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Imagining a Globally Distanced Transnationalism

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Transnational studies of almost everything have been in vogue for the last couple of decades—for some very good reasons. In American studies, those very good reasons include the perennial battle against American exceptionalism, the ritual denunciation of which is still a necessary part of the preliminaries of any reputable contribution to American studies. But so often transnational studies implies a heroically individualist model that means only a few people can do it properly and many cannot do it at all—multilingual, multiarchival research is expensive and requires skills not everyone has. For years I have been asking at conferences why we continue tacitly to privilege this heroic individualist model of transnational research when it has never in history been easier to communicate—write, talk, see, hear—very effectively across borders and around the world without leaving home. The Covid crisis is an occasion to ask that question again; the arguments against constant air travel are also of course mounting on environmental grounds. This year we have all improved our online communication skills; travel may not be possible again for some time and international research travel is not possible in every nation anyway, for economic, political, or other reasons.

So why are we not inventing a transnational American studies in which people can viably stay at home but still actively participate in transnational research and analysis? In the Asia Pacific region that is a particularly important possibility because US influence is something the whole region has in common, hence there is a shared interest in understanding US culture and society. In only particular Asia Pacific nations can scholars afford or be allowed regular travel to the United States for research and conferences. In recent scholarship on globalization, and in multisite ethnographic work in anthropology, we have possible models. In area studies such as American studies of course that works less well—there is little substitute for being there at least some of time. But what if US scholars teamed up with international partners to share data and the collaborative work of interpretation? Or to extend the analysis in American studies

(generously, perhaps hemispherically, defined) to global comparisons? Think of Kiran Klaus Patel's fine 2016 book *The New Deal: A Global History*—a piece of heroic individual scholarship.¹ Imagine a global history of the New Deal—or of Progressivism, or antimonopoly, or republicanism, or the 2020 pandemic—by a transnational team in intellectual dialogue for a couple of years as they researched and wrote the work. Why not? Just as we now believe that more diverse workplaces and classrooms are better, so more diverse research teams are better.

Take the US response to the Covid global pandemic as an example. Looking at it from Australia provokes some thoughts about federalism. In both Australia and the US, city and state governments have often performed heroically through the crisis on the frontlines of managing health care, education, and quarantine regulations—thus creating and drawing attention to tensions in federalism. At a time when global media, nationally and internationally, are more than ever fixated just on the US presidency and the horse race presidential election, and when local news is increasingly an endangered species, this has been a salutary reminder of the importance of state and local government. That is true in both the US and Australia, but it plays out differently. On the question of whether states should be able to close their borders during the pandemic, Americans are about evenly divided, but three quarters of Australians say yes.² While a majority of Americans support tough restrictions on personal mobility during the pandemic, polls have also found somewhere between a fifth and a third support protests against them—much higher than in Australia.³ A poll by the US Studies Centre in Sydney found thirteen percent of Australians think restrictions have gone too far or much too far, compared to twenty-five percent of Americans.⁴ That single comparative window tells us some things about the US—including about levels of current political polarization, historical attitudes to state regulation, expertise and science. But imagine a more transnational study that could compare the US to several other nations. Quite different questions might be opened up—thinking about the US and Korea, Brazil, or the Netherlands would no doubt generate questions that might not occur to someone thinking just about the US and Australia. Opinion polls have their limits as sources for scholarship of course, but they offer these kinds of quick insights and perhaps a place to begin thinking about why—ensuing work in the humanities can then be much more focused on longer term and qualitative questions.

In Australia, the racial justice crisis in the US has garnered more attention from academics in American studies than the US response to the pandemic. Race in the US has long fascinated Australians, and Australian scholars have made major contributions to this aspect of American studies. Commentary this year has both explicated the historic roots of current conflicts in the US but also related it to Australia's own history of racial injustice—including the disturbing figures on incarceration and death in custody of Indigenous Australians. There remains important, more broadly transnational work to be done about the global Black Lives Matter movement and the different ways this American formulation of the issue of racial justice has been proclaimed (and of course resisted) around the world.

Lamenting the persistence of American exceptionalism is of course much easier than doing something about it. Maybe the pandemic and the climate crisis together will be the push that is needed to develop a more genuinely transnational American studies—one that can at least to some extent be participated in from home and that iteratively generates new insights and arguments from where people are.

Notes

- ¹ Kiran Klaus Patel, *The New Deal: A Global History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).
- ² Sara Wallace Goodman, “Should US States Be Free to Close their Borders to Other US Citizens?,” *Washington Post*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/03/should-us-states-be-free-close-their-borders-other-us-citizens/>; “Polling: State Border Closures,” *The Australia Institute*, May 30, 2020, <https://www.tai.org.au/content/polling-state-border-closures>.
- ³ Grace Panetta, “Americans, Including a Plurality of Republicans, Oppose the Anti-lockdown Protests Taking Place across the Country,” *Business Insider Australia*, April 21 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/americans-republicans-oppose-anti-coronavirus-lockdown-protests-poll-2020-4?r=US&IR=T>; and Randall Chase and Emily Swanson, “Most Americans Disapprove of Anti-lockdown Protests,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2020/0511/Poll-Most-Americans-disapprove-of-anti-lockdown-protests>.
- ⁴ Anna Patty, “Australians Less Ideological about COVID Lockdown than Americans,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 10, 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/australians-less-ideological-about-covid-lockdown-than-americans-20200508-p54rai.html>.