

# Introduction: Doing Transnational American Studies Abroad

---

ALFRED HORNUNG

The last issue of *JTAS* focused on global experiences of teaching or living transnational American studies abroad, recognizing the need to transnationalize. This issue presents regular articles and essays of a special forum which look at the United States from an external perspective that represents critical observations about internal cultural affairs and historical conceptions of the American nation state. The first two articles present the unusually perceptive position of American activists and writers abroad discriminated against at home as people of color. Mary Church Terrell's dedicated engagement in international peace work and her courageous stand as an African American woman intellectual for a diversified evaluation of African soldiers in the French army occupying the German Rhineland after the First World War are an excellent demonstration of transnational American studies, expertly analyzed by Noaquia Callahan Banks. Terrell's own experience of racist profiling at home allows her, as the only colored member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, to reject the stereotypical accusation of Black men raping white women advanced by the German population for political reasons and automatically shared by her colleagues. In the same way in which Terrell's two-year experience in Europe and her knowledge of German and French gave her an edge over her mostly monolingual and monocultural companions, the Afro-Caribbean writer and naturalized American Claude McKay profited from his experiences in Europe and Northern Africa. It is particularly his encounter with Communism in the Soviet Union, which paraded him as a favored exotic fellow believer, and his critical distance from Leninist Internationalism that entered into his last novel, unpublished during his lifetime. As Nahum Welang's conclusive interpretation shows, McKay departed from the Communist ideology and defended the African resistance against Soviet interventions in the Ethiopian war: "McKay has more faith in the prospects of a Pan-Africanist alliance than collaboration with the Stalinite agents of Soviet Russia" ("Losing Leninist Internationalism in Claude McKay's Lost Novel," this volume, p. 41). McKay's and Terrell's transnational

mobility positioned them to speak out with the clarity in analyzing the racialized nature of these engagements with shaping national narratives. Similarly, W.E.B. Du Bois's German education at the University of Berlin (1892-94) gained him a modest fellowship for a five-month visit to Nazi Germany in 1936 "to study how the German system of industrial education could be applied to re-organizing equivalent American Negro institutions." In his reports back home published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, first analyzed by Werner Sollors in an article of *Amerikastudien / American Studies* in 1999, Du Bois clearly revealed his observation of the discrimination and hostile attitude of German fascism against the Jews, whom he felt were treated like African Americans back home: "There has been no tragedy in modern times equal in its awful effects to the fight on the Jew in Germany. It is an attack on civilization, comparable only to such horrors as the Spanish Inquisition and the African slave trade."<sup>1</sup> In Sollors's analysis, "Du Bois approached the danger of the impending Holocaust with remarkable insight and caring, combining sharp political anti-racism with pronounced cultural Eurocentrism."<sup>2</sup>

The influence of a personal background of diversity creates a special critical sensitivity for insights and informs most of the current contributions. It certainly motivated the Shelley Fisher Fishkin Prize winner of 2022, Mahshid Mayar (University of Cologne), in her examination of world maps designed for pedagogical purposes in schoolbooks at the turn of the twentieth century. Both her article and the excerpt from her book *Citizens and Rulers of the World: The American Child and the Cartographic Pedagogies of Empire* (University of North Carolina Press, 2022) take up Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer Abroad* with an emphasis on the superior perspective from a balloon flight and from abroad. We would like to congratulate Mahshid Mayar on her supreme scholarship in the vein of Shelley's transnational American studies.

Mahshid's publications as well as the contributions of the Special Forum on "Archipelagic Spaces and Im/Mobilities" reemphasize the productivity and sustainability of the transnational American studies approach. Almost twenty years after Shelley Fisher Fishkin launched this innovative methodology invoking the importance of the addition of outside perspectives and the American studies scholarship pursued by non-American scholars abroad, the TAS formula has proven its great success and entered a new phase in the immensely productive archipelagic studies. It is no coincidence that the originators and major shapers of this transnational discipline live or have lived outside of the continental United States, looking at America from a position of exteriority. Édouard Glissant's original introduction of the idea of the archipelago and relational connections vis-à-vis continental territories, which he extended into and combined with the Federated States of Micronesia,<sup>3</sup> or the works of Pacific writers such as Epeli Hau'ofa and Craig Santos Perez find further exfoliation in the collaboration between Michelle Ann Stephens from the Caribbean and *JTAS Reprise* editor Brian Russell Roberts with island experiences in Hawai'i and Indonesia. Both were important participants in two powerful conferences organized at Leipzig University and the University of Vienna in 2021 and 2022, carried out by principal investigators of the German and Austrian excellence programs to "open up and navigate

new paths of thinking through the intersections of archipelagicity, mobility, US-American imperialism, and decoloniality” (Introduction, 73). It is fascinating to follow the trajectory of visions from archipelagic relations and unincorporated territories to the American nation, including literary accounts, musical presentations, historical evaluations, tours planned for tourists to the Panama Canal or Caribbean islands and the extension into outer space to questions of (extra)territoriality. Along with new variations of the archipelagic method as terripelagic or astrocolonialism, Jonathan Pugh proposes a change from Glissant’s relational geographical method, which challenges modern reasoning, nation-states, and traditional space-time coordinates, to a vertical method, also based on Glissant, to think of the “world as abyss.”<sup>4</sup> Pugh’s claim that the application of both archipelagic and abyssal thinking to transnational American studies works “against such things as American exceptionalism” (“The Americas: A Relational or Abyssal Geography? An Interview,” 292) reinstates Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s original idea when launching the program in 2004. The correlation of the archipelagic methodologies with transnational American studies will lead to a reclassification of the once American-only writers and works as a decolonial and counterimperialist move against the untenable America-only position. In short, it counteracts the critical accusations of American exceptionalism which accompanied the formation and evolution of transnational American studies.<sup>5</sup>

The editors of *JTAS* would like to thank all authors for their contributions to bring transnational American studies up to date. Special thanks are due to the editors of the *Special Forum* and *JTAS Special Forum* editor Pia Wiegink accompanying the editorial process. Last but not least, the issue would not appear without the untiring work of the editorial team, which has just been joined by Helen J. Yang (Yale University). We welcome her and recognize the expertise of our managing editor, Sabine Kim, guiding the team and doing transnational American studies abroad.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 19, 1936, quoted in Werner Sollors, “W. E. B. Du Bois in Nazi Germany, 1936,” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 44, no. 2 (1996): 219.
- <sup>2</sup> Sollors, “W. E. B. Du Bois in Nazi Germany, 1936,” 221–22.
- <sup>3</sup> John Carlos Rowe, “‘O Carib Isle!’ or ‘Scattered Moluccas’? Édouard Glissant’s Pacific Relation,” *Atlantic Studies* 15, no. 2 (2018): 160–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2017.1388994>
- <sup>4</sup> Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler, *World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.16997/book72>.
- <sup>5</sup> Laura Bieger, Ramon Saldivar, and Johannes Voelz, eds., *The Imaginary and Its Worlds: American Studies after the Transnational Turn* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press,

2013), [https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/215/oa\\_monograph/chapter/985301](https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/215/oa_monograph/chapter/985301); and Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera, *After American Studies: Rethinking the Legacies of Transnational Exceptionalism* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

### Selected Bibliography

Bieger, Laura, Ramón Saldívar, and Johannes Voelz, eds. *The Imaginary and Its World: American Studies after the Transnational Turn*. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2013. [https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/215/oa\\_monograph/chapter/985301](https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/215/oa_monograph/chapter/985301)

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Herlihy-Mera, Jeffrey. *After American Studies: Rethinking the Legacies of Transnational Exceptionalism*. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Hornung, Alfred. “Living Transnational American Studies.” *Journal of Keio American Studies* 0 (Summer 2020): 44–65.

Pugh, Jonathan, and David Chandler. *World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene*. London: University of Westminster Press, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.16997/book72>

Rowe, John Carlos. “‘O Carib Isle!’ or ‘Scattered Moluccas’? Édouard Glissant’s Pacific Relation.” *Atlantic Studies* 15, no. 2 (2018): 160–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2017.1388994>

Sollors, Werner. “W. E. B. Du Bois in Nazi Germany, 1936.” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 44, no. 2 (1996): 207–22.