head of the ASA’s International Committee, to speak at the ASA’s International Partnership Lunch on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of ASA’s International Initiative prompted me to reflect on the trajectory of my efforts to get the ASA to be more open to work from Americanists from around the world.

When I found myself elected president of the American Studies Association in the spring of 2003, for a term beginning in 2004, I thought long and hard about what I’d like to try to achieve during my term. That fall at the 2003 Hartford convention, I had the meeting that every incoming president has with the outgoing president, to describe what I intended to do. I told my predecessor that I planned to work hard to raise funds to bring an unprecedented number of international scholars to the next

annual meeting. “Why?” she asked. “Why would you want to do that?” I answered her, “To learn something.” She was still incredulous: “What would you learn? ‘This is how I teach American Studies in my country, this is how I teach it in my country.’ How boring is that?” At first I was hurt by her dismissive attitude. But in retrospect, I’m grateful for it. It made me determined to prove her wrong.

I had no idea whether I’d be successful in raising funds or in getting international scholars to the meeting. But I had no doubt about the value of doing so. American Studies scholars in the US had been writing about the role of the US in the world for some time, and particularly critiquing the workings of US imperialism abroad. But they were mainly talking to themselves. For the most part, the notion that valuable insights or approaches to scholarship could come from outside the US had not crossed their minds—and the notion that scholars who did not teach or publish in English might nonetheless have perspectives that would be useful to encounter was an even more alien idea. My own limited experience had taught me that such a view was myopic and wrong.

A 1992 conference of the British Association of American Studies in Swansea that I attended during a sabbatical year at Clare Hall, Cambridge, made me aware of a host of British scholars in American Studies whose work I had not previously encountered. The pattern was repeated in 1993 when I accepted invitations to lecture in Italy. I’d never read any Italian scholars writing on American literature and therefore sought some out in the Cambridge Library, hoping that my knowledge of French and Spanish would help me decipher an Italian essay or two. I was startled to find that leading literary scholars in Italy had been publishing insightful essays on African American literature a decade earlier than their counterparts in the US. That same spring, when I was invited to speak about *Was Huck Black?* in Paris, thanks to the good offices of the incomparable Werner Sollors, I was thrilled to learn about work that French scholars were doing on African influences on Melville. When I went to an American Studies conference in Turkey in 1994, I was delighted to encounter scholars doing fascinating work with which I was totally unfamiliar. I helped two such scholars draft a proposal that was accepted at a subsequent ASA conference. They gave terrific papers—comparing responses in the mainstream and African American press in the US to John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me* with responses in the mainstream German and Turkish-language press in Germany to a German writer’s experiment with passing as a Turk in an increasingly racist Germany. But only two scholars besides myself showed up at their panel, and they were two that I’d personally buttonholed. I was mortified: ASA members saw no reason to listen to scholars who had come all the way from Turkey—even if their topic was a unique and fascinating one.

I’ll never forget the reception I attended in Kyoto in 1999 when I went to Japan as a Fulbright lecturer. Shunsuke Kamei, an energetic and wizened emeritus professor from the University of Tokyo, approached me weighed down with an armload of offprints of pieces he had published on Mark Twain—in English—that he was sure I’d never heard of. Alas, he was right. As it turned out, his articles were just the tip of the

iceberg. Japanese scholars had been publishing worthwhile work on Mark Twain in English in Japanese publications for many years, but US Twain scholars were completely oblivious to it. As president of the Mark Twain Circle of America at the time, I made it my mission to write about the work of Japanese scholars and to publish bibliographies of it—and to chastise the leading US bibliography of the year’s work in American literature for omitting Japanese scholarship from its annual review of work in the field. (The most recent issue of the English-language Japanese journal *Mark Twain Studies* includes tributes to one of the most respected of those scholars, Makoto Nagawara, a Hiroshima survivor and a brilliant critic of American literature, who passed away not long ago.) When I got to Stanford in 2003, I was happy to find many volumes of the wonderful American Studies monograph series that Alfred Hornung edited for a number of years in the university library. But I was appalled to find that, more often than not, I was the first person to check one of the books out.

A conversation with Alfred Hornung in Hartford after my dispiriting meeting with my predecessor further strengthened my resolve to figure out a way to bring more international scholars to the next ASA annual meeting than had ever attended before. Why not invite the presidents of American Studies Associations from around the world, Alfred asked? And the editors of international American Studies journals? And international program directors? Great idea, I responded. Now all I had to do was raise thousands of dollars to help make this happen.

I consulted with friends and colleagues and got particularly good advice from my friend Nan Keohane, then president of Duke. I researched potential funders, crafted pitches, and wrote letters. My efforts paid off when the Mellon Foundation agreed to support the International Initiative with a generous grant of \$40,000. I will always be grateful to Joseph Meisel, grant officer for higher education for the Mellon Foundation, for making this support possible. The grant’s aim was to foster serious scholarship about the US in American Studies programs throughout the world by facilitating ongoing conversations between international scholars of American Studies and Americanists in the US. The grant helped support travel expenses for program directors, journal editors, and other scholars from Australia, Austria, Canada, China, Egypt, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Turkey, the UK, and Vietnam. The set of meetings, discussions, formal sessions, workshops, and informal gatherings that we were able to put together, building on the core number of international scholars whose trips the Mellon grant helped make possible, served, in turn, to attract additional international scholars who were not presenting on the program but believed the meeting would be beneficial to them—scholars who sought and received their own funding elsewhere, bearing out the “build it and they will come” philosophy. Additional scholars came from Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Lebanon, Mexico, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Turkey, the UK, and

Vietnam. All told, an unprecedented number of scholars from around the world attended the 2004 annual meeting in Atlanta—approximately 150 from outside the US. And indeed, the total attendance at the meeting was a record for an ASA meeting held outside of Washington, DC. Special events included a networking breakfast and workshop for US and international program directors attended by 91 participants from 28 countries, with about a third of the participants from the US, as well as the first International Partnership Lunch designed to bring US and international scholars together to lay the groundwork for a range of collaborative ventures. Michael Frisch, then chair of the ASA's International Committee, characterized these occasions as a “stunning, transformative experience for all participants. There has never been anything like this level of internationally inclusive, deeply substantive and engaged dialogue at an ASA meeting.”⁸ The Mellon Foundation generously gave the International Initiative financial support during the three years I was on the ASA's Executive Committee. The following year the grant helped bring scholars from Belarus, Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, Georgia, Iran, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, Poland, South Africa, Taiwan, Tunisia, Turkey, and the UK, and the year after that scholars from Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and India were added to the mix.

Having international scholars attend the annual meeting and interact with US-based Americanists may have been my immediate goal when I created the ASA's International Initiative. But it was a much less modest goal that actually energized and engaged me, and I allowed it to take over my life for several years: I wanted to change the culture of the profession. I wanted US Americanists to be cognizant of the work that peers outside the US were producing, and to get into the habit not only of reading and citing that work but of collaborating with international scholars on projects small and large. I did not know what the upshot of all this would be. But I knew that the blinkered myopia of many Americanists in the US—a myopia that eerily echoed the self-satisfied smugness of the cowboy then residing in the White House and shaping our foreign policy—had to end.

I'm delighted to report that, to a large extent, this has happened. Transnational research and transnational questions have grown increasingly central to the field of American Studies over the last ten years, and increasingly central to my own research agenda as well. My current research project is a transnational, multidisciplinary effort to recover the experience of the Chinese railroad workers whose labor on the Transcontinental Railroad established the wealth that allowed Leland Stanford to create the university at which I teach.⁹ It is a story that can't be told from one side of the Pacific alone. The project now involves over 150 scholars from North America and Asia.

My experience with the International Initiative helped prompt me to see the need for a new online, open-access journal, a virtual space in which transnational conversations could be continued. That realization led to the creation of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* over six years ago. A session at this past year's annual meeting of the American Studies Association in Los Angeles devoted to “The

Subversive Pleasures of Transnationalism: The *Journal of Transnational American Studies*” allowed the *JTAS* team our first opportunity to come together to take stock of where we are, reflect on what it is that we do and why we do it, and to brainstorm about the future. The panel included six *JTAS* editors: Greg Robinson (who served as chair), Alfred Hornung, Nina Morgan, Chris Suh, Takayuki Tatsumi, and myself. It was a pleasure to share with the audience the origins of *JTAS*, and especially to sing the praises of three editors who were not present but whose efforts were key to the journal’s inception back in 2007 and whose continuing involvement is key to its success: Shirley Geok-lin Lim, a Founding Editor in whose Santa Barbara home plans for the journal were hatched; and Eric Martinsen and Caroline Kyungah Hong (then graduate students in English at the University of California, Santa Barbara), who became the journal’s Managing Editors. Aware of valuable articles on transnational topics that had trouble finding a home in existing journals, Shirley and I mused about the need for a journal that defined its mandate as publishing just such pieces. But without institutional support, without a budget, and without subscribers, the prospect of actually launching such a journal was completely daunting. Then Eric Martinsen realized that the California Digital Library’s eScholarship Repository offered UC institutions at no cost the prospect of doing just that: launching a peer-reviewed, online, open-access journal. At the time, only journals in the sciences and social sciences were making use of this platform; to his great credit, Eric realized that there was no reason why a journal in the humanities could not use it as well. Working with Caroline, as well as Associate Managing Editors Nigel Hatton and Steven Sunwoo Lee (both of whom were graduate students in Modern Thought and Literature at Stanford at the time), and a committed group of Founding Editors and Advisory Board members, *JTAS* began to take shape. The first issue of the journal, which is cosponsored by Stanford’s American Studies Program and by the American Cultures & Global Contexts Center at UC Santa Barbara, came out in 2009.

The *JTAS* panel at the ASA explored some of the benefits that being an online journal entails—and some of the possibilities that the future might hold. We noted that having a working Editorial Board made up of scholars based in Atlanta, Hong Kong, Mainz, New York, Palo Alto, Montreal, and Tokyo turns out to be an insomniac’s dream: whatever hour of the day or night one wants to have a stimulating online conversation, we know that a colleague is likely to be up and about and answering email on some continent or other. We observed that every piece that passes peer review is read and discussed by the entire Editorial Board (which includes, in addition to the editors present on the panel, Thomas Bender and Shirley Geok-lin Lim). We spoke of how pleased we were to be able to reach the broadest possible audience by not having to charge for subscriptions; to be able to monitor readership by tracking “hits” for every article; and to be able to run gorgeous full-color images of art that would be prohibitively expensive for a print journal to include. Hsinya Huang, a *JTAS* Advisory Board member who attended the session, asked whether possibilities down the road might involve developing more multimedia features, publishing pieces with links to

audio recordings and to video footage. The universal response of the panel of editors was, why not? We are always open to new formats, new Special Forum topics, new approaches, and new voices. We welcome suggestions from our readers.

We are delighted to welcome Hsuan Hsu of UC Davis to the *JTAS* Advisory Board. Professor Hsu is familiar to *JTAS* readers through both his stellar scholarship and his masterful editing of one of our most popular Special Forums, “Circa 1898: Overseas Empire and Transnational American Studies” (*JTAS* 3:2). We’re very happy to have this enormously productive and enterprising scholar on the *JTAS* team. It is also a great pleasure to welcome two new Associate Managing Editors: Brian Goodman and Corey Masao Johnson. Brian, who earned his undergraduate degree in American Studies from Stanford, is completing a PhD in American Studies at Harvard. Corey, who earned his undergraduate degree in English and American Literature from Harvard, is completing a PhD in Modern Thought and Literature at Stanford. Both earned MSt degrees (with distinction) from Oxford along the way. *JTAS* readers know that Chris Suh (who earned his undergraduate degree in American Studies from Brown with Honors and is completing a PhD in History at Stanford) has been and continues to be a superb Special Forums Editor at *JTAS*. We are pleased to announce that Chris is now a Co-Managing Editor of *JTAS* as well. It is a pleasure and a privilege to have the opportunity to work with such smart and dedicated colleagues.

On behalf of all the *JTAS* editors, I would like to express our gratitude to the scholars who have shared their expertise and their wisdom so generously with *JTAS* by participating in the peer-review process—and most of all, to our contributors, for allowing *JTAS* to present their work to the world and for helping us envision what the field of transnational American Studies is and might become.

Notes

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, “El Hacedor,” in *Collected Fictions*, by Jorge Luis Borges, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998), 327.

² Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

³ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁴ Werner Sollors, *Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁵ Werner Sollors, ed., *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); and Marc Shell and Werner Sollors, eds., *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature: A Reader of Original Texts with English Translations* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

⁶ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' Complicating 'Blackness': Remapping American Culture," *American Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1995): 428–66; and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Desegregating American Literary Studies," in *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, ed. Emory Elliott, Louis Freitas Caton, and Jeffrey Rhyne (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 121–34.

⁷ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, ed., *The Mark Twain Anthology: Great Writers on His Life and Works* (New York: Library of America, 2010).

⁸ Michael Frisch, "Summary Report and Evaluation, International Initiative Events at 2004 ASA Atlanta Meeting—Program Directors Breakfast and Workshop/Roundtable Event, International Partnership Lunch" (American Studies Association, Atlanta, GA, November 29, 2004).

⁹ Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/chineserailroad/cgi-bin/wordpress/>.

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