



TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE IN AMERICA

Where Do We Stand Twenty Years after Fishkin's Transnational Turn?

In 2004, the then-president of the American Studies Association, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, gave a presidential address titled "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies." In it, she explored the numerous ways that adopting a transnational perspective could benefit American studies. Among other things, she urgently pointed out that

[a]t a time when American foreign policy is marked by nationalism, arrogance, and Manichean oversimplification, the field of American studies is an increasingly important site of knowledge marked by a very different set of assumptions—a place where borders both within and outside the nation are interrogated and studied, rather than reified and reinforced. (Fishkin 20)

As Donald Trump's second presidential term unfolds, it is becoming increasingly clear that this administration's policy, both foreign and domestic, not only relies heavily on a nationalistic vision characterized by arrogance and oversimplification, but has also led to what Fishkin, in her contribution to this special issue, succinctly

describes as a "tsunami of bigotry, ignorance, ambition, and sheer malevolence that threatens all that we hold dear" (25). Outside the US, this tsunami has already caused a "visible erosion of US credibility—not just as a political actor, but as a symbolic anchor" (Reimer 7). Against such a backdrop, it has become even more pertinent to interrogate the concept of the nation state, its structures, borders, premises and promises. This is even more the case if we consider the anti-immigration sentiment and the various calls to "close the borders" that have become prominent and loud not only in America, but also in other anglophone countries, as well as across Europe. The present special issue thus aims to make its contribution by drawing on both Fishkin's transnational turn and its legacies and the more recent concept of transnational literature. Paul Jay sees transnational literature as "a particular type of literature [. . .] dealing, collectively, with a set of issues and themes associated with decolonization, globalization, postmodernity, and technology. [. . . T]ransnational literature is about the variety of forms of transnational experience produced by the convergence of these forces" (51). This kind of literature thematizes precisely such subjects as migration,

displacement, and border fluidity (52). The thematization of these subjects in transnational literature, then, becomes the starting point for this issue's examination of where the transnational in American literary studies stands today.

The Transnational, Literary Studies, and American Studies

Rich in meaning and plasticity, the concept of the *transnational* lends itself to multiple and nuanced interpretations in a variety of fields. This term's beginnings have been traced to Edward Sapir's article "Culture, Genuine and Spurious" (1924), where it was used for the purpose of "reflect[ing] on the economic and political processes that framed the cultural changes of his era" (Besserer 111). Yet in a particularly American context, the terms *trans-national* and *trans-nationality* already appeared in 1916 in an essay by Randolph Bourne, who used them to describe America as a "federation of cultures" (Bourne 5). Despite having already appeared in the early twentieth century, the notion of the transnational first gained significant prominence as late as the 1990s, partially spurred by the 1994 publication of the book *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* by Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc (Mügge 109). This book challenges the notions of citizenship and nationhood by exploring the transnational existence of migrants, including their cross-border activities and communities. By 1999, the term had already accumulated numerous uses categorized by the anthropologist Steven Vertovec in his article "Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism." He recognizes six categories of use—as social morphology, type of consciousness, mode of cultural reproduction, avenue of capital, site of political engagement, and (re)construction of "place" or locality (449–55). The concept of the

transnational has since also been widely discussed in literary and cultural studies. Some notable examples include Peter Hitchcock's *Imaginary States: Studies in Cultural Transnationalism* (2003) and *The Long Space: Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form* (2010), which together examine the relationship between cultural transnationalism, postcolonialism, and commodity circulation; Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih's anthology *Minor Transnationalism* (2005), in which a number of contributors re-examine the concept of minority cultural formations and their relationship to the binary modes of assimilation and/or opposition to the majority culture; Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani's anthology *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism* (2013), which examines the relationship between the two titular concepts from numerous vantage points; and Dagmar Vandebosch and Theo D'Haen's anthology *Literary Transnationalism(s)* (2018), which discusses the concept of world literature in relation to the transnational and takes up the various ways in which literature moves beyond borders, including translation, adaptation, and intertextual referencing. While in no way exhaustive, the above overview aims to showcase the multiple meanings that the notion of the transnational has had, ranging from migrants' transnational ties to cross-border commodity creation and circulation to the cultural objects and formations that surpass the national either by the virtue of their production, circulation, themes, aesthetics or all of the above. In this special issue, the concept of the transnational is understood as the product of an ongoing scholarly conversation about its various facets. Like Fishkin's address, the issue is thus meant to open up rather than limit the broad contours of the transnational in American studies and its implications.

The primary arena of investigation for this issue is the question of the transnational particularly as it has been understood in the literary academic domain. Therefore I wish to note here two

pieces of scholarship in particular: Kai Wiegandt's anthology *The Transnational In Literary Studies: Potential and Limitations of a Concept* (2020) and Paul Jay's monograph *Transnational Literature: The Basics* (2021). Drawing on Verovec's article, the introduction to Wiegandt's anthology offers a useful overview of the ways the concept of the transnational has been used in literary studies in relation to identity, theme, aesthetics, reception, marketing, and critical perspective. Simultaneously, it attempts a delineation of the transnational against "rival terms" such as the postcolonial, the cosmopolitan, and world literature. Of course such a delineation can never be complete since there are always significant overlaps between these various categories. Yet discussions such as Wiegandt's create a meaningful entry point into transnational literary studies as a field that can often seem overly complicated and unruly. The same applies to Jay's monograph, whose entire first part discusses the various facets of the transnational, transnational literature, and how this kind of literature overlaps, interacts with, and in some cases subverts existing categories such as diaspora studies, globalization studies, border studies, and the like. Important to note in the context of this book is its dedication to "explor[ing] the rise of transnational literature as *both* a field of study and a kind of literature, stressing throughout the symbiotic relationship between the two" (Jay 4). Jay here sees transnational literature not as a genre in the traditional sense, but rather as a *kind* of contemporary literary production that remains in constant dialogue with transnational literary studies, forming a "reciprocal and co-constitutive relationship. What counts as transnational literature is constantly—and simultaneously—being worked out among writers, reviewers, and readers in the public sphere, and by critics and scholars in the academy" (Jay 23). In other words, transnational perspectives, scholarship, and literature exist in a close relationship with each other, shaping and supporting each

other along the way. It is this kind of approach to the transnational, and to transnational literature, that this special issue takes, informed on the one hand by Fishkin's transnational turn and, on the other, by texts that can be seen as pertaining to the fast-growing body of transnational literature.

When it comes to American Studies more specifically, Shelley Fisher Fishkin was not the first to speak of transnationalism or of a transnational turn. However, her address did mark a significant turning point in the way the field of American Studies was being conceptualized by its own practitioners. Not everyone agreed with the points made in the address. In fact, the transnational turn has been criticized for, among other things, potentially glossing over the neoliberal component of transnational flows, inadvertently reinforcing American exceptionalism (albeit from a new vantage point), and being used as a kind of American rejuvenation project (see e.g., Fluck). Yet the impact of the address has certainly been significant enough to warrant "taking stock" of its aftermath twenty years later in the context of this special issue. In fact, Fishkin's address has shown itself to be a particularly suitable and productive scholarly through line for the issue for two additional reasons. Firstly, the address is informed by a profound understanding of both the history of American studies and the numerous meanings of the notion of the transnational—understandings which retain their validity despite the more recent developments in the term's interpretations and uses. And secondly, it calls for devoting more attention to American studies scholarship produced outside the US, which is what this special issue also wishes to highlight. Fishkin's invaluable contribution to this issue, "Transnational American Studies: The Last Twenty Years," highlights two projects in which she herself has participated—the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* and the "Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project" at Stanford—and which testify to the

importance of such transnational collaborations. These two major scholarly undertakings would have been impossible without the participation of numerous non-US-based American Studies scholars. To borrow her words once again, “the worry that it would be boring to talk with colleagues from around the world [is] simply dumbfounding—and absurd” (23). As another illustration of Fishkin’s point, it is worth pointing out two anthologies which were published as a result of collaboration between US-based and non-US-based scholars. These works, which found publication in the years between Fishkin’s address and this special issue, are part of *Re-Mapping the Transnational: A Dartmouth Series in American Studies*, edited by Donald E. Pease, and both have been significant in my own work on transnational literature and aesthetics. These two collections, in one way or another, center on the “transnational turn” in American studies primarily in connection with literature, and by their very nature speak in favor of Fishkin’s call for more visibility of non-US-based American Studies scholars and scholarship—a call to which this issue strives to respond.

The first one is titled *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies* and was edited by Winfried Fluck, Donald E. Pease and John Carlos Rowe and published in 2011. Produced as the result of three transatlantic conferences held between October 2006 and October 2009 at the University of Southern California (2006), the Free University, Potsdam University, and Humboldt University in Berlin (2008), and Dartmouth College (2009), this anthology takes up the transnational turn in American Studies from a German vantage point and endeavors to remedy the observation that “transnational Americanists had not as yet added a coherent order of intelligibility to the field” (Fluck et al. 13). Ultimately the book mounts a dialogue that is both critical of the more traditional exceptionalist premises of American studies *and* aware of the potential limitations of an anti-exceptionalist stance. The

second anthology was edited by Laura Bieger, Ramón Saldivar, and Johannes Voelz and titled *The Imaginary and Its Worlds: American Studies After the Transnational Turn* (2013). This book takes what I consider to be a very inspiring approach as it re-examines the concept of the imaginary in light of the changes brought on by the transnational turn rather than re-mapping the transnational turn directly. This collection offers a fresh look at the transnational turn that has been mapped and re-mapped numerous times since Fishkin’s presidential address. It is my hope that this special issue will offer a likewise inspiring and thought-provoking perspective on the aftermath of the transnational turn through its almost exclusive focus on post-millennial texts that thematize transnational experience(s) in America and its call for creative scholarly approaches to the various facets of transnationality that they depict and/or embody.

In this context, I would also like to note the series *Routledge Transnational Perspectives on American Literature*, edited by Susan Castillo, which has also done some work of the kind this special issue aspires to. The series includes books such as the anthology *Ethnic Literatures and Transnationalism: Critical Imaginaries for a Global Age* (2015), edited by Aparajita Nanda, which focuses on the mutual influences of transnationalism, literary studies, and ethnic studies in the study of literature “defined in its broadest sense of being a documentation of culture” (Nanda), and *Ambivalent Transnational Belonging in American Literature* (2021) by Silvia Schultermandl, which rests on a dialogue between the transnational and the affective and warns against seeing the transnational as straightforwardly subversive. What is striking is that neither of these books takes its transnational perspective for granted. *Ambivalent Transnational Belonging* in particular strives to navigate the complex spaces between the usefulness of the transnational as a lens in American literary studies and the dangers of not

taking the criticism leveraged at the concept seriously.

The Essays in this Volume

Here I would like to return to the connections and conversations between Fishkin's address and the essays in this special issue. The address points out a number of paths down which the transnational turn could lead American studies. As we will see, the essays in this issue speak to many of these points, but also to what Fishkin is writing today. In her contribution to this special issue, Fishkin revisits four of the points made in the address, responding to some of the criticism she received at the time: that the transnational turn would marginalize Native American Studies; that it would reinforce the nation rather than displacing it from a position of centrality and prominence; that her call to go beyond English-language material was not realistic given the inclinations of the current student body; and that including the voices of non-US-based scholars would be useless and boring. She goes on to show how each of the concerns has since proven to be unfounded, and thus provides a cross section of sorts of the state of transnational American Studies twenty years later. Let us then start from this end of the discussion, and with the point about the nation and its borders in particular, since the scholarship in this special issue largely supports Fishkin's claim that a transnational perspective has not reified the two, but rather continued decentering them (16).

In this context, the essays by Simar Bhasin and Henriette Rørdal contend with continued destabilization of the notions of citizenship and/or the American dream through their analyses of contemporary aesthetic representations of a precarious transnational existence. Bhasin's essay discusses two of Jonathan Escoffery's short stories—"In Flux" and "Independent Living"—from his 2022 collection *If I Survive You*. She argues

that the autofictional mode and the interlinked short story genre as employed by Escoffery reflect a thematic deterritorialization and transnational precarity which arguably ruptures the borders of American literary fiction and (re)interrogates the myth of America as "a land where migrant dreams can come true" (43). Additionally, her essay considers the way that Escoffery's texts comment on the histories behind the contemporary migration flows from the Global South to the Global North. As such, it also speaks to multiple points made by Fishkin in her original address regarding global flows and crossroads and their histories, as well as the dynamics of the US as a territory, a population, and a culture subject to the effects and consequences of these flows (Fishkin 22–32). To put it more succinctly, Bhasin's essay studies the work of an author who couples the history of his family's migration from Jamaica to the US with the "what-if" affordances of the autofictional form to explore what it means to be a second-generation immigrant of color and an author in today's America. The complexity that arises from these explorations enriches our knowledge of what American literary fiction is and can be at the same time as it validates some of Fishkin's predictions for the transnational turn.

Rørdal takes a somewhat different approach as she explores Guy Standing's concept of the precariat to discuss the crumbling of the American dream for the protagonist of Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* (2007). Rørdal argues that Sepha (the protagonist) finds himself in a "perpetual state of becoming" as he strives toward two mutually entangled but equally unachievable futures—that of national belonging and that of financial security. What then emerges are "the outlines of a particular aesthetics in which liminal spaces force us to suspend, revise, and re-think old lines of thought" (59). Such a rethinking includes a reassessment of the relationship between migration and social mobility, but also a renegotiation of

the relationship between American Studies, the concept of American literature, and the concerns of transnational literature produced in America. Rørdal's essay particularly relates to Fishkin's points about the US as a nation state that is always at a crossroads of cultures (Fishkin 43) and about the effects and consequences of global flows of people, capital, and commodities (Fishkin 24). This relationship can be seen in the way the essay examines the aesthetic representation of the entanglements of a state of cultural and national liminality with the overall trend toward class-related and economic precarity. Whether or not the increasing levels of precarity and the simultaneously declining opportunities for social mobility for the average American worker can be tied to the global flows of goods and capital, the fact remains that the status of the migrant, whose mobility is intertwined with these global flows, in large part depends precisely on their place in the hierarchies of the current capitalist system. In this context, Rørdal's essay explores precisely the way Mengestu aestheticizes the dually precarious position of working-class migrants.

While Bhasin and Rørdal largely focus on the dynamics of a transnational existence in America, David Siglos's essay studies the phenomenon of sudden death among Filipino men known as *bangungot*, its resistance to the usual premises of diagnostic narratives, and its power to disrupt imperial and heteronormative ways of seeing. Through his analysis of R. Zamora Linmark's 2011 novel *Leche* and the experiences of its Filipino American protagonist, along with his own encounters with the phenomenon, Siglos offers a kind of "view from *el otro lado*" (Fishkin 23) and mounts a literary and cultural critique of the lingering impacts of American imperialism on Filipinos and Filipino Americans. The essay's methodological approach, which weaves together personal anecdotes and scholarship, mirrors its critique of imperialism and outlines an epistemic approach based on Filipino perspectives that

can bring more nuance to post-transnational-turn American Studies scholarship. In this way, Siglos's essay also responds to an overarching question that Fishkin posed in her address: "What would the field of American studies look like if the transnational rather than the national were at its center?" (Fishkin 21) through its endeavor to decenter the ways of knowing that still dominate American Studies.

The final essay of the issue is by Elina Siltanen and takes up the various ways in which the other-than-human, both animate and inanimate, disrupts the border regimes of the Mexican-American border in Lorna Dee Cervantes's poetry collections *Emplumada* (1981) and *Sueño* (2013). She connects the movements of the other-than-human to posthumanist ideas, which in turn creates an alternative vision in which, perhaps paradoxically, even borders themselves move in ways that the border regimes of nation states attempt to prevent humans from doing. In exploring the borderlands between Mexico and the US from the perspective of the other-than-human, Siltanen expands upon the line of thinking that Fishkin's address seems to have been inspired by, dedicated as it was to Gloria Anzaldúa, "a brilliant theorist of the arbitrariness of borders and the pain that they inflict, of the harsh realities of internal colonization, and of the challenges and delights of embracing multiple psychic locations" (Fishkin 21). In the present moment, marked by an increased hostility towards migrants and immigrants in both the US and the rest of the world, as well as by the mass deportations being conducted by the US, it has become even more important to place the arbitrariness of borders in the spotlight, which is precisely what Siltanen does.

Together, the essays of which this special issue is composed speak not only to the ongoing decentering of the American nation and its borders, but also to the vitality and importance of American Studies scholarship conducted both

within and outside the US: the six participating scholars, including myself, are based in four different countries—India, Norway, Finland, and the US—and three continents, and as such bring in a significant range of perspectives. We hope that readers will find this issue as engaging to read as it was rewarding to develop.

Tijana Przulj
University of Bergen

20 November 2025

A Note on Funding

This special issue was developed with a contribution from the L. Meltzer University Fund (L. Meltzers Høyskolefond/L. Meltzers Universitetsstiftelse).

Works Cited

- Basch, Linda, et al. *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States*. Gordon and Breach, 1994.
- Besserer, Federico. "Transnational Studies Twenty Years Later: A Story of Encounters and Dis-Encounters." *Etnográfica*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2018, pp. 109-30. <https://doi.org/10.4000/etnografica.5172>.
- Bieger, Laura, et al., editors. *The Imaginary and Its Worlds: American Studies After the Transnational Turn*. Dartmouth College Press, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1349/ddlp.3685>.
- Bourne, Randolph. "Transnational America." *Atlantic Monthly*, 118, July 1916, pp. 86-97. <https://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/rban-nis1/AIH19th/Bourne.html>.
- Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004." *American Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2005, pp. 17-57. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2005.0004>.
- Fluck, Winfried. "A New Beginning? Transnationalisms." *New Literary History*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2011, pp. 365-84. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2011.0030>.
- Fluck, Winfried, et al., editors. *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies*. University Press of New England, 2011.
- Hitchcock, Peter. *Imaginary States: Studies in Cultural Transnationalism*. University of Illinois Press, 2003.
- . *The Long Space: Transnationalism and Post-colonial Form*. Stanford University Press, 2010.
- Lionnet, Françoise, and Shu-mei Shih, editors. *Minor Transnationalism*. Duke University Press, 2005. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822386643>.
- Mügge, Liza. "Transnationalism as a Research Paradigm and Its Relevance for Integration." *Integration Processes and Policies in Europe: Contexts, Levels and Actors*, edited by Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas and Rinus Penninx. Springer International Publishing, 2016, pp. 109-25. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-21674-4_7.
- Nanda, Aparajita. *Ethnic Literatures and Transnationalism: Critical Imaginaries for a Global Age*. Routledge, 2015.
- Quayson, Ato, and Girish Daswani, editors. *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118320792>.
- Reimer, Jennifer A. "History's Shadow, Baldwin's Mirror, and the Long Undoing of American Innocence." *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2025, pp. 5-14. <https://doi.org/10.5070/T8.50553>.
- Sapir, Edward. "Culture, Genuine and Spurious." *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1924, pp. 401-29. <https://doi.org/10.1086/213616>.
- Schultermandl, Silvia. *Ambivalent Transnational Belonging in American Literature*. Routledge, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003129844>.

Vandebosch, Dagmar, and Theo D'haen, editors. *Literary Transnationalism(s)*. Brill, 2018.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004370869>.

Vertovec, Steven. "Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1999, pp. 447-62.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/014198799329558>.

Wiegandt, Kai, editor. *The Transnational in Literary Studies: Potential and Limitations of a Concept*. De Gruyter, 2020.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110688726>.