

# Burger King and Transnational American Studies: Lessons from the 2013 Nordic Association for American Studies Conference

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**Abstract:** *This article explores the incongruities between transnational American studies as theorized and practiced. Inspired by our experience at the 2013 Nordic Association of American Studies (NAAS) conference, we discuss the challenges of practicing “transnational” American studies within specific nation- and region-based communities. U.S. scholars tend to conceptualize “transnational” American Studies as an attempt to destabilize U.S. nation—a broadening of the geopolitical frames of reference to promote a variety of heuristics such as hemispheric, Atlantic, circum-Caribbean, borderlands, and transpacific. Scholars at the NAAS conference foregrounded emergent trends and lines of exchange that are sometimes elided in a transnational American studies conceived largely from the vantage point of the U.S. While many themes emerged at the NAAS conference, we examine how the focus on Scandinavian-American relations, Asia, and transnational families help us rethink the transnational turn in American Studies and the borders that bind its practice. In this context, we discuss the paradox of transnational American Studies – that, despite its aim to expand toward an all-encompassing “transnational” paradigm, it remains defined by our geopolitical positions. This paradox presents opportunities for theorizing the divide between American studies and its varying scholarly terrains, especially through international scholarly practice.*

**Keywords:** *transnational, Scandinavian-American, Asian-American, family, American studies, international scholarship*

Before our trip to Karlstad, Sweden, we thought of ourselves as skilled international travelers. Sharing a keen attention to detail and penchant for planning, we anticipated little trouble on our journey. But as we made our way to the 2013 Nordic Association for American Studies (NAAS) Conference, we encountered several challenges, roadblocks, and close-calls that made us realize just how far from home we had traveled. The first bump occurred when we boarded the wrong train. The train station in Stockholm was crowded and dizzying, a tangle of escalators and platforms, dotted with monitors listing unrecognizable destinations. Even though we had translated the ticket to English beforehand, the numbers and town names formed an incomprehensible mass that failed to align with any of the listed departures. Confused by the overlapping names of various train routes, we identified not one, but two trains leaving at the same time for our first destination, the ever-mysterious Örebro. Unsure of what to do, we initiated what would become a long series of questions to transportation officials and passengers, who, as luck would have it, spoke perfect English. A transit employee directed us towards the nearest train, but only after impatiently reminding us that the monitors displayed this very information. We boarded, and despite our uncertainty, began to relax.

Quickly settling down with snacks and books, we both drifted into jet-lag-induced naps only to be awakened by a kind train official asking for our tickets. Much to our dismay, we discovered that we had, in fact, boarded the wrong train. She assured us, however, that we would arrive in Örebro in time to catch our next bus. *Bus?* We had no idea a bus was in our future, let alone three different ones. When we had booked our tickets online, we had naively assumed that the four-part journey listed simply tracked the different train stops, not that *we* would be weaving between buses and trains. After clarifying the ticket information with the official, we learned that we would travel the next two legs of the journey on Bus 100. Awake and chagrined by our own misunderstanding, we waited anxiously to locate Bus 100 at our next stop, and were successful. After a few minutes of watching the Swedish countryside, we both dropped off, but were awakened yet again by an unsettling observation. Sitting in front of us at our current stop was another Bus 100. With American 80s music blaring in the background, we made our way quickly to the front, where the bus driver informed us that we would need to transfer to the *other* Bus 100, which was due to depart any second. Running back to grab our bags, we scurried over to the second Bus 100 just in time.

Afraid to fall asleep again, we chatted and stared tiredly out the window, commenting on the number of trees and searching the horizon for any sign of moose. We began to notice, in our now hyper-vigilance, that this third leg of the journey was moving slowly and the time for us to board our last and final train was quickly approaching. We both grew nervous. *How would we get to Karlstad? How far are we?* Inevitably, we missed our last bus. However, much to our relief, the bus driver volunteered to drive those of us that had missed our connection the final fifteen minutes to Karlstad, where we thankfully arrived in a soft rain. Luckily, we recognized the blazing red “Scandic” hotel sign in the distance and celebrated the prospect of a meal and a good night’s sleep. But even in this final stage of the trip, we were mistaken. *Our* Scandic hotel, the front desk clerk informed us, was around the corner. With nothing else to do but laugh, we trekked the final two blocks to the correct hotel. Desperate for sustenance, we searched for a restaurant that was still open. We landed, ironically, back in the heart of America – Burger King.

In retrospect, we have come to see these events as a fitting prelude to the NAAS conference – an American studies fable, perhaps. Our purpose in traveling to Sweden was to explore how non-U.S. scholars pursue American studies and put into practice the more recent turn to transnational approaches and collaborations. What we discovered was not only a robust conversation highlighting innovative directions in American studies, but also the ways in which national borders continue to structure the field and practice of American studies. Although we traveled to a country that spoke our native language, listened to our tunes, and even offered our native fare, we became keenly aware of our status as outsiders, unable to navigate what, to many, is a self-explanatory transit system with direct trains from Stockholm to Karlstad. Our moments of disorientation highlighted the intersection of our geopolitical and academic vantage points: while we were on our way to a conference on American studies, a field that we ourselves comfortably inhabit, both academically and geographically, we were anything but comfortable as we traversed an unfamiliar nation. This experience as international travelers revealed the continuing insularity of American studies – that even as the field has become increasingly transnational, its boundaries broadening and expanding to include and even consume other nations, localities, literatures, and histories, national boundaries continue to bind both its perspectives and practices. This fact presents a challenge to the general spirit of transnational American studies, which often privileges a global-

ized and cosmopolitan context over the crusty old nation-state. Indeed, for decades, scholars have been unearthing a transnational American landscape of literature and culture, mapping a literary terrain that crosses linguistic, cultural, and geographic divides, excavating marginalized voices and recovering literary histories that challenge the idea of a coherent, monolithic, stable American nation. But if American studies has become unquestionably transnational, why was our transnational journey so awkward? And more importantly, does this tension, between our rocky travel experience and the seemingly smooth transnational terrain of American studies, reveal an underlying, unacknowledged kink in the transnational scholarly turn?

As scholars entering this field, we are poised to participate in the hardy American studies discussions both within and beyond the U.S. However, in reflecting on our experience at the NAAS conference, we have become increasingly aware of how our geographical position shapes our relationship to American studies, and how the field tends to rely on certain geopolitical frames of reference. We have studied the transnational flows between the U.S., the Mexican-American borderlands, the Caribbean, and, more broadly, the hemisphere. We have studied the Americas, moreover, through transatlantic, transpacific, and Oceanic lenses, recognizing the myriad paradigms for understanding the development and dispersal of American literature and culture. Despite the breadth and depth of these scholarly perspectives, the NAAS conference reminded us how these lenses privilege certain geopolitical relationships and how the location of our graduate training in an American university has shaped the nature of our scholarship; although we have embraced transnational American studies, we have inevitably elided scholarly questions and issues that become visible from other geographical vantage points. Similarly, even as American studies writ large develops a broadening range of transnational heuristics, it is still conceived largely from within the U.S. It thus overlooks the instructively different stories and materials that arise when we examine the U.S. and the transnational America(s) from a geopolitical context outside of the U.S. Just as our academic viewpoints have been influenced by the geopolitics of our graduate training, so has the field of American studies been shaped by a specific set of scholarly geographies and perspectives that determine its scope, subject matter, and sites of debate.

This article considers the more recent transnational turn in American studies in light of the NAAS conference's conversations, recognizing that this conference represents only one instance of the diverse field of

Scandinavian-American studies. We take the relationship between key scholarly trends at this conference and U.S.-based Americanist scholarship – its overlapping, intersecting and diverging trends – as a case study for examining the strengths and limitations of transnational American studies as both a field and a practice. We begin with an overview of transnational American studies, focusing on the emergence of the hemisphere as one of its paradigms. Next, we examine three major foci of the NAAS conference and the recent trends they highlight in Americanist studies scholarship. We discuss the conference's unique contribution to the study of Scandinavian-American relations, a largely unrecognized aspect of American studies within the U.S. academy. We then turn to the conference's complex conceptualization of U.S.-Asian connections and its treatment of transnational families, both of which revealed the similarity in Scandinavian and U.S.-based Americanist modes of scholarship. In so doing, we address the largely unacknowledged relationship between the U.S. and Scandinavian Americanist scholarship and suggest that these three foci offer a series of methodological and scholarly opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration and research. For even as American studies becomes increasingly transnational in theory, the field, as we show, could become more transnational in practice.

Guided by what has emerged in recent years as “Transnational American studies,” our training has been dominated by questions about how texts imagine the U.S. in relation to the world. Specifically, our work focuses on the stabilization and destabilization of national borders and how texts move beyond the nation while remaining engrained within it. Shelley Fisher Fishkin identified this “transnational turn” in 2004, highlighting the discipline's increasing interest in the “historical roots of multidirectional flows of people, ideas, and goods and the social, political, linguistic, cultural, and economic crossroads generated in the process” (22). Since then, scholars have produced work that tracks the movement of cultures beyond and across U.S. borders, examining questions of race, gender, and class through a variety of transnational heuristics that have reenergized older fields of study and opened new ones, including hemispheric, transpacific, Atlantic, transatlantic, Caribbean, and border studies.

Our own engagement with transnational studies has most often taken the shape of the hemisphere. Emerging in the last decade, hemispheric studies challenges the centrality and coherence of the U.S. nation. Adopting

a comparative approach, it examines the overlapping geographies, movements, and cross-filiations between and among peoples, regions, diasporas, and nations of the American hemisphere. It unites scholars working across different fields such as Latin American, Asian American, African American, Canadian, and Native American studies, and encourages a multilingual methodology that attends specifically to the primary languages of the Western Hemisphere. While this type of transnational approach has been circulating within the U.S. academy since the early decades of the twentieth century, it is only recently that U.S. scholars have begun to take Herbert Bolton's statement that "each national history is but a thread of a larger strand" as a motto for a new field of critical inquiry (449).

In the last fifteen years, for instance, scholarly works such as Walter D. Mignolo's *Local Histories/Global Designs* (2000) have foregrounded theoretical approaches to the hemisphere, using the Americas to show how colonial modernity has shaped and subalternized even the production of knowledge. Works like Kirsten Silva Gruesz's *Ambassadors of Culture* (2002) and Anna Brickhouse's *Transamerican Literary Relations* (2004), on the other hand, have worked to uncover and recover the untapped overlaps between the literary cultures of the Americas. Still others have focused on specific transnational regions within the hemisphere and their relationship to U.S. nation as evidenced in works such as Sean Goudie's *Creole America* (2006) and Matthew Guterl's *American Mediterranean* (2008). Collections such as Caroline Levander and Robert Levine's *Hemispheric American Studies* (2008) have taken a broader scan of hemispheric studies' methodologies while works such as Ralph Bauer's *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures* (2003) have considered seriously the comparative aspects of Spanish and Anglo-American literary forms. While the majority of such work follows a historical precedent that predictably and, as Helen Delpar reminds us, problematically "looks South," a smaller, but equally rigorous collection of scholarship, has looked north, as shown by the work of Winfried Siemerling and Sarah Phillips Casteel's *Canada and Its Americas* (2010). Besides these scholarly monographs, journals such as *Comparative American Studies*, inaugurated in 2009, and the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, started in 2003, endeavor to make approaches like hemispheric studies into an ongoing engagement. Meanwhile, Digital Humanities projects, such as the Our Americas Archive Partnership have made the hemisphere into an open-source digital environment that stimulates research and teaching of the Americas.

Despite their explosion in the last decade and a half, transnational heuristics like the hemisphere are not without their limitations and challenges—institutional, intellectual, and methodological. For instance, as Deborah Cohn and Guterl have pointed out, American studies has become institutionally vulnerable to substantial reduction and decline in an age of academic budget crises. This vulnerability largely stems from the field's hazy methodology, seeming lack of practical applicability in the workplace, and—herein lies the rub—its increasingly imprecise object of study. Yet Americanists seem more than willing to blur the boundaries of their objects of study to pursue a more transnational or comparative mode of studying what has traditionally been bathed in historical, literary, and cultural narratives of exceptionalism. In fact, scholars such as Laura Bieger, Ramón Saldivar, and Johannes Voelger have questioned the transnational turn as well, calling for a more “self-critical account” of transnational American studies and the “imaginaries” that motivate it—the “existing forms and patterns” that generate and delimit social formations and communities (xxvi, xi). Reconsidering “America” as transnational, or even post-transnational, however, risks weakening the institutional status and strength of this interdisciplinary field. Americanists believe this reconsideration is well worth the risk and have introduced, in spite of this institutional vulnerability, robust transnational American studies seminars and programs at the undergraduate and graduate level.

Americanists have been quick to notice, in this context, a glaring paradox in the development of hemispheric and, more broadly, transnational American studies—the persistence of monolingualism. If the field itself is becoming increasingly trans-, inter-, and multinational in its purview, how do we account for the lack of foreign language instruction in American studies training and education? In implementing their American studies program at Indiana University, Cohn and Guterl encouraged their students to work in multiple languages as they studied the Americas, but they recognized this multilingual dimension as a challenge to the program. Gruesz's *Ambassadors of Culture* currently stands as a primary example of the multilingual work produced from this sort of renewed attention to language. In her preface, she explains her decision to provide original Spanish quotations, followed by their “deliberately unpolished” English translations (xvi). The point of this approach is to challenge Anglophone readers and Americanists to grapple seriously with Spanish as a central literary language, not just of the hemisphere, but of the United States itself. In this same vein, Emory Elliott, in his 2007 ASA Presidential Address, emphasizes multilingualism as

a necessity for the future of American studies: “Not only is it self-focused and offensive to assume that everyone else must speak English, but to be unable to converse with others in another language is to lose in translation more than one can ever know” (18-19). Indeed, the question of language has not been lost on Americanists looking towards a transnational future. But despite their efforts to confront the question of multilingualism, American studies remains overwhelmingly monolingual in its institutional programs, conferences, and publications.

The persistence of monolingualism in an increasingly multi- and transnational field perhaps gestures towards a more overarching challenge to transnational American studies—that of its imperialist undertones. While many scholars of transnational studies have been engaging with literatures in languages other than English, critics have been quick to note that the field, as Hester Blum puts it, “can replicate structures of imperial possession on intellectual and cultural levels” (749). Aptly confronting this challenge in her essay, “Inter-American studies or Imperial American studies?”—published, notably, in *Comparative American Studies*—Sophia McClennan suggests that hemispheric, or “inter-American” studies, might constitute “the latest variation on the Monroe Doctrine of patronizing Latin America” (394). She points out that the hemispheric turn in American studies might resemble, or even become, an imperial threat to Latin American studies—an “overt invasion of the rich Latin American canon” (402). McClennan’s comments point out that even as empire studies has enjoyed a significant uptake in the last decades—as evidenced by collections like Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease’s *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993) and essays like Susan Gillman’s “The New, Newest Thing: Have American Studies Gone Imperial?” (2005)—the potential of hemispheric American studies to become a monolingual and imperialist trend looms large.

While scholars are aware of these dangers, they struggle to define a methodology that addresses these issues of historical amnesia, monolingualism, and the politics and ethics of citation—when, where, and whose scholarship to cite in transnational American work. In a recent roundtable section in the *Journal of American Studies*, scholars have debated these issues, showing the contrast between comparative and transnational approaches. In her review of Paul Giles’s *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (2011), Gruesz demonstrates the continuing urgency and relevance of these debates for Americanists venturing outside of a nation-based frame. Giles’s book aims to reconceive the geographical and temporal frameworks of Ameri-



can literary studies, reading broadly across texts, time periods, and critical conversations. Gruesz takes Giles to task on his monolingual archive of texts, his neglect of previous Latin Americanist and hemispheric American scholarship, and, significantly, his U.S.-focused perspective, even as he seeks to think American literature as a global phenomenon. She critiques Giles's argument that Jose Martí's writings "displace" American from north to south. Here, she claims that Giles assumes a U.S. perspective for examining the transnational American literary terrain: "it is only a US reader who would feel 'displaced' by Martí's use of 'América,' not the Latin American newspaper readers who first encountered his essays, or the many successor generations of Spanish readers since" (Blum et al. 751). Giles's work, according to Gruesz, remains defined by an Anglo-U.S. perspective, even as it claims to transgress a U.S. nation-based frame.

In the same roundtable, Giles's responds to this criticism, arguing that Gruesz's shortsightedness around issues of language distracts from the larger task of thinking beyond the nation. For Giles, this task is "not simply to accumulate new idioms" but to consider how these understudied texts and contexts impact traditionally-conceived U.S. national narratives (762). Put differently, Giles writes that "the separatist privileging of any given special interest, whether based on ethnic, linguistic or historical specialization, can induce a parochial myopia to the larger contours of the Americanist field" (762). These words, along with Gruesz's sharp critique of Giles's book, highlight the issue of scope and scale for transnational American studies—that it risks, in Gruesz's view, oversimplifying literary, historical, and cultural traditions in the Americas, or, in Giles's view, becoming cripplingly "separatist" in its "linguistic or historical specialization."

The lively set of papers delivered at the NAAS conference demonstrated to us how scholars outside the U.S. are addressing these questions in ways that diverge from and converge with the conversations on our own turf, so to speak. The conference illuminated diverse conversations about locatedness, transnationality, and comparativism and innovative pathways through which scholars are addressing these complexities. As a whole, the NAAS conference could be seen as a case study of larger scholarly trends that have emerged within Scandinavian and U.S.-based transnational Americanist communities. Such trends, as they evidence key overlaps and differences between these communities, reveal a largely overlooked relationship between U.S.-based and Scandinavian Americanist scholarship. In short, they

signal opportunities for implementing transnational American studies not just in theory, but also in practice.

The conference's emphasis on Scandinavian-American relations offered us a fresh take on the local and global relationships driving American studies by challenging widely-held assumptions about what we mean when we speak of "transnational America." In light of the transnational turn, Americanists have been reconsidering their object of study through frameworks such as the hemisphere, the Atlantic, and the Caribbean; yet, these frameworks have often been limited to regions and nations contiguous to the U.S., meaning those nations that share an ocean or a border. For instance, scholars of U.S. imperialism have more recently attended to the relations between the U.S. and Mexico in U.S. history, literature, and culture. And, of course, connections between the U.S. and the United Kingdom have informed the majority of scholarship within transatlantic studies for years. Indeed, studies of *certain* nation-to-nation or region-to-nation relations have blossomed amidst the transnational turn and have come to characterize the stories we tell about a transnational American landscape. Regardless of the broadening frames of transnational American studies, these approaches, in focusing overwhelmingly on contiguous geographical entities, tend to obscure other sets of transnational relations that are equally ripe for analysis. The NAAS conference's emphasis on Scandinavian-American relations stepped outside of the expected scope of U.S.-based transnational American studies, locating unexpectedly intimate connections across physically distant regions. In so doing, it revealed the benefits of looking beyond the expected routes of U.S. scholarly inquiry to consider new geopolitical formations.

Featuring a plethora of scholarship on Scandinavian-American studies, the NAAS conference illuminated this already burgeoning, transnational, and self-aware scholarly corpus, one that challenges and reframes the geopolitical, institutional, and intellectual contours of transnational American studies. Presentations highlighted narratives of Scandinavian-American contact, emphasizing how U.S. local histories and public memory have been shaped by patterns of Scandinavian discovery and immigration. Perhaps the most enduring link between the U.S. and Scandinavia, the Viking discovery narrative, provided a framework for several scholars to reveal how Scandinavian immigrants and Americans have continuously deployed an alternate narrative of discovery to create and contest ethnic, racial, and cultural identity within the U.S. Meanwhile,

other scholars emphasized the Scandinavian history of specific intranational regions such as the U.S. Midwest, where Swedish pioneers and Native Americans interacted. Examining the exchange of ideas between the U.S. and Scandinavian writers, they also revealed the international, intellectual confluences between the U.S. and Scandinavia. Such studies illustrated that American studies has, in fact, always been an international discipline, one that has created connections across nations and formed part of intranational discussions. They therefore called attention to a relatively untapped scholarly vein within the U.S. academy.<sup>1</sup>

It may come as no surprise that U.S.-based scholarship has largely turned a blind eye to Scandinavian-American studies. Yet within Scandinavia, this vibrant field confronts histories of migration and cultural contact – histories lesser known to Americanists working from within the U.S. Founded in 1968, *American Studies in Scandinavia* stands as a venue for work focused on Scandinavian Americanist scholarship and U.S.-Scandinavian relations. In the past decade, the journal has included articles that identify unacknowledged sites of literary and intellectual exchange between the U.S. and Scandinavia. Moreover, it has attended to U.S.-Scandinavian institutional relationships in the history of higher education in Sweden. The 2008 section on “Transnational Strategies in Higher Education and Cultural Fields: The Case in the United States and Sweden in the 20th Century” provides a case in point, where authors Dag Blanck and Mikael Börjesson introduce a series of essays examining “the academic migration between the two countries” and their transnational scholarly practices (81, 88). The field of Scandinavian-American studies, in other words, combines scholarship with institutional awareness, encouraging work that is transnational in both theory and practice, work that stands as a model for U.S.-based Americanists wrestling with the professional parameters and intellectual paradigms governing the field.

In recent studies, new routes in Scandinavian-American studies have emerged within both Scandinavian and U.S.-based scholarly commu-

1 Angela Falk, “Contact Narratives about Swedish Pioneers and Native Americans in the Smoky Valley,” 26 May 2013; Ida Jahr, “‘When I think of America at night, no more sleep for me’: The inter-nationalism of Sigmund Skard,” 26 May 2013; Christopher M. Streba, “The ‘Viking’ Origins of Left Coast Politics: Scandinavians and San Francisco Labor, 1890-1934,” 25 May 2013; Jens Björk Andersson, “Drawing the Color Line – the making of whiteness in Swedish-American newspaper in the early 1880s,” 25 May 2013; Christa Holm Vogelius, “‘Our Viking Ancestors’: The Scandinavian ‘Discovery’ of America and US Literary History,” 24 May 2013.

nities. In the past few years, popular and scholarly histories alike have provided in-depth stories of transnational migration and community formation, such as Eric Dregni's *Vikings in the Attic* (2011) and Daron W. Olson's *Vikings across the Atlantic* (2013). Similar to Olson's book, the edited collection *Norwegians and Swedes in the United States* (2012) takes a transnational approach to Scandinavian-American studies and immigrant studies. Yet in its essays on inter-ethnic immigrant history, the volume avoids the "trans" in transnational insofar as it characterizes Norwegians and Swedes as "bordered groups" that become intimate in their mutual experience of Americanization, but that constitute a "dichotomy" rather than a "continuum" (Gabaccia," x-xi). Organized into four sections—context, culture, conflict, and community—the collection draws broad conclusions about the Norwegians and Swedes in the U.S., but also emphasizes the heterogeneous terrain of local and particular histories and sites of contact. Including work from scholars in the U.S., Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, and published at a U.S.-based press, this volume reflects the intellectual tenor and spirit of the NAAS conference, as it presented Scandinavian-American studies within a transnational, yet locally attentive, context.

As a general scholarly trend, Scandinavian-American studies is indeed beginning to enter the world of U.S.-based transnational American scholarship. Citing her early work at the University of Oslo as inspiration, Annette Kolodny excavates the impact of Nordic literatures—specifically the Vinland sagas—on narratives of Anglo-American discovery in her recent book *In Search of First Contact* (2012). In her analysis of these sagas, Kolodny also introduces Native stories of first contact that have long been unknown in the scholarly community, calling us to radically reconceptualize American literary and cultural history. Her book does not so much replace the Columbian narrative of discovery with a Viking-centered one, as it focuses on the vexed history of such narratives and the limitations of the concept of "first contact" in understanding colonial encounters. In the past year, the project received a laudatory review in the March 2014 issue of *American Quarterly* and has been the subject of an American Studies Association colloquy on early American studies. That this book has been well received in the past few years suggests the major payoffs of foregrounding Scandinavian histories in transnational American scholarship. Like the NAAS scholars focused on myths and narratives of Viking discovery, Kolodny recognizes the benefit of looking outside the usual geographic routes of

American studies to foreground an innovative paradigm for transnational Americanist scholarship – one that goes beyond the nation’s contiguous spaces and considers overlooked sites of transnational histories, cultures, and crossings.

While the NAAS conference highlighted the rich possibilities of Scandinavian-American studies and called us to push outside the dominant geopolitical heuristics of transnational American studies, the cluster of papers analyzing the evolving relationship between Asia and the U.S. overlapped with scholarly trends within the U.S. academy and highlighted the methodological problems that trouble both U.S. and Scandinavian American studies scholarly communities. Like the Scandinavian-American current at the conference, the papers on Asia sought to recover and highlight the diverse histories, voices, and texts through which the U.S. has engaged with other nations and regions. These presentations also underscored the importance of seeking out new directions for longer-standing transnational paradigms – in this case, those regarding the Pacific and Asia. This being said, we realize that to speak of “Asia” as if it is some monolithic, homogenous structure is a generalization that scholars of Asian American studies have trenchantly critiqued over the last decade. In fact, as Eric Hayot reminds us, recent transnational scholarship arising from the field of Asian American studies as well as transpacific, Asian diaspora, and U.S. empire studies aims to dispel this very assumption by recognizing many different “Asias” – nationalities, languages, and voices – that drive these fields of study. The tendency to seek connections with “Asia” or even specific nations like China without a methodological awareness of their immense diversity can easily bolster a fixed idea of Asia and, in so doing, encourage approaches that posit “Asia” as “a revelation about the nature of the United States, or Americanness, so that the rest of the world becomes interesting only when it says something about us” (Hayot 910). Instead, as Hayot argues, transnational approaches should strive to attend to the ways in which the diverse histories, literatures, and languages of Asia “interpenetrate and destabilize” “situations that have nothing to do with the United States” (910).

The discussions at the NAAS conference revealed the diverse ways in which these debates are playing out in American studies writ large. Presentations examined broad narratives that tracked, for example, overlaps between China’s and the U.S.’s rise to global modernity, as well as more historically focused instances of conflict between “Asia” and America, such as the disintegration, guilt, and historical amnesia surrounding post-WWII

Japanese immigrants in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> Such scholarship illustrated that conflicts between American studies and Asian American studies continue to produce both productive and limiting tensions. Though contemporary Americanist work on Asia and Asian America aims to challenge nationalist paradigms, it often reproduces the same limitations and assumptions that attend those paradigms. This tendency is a long-standing problem that arises from the vexed location of Asian American studies within American studies, a discursive position that, as Sucheta Masumdar notably argues, often obscures the many transnational directions of Asian American studies (30).

The NAAS conference highlighted how this tension continues within the transnational turn in both the U.S. academy and abroad: Americanist scholars of Asia and Asian America, at times, reify national boundaries and their accompanying monolithic and often essentialist identity categories, even as they set out to transgress and deconstruct them. In particular, conference presentations called attention to how this reification can follow with the use of comparative frameworks. Though such approaches can productively highlight moments of sameness between, for instance, China and the U.S., they also run the risk of flattening historical and cultural specificities and ignoring what Lisa Lowe has importantly described as the “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity” that constitutes Asian America (66). Moreover, in attempting to articulate the possibilities of such comparisons, these approaches can easily reinscribe a particular U.S. vantage point within the developing field of U.S.-Asian studies, one that elides the thorny tensions between nations in favor of a sunnier narrative of broadly transnational, yet U.S.-centered, historical progress. Such approaches illustrate that, just as comparative and transnational work in American studies can spark innovative debate and inspire us to sincerely ask, as Levander does, “where is American literature?,” it can also offer an easy answer: “in America, of course.”

NAAS scholars, much like U.S. scholars, demonstrated the ways in which transnational approaches also have the capacity to move past monolithic narratives, recognize the “*undecidability* of identity,” and contribute to “the construction of an Asian American studies geared specifically

2 Russell Duncan, “Defying History: Old Man West and the Young Chinese Cinderella,” 24 May 2013; Lena Ahlin, “‘And we knew it would only be a matter of time until all traces of us were gone’: Julie Otsuka and Japanese American incarceration during World War II,” 25 May 2013; Clara Juncker, “The West in Asia/Asia in the West: Ha Jin’s *Nanjing Requiem* (2012),” 25 May 2013.

toward undermining racial essentialism” (Chuh 14). Rather than smooth over differences, transnational scholarship on U.S.-Asia connections can excavate moments of systematic oppression, racial paranoia, and historical repression to illuminate the multidirectional narratives and cultural specificities of U.S. interactions with Asia(s). This type of work aligns with more recent Asian Americanist scholarship that draws upon theories of transnationalism and postcolonial studies, such as Colleen Lye’s *America’s Asia* (2005)—which examines dominant U.S. representations of Asia and Asian America to theorize the connections between economics and the “Asiatic racial form.” Moving beyond implicitly transnational frameworks like Lye’s, monographs like Yunte Huang’s *Transpacific Imaginations* (2007) and collections such as *Transnational Asian American Literature* (2005) take transnationalism as the critical site from which to launch studies of Asian America and rethink “ethnicity as at least partly an effect of international relations” (Hayot 908). In addition, scholarly works like John Eperjesi’s *The Imperialist Imaginary* (2005) analyze connections between the U.S. and specific Asian nations during moments of international, imperial, and colonial crises to challenge more dominant historical narratives. In participating in these trends, scholars at the NAAS conference illustrated how the tensions governing Asian American studies transcend the national specificities of scholarly practice. Their presentations similarly showed how scholarship on Asia epitomizes the advantages and problems of the transnational turn in the U.S. and beyond: it has the capacity to both challenge cultural and racial essentialism and reproduce these narratives.

Just as the focus on Asia at the NAAS conference reflected a shared vein of transnational American scholarship, one that evidences a continuing tension between nation and transnation as well as overlapping scholarly conversations between U.S. and Scandinavian scholars, so too did the papers exploring transnational families. In general, Americanist scholarship on the family has focused on the construction of U.S. nation and citizenship. It has interrogated the civic and cultural roles of the mother, child, and father in the construction of national, racial, and gendered identity. Productive paradigms like the Republican mother have anchored numerous studies of domesticity, the nuclear family, and U.S. nation-making. Since the 1990s, works like Russ Castronovo’s *Fathering the Nation* (1996), Shirley Samuels’ *Romances of the Republic* (1996), and Amy Kaplan’s influential essay “Manifest Domesticity” (1998) have explored how the histories of slavery and empire trouble the paradigm of the family in U.S. nation-making.

Meanwhile, scholars of sexuality have critiqued the heteronormative character of U.S. citizenship, showing how citizenship is defined through a heterosexual, nuclear-familial paradigm. As part of this move, Lauren Berlant argues in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997) that “a nation made for adult citizens has been replaced by one imagined for fetuses and children,” a claim that Lee Edelman picks up in *No Future* (2004) (1). Following from these earlier studies, a more recent wave of Americanist scholarship concentrates on the figure of the child—as a citizen-in-training, a figure central to developing white supremacy as a tenant of liberal democracy, or, in the case of adoption, one who experiences fresh starts free from genealogical restraints. Notable studies like Levander’s *Cradle of Liberty* (2006) and Carol J. Singley’s *Adopting America* (2011) consider the child as an indicator of national and racial identity. Although Americanist scholarship has largely understood the child and, more broadly, the family as a vehicle for nation-building and citizenship, work on the family is becoming increasingly transnational, as some of the more recent scholarship shows.

The work presented at the NAAS conference robustly contributed to this critical conversation, locating the family squarely within a transnational and contemporary framework and interrogating related issues of transnational adoption, reproductive technology, and citizenship.<sup>3</sup> These papers raised the familiar questions of nation and race in the context of contemporary and global issues such as the representation of the orphan experience, the process of surrogacy, and transnational adoption narratives. They discussed the representation of the multiracial family within the U.S. nation, delineating the adoptee’s process of national and cultural assimilation through the affective structure of the family. Like much U.S.-based scholarship, the work at the NAAS conference highlighted the family as an increasingly multi- and transnational structure in contemporary American literature, one that extends from the U.S. to Asia and considerably broadens the geographical context for examining the family in American studies.

While scholars have not entirely abandoned the nation when it comes to family studies, the NAAS conference called attention to a developing

3 Pirjo Ahokas, “Challenging the Color-Blind American Dream: Transnational Adoption in Three Selected Contemporary Novels,” 26 May 2013; Jenny Bonnevier, “Born in the USA: Representations of Reproductive Technology and the Politics of Family,” 25 May 2013; Abby Goode, “Infertile America: (Counter) currents of Nationalist-Natalist Rhetoric,” 25 May 2013; Helena Wahlström, “Making Home, Building Kinship: Contemporary Orphan Stories,” 25 May 2013.



track of family studies within Americanist scholarship that is beginning to confront the nation-based boundaries of the field. Elizabeth Kella's essay, "Regeneration through Kinship: Indian 'Orphans' Make Home in Works by Linda Hogan and Leslie Marmon Silko" (2012) challenges the national contours of orphanhood and family by analyzing the intersections of indigeneity and Native kinship networks. Kella's *Making Home* (2014), co-authored with Maria Holmgren Troy and Helena Wahlström, addresses orphanhood and kinship on a broader literary scale; this work critiques the limits of national and familial belonging just as much as it observes the limits of American literary history. Meanwhile, Americanists have begun to tackle explicitly transnational contexts of adoption. Pirjo Ahokas, for instance, links transnational adoption to what she describes as the "Color-Blind American Dream," which operates through a "denial of racial difference" (111). Whether disrupting firmly entrenched assumptions about nation, race, and family or analyzing explicitly transnational family relations, Americanist scholarship on family and kinship is challenging the traditional and nation-based parameters of the field.

The NAAS conference's focus on the family ventured into the realms of kinship as well as science and technology studies, foregrounding emerging lines of Americanist scholarship focused on reproductive technology that, in some cases, requires transnational frameworks. Rather than take an explicitly transnational approach, however, this scholarly track interrogates how popular representations of reproductive technology reinforce conceptions of the U.S. family and national identity, often bolstering racial and gender hierarchies. Such work raises difficult questions about U.S. reproductive politics, choice, and the role of race and class in biotechnology. It also puts pressure on disciplinary boundaries, as feminist science and literary scholars such as Susan Squier have done since the 1990s. This (re)turn towards reproduction effectively opens up potentially interdisciplinary opportunities that fuse current work on reproductive technology and politics with the transnational questions guiding American literary studies today.

Although these three foci of Scandinavian-American relations, U.S.-Asia connections, and family and reproduction studies by no means encompass the diversity of discussions at the NAAS conference, or the rich field of American studies in Scandinavia overall, they exemplify some of the central strands of debate currently driving American studies. The conference's emphasis on Scandinavian-American relations highlighted how the trans-

national turn has privileged specific frameworks and the papers on Asia reminded us about the continued thorniness of practicing transnational American studies from U.S.-based and Scandinavian perspectives alike. On a slightly different note, the papers on the family revealed the benefits of both transnational and nation-based methodologies in interrogating the dynamics of race, class, and gender. They not only highlighted overlapping trends of study, but they also opened up new possibilities for U.S.-Scandinavian collaboration.

By illuminating new pathways as well as exemplifying continuing strands of transnational American studies, these three foci helped us to recognize the continuing borders that bind our field's practice. The various disparities and overlaps between U.S.-based and Scandinavian scholarship have urged us to explore why the practices of certain fields (Asian American studies in this instance) and not others (Scandinavian-American studies) more readily transcend nation-based scholarly communities. Despite our willingness to move methodologically, thematically, and physically beyond U.S. borders within our own research, our trip to Sweden hit home – metaphorically and geographically – the locatedness of American studies' practices. Of course, scholarly exchange programs, international journals, and conferences like the NAAS conference work to transgress those boundaries. Yet, if our late night fries at the scenic Karlstad Burger King taught us anything, it is that American studies, even as it is becoming transnational in theory, has not become fully international in practice. While the collaborations between specific nation-based scholarly communities have increased significantly in past decades, these forward steps only go so far; the practice of American studies continues to move in a relatively limited number of directions. Though increasingly global, it remains hemmed in by a diversity of institutional, economic, linguistic, and national boundaries. It has the potential to become even more innovative in its transnational approaches, particularly through dialogues across national scholarly communities.

The NAAS conference asked us to imagine what an American studies founded on a more integrated vision of transnational practices would look like and how it would function in a world where national borders, despite all the hoopla about their permeability, still matter. In attending the NAAS conference, we have attempted to move in this direction, towards cross-national scholarly conversations that can broaden, destabilize, and reorient our often geographically-defined vantage points. Scholarship that reaches

across national boundaries can only serve to enhance and develop a not-yet-fully transnational American studies, and, in the process, produce innovative new research that not only reveals the transnational character of U.S. culture, but also considers new forms of scholarly communication and education. What would/could American studies look like if, for instance, more graduate seminars or scholarly reading groups were transnational – if students and professors at American universities weekly shared their discussion space with students and professors at Karlstad University via Skype? What would happen, for example, if two seminars together created an American Studies blog that stimulated further dialogue between national scholarly communities and opened these discussions to the public? In other words, what new ideas, methodologies, and concepts would appear if the practitioners of American studies more fully participated in the transnational circuits they propose to study? What are the consequences, limitations, and gains of making our scholarly practices and not just our scholarly frameworks “go global”? As our brief time in Karlstad showed us, such discussions between American studies programs, associations, and journals across nations can help to build a methodology founded on transnational practices – one that will not only consider the transnational dimensions of U.S. culture, but also create disciplinary, institutional, and intellectual bridges between and beyond nations.

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