# Introduction: Covid-19 and Transnational American Studies

AIKO TAKEUCHI-DEMIRCI,
Koç University

Inspired by an idea proposed by our board member Shirely Geok-Lin Lim for a "Covid-19 commentary," the *JTAS* editorial team invited submissions of short "think pieces" on the impact of the global pandemic on Transnational American Studies, including how we conduct research, how we teach, and how we observe the United States's (changing) position and roles in the world. We received candid, intriguing, and insightful pieces from scholars looking at the United States in relation to different parts of the world—Taiwan and Hong Kong, Turkey, and Australia.

As the entire world struggles with a common threat, the leadership of each nation has been put to the test. Writing from abroad, the authors in this special forum describe the local media's keen interest in US President Donald Trump's (disastrous) handling of the pandemic, often referred to as a negative example and evidence of the United States's incompetence as the world's leader. The perceived decline of US influence has triggered a contest for power and leadership among other nations to fill the "vacuum" it has left in the international order (namely in the World Health Organization). As **Perin Gürel**'s essay illustrates, such power struggles could be seen in the "soft power" diplomacy over international aid campaigns.

The shattering of US superiority is further demonstrated by domestic racial tensions and structural inequalities, which have been amplified by the pandemic. News and social media across the world have covered the Black Lives Matter movement and systemic racism in the United States intensively. **Wen Liu**, however, sees this as a moment for transnational solidarity against multiple imperialisms and the "rapid right-wing turn of global hegemonies." The US president's characterization of Covid-19 as "the China virus," as well as the exponential rise of hate crimes against Asians and Asian Americans, has exposed the persistent Orientalist trope of racial othering. The

interconnected discourses of anti-Blackness and Orientalism can also provide the basis for Asian–Black solidarity. Referring to the connection between the BLM movement and the Hong Kong protests against Beijing's authoritative control, Liu asserts that such cross-national, cross-racial solidarity should be built on a "bidirectional and bifocal analysis," rather than "merely relying on the US-centric epistemology of what constitutes leftist politics."

A transnational examination of US politics and society seems ever more important in this time of global crisis, but the pandemic has also posed serious challenges to our scholarly practices, as "transnational studies" often depend on the ability to travel across borders for research and conferences. **David Goodman**, as a US historian based in Australia, points out the "privilege" we knowingly or unknowingly bestow on transnational research, which often requires significant funding and time—something many people may not be able to afford. Gürel, working with people and materials in the Middle East as a US cultural historian, describes how transnational research could also be affected by political situations and diplomatic relations. With new travel restrictions imposed by governments and universities due to the pandemic, transnational research activities are becoming more challenging than ever, and many of our plans are placed on hold.

Nonetheless, the difficulties we are experiencing now have also prompted us to find alternative ways to reach resources and people—with the help of technology—and to be creative and flexible in how we plan and conduct our research activities. **Douglas B. Craig** reminds us that scholars studying the United States from abroad have always been in search of ways to stay connected with international colleagues, collaborators, and research bases, long before this pandemic. But now, even those located in the United States are finding new ways to collaborate, both inside and across the borders. We are indeed seeing more opportunities to "invite" speakers regardless of geographic distances (as long as we can figure out the time-zone differences) for online lectures, which in turn can be shared to and viewed by people across the world. People can easily "attend" conferences online without having to worry about the money and time to travel. More and more books and archival resources are digitalized and available for wider and remote access—a trend that hopefully will continue after the pandemic. These changes suggest that the pandemic may actually have enhanced our academic connectivity and efficiency.

But we all know that some things just have to be done in person. Virtual meetings and remote research, however convenient, cannot replace in-person interactions, fieldwork, and actual visits to archives. As Craig points out, students and early-career scholars may be the ones who suffer the most from the effects of travel restrictions and shrinking opportunities rather than established scholars. Universities are losing international students (and their money), and many international students are stranded or held in limbo, hindered in their opportunities to learn because of the strict (and often racialized) border restrictions and the closing of university campuses. How

universities respond to this crisis in international education may also affect the future direction of transnational research.

Together, these essays remind us that transnational politics, the movement of people and capital, and the practice of scholarship itself are constantly changing and evolving. The Covid-19 pandemic can become a catalyst for reflection and change—what will Transnational American Studies look like in the postpandemic world?