



TRANSNATIONAL AMERICAN STUDIES

The Last Twenty Years

The task I've taken on in this article is an impossible one. So much has happened in the field of transnational American Studies over the last twenty years that I can touch only the surface in the space I have here. But I welcome the opportunity to reflect on a handful of the many intriguing developments that the last two decades have produced.

Let me begin by saying what this essay will *not* do. I will not offer a totalizing theory of what transnational American Studies is or ought to be, or of what it is not. It's too soon for that. Twenty years may sound like a long time, but it really isn't. The field of American Studies itself is nearly a century old. If American Studies itself is almost a centenarian, the phenomenon that I called "the transnational turn in American studies" in 2004—which just recently passed its twentieth birthday—is, in many ways, still a mere teenager. Like all teenagers, it has many moods. It can be passionate, energetic and engaged; it can also be cynical, blasé, and detached. It can be omnivorous and it can be a very picky eater. Like all teenagers, it is a work in progress—defined as much by its unrealized aspirations as by its achievements. It wants to be smarter, more just, and more sensitive than its parents, wary of the prospect of replicating their blind spots and

myopia. And, like all teenagers, it is embroiled in a perpetual crisis of identity, plagued by constant self-doubt, and prone to endless questioning. What will it be when it grows up? We'll have to wait and see.

As I reviewed some of the fascinating and disparate works of scholarship that have come into being over the last two decades, I found myself recalling my favorite quote from Jorge Luis Borges:

A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face. (327)

When the field of transnational American Studies is as old as American Studies is now, the array of texts its scholars will have produced will trace the contours of our field.

Many scholars were wary and suspicious back in 2004 when I gave my Presidential Address to the American Studies Association on "The Transnational Turn" in American Studies (Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures"). Let me mention four of their

concerns and suggest how unfounded they turned out to be.

- Some scholars of Native American Studies told me that they were worried that if the transnational became a central focus of the field of American Studies, Native American Studies would be left out, marginalized even more than it was at the time.
- Some warned that transnational American Studies would only have the effect of reifying the nation rather than decentering it.
- Others expressed concern that my suggestion that they broaden their work beyond English-language materials was out of step with students' growing disaffection with learning foreign languages; indeed, my own department at the University of Texas at the time had recently raised the possibility of eliminating the language requirement for the PhD—a proposal that I'm happy to say was voted down.
- And finally, some US-based scholars complained that having to listen to the voices of scholars from outside the US would be boring. Actually an ASA official said that, after hearing that I planned to raise funds to bring more international scholars to the annual meeting than had ever come before. Why would I want to do that? This person asked.

As it turns out, the last twenty years have seen a remarkable efflorescence of scholarship in transnational American Studies fostered by a broad range of institutions, journals, and initiatives, with a resulting cornucopia of books and articles that have demonstrated how baseless each of these concerns turned out to be. I'll address each of these concerns in turn.

First, the concern that Native American Studies would be left out of a new turn to transnational approaches. That simply hasn't happened. Indeed, two institutions devoted to transnational American Studies that were born during the last two decades have shown how unwarranted that concern really was: one is the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, a peer-reviewed, open-access journal that is now sixteen years old, which was co-founded in 2009 by Alfred Hornung, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Takayuki Tatsumi, and myself; the other is the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany, which Alfred Hornung founded in 2014. Both entities have demonstrated the fresh and important ways that transnational approaches can enliven and enrich Native American and indigenous studies.

In 2012, the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* featured a special forum on "Charting Transnational Native American Studies," edited by Hsinya Huang, Philip Deloria, Laura Furlan, and John Gamber. As these scholars point out in their introduction, "[f]rom a Native American perspective, the US has always been transnational, due to its relationships with sovereign Native nations within its borders," and, indeed "indigenous experiences may make much more sense if understood with less focus on national boundaries" (Huang et al., "Charting"). In their essay in this special forum, titled "The Trans/National Terrain of Anishinaabe Law and Diplomacy," Joseph Bauerkemper and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark acknowledge that there has been "extensive and enduring resistance to transnational theoretical and methodological frameworks" among Native American Studies scholars, largely because the efforts of "scholarly transnationalism" to "unmoor intellectual work from national(ist) affiliations" runs directly counter to the "extensive and enduring commitments to nationhood within Native American Studies." Yet, they go on to say, "the judicious use of

particular aspects of conventional transnationalism and the development of innovative conceptions of transnationalism can serve" the field of Native American Studies. The "mode of indigenous transnationalism" these authors propose "decenters the settler-state while recentring Native nationhood." It underscores "the boundaries that distinguish Native nations as discrete polities. Through an analysis of Anishinaabe law and diplomacy, this article lays "the groundwork for recognizing the transnational flows of intellectual, cultural, economic, social, and political traditions between and across the boundaries of distinct yet often—though not always—allied and mutually amenable Native nations" (Bauerkemper and Stark).

Chadwick Allen, in his essay in that special forum, offers the alternative rubric for the term "trans-indigenous" to describe native networks and coalitions of global indigenous studies; the term is also deployed by Hsinya Huang in a book published in the UK two years after the special forum came out, entitled *Aspects of Transnational and Indigenous Cultures*, which she co-edited with Clara Shu-chun Chang (Allen, "A Transnational"; Huang and Chang). Like the work of the scholars noted above, Huang and Chang's book reframes both Indigenous Studies and Ethnic Studies as transnational at their core, exploring global vectors that transcend the borders of both Indian nations and nation states to generate new insights into place, mobility, identity, and community. It demonstrates that scholarship informed by comparative and multilingual approaches can enrich our understanding of the literary production of Indigenous people, as well as the representation of Indigenous people in popular culture. For example, in "Towards Trans-Pacific Ecopoetics: Three Indigenous Texts," Huang explores the "Indigenous Pacific" as a "large world in which the indigenous people intermingled along numerous, interconnecting routes, unhindered by the boundaries erected much later by imperial powers" (113). She

examines it as a place where neighboring communities "exchanged ideas and products, often across vast oceanic distances" (113). Her comparison of *People of the Whale* by Chickasaw (and West Coast North American) writer Linda Hogan with *Whale Rider* by New Zealand/Aotearoa Māori writer Witi Ihimaera and *Eyes in the Sky* by Aboriginal Taiwan Tao writer Syaman Rapongan allows her to explore the Pacific "as a site of trans-indigenous solidarity in protecting oceanic environments" (114). Eschewing the trajectories of imperialism and colonialism, Hogan, Ihimaera, and Rapongan craft "mobile, flexible, and voyaging subjects" who are not "physically or culturally circumscribed by terrestrial boundaries," and for whom the Pacific is a site of "co-belonging and co-history across species boundaries and racial/ethnic and cultural borders" (115-16). In Huang's hands, the surprising resonances among the ocean-nurtured beings that emerge from these imaginative works come to inhabit a "planetary commons" united by the water that sustains both life and art.

Chadwick Allen's essay in the Special Forum in *JTAS* reminds us that long before the transnational became a common concept invoked in scholarship on history, literature, and the arts, "this kind of travel was already the old and ongoing story of incised rock and painted hides; of baskets, pottery and textiles; of fish hooks, canoes, and projectile points; of carvings, personal adornments, and sacred objects. . . . *Trans-*, yes, in the sense of *across*, *beyond* and *through*; but not limited to the national borders of contemporary (settler) nation states" (Allen, "A Transnational"). Or, as Huang and Chang remind us, "[n]eighboring communities have always exchanged ideas and products, often across vast ocean distances. Along these routes of interconnection was a large world in which indigenes mingled, unhindered by boundaries erected much later by imperial powers" (xvi). Allen explores this idea at greater length in his 2012

book *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies*.

Transnational approaches allow cultural products from far-flung places to be put in conversation with each other. For example, in her essay in Huang and Chang's collection, Tzu-I Chung discusses Walt Disney's *Pocahontas* alongside an enormously popular recent Chinese novel, *Wolf Totem*, by Jiang Rong, offering insights into the representation of Native Americans in both US and Chinese culture. Meanwhile, Erik Hieta compares the characterization of Indians and Sámi in an essay titled "'Awakening the Racial Spirit': Indians, Sámi, and the Politics of Ethnographic Representation, 1930s–1940" in *American Studies in Scandinavia* in 2019.

Other works melding Native American Studies and transnational American Studies during the last two decades include Shari Huhndorf's 2009 book *Mapping the Americas: The Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture*. Engaging such issues as labor and environmental exploitation, global imperialism, and the commodification of indigenous cultures, Huhndorf's book examines how Native cultures increasingly transcend national boundaries. Also interesting on this general topic are four other works: Robin Maria DeLugan's 2010 article in *American Ethnologist* titled "Indigeneity across Borders: Hemispheric Migrations and Cosmopolitan Encounter"; a special issue of *American Quarterly* edited by Paul Lai and Lindsey Claire Smith in 2010, titled "Alternative Contact: Indigeneity, Globalism, and American Studies"; Daniel Heath Justice's 2010 article on Cherokee Transnationalism in the *New Centennial Review*; and Jodi Byrd's article "American Indian Transnationalism" in the *Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature* edited by Yogita Goyal in 2017.

A truly intriguing example of melding Transnational American Studies with Native American Studies is Padraig Kirwan's essay "Recognition,

Resilience & Relief: The Meaning of Gift," which appeared in a 2020 book edited by Kirwan and LeAnne Howe called *Famine Pots: The Choctaw Irish Gift Exchange 1847-Present* (and which won the American Studies Association's Shelley Fisher Fishkin Prize For International Scholarship in Transnational American Studies in 2021). The essay and the book tell of a sizeable sum of money the Choctaw collected and sent to the Irish in 1847, at the height of the potato famine and just sixteen years after the Choctaw began their march on the Trail of Tears. Kirwan brings together a broad range of historical sources to probe how the Choctaw Nation's stunningly generous gift to the poor of Ireland during the potato famine was more than a memorable expression of empathy: it involved recognition of how the Irish and the Choctaw had both been victimized in analogous ways by powerful nationalist governments ready to turn aside from their plights. Both an imperialist British government and an expansionist American one were ready to marginalize the Irish and the Choctaw, respectively, as "others" whose sufferings were the unintended consequences or collateral damage of an official policy that has been called a kind of benign imperialism. As he traces these two marginalized groups' longstanding awareness of each other and their appreciation of the ways in which their suffering had been ignored or rationalized by the misguided paternalism of central powers, Kirwan shows us the importance of the mutual recognition that the 1847 Choctaw gift embodied. The Irish in America were often viewed as victimizers of Native Americans despite the fact that the Irish themselves were often marginalized by some of the same forces that viewed Native Americans as irredeemably "other." While fully recognizing the fact that Irish and Irish American settlers were often deeply implicated in Indian removal in nineteenth-century America, Kirwan manages to unearth unexpected affinities and partnerships between the Irish and Indigenous involving moments of

reciprocity and recognition that were profoundly important to both groups—and that are often recalled by people in both nations.

The transnational turn in our field has brought not only conceptual complexity to the study of Native American and Indigenous cultures, but also advances in access to important Native American research materials. A symposium held in 2022 at the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies in Mainz, Germany, on “Indigenous Print cultures, Media, and Literatures,” organized by Oliver Scheiding and Cristina Stanciu, brought Native scholars and others from around the world together to consider the current state of digitization of Indigenous periodicals and archives. The conference’s findings were extended and amplified by a research group devoted to Transnational Periodical Cultures funded by the state of Rhineland-Palatinate in Germany, the German Research Foundation, and the Obama Institute, which investigated the possibilities of building a “Text Corpus of American Indian Newspapers and Magazines, 1890-1930,” and by a research project on “Periodicals and Indigenous Modernity” funded by the German Research Foundation (Scheiding and Newton 111-32).

During the last decade, there have been a number of other stimulating volumes and essays exploring transnational dimensions of Native American literature and culture. These include the 2017 collection *The World, the Text and the Indian: Global Dimensions of Native American Literature*, edited by Scott Richard Lyons, which grew out of a 2013 symposium held at the University of Michigan on “Globalizing the Word: Transnationalism and the Making of Native American Literature” (1). The book includes examinations of such under-studied topics as Objibwe men who fought in Europe in World War I (Vizenor) and Native American literary criticism in a global context (Krupat). Global contexts also come into play in Robert Lee’s article (in Huang and Chang’s

volume) about a Cherokee writer’s encounter with Germany and Australia; a Choctaw writer’s encounter with France, Germany, and Asia, and the encounter of a writer with Ponca/Osage roots with England.

Other works published in the last decade explore the challenges of Native and Indigenous “survivance” against a global backdrop of the myths and stereotypes that often go hand in hand with (and sometimes undergird) actual physical violence that threatens Native life (Banerjee 13). These insidious “fairy-tale” versions of Indigeneity, as Mita Banerjee notes in her introduction to the edited collection *Comparative Indigenous Studies* (2016) may be found “in cultures as diverse as Germany, Russia, the US, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark and Suriname,” often accompanying “the material violence of displacement, genocide, and environmental injustices” (11-12). The global performance and appropriation of Native American traditions has also gotten more attention in recent years. For example, Tara Browner explored American Indian-style pow-wow singing and dancing in Denmark in 2011, while Leopold Lippert examined “cross-racial performances of ‘Indianness’ on various Austrian stages” in 2018.

Scholars have also probed the roots of global fantasies about Native Americans in the last two decades. The global reach of a figure like Karl May, the best-selling German author of all time, whose novels introduced many of these myths around the world, often figures in these discussions, but other writers do as well. In his examination of portrayals of American Indians in Danish travel literature in the mid to late nineteenth century, for example, Jørn Brøndal looks at the ways in which writers including Hans Peter Christian Hansen, Vilhelm C. S. Topsøe, Robert Watt, and Henrik Cavling promoted the narrative of the “vanishing Indian” in Danish culture, tying “the Indians to a receding landscape of the past and—for the most part—to establish a

contradiction between Indians and white ‘civilization’—although they “sometimes attempted to create links between the Indians and Scandinavian settlers” (82). Meanwhile, a 2022 essay collection titled *Finnish Settler Colonialism in North America: Rethinking Finnish Experiences in Transnational Spaces*, edited by Rani-Henrik Andersson and Janne Lahti, examines Finland’s complicity in the settler colonialism that led to the displacement and elimination of so many of North America’s Indigenous peoples and their cultures. Janne Lahti’s chapter, for example, “Gustaf Nordenskiöld and the Mesa Verde: Settler Colonial Disconnects and Finnish Colonial Legacies,” examines Gustaf Nordenskiöld’s decision in 1891 to excavate and pillage the ancestral Puebloan cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde and bring the artifacts he collected back to the Finnish National Museum. (A portion of these Indigenous ancestral remains and artifacts were returned to the US in 2019).

Whether focusing on the exchange of ideas, gifts, artifacts, and publications, or on how Indigenous peoples are impacted by the circulation of global capital, or on what Indigenous individuals see and how *they* are seen when they travel, transnational approaches turn out to have more to offer Native American Studies than many had expected.

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A second area that concerned some colleagues in the early 2000s was the fear that transnational American Studies would only reify the nation rather than decenter it. However, that didn’t happen. Instead, our mental maps have been reshaped dramatically over the last two decades. While the 1990s saw the rise of hemispheric approaches to our field, and while transatlantic approaches had been around for quite a while, during the last two decades, *transpacific*, *oceanic*, *archipelagic*, and *planetary* perspectives have come into their own, with each term having the

potential to dramatically transform the ways in which we envision American Studies’ place in the world. Yuan Shu has been instrumental in promoting transpacific and oceanic approaches to American Studies, while Brian Russell Roberts has championed archipelagic perspectives, and Alfred Hornung has advocated for a planetary understanding.

Yuan Shu is co-editor of *American Studies as Transnational Practice: Turning toward the Transpacific* (2015), as well as a 2019 collection *Oceanic Archives, Indigenous Epistemologies, and Transpacific American Studies*. These volumes suggest what focusing on the Asian Pacific and Pacific islands can teach us not only about neglected dimensions of American empire, but also about Indigenous epistemologies and non-western knowledge production (Shu, *Oceanic Archives* 2). Exploring how “the Far West of North America became the Far East of Northeast Asia” can fill in gaps left by US state-bound archives, which, for example, “did not include anything on the Chinese ‘middle passage’ across the Pacific or their treatment after their arrival in Hawai’i, North America, and Central and Latin America” (Shu, *Oceanic Archives* 2). The shift to a transpacific or oceanic frame of reference that Shu advocates also opens the door to topics like the one that Elizabeth DeLoughrey explores in “The Myth of Isolates: Ecosystem Ecologies in the Nuclear Pacific,” in *Oceanic Archives*. DeLoughrey tracks “the origin of the science of ecosystem ecology to the nuclear tests conducted by the US military during the Cold War,” noting that few scholars working in ecology today understand “the indebtedness of the Age of Ecology to the Atomic Age,” and miss the ways in which “American environmentalism and militarism are paradoxically and mutually imbricated” (Shu, *Oceanic Archives* 6).

Oceanic perspectives are central to archipelagic American Studies, a concept for which Brian Russell Roberts has been a compelling advocate in the 2018 anthology he co-edited with Michelle

Ann Stephens, *Archipelagic American Studies*, and in his brilliant 2021 book *Borderwaters: Amid the Archipelagic States of America*. Roberts startles us with the insight that since the late twentieth century, the US has claimed more water space than land space, as well as more water space than any other country in the world. National mythologies of the United States as a continent give way to a different understanding of America's place in the world as what Roberts calls an archipelagic nation, a new geography that offers up fresh and thought-provoking insights into what we are as a nation. Eschewing continental exceptionalism, Roberts—and the contributors to the anthology he co-edited—focus on the US as a set of interconnected islands, archipelagoes, shorelines, continents, seas, and oceans and illuminate unexpected dimensions of our past, present, and future. In *Borderwaters*, Roberts notes that when we take into account the US's maritime claims, the US has borders "contiguous with some twenty-one countries," demonstrating why the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in 1983 called US an "ocean nation"—indeed, the largest oceanic nation in the world (2, 4-6). Roberts's inquiry into how archipelagos are grasped and understood shows a rather mind-boggling openness to considering "nonhuman subjectivities such as those exhibited by island-hopping birds, large monitor lizards swimming among islands, or the coral polyps that form the islets that constitute the archipelagic formation of an atoll" (16). Roberts's "postcontinental redescription of the United States" offers stimulating and provocative questions for American Studies scholars to ponder (16).

And while Yuan Shu and Brian Russell Roberts have urged us to attend to transpacific, oceanic, and archipelagic perspectives, Alfred Hornung has taken an even broader view, urging us to take a *planetary* perspective on our field of study in a 2011 essay entitled "Planetary Citizenship," and in a 2015 essay titled "ChinAmerica: Global Affairs and Planetary Consciousness" (which

appeared in Shu's *American Studies as Transnational Practice*). Hornung notes that foregrounding issues such as ecology and the environment requires that we move beyond narrow national political and economic boundaries and adopt what he refers to as a "planetary consciousness," an idea that builds on the concept of "planetary" limned by Gayatri Spivak. Hornung tracks how planetary perspectives shaped the life writing of individuals including Canadian scientist David Suzuki and former US president Barack Obama, two men who, in his view, "lived and practiced" a "planetary citizenship in their dedication to environmental causes and new global initiatives for the improvement of life on Earth" (Shu, *American Studies as Transnational Practice* 13).

Rather than reifying the nation state, as some critics of transnational American Studies had predicted, new spatial paradigms have emerged. In addition to transpacific, oceanic, archipelagic, and planetary perspectives on our field of study, scholars in the last two decades have continued to argue for the value of "hemispheric" and "interAmerican" frames (Levander and Levine; Rausser). All of these approaches have decentered the nation and given us entirely new mental maps.

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Let's move now to the concern that encouraging American Studies scholars to move beyond English-only materials in our research would be problematic and more trouble than it was worth. Colleagues expressed to me informally their fear that this idea was out of step with students' growing resistance to learning foreign languages and would not yield much new knowledge that was particularly valuable. But those who expressed these views failed to recognize that there were scholars already conversant in languages other than English who had not previously used their language skills to explore topics

in American Studies because of the English-only traditions in the field. As the field of American Studies began to welcome research that drew on archives and knowledge bases in languages other than English, scholars who had previously published work in English—like UCLA’s King-kok Cheung—could now feel free to frame research topics that utilized their knowledge of other languages. Vast unexplored areas of inquiry have opened up as a result, moving the field in fruitful new directions.

Those who doubted the value of encouraging the use of foreign-language sources in American Studies also failed to realize that a move of this sort could attract a new crop of scholars who would find the field appealing precisely because of its openness to transnational research that moved beyond materials in English alone. Some, who already knew languages other than English, would develop fresh research topics that could be pursued only by scholars with their multilingual skills—particularly topics in which the subject of translation itself often plays a central role.

Others would learn new languages in order to gain access to archives crucial to their research. As we will see, the subfield of Cold War Studies is one area in American Studies that has been significantly deepened by four stellar younger scholars who have utilized their foreign-language skills during the last two decades to publish groundbreaking books and articles: Maria Bo, Chris Suh, Selina Lai-Henderson, and Brian K. Goodman.

King-kok Cheung, a senior Americanist in UCLA’s department of English, had published a body of respected work on Asian American literature over the years that analyzes works written in English by US and Canadian writers of Asian descent (Cheung, *Articulate Silences*; Cheung, ed., *An Interethnic Companion*). But in 2019 she drew on her knowledge of Chinese, as well as English,

to write a stimulating and original book—*Chinese American Literature without Borders*—that uses a bilingual and intercultural approach to both Chinese and Chinese American writers, showing just how much we can gain when we broaden our tools of analysis beyond English alone. “Moving across languages,” she writes, can “open our eyes to alternative ways of seeing, being, and becoming” (15). While noting the marginalization of Asian American literature in both Chinese and US cultural conversations, Cheung demonstrates how the series of writers she discusses manage to “cross-pollinate two cultures,” in the process “melding centers and margins” (5). Her critical strategy “spans languages and national cultures to illuminate the writers’ hyphenated consciousness and bicultural aesthetics” (13). “By stretching across linguistic and cultural bounds,” she writes, she seeks “to decenter the European American heritage and work toward a bilateral literary analysis” (2). At the same time, “[b]y collating Chinese and American gender norms and tuning in to bicultural aesthetics,” Cheung tells us, she “traces how the writers tap their ancestral and adoptive cultures for artistic inspiration, all the time questioning the mores of both societies” (12). Cheung is currently taking her bicultural and bilingual investigations in yet another direction, in a book she is developing titled *Canto Aiiieeeee! Cantonese-American Reverberations in Literature, Theater, Martial Arts, and Popular Culture*, that she is co-editing with Belinda Kong, Selina Lai-Henderson, Bo Wah Leung, Sean Metzger, and myself. It will be the first major anthology to explore transnational Cantonese-American cultural circulations in the arts and the first to excavate their crucial importance to American Studies more broadly.

Cheung’s approach of bringing multilingual transnational perspectives to bear on both Chinese and Chinese American writing is being extended by a new generation of scholars, including my Stanford colleague Maria Bo. Bo is one of four younger scholars who have recently

published fresh and important research on the Cold War informed by multilingual archives and perspectives. Bo is completing a book titled *Writing on Water: Tracing Equivocality in Sino-US Cold War Literary Translations*. It addresses the role literature and translation played in Cold War efforts to convince members of the Chinese diaspora to choose whether to side with the US-led Free World or with the Communist state of Mainland China. Bo studies “Asian and Asian American writers that were mobilized, knowingly or not, as ‘Cold Warriors,’ as they wrote between languages and translated texts across the Pacific” (Bo, *Writing on Water*). One case she examines is how Jade Snow Wong’s 1950 Chinatown novel, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, was translated and sent abroad by the US State Department to Overseas Chinese everywhere as an example of the success of democracy, only for its narrative to run aground as the book’s American concept of ethnicity failed to translate abroad (Bo, “Language Lessons”). Another chapter analyzes Eileen Chang’s translation of Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* in 1953 “as part of a U.S. government-sponsored propaganda project” that aimed to integrate “American and Chinese notions of literary ‘truth’” (Bo, “Freedom Overseas”). Bo’s work on literary propaganda between the US and China helps us “re-imagine traditional boundaries of what counts as ‘Asian American’ cultural production” (Bo, *Writing on Water*). Focusing on translation—as Bo writes, “what problems it causes, what unplanned effects it has, and how it reveals the stories we tell ourselves as we attempt to connect with each other”—allows us to read ethnic American literature in new ways while revealing historical threads of transnationality that have always existed in literary production (Bo, *Writing on Water*). Bo’s research on diasporic Asian literature draws on her language training in Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, and French, as well as a grounding in translation theory.

Translation figures in subtle ways in the research that resulted in Chris Suh’s 2025 article in *Diplomatic History*, “Diasporic Politics in the Age of Decolonization: Korean Independence and the US Military Occupation of Korea, 1945–1948.” Suh’s bilingual skills allow him to mine both the Korean and English-language stories in a newspaper published in the US, as well as English and Korean primary and secondary sources in both countries. Articles that appeared in English during the early Cold War in *Korean Independence (Tongnip)*, a bilingual newspaper based in Los Angeles, turned out not to be just translations of those that ran in Korean in that newspaper (as had long been assumed): they were completely different stories. Analyzing the Korean-language stories in that paper (along with other archival materials) allows Suh to challenge the dominant interpretations of the origins of the Cold War in Korea and responses to the US military’s occupation of the country. The article examines how progressive and Marxist Korean Americans made sense of the changing US policy in Korea from 1945 to 1948, when the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) governed the southern half of the peninsula. It argues that, until the summer of 1947, editors of and contributors to *Korean Independence* supported US policy because they believed the United States would work with the non-communist left in Korea toward reunification and would oppose anti-communist Korean politicians who sought to establish a separate government in South Korea. Suh’s examination of the archives of the US Army Military Government in Korea, as well as the US State Department, shows that the diasporic Koreans who edited and wrote for the paper understood the United States’ policy correctly. Although the prevailing understanding of the early Cold War in Korea assumed the opposite, Suh’s archival research shows that during these years the USAMGIK had a difficult relationship with the rightists in Korea, including Syngman Rhee, who

campaigns to create a separate, anti-communist South Korea (and who would become the first president of the country in 1948). The article concludes by showing how the separate government in South Korea emerged only after the United States changed its policy toward Korea in 1947, when the escalating tensions of the Cold War prompted the United States to adopt a more aggressive posture toward the Soviet Union.

Suh had earlier utilized his language skills to probe the complexities of the early Cold War challenges faced by the USAMGIK in a prize-winning 2014 paper about responses to the first Korean-American novel *The Grass Roof* (1931), and its author, Younghill Kang, in 1946 (Suh, "East Goes West"). As Kun Jong Lee has noted, Younghill Kang's *The Grass Roof* was not translated into Korean until 1977, and did not attract the attention of literary scholars based in Korea until the 1990s (K. Lee 276). But despite being a book that only a relatively small number of Koreans could even read in the 1930s, Koreans in Korea applauded the novel out of gratitude that it "had drawn the attention of Anglophone readers to Korea's colonial situation," and out of a sense of national pride sparked by "the accolades it got in the American press"—despite recognizing "flaws they saw in its depiction of their country" (Suh, "East Goes West"). In 1946, the USAMGIK liked the book so much that they brought Kang, now an American, back to Korea to run their public information office and ordered many copies of the novel, flagging it as recommended reading to any GI who wanted to learn about Korea. But, as Suh notes, the same military officials who brought Kang back to Korea "became furious when Kang, after returning to the United States a year and a half later," published an essay

in which he argued that the country recently 'liberated' by the United States was now filled with corruption, hunger,

poverty, and political chaos. The US Military Government, Kang explained, had the "agency" to "correct the evils of the provisional regime" yet it refused to do anything. (Suh, "East Goes West")

Suh observes that most of the Koreans who had taken issue with aspects of Kang's portrayal of Korea in *The Grass Roof* now celebrated his depiction of the country under American rule.

Suh's bilingual skills allowed him to come up with similarly fresh and unexpected interpretations of the roots of US policy toward Korea in the decades leading up to the Cold War in his 2023 book *The Allure of Empire: American Encounters with Asians in the Age of Transpacific Expansion and Exclusion*. Suh demonstrates that American imperialism in Asia and the persecution of Asian Americans in the American West turn out to be connected in ways that previous scholars largely ignored. A tremendous number of useful Japanese primary materials that have never been translated into English have been translated into Korean, allowing Suh to effectively put into conversation English, Korean, and Japanese sources that he uncovered in archives in Seoul, San Francisco, Washington, DC, New York, New Haven, Boston, and Atlanta. The result is a groundbreaking book that interweaves previously separated stories of immigration policy, military conquest, social science studies, and global ideologies of racial hierarchies to present a new history of the imperial Pacific from the Russo-Japanese war (1904-5) through the 1940s.

A third young scholar in Transnational American Studies who is using her ability to access materials in two languages to make a distinctive contribution to Cold War Studies is Selina Lai-Henderson. Her prize-winning 2023 essay "'You Are No Darker than I Am': *The Souls of Black Folk* in Maoist China" (winner of the Modern Language Association's 1921 Prize in American Literature) and her 2020 article "Color Around the Globe:

Langston Hughes and Black Internationalism in China” both draw on her research in English- and Chinese-language archives. These bilingual materials enable Lai-Henderson to present rare insights into Hughes’s engagement with Chinese leftist writers in China during this era and unpack the ways in which Hughes, the first African American intellectual to visit China, transformed the public image of African Americans in the Chinese cultural imagination. Lai-Henderson points to the inspiration that Hughes’s visit had for both the Chinese intellectuals whom he met in China and African American civil rights leaders back home. It would help enable his contemporaries on both sides of the Pacific to envision the possibilities of an Afro-Asian alliance during the Mao and Civil Rights eras in the 1960s and 70s. Lai-Henderson’s original discussion deepens our understanding of Hughes’s efforts to frame a concept of black internationalism. As she notes, “[a]t a time when the Soviet Union held center stage in communist revolutionary thought, Hughes’s Chinese encounters challenged the assumption in American and African American communities” that China was, for the most part, “largely irrelevant in the discourse of proletarianism” (Lai-Henderson, “Color” 107). Although he was in China only relatively briefly, his trip remained important to him as he “repeatedly included China in the complex web of global liberation in his writing,” drawing connections that linked the United States, Africa, China, and the Soviet Union in his exploration of “alternative democratic spaces that allow for mobility and continuity in how African Americans define their positions in the world” (Lai-Henderson, “Color” 107). A previously unpublished poem titled “China” that Hughes wrote in 1963 (which Lai-Henderson unearthed and published in the *Yale Review* in 2024) further suggests Hughes’s admiration of China’s role in global struggles against oppression during the Cold War, a time when Hughes’s relationship with the US government was fraught. Her current work focuses the

transnational travels of both Hughes and W. E. B. Du Bois in China, and on China’s impact on these two canonical American writers. (She has contributed to other areas than Cold War Studies as well. Her earlier 2015 landmark volume, *Mark Twain in China*, made invaluable contributions to Mark Twain studies and translation studies and raised intriguing questions about ideas of race and nation in transnational global contexts.)

But what about students who do not start out with training in multiple languages? What about the fear that greater emphasis on foreign languages and translation will deter students from embarking on research in transnational American Studies? Although some students may be deterred, others will embrace the challenge, as Brian Goodman did. As an undergraduate at Stanford, Goodman was intrigued when he learned, while poking around in the Allen Ginsberg papers in Stanford’s Special Collections, that the poet had travelled to Prague in 1965, and was crowned as “*Kraj Majales*,” or “King of May,” by Czech students. He decided to write a senior essay about the episode, and got an undergraduate research grant from Stanford to go to the Czech Republic to interview some of the participants in those events who were still around. In the process of doing that, he decided he really needed to learn Czech, and he did. It turned out that his investigation of Ginsberg’s trip was only the tip of the iceberg. His 2023 book, *The Nonconformists: American and Czech Writers Across the Iron Curtain*, documents the many surprising and important connections between US and Czech literary culture during the Cold War—connections that had a major impact on both art and politics on both sides of the Atlantic. He discusses not only friendships forged by American writers Ginsberg, Philip Roth, and John Updike with Czech nonconformists including Vaclav Havel, Josef Škvorecký, Ivan Klima, and Milan Kundera, but also the history of the Czech fascination with American cultural trends

from the Beats to Dixieland jazz, rock and roll, and the works of authors like Langston Hughes and Ernest Hemingway—even when that fascination came with major risks. The story the book tells about the transnational circulation of literature that transformed Kafka's Prague into "a global capital of dissent" demonstrates (as Jonah Raskin puts it) "that the Iron Curtain wasn't as formidable and as impenetrable a force as it once seemed to capitalists and communists, peaceniks and warmongers, and those who advocated for the use of nuclear weapons and those who wanted to ban them" (Raskin). Goodman, "a versatile literary historian of the Cold War," as Raskin writes, and "an advocate for cultural cross fertilization and building bridges not walls," demonstrates that there was more cultural traffic back and forth between the East and the West than most of us suspected. The result is a productive intervention into our understanding of the Cold War (Raskin).

I don't want to suggest that all students will find multilingual approaches to American Studies appealing—just as I don't want to suggest that every scholar in our field must work on transnational topics. But I do want to highlight some of the rich, unexplored territory that awaits us when we and our students move beyond an English-only vision of our field.

* * *

Finally, let me address the complaint that paying attention to the voices of scholars from outside the US would be boring—that there wasn't that much that Americanists in the US could learn from them. Here I'll draw on my own experiences for evidence as to how unfounded that concern actually was. In addition to invigorating and enlivening the annual American Studies Association convention with their presence, students and colleagues from around the world have transformed my personal agenda as a scholar in unexpected and fascinating ways.

Over the last two decades I've embarked on several research ventures in transnational American Studies that involved intense collaboration and consultation with scholars from around the world—projects which I would not have even conceived of had I not recognized how much I had to learn from them. The experience has been *anything* but dull.

The first was the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* (I have served on its editorial board since co-founding it in 2009). Sponsored by the Obama Institute and Stanford's American Studies Program, and hosted on the University of California's e-scholarship platform, the journal's editors include scholars based in Canada, China, Germany, Japan, Turkey, and the US (*JTAS*). It has published work by scholars based in Argentina, Australia, Austria, Canada, China, Cuba, Denmark, France, Germany, Guam, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Korea, Lebanon, Macao, Malaysia, Morocco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Romania, Russia, Samoa, American Samoa, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, Tunisia, Turkey, the UK, and the US (Fishkin, "Envisioning"). The journal has included Special Forums on topics including "Archipelagoes/Oceans/American Visuality"; "Teaching and Theorizing Transnational American Studies Around the Globe"; "Global Huck: Mapping the Cultural Work of Translations of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*"; "Transnational Black Politics and Resistance"; "Overseas Empire and Transnational American Studies"; "Charting Transnational Native American Studies"; "Sweden and America"; "La Floride française: Florida, France, and the Francophone World"; and "The Molecular Intimacies of Empire," to name just a few. The most recent issue of *JTAS* contains a special section on "Reflections on the US 2024 Elections in a Global Context," which features contributions from scholars based in Belgium, China, Denmark, France, Hungary, India, Italy, Poland, and the US (Gaines and Reimer 5-107). Being exposed to the work of

scholars from around the globe has been anything but boring—and the editorial discussions with wonderful colleagues have been a true joy. *JTAS* has also been an important training ground for graduate students: during their time in graduate school, Chris Suh was *JTAS*'s managing editor, Brian Goodman was its Special Forums editor, and Selina Lai-Henderson was an associate managing editor. All three are now emerging leaders in a field that barely existed when they entered college.

What I learned from co-editing the "Global Huck" special forum in the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* prompted me to make transnational perspectives central to my own most recent book, published in 2025 in Yale University Press' "Black Lives" biography series: *Jim: The Life and Afterlives of Huckleberry Finn's Comrade*. The book includes a long chapter that deals with more than a dozen of the sixty-seven languages into which Twain's novel has been translated. It was a pleasure to interact with scholars I'd met and worked with who have studied translations of the book into Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish, and also to read research in English by scholars I didn't know personally who'd written on versions in Czech, Danish, Norwegian, Slovenian, and Swedish (Fishkin, *Jim* 276-310). I was also happy to be able to include in my long chapter on Black actors who have portrayed Jim in film versions of the novel discussions of two Soviet and two German films; colleagues and former students with greater knowledge of Russia and Germany than I had were happy to answer questions that came up in my research (Fishkin, *Jim* 216-27; 268-75).

The second major collaborative venture in transnational American Studies on which I have embarked was the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford, a massive enterprise that began in 2011 and ended in 2021 that aimed to recover the history of the Chinese

who built the first transcontinental railroad across the US—the source of the funds that built my university. I don't think I would have even conceived of the project—which I co-founded and co-directed with my colleague Gordon H. Chang—If experience had not taught me what a pleasure it was to collaborate with colleagues around the world. Over 150 scholars in history, literature, anthropology, archaeology, and other fields from Canada, China, Taiwan, and the US worked together to produce books and articles in Chinese and English, oral histories, digital visualizations, and traveling historical and photographic exhibits that illuminated this neglected chapter of the past. There were things we never could have learned without the involvement of scholars from all over the world. A colleague at a French-speaking university in Canada, for example, found the only eye-witness account of the 1867 strike by the Chinese workers, the largest workplace strike yet in America at the time, in a memoir in French by Simone de Beauvoir's uncle (Robinson 221-23). Colleagues in China were able to contribute invaluable insights into how the workers paid for their passage, how they sent the bones of deceased workers back to China, what their state of education and literacy was, etc. (Guoxiong; Ding; Jin). It was a tremendous pleasure to visit some of the sending villages with colleagues in China and to have them accompany us to sites in the Sierras that the Chinese built. The fruits of our research appear in the volume I co-edited with Gordon H. Chang, *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental*, and in the broad range of materials listed and linked on the project's website—including books in Chinese and English, a special issue of a journal, over fifty oral histories, web-exclusive publications, digital visualizations, a teaching guide, etc. (*Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University*). I find the worry that it would be boring to talk with colleagues from around the world simply dumbfounding—and absurd.

* * *

The transnational turn in American Studies did not marginalize Native American studies. It did not reify the nation in new ways. The field's increased openness to scholarship in languages other than English turned out to be a boon rather than a burden, and interactions in person, in print, and online with scholars from around the globe turned out to be anything but a bore. The transnational turn may still be a teenager in the grand scheme of things—but it is a teenager with a promising future.

Today, however, that future is threatened by political developments in the US that have left scholars (as well as many others) reeling. The current administration has waged war on the ideals on which the nation was founded and on efforts over the centuries that followed to form a “more perfect union.” The idea of equality has been assailed. Voting rights, civil rights—even democracy itself—have been devalued and undermined. The values of diversity, equity and inclusion have been demonized, along with expertise itself. History is under siege. Universities are under attack. Important research projects have been defunded and decimated. Presenters from right-wing media now occupy major cabinet positions. Museums are being forced to toe a narrow ideological line. The rule of law can no longer be assumed. Facts themselves are cast as the enemy. International exchanges are being curtailed or cut. Scholars who mention “race” or “gender” in their Fulbright applications find their promised grants cancelled. International students are being deported. Federal troops line the streets of peaceful major American cities. American citizens are increasingly deprived of rights for which hundreds of thousands fought and died over two and a half centuries. The world in which the scholarship described and celebrated in this essay was produced is no longer the world in which we live. What are we to do?

This summer, while staggering under the grief, shock, and disappointment of watching our fragile American experiment in democracy endure the steady onslaught of an elected leader who emulates the dictators and autocrats he admires, I attended a Critical Island Studies Symposium at National Taiwan Normal University in Taipei. I began to wonder: might our sanity as scholars of American Studies be saved by our embracing an archipelagic vision of what we do?

What if, instead of getting depressed by the thought that we now live in or study a United States that has betrayed us and the ideals on which it was founded, we envisioned ourselves as inhabiting an archipelago of border-crossing seekers of knowledge? Doesn't that also describe where we live? What if we and the individual scholars with whom we interact and correspond all over the world were each tiny islands in this imagined archipelago, along with the institutes and departments and universities that house us, the journals we edit, the conferences we attend? What if we envisioned ourselves as part of a vast and expansive constellation of islands of inquiry where inhabitants were linked by the conviction that history, facts, and truth matter? What if each of us were part of an archipelago of shared respect, of curiosity, and diversity—an imagined community that stretches from one end of the globe to the other? An archipelago of islands that may be *in* various nation states, but are not *of* them? An archipelago that fiercely asserts its independence even when that independence is threatened and challenged by those who fear it or misunderstand it or don't believe it has a right to exist?

I have studied the US with passion and devotion for my entire professional life. I now know that what I had imagined it to be all those years is not a given—that some of the qualities that made it vibrant and fascinating also contained the seeds of the forces now tearing it apart. It is more imperative now than ever that we keep producing

scholarship that raises more questions than it answers; that we keep teaching classes that open students' minds; that we keep asking hard questions and seeking complex answers; that we keep the light burning in the darkness. If we can take solace in the archipelago of islands that retain a devotion to facts, to truth, to knowledge, to diversity, equality, inclusion, democracy, and the rule of law, we may be able to weather this tsunami of bigotry, ignorance, ambition, and sheer malevolence that threatens all that we hold dear. All we can do is try.

A Note on the Text

I presented an earlier, shorter version of this essay as a keynote talk at "Transnational American Studies Revisited," the 56th Annual Comparative Literature Symposium held at Texas Tech University, April 12-14, 2024, organized by Yuan Shu.

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