

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

Introduction: Theorizing and Teaching Transnational American Studies Around the Globe

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9mk3r7h1>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 13(2)

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Publication Date

2022

DOI

10.5070/T813259206

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Teaching and Theorizing Transnational American Studies around the Globe

JTAS Special Forum

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What would American studies look like if the transnational rather than the national were at its center? How do we theorize and teach Transnational American Studies around the globe? Since Shelley Fisher Fishkin challenged us with the first question in 2004,¹ scholars in the US and around the globe have sought to redefine the field imaginary, object of study, as well as methodology of Transnational American Studies. Indeed, from the initial gesture to expand American studies in a hemispheric framework in the mid-1990s, which encompassed what José Martí called “Our America,”² to the recent effort to historicize “the Eastern Bloc” as the “disciplinary unconscious” of Transnational American Studies,³ scholars have raised questions about the formation and development of American studies, interrogating the correlation between US exceptionalism and US imperialism. In her case study of Robert Greenhow and Transnational American Studies in 1848 as an instance of how academic scholarship could end up serving the purpose of an expansionist state, Anna Brickhouse cautions against the appropriation of academic work by the state and expresses concerns about the possibility of committing academic imperialism in the process of reinscribing the hemispheric model of American studies.⁴

In his decade-long efforts to rethink the futures of American studies in relation to the Cold War, Donald E. Pease has articulated US exceptionalism and US imperialism as two sides of the same coin and considered US exceptionalism as historically informing and disciplinarily centering on the existence of American studies. In critiquing the relations between US citizens’ belief in US exceptionalism and the state’s production of exceptions to its core tenets in terms of “structures of disavowal,”

Pease embraces Transnational American Studies's new potential for moving beyond US exceptionalism to create venues for critical reflection: "Rather than construing the territorial nation-state as the instrument for evaluating and representing America's global inter-relationships, this transnational model called for the reconceptualization of social movements as models for transnational understandings of cultural and political processes as passing back and forth between disparate cultural systems, whose analyses required the retrieval of forgotten histories and imaginings of new geographies."⁵ Prioritizing these forgotten histories and imaginings of new geographies, Pease envisions "a comparative model of imperial state exceptionalisms" as a new methodology for Transnational American Studies.⁶

In their response to the transnational turn of American studies in terms of globalizing American studies, Brian Edwards and Dilip Parmeshwar Gaonkar further Pease's critique of US exceptionalism as undergirding American studies and challenge what they call "the tripartite structure" of American studies, which privileges US exceptionalism as its disciplinary rationale and the American Century as its object of investigation.⁷ This tripartite structure as they envision it has served as "an enabling interpretive matrix," which contains a variety of contradictions that have been "generated both internally by academic inquiry and externally by changing historical conditions."⁸ Edwards and Gaonkar bring up a provocative rhetorical question: "What happens to American studies when the American Century—which can be variously described, including as an imperial formation, but which always refers to a particular logic of the circulation of capital, signs, texts, and (cultural) goods—comes to an end or enters its *longue durée*?"⁹

Indeed, as transatlantic American studies scholars have theorized the spatially configured Atlantic World in their exploration of what Walter Mignolo calls "the emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit,"¹⁰ which converged on the slave trade, colonization of the Americas, and the founding of the American republic, transpacific American studies have also transformed the temporally constructed Pacific from "the Asia Pacific Era" to "America's Pacific Century," which continues to evolve and impact the globe in the era of Cold War 2.0 between the United States and China. While theorizing US empire building, military intervention, and economic expansion in the Pacific as an extension of the conquest of the Americas,¹¹ scholars of transpacific American studies have also promoted decolonization and advocated Indigenous epistemologies in the South Pacific and the Asia Pacific as central to the field imaginary and object of study.

Indeed, from Yunte Huang's *Transpacific Imaginations* (2008) and Steven Yao's *Foreign Accents* (2010) to Richard Jean So's *Transpacific Community* (2016) and Lily Wong's *Transpacific Attachments* (2020), scholars of transpacific American studies have not only theorized various moments of the encounter and exchange between East Asia and North America and inserted Asian historical and geographical imaginings into transpacific American studies scholarship, but they have also sought to develop Asian perspectives with ontological and epistemological meanings and implications.

Huang defines transpacific imaginations as literary and historical imaginations that “have emerged under the tremendous geopolitical pressures of the Pacific encounters.”¹² He invokes what Melville called “the deadly space between” as his point of entry and investigation: “It is both a contact zone between competing geopolitical ambitions and a gap between literature and history that is riddled with distortions, half-truths, longings, and affective burdens never fully resolved in the unevenly temporalized space of the transpacific.”¹³ In the same vein, So announces from the outset that his book project “seeks to locate an alternative genealogy of the transpacific within the interwar period that swerves from postwar accounts of this space as relentlessly constituted by flows of capital that one resists or kneels on.”¹⁴ These projects have not only furnished the historical details of the transpacific movements but also complicated the grand narrative of US exceptionalism and US imperialism.

Meanwhile, volumes of collected essays have also emerged that seek to theorize the transpacific. In the introductory essay to their volume on transpacific studies, which focuses on critical perspectives, Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janet Hoskins define and frame the emerging field of transpacific studies by combining critical insights from Area Studies (Asian Studies and Pacific Studies), American studies, and Asian American studies. They note, “Transpacific studies draws from all three of these approaches while focusing less on the limits of a particular place or a people and stressing the movements of people, culture, capital, or ideas within regions and between nations.”¹⁵ By highlighting “the theories of the transpacific” and “transpacific cultures,” Nguyen and Hoskins prioritize the Asia Pacific as the site of action for transpacific studies and de-privilege North America as the sole center of intellectual investigation.¹⁶

In the same vein, in his introduction to a co-edited volume of essays, *Oceanic Archives, Indigenous Epistemologies, and Transpacific American studies*, Yuan Shu expands what Pease calls forgotten histories and imagined geographies to cover the Pacific islands and the South Pacific and invokes what Mignolo frames as “decolonial thinking” that has emerged from American studies, Asian Studies, Pacific Studies, and Asian American studies. He announces from the outset that “[b]y investigating the transpacific as moments of military, cultural, and geopolitical contentions as well as sites of global economic integration and resistance, we develop transpacific American studies as a new critical paradigm in Transnational American Studies.”¹⁷ Specifically, Shu invokes “oceanic archives” as a cultural trope and a material site that point to the South Pacific and Pacific islands as spaces of resistance to US exceptionalism and US imperialism as he foregrounds Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies of peoples in the South Pacific and the Asia Pacific as the center of his investigation.

Now it is time we shifted our attention to how these critical articulations and innovations have played out in our pedagogy and teaching practices around the globe. How do we theorize our teaching of American studies in different forms, modalities, locations, and moments, which have often been mediated by geopolitics and

technology? How do we as scholars and instructors in both “the West” and “the Rest” teach and theorize Transnational American Studies beyond the borders of the US? If American studies was a Cold War product of the 1950s coterminous with the emergence of Comparative Literature and Area Studies, how have US government-funded programs, centers, and journals around the globe impacted and continued to shape our teaching and pedagogy? How do we relate such critical issues in American studies as legacies of slavery and abolitionism, inequalities of race, class, and gender, and politics of migration and border crossing to our colleagues and students around the globe? What does it mean when Asian Americans approach American history the “wrong way,”¹⁸—from the Far East of the Asia Pacific to the Far West of North America, or from the West Coast to the East Coast of the US, as Roger Daniels puts it? In an age troubled by anti-Asian hate crimes and anti-Black policing violence, how do we teach meaningful lessons about US activism and social justice issues in the Global South and the rest of the world? In what critical ways do Transnational American Studies continue to matter in the post-Trump and post-pandemic era?

In this special forum, we have selected five essays that explore both the theoretical and pedagogical dimensions of Transnational American Studies in the Asia Pacific and North Europe, with discussions involving resistance, negotiation, and appropriation of US exceptionalism and US imperialism for both US and non-US academics. Starting with Sara L. Spurgeon’s essay, “Transnational American Studies, Ecocritical Narratives, and Global Indigeneity: A Year of Teaching in Norway,” which documents her experience in teaching American studies at the University of Bergen, Norway, as a Fulbright scholar in 2019, we have a glimpse of an updated version of transatlantic American studies that features ecocritical questions and Indigenous resistance in North America and North Europe. Spurgeon not only read a range of literary and cinematic texts through the critical lenses of comparative ecocriticism and theories of trans-Indigeneity, but she also highlighted similar histories of settler colonialism in Norway and the United States. Focusing on the case of a Norwegian activist and Sámi author and the Standing Rock protests in 2016, Spurgeon uses environment, literature, and social justice as consciousness-raising activities in Norway and turns Transnational American Studies into both theory and activism.

Etsuko Taketani’s essay, “America’s Aerial Archives: Teaching and Theorizing Transnational American Studies in Japan,” revisits the US-occupied Japan (1945–52) by examining the US “aerial archives,” which she defines as texts “recording the shift in aeriality” in survey of Japan from the visual to the literary to the material. In problematizing the traditional frames of reference that are “often grounded in geographical forms or metageography,” Taketani develops the connections between aeriality and the planet as a culturally contested terrain, which merits the critical attention of Transnational American Studies. Yuan Shu’s essay, “Teaching and Theorizing Transnational American Studies in Singapore and Southeast Asia in the Post-American World,” shares his personal research and teaching experiences in Singapore as a city-state, which not only serves as a regional power itself in Southeast

Asia but also performs a strategic role as a hub that connects the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. He explores the ways in which Singapore repositions itself in the US-centered global order by privileging Asian Studies and downplaying American and European Studies in its imagining of the nation-state.

In her essay, “Graphic Matters: Teaching Asian American studies with Graphic Narratives in Taiwan,” Pin-chia Feng posits graphic narratives as a powerful pedagogical tool to illuminate the complex history of Asian America in relation to Taiwan and the Asia Pacific. By resituating graphic texts in relation to specific Asian histories and Asian American identities in the age of Covid-19, Feng foregrounds the “complicated histories and ideological foundation” underlying the formations of Asian America. Last but not the least is Ousmane K. Power-Greene’s essay, “‘In my own country ... I’ve been Nothing but a Nigger’: The Education of a Black Professor in Wuhan, China,” which discusses his experience teaching a summer school in Wuhan in 2019. His focal point is the historic meeting of W. E. B. Du Bois, Shirley Graham Du Bois, and Mao Zedong in Wuhan in 1959 as a critical point of Afro Asian solidarity. Drawing on the rich histories of Afro-Asian encounters throughout the long twentieth century, Power-Greene shares his critical insights with his Chinese students on the historical and cultural intertwining of race, class, gender, sexuality, and Black internationalism in a comparative and global form.

This collection of five essays offers a glimpse of how Transnational American Studies have been taught in Northern Europe and the Asia Pacific. Because our received papers in the special forum do not cover teaching experiences in Africa, the Middle East, or the Americas, we hope the critical conversation on the theory and pedagogy of transnational American studies will continue both in the United States and around the globe. Indeed, American studies will continue to matter in the post-American world and in the era of Cold War 2.0.

Notes

- ¹ Shelly Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroads of Culture: The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 17–57.
- ² Carolyn Porter, “What We Know That We Don’t Know: Remapping American Literary Studies,” *American Literary History* 6, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 468.
- ³ Joseph Benatov, “Transnational American studies: A Postsocialist Phoenix,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 65, no. 1–2 (March 2019): 24.
- ⁴ Anna Brickhouse, “Scholarship and the State: Robert Greenhow and Transnational American studies 1848/2008,” *American Literary History* 20, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 695–722.

- ⁵ Donald E. Pease, "Rethinking 'American' Studies after US Exceptionalism," *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 20.
- ⁶ Pease, "Rethinking," 25.
- ⁷ Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "Introduction: Globalizing American studies," in *Globalizing American studies*, ed. Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 6.
- ⁸ Edwards and Gaonkar, "Introduction," 6.
- ⁹ Edwards and Gaonkar, "Introduction," 5.
- ¹⁰ Walter D. Mignolo, "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 58.
- ¹¹ Arif Dirlik, "The Asia-Pacific Idea: Reality and Representation in the Invention of a Regional Structure," in *What Is in A Rim? Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea*, 2nd edition, ed. Arif Dirlik (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 23.
- ¹² Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 2.
- ¹³ Huang, *Transpacific*, 2.
- ¹⁴ Richard Jean So, *Transpacific Community: America, China, and the Rise and Fall of a Cultural Network* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), xxxvi.
- ¹⁵ Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janet Hoskins, "Introduction: Transpacific studies: Critical Perspectives on an Emerging Field," in *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field*, ed. Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 24.
- ¹⁶ Nguyen and Hoskins, "Introduction," 24–25.
- ¹⁷ Yuan Shu, "Introduction: Oceanic Archives, Indigenous Epistemologies, and Transpacific American Studies," in *Oceanic Archives, Indigenous Epistemologies, and Transpacific American studies*, ed. Yuan Shu, Otto Heim, and Kendall Johnson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019), 3.
- ¹⁸ Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), 2.

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