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## Towards a genealogy of transnational perspective

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## TOWARDS A GENEALOGY OF TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Over the last decade, American Studies scholars from the US have attempted with much regularity and critical force to disassociate the present discipline from the practices and ideologies of its exceptionalist past. Having been authorized within the historical and political context of the US's expansive Cold War strategy, the ASA has often had to address its institutional relationship with US state power as well as the ostensibly nationalist impulse of this power. Simply put, Americanists broadly and ASA presidents particularly have posited various counter tactics in order to differentiate their own knowledge production from that of the US nation-state. This has been the case at least since Janice Radway's question 'What's in a Name?' (Radway, 1999) and continues to resonate in Shelley Fisher Fishkin's (Fishkin, 2005) and Emory Elliott's (Elliott, 2007) more recent presidential addresses at the ASA's annual meetings. These tactical endeavors are too numerous to explicate here, but with my colleagues from Göttingen, Berlin, and Härnösand I aim to tarry with American Studies' critical 'turn' toward the transnational. I am specifically interested in using this forum to begin raising a set of questions that examine the historicity of the 'transnational perspective', particularly as it is taken up as a category for critique. I use the title 'Towards a Genealogy of Transnational Perspective' as a beginning intention for what really obliges an extensive and weighty (if not overly ambitious) project that can account for knowledge production in our current moment—that is, account for an order of knowledge that makes possible the transnational as a perspective.

The 'turn' to the transnational in American Studies underscores a preoccupation with global and globalizing arrangements, the US's role (whether constitutive or not) within these arrangements, and how American Studies should therefore produce knowledge under these conditions. This was made evident in Shelley Fisher Fishkin's 2004 Presidential Address, 'Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies', wherein she called Americanists to make central the transnational as an analytic of culture. More importantly, though, Fishkin begins the address by engaging in an apologetics on behalf of American Studies as a still-yet-important field of knowledge, claiming principally that its aims are not to export 'an arrogant, pro-American nationalism' (20). Against this nationalist impulse, Fishkin cites a perspective that looks 'beyond the nation's borders', that actually interrogates 'borders both within and out-

side the nation' (20). For Fishkin, the instrumentalization of this perspective makes possible a critical and epistemological break from 'American foreign policy', which 'is marked by nationalism, arrogance, and Manichean oversimplification' (20). This formulation posits the transnational as the antipode to US state power, a power which seemingly exercises force more often than not through nationalist modalities and for national interests. By proposing or making central the transnational as an oppositional point of view, we in American Studies, as Fishkin's argument goes, can resist repeating the 'arrogance' of the US's exceptionalist vision of itself in the world.

Fishkin's thoughts follow generally from works in American Studies that have invoked the transnational perspective as an oppositional tactic to American exceptionalism. These works are too numerous to cite here, but we might recall at least two essays: the first by Donald Pease, 'C.L.R. James, *Moby-Dick*, and the Emergence of Transnational American Studies', and 'America and Its Studies' by Djelal Kadir. These essays are memorable for their critical and imaginative interventions. More importantly, though, they now seem instrumental in inaugurating the emerging fields of transnational and international American studies. For Pease, C.L.R. James's reading of *Moby-Dick* through the 'perspective' of the mariners, renegades, and castaways instantiates a reimagining of American Studies as 'a postnational space', a field 'that engendered multiple and collective identifications and organizational loyalties' (Pease, 2000: 119). These transnational 'associations', through the 'shared condition of postnational migrancy', as Pease wants to argue, resisted the state's hermeneutic tendency to read 'cultural identity' through a national frame (118–19). In concluding his essay on the emergence of Transnational Studies, Kadir, echoing Pease and in some ways prefiguring Fishkin, argues that 'our perspective must be translocal and relational, rather than fixed or naturalized. Our discursive locus must be supple, mobile, transnational' (Kadir, 2003: 22). By citing these essays (though all too briefly), I want to note that the call for the transnational emerges for these critics as a response to 'America's official, nationalist mythology', as Kadir states it (22). In other words, like Fishkin, both Pease and Kadir direct their critique of American power toward its nationalist articulation of power, and they further posit the transnational as the critical and antipodal response to the national 'myth'.

Fishkin, Pease, and Kadir seem to accept a priori that the state's hermeneutic for reading and engaging with culture functions through a national lens and that the 'transnational perspective' and the transgressing of national boundaries (however these are imagined) can exceed the state's hermeneutic. I want to recognize the potential belatedness of this critique, however. In other words, if the transnational perspective in American Studies enacts a 'looking beyond the nation's borders', attempts to study or interrogate how the borders 'in and out of the US' flex with transnational flows (populations, commodities, capital), it behooves us to ask whether or not this perspective is always-already isomorphic with American power. With my other colleagues on this forum, I've been trying to ask what is at stake in the 'turn' to the transnational, particularly as the transnational constitutes a 'perspective'. What is this perspective? What order of knowledge or intelligence can perceive transnationally? How do we differentiate our work in American Studies with the modalities of thought and knowledge



production found in the fields of policy, economy, finance, and state strategy which also want to perceive globally and transnationally?

As a possible line of inquiry towards a genealogy of the present discourse on transnational perspective—and to complicate American Studies' relationship to knowledge production within transnational arrangements—I want to draw attention to the U.S. military's new Counterinsurgency Doctrine. I do this not because I think American Studies is complicit with the U.S.'s monopoly on violence but because American Studies has need to further interrogate how it inaugurates particular new field formations in relationship to this violence. If we read the new doctrine, the emerging model for the military is not necessarily coded in nationalist victories carried out by overwhelming conventional military strength. Success is being redefined in terms of a larger transnational context, whereby the U.S. maintains an interest in integrating populations with liberal markets. Or, as the document states, 'This is a time when "money is ammunition"' (*Counterinsurgency*, 2006: Ch. 1, 27). In this context, the US military's newly understood role is to secure this order of integration through various applications of force—taking into account the 'political, economic, military, paramilitary, psychological, and civic' dimensions of this force (Ch. 1, 1).

While the counterinsurgency doctrine doesn't mention military analyst and strategist Thomas Barnett, author of *The Pentagon's New Map* and a similarly themed work, *Blueprint for Action*, the new doctrine seems to carry his imprint. For Barnett, who according to one article in *The Washington Post* (Tyson, 2005) is being acclaimed as an important strategic military mind in the age of globalization, the priority of the US should be to support the integration of populations into the global network (Barnett, 2004: 2–8). Like the counterinsurgency doctrine, though, Barnett understands that military force has the responsibility to eradicate 'transnational insurgencies' (*Counterinsurgency*, 2006: Ch.1, 12) which resist global integration or, in Barnett's terms, 'connectivity' (2004: 3–4). It's no surprise, then, the term 'culture', mentioned nearly ninety times in the document, becomes as much a part of the lexicon of military strategy as it does for our own sense of oppositional critical practices in Transnational American studies. The military needs—in fact, sees as a priority—an intelligence that is capable of reading culture and the spaces where cultures intersect, not only with each other but with a political economy that makes possible the transnational configurations of commerce and global flow. As chapters one and three of the doctrine seem to suggest, 'culture' becomes for the military—as it has already for the World Bank, UNESCO, among other organizations—a category for indexing a population's threat or integration potential.

I want to reiterate again that I do not think American Studies has a direct and willful complicity with US state violence; I do, however, want to admit the possibility that the recent turn to the transnational in American Studies as a mode of knowledge production and critique of the US may not fully take into consideration how American power has likewise re-orientated knowledge with twenty-first-century strategy. I've hinted at the *Counterinsurgency Doctrine* as one instance of this re-orientation. And still the question remains: what's at stake in the call for a transnational perspective? And how do we begin to account for an intelligence capable of perceiving transnationally? The US military has provided an institutional and doctrinal account

of its production and exercise. For our work in American Studies, we must further ask whether the perspective of the transnational migrant (Pease), the cosmopolitan intellectual (Kadir), the global citizen (Kenichi Ohmae—another name that complicates this further), or other subject/identity positions emergent with globalization are adequate for responding to this order of US power? If we recall, Antonio Gramsci had traced out an earlier formation of the cosmopolitan figure, one who emerged with the centralization of intellectual power under the Roman Empire and developed with the spreading influence of the Church (Gramsci, 1971: 14–23). Gramsci’s account of this movement provides an apt lesson on questions regarding intelligence and knowledge coincident with particular arrangements of power. In the field of American Studies, I think we need to ask important and genealogical questions (as I’ve only begun to do here) that address how the ‘perspective’ that we’ve invoked for critical work may, in fact, be historically attendant with the intensification of globalization, with transnational configurations, and with the production of knowledge. Rather than beginning with perspective as a category upon which knowledge is based, a genealogy of a ‘transnational perspective’ must try to document its emergence, trace out its effects, and examine the conditions that make possible such a perspective.

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