

Transnational Relations – Past, Present, and Future: The 2021 Postgraduate Forum

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The papers in this issue of *COPAS* are all contributions that were developed from presentations given at the annual conference of the 2021 Postgraduate Forum (PGF) of the German Association for American Studies (GAAS). This PGF conference was the first since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Originally it was planned as a hybrid event which would have taken place both in Stuttgart and online, affording doctoral students and early-career researchers in the German American Studies community a much-needed opportunity to reconnect in person, while also allowing those unable to travel the ability to attend online. However, a new wave of the pandemic hit Europe in the fall of 2021 and made a hybrid format impossible. Thus, the conference, which took place from December 2-3, 2021, was completely online.

It quickly became evident, however, that despite the pandemic, the inspiration and creativity of the postgraduates in American Studies had not been diminished in the slightest. The presentations were all illuminating; they dealt with the conference's theme of "Transnational Relations: Past, Present, and Future," in novel and interesting ways. The conference featured three panels, a workshop, and a roundtable discussion. The subjects of the panels were: (1) "The Transnational Turn"; (2) "Sociology and Politics"; and (3) "Re-Framing American Literary Studies." The workshop, titled "Creative Futures: Envisioning New Publication Formats," allowed participants to discuss what publishing means in an increasingly digital world; and finally, the roundtable focused on the possibility of finding "Careers Outside of Academia." This was chaired by Jana Keck, who led a conversation that included Sebastian Kubon from the University of Hamburg, Christiane Pyka from the German-American Center in Stuttgart, and Marcus Willand, from the University of Darmstadt. Both the workshop and the roundtable investigated new ways of thinking about how to apply academic skills to non-traditional pursuits and complemented the theme of "Transnational Relations" nicely, in that they were also interested in how an increasingly globalized world has changed the way we view academia in general.

The overarching theme of "Transnational Relations" felt especially relevant in the wake of the pandemic, which exposed the ways in which the world is intimately connected: A pandemic affecting the entire world made evident just how much issues that affect one country affect another; it also shed light on the extent to which inequities that exist in one nation state exist in similar ways in others; and finally, it showed how the post-colonial world and globalization

have macro effects that are reflected in individual countries worldwide. Thus, despite the fact that the first panel was titled “The Transnational Turn,” all the panels and papers presented at this conference were cognizant of this shift in American Studies, and as evidenced by this issue of *COPAS*, make good use of the discipline’s research done since.

The “Transnational Turn” in American Studies

Winfried Fluck informs us that, in its earliest conception, “American Studies, especially in Europe, might be characterized as a re-education project, because the main goal was to prove that the United States, the new world power and leader of the Western world, possessed a valuable culture of its own and could be considered mature and civilized enough for its new role” (61). This is to say that at first, as Philip J. Deloria and Alexander L. Olson write in *American Studies: A User’s Guide*, “the object of American Studies emerged out of the mutual relation between ‘American’ (as in the United States) and ‘culture’ (as in the expressions and sensibilities that seemed ‘American’)” (16). During these early years of American Studies, the focus of the discipline was thus concerned with “the exploration of family histories, places of origin, migration, local communities, material contexts, embodied experiences and situated forms of knowledge” (Durán 141).

The transnational turn in American Studies argues that any consideration of the United States (and the Americas in general) which does not analyze American Studies within a transnational framework is in danger of perpetuating ideas of American Exceptionalism—a concept which American Studies should never accept uncritically (Pease 17). Thus, important work in the late 1990s began what came to be known as a “transnational turn” in American Studies. In his December 2000 article, “The Transnational Turn: Rediscovering American Studies,” Robert A. Gross proposes considering “‘transnationalism’ as the latest move to alter an interdisciplinary field that has been radically remade in the last two decades, under the multicultural challenge” (377).

These ideas are echoed and made explicit in Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s now famous presidential address to the American Studies Association made on November 12, 2004, at its annual conference, in which she argued that:

The goal of American studies scholarship is not exporting and championing an arrogant, pro-American nationalism but understanding the multiple meanings of America and American culture in all their complexity. Today American studies scholars increasingly recognize that that understanding requires looking beyond the nation’s borders, and understanding how the nation is seen from vantage points beyond its borders. (20)

This led to some important innovations in the field, not least of which was the recentering of the focus of analysis. Winfried Fluck, Stefan Brandt, and Ingrid Thaler suggest that the transnational turn in American Studies has three major areas of focus (among others):

1.) cultural hybridities and border discourses (new structures of self-formation linked to changes in the cultural fabric of America), 2.) diasporic identities (the Black Atlantic as a

counter-movement to modernity), and 3.) transculturations (the Americanization of European culture and, vice versa, the Europeanization of American culture). (1)

Thus, we see how each of the three major focal points identified by Fluck et. al work toward the goal of challenging concepts of American Exceptionalism respectively. First, by studying cultural hybridities and borders, transnational American Studies challenges conventional concepts of what it means to be an American to begin with, thus eviscerating any essentialized notion of an American as a white European creation. Secondly, by understanding diasporic identities as a counter-movement to modernity—or as we might argue, following Toni Morrison’s proclamation that modernity begins with slavery (qtd. in Gilroy 178), as a counter-modernity— transnational American Studies sees America through a critical lens, a lens which is especially critical of American Exceptionalism. This is to say that transnational American Studies sees the United States as a land that is in constant need of critique by elements within and without it, elements which it has historically worked to exploit and oppress, and which it continues to exploit and oppress. Finally, by investigating the transculturations of America—the Americanization of Europe and the Europeanization of America (and we would go even further and say the Americanization of non-western countries and the adoption of non-western cultural traditions by America) —America cannot be considered any more exceptional than any other nation in this increasingly hybridized world. Thus, the transnational turn in American Studies is one in which American Studies fully hit its stride, as any transnational approach to American Studies is no longer purely American Studies, but rather a study of power, history, hegemony, and politics on a swiftly globalizing planet.

To that end, the papers in this special issue of *COPAS* take a transnational approach to American Studies and make use of sharp critical analyses in their discussion of various aspects of the American and the transnational in relation to the Americas. The contributions follow our panel topics and cover such areas as the transnational turn in American Studies, the political implications of transnational American Studies, and Literary Studies in a world dealing with the effects of climate change. This work is especially important now, as the United States sit on a precarious ledge of leaning halfway into despotism (January 6, 2021), as the Supreme Court rescinds the rights of half its population’s control over their own bodies (*Dobbs vs. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*), and as individual states systematically roll back the hard-won voting rights gains made by activists during the difficult battles of the Civil Rights Movement (*Shelby County v. Holder*). We hope that the papers in this issue of *COPAS* inspire future scholars of American Studies to consider even broader and more varied approaches to transnational American Studies.

COPAS 23.1 at a Glance

Emma Charlotte Weiher examines the work of the late poet Mary Oliver in her article, “‘Emerson, I am trying to live[...]the examined life’—The Transcendentalist Poet Mary Oliver.” Weiher reads Oliver’s work as neo-Transcendentalist, thus connecting the poet’s work back

to the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In doing so, Weiher shows how Oliver's work speaks to a world facing global climate issues. By reading Oliver through the concept of the Emersonian Over-Soul, Weiher sees Oliver's poetry as establishing a relationship between man, nature, and God that deeply intertwines human concerns with those of the environment. This relationship, Weiher argues, develops through acts of attention—what she reads as the “lens of attention” that establishes this connection more profoundly in the observer. This also leads her to read Oliver as a gender-neutral poet, as “identity remains as nebulous and unspecific as possible.” Moreover, Weiher connects Oliver's spirituality directly with the poetry in reading the work as a form of prayer and/or meditation. In doing so, she argues that Oliver brings the question of poetry directly in line with the question of environmental activism.

Fenja Heisig explores the transnational dimensions of travel writing in her article, “Travel Writing and Transnational Relations: Francis Lieber as *The Stranger in America*.” Heisig reads Lieber's travelogue *The Stranger in America* as a work that the author uses to situate himself between two worlds: the European and the American. She shows how Lieber, by claiming to do the work of examining America as an outsider, not only attempts to position himself as an objective outsider, but also, at the same time, to situate himself in American society in such a way as to be a new American himself. Through this somewhat tortured maneuvering, Lieber inadvertently becomes an early practitioner of transnational American Studies, and Heisig argues that Lieber can be said to be an early forerunner of American Studies in general. In her discussion of Lieber and his travelogue, Heisig examines questions of biography and autobiography in travel writing; she analyzes the travelogue as a genre in its own right; and she performs a close reading of Lieber's text. Central to Heisig's discussion are issues of identity and what it means to belong to a nation and to be somewhere in-between two nations, or to exist as a transnational being.

Does being US-American mean being White? Does it mean not being Black? Lisa Seuberth's article, “From Melville to Saunders: Using Liminality to Uncover US-American Racial Fantasies” provides a comparative analysis of Herman Melville's romance *Moby Dick* (1851) and George Saunders's fantastic ghost story *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017). Seuberth examines how these two novels, placed in socio-historical contexts that are more than 160 years apart, navigate through a specific kind of White supremacist discourse that Toni Morrison identified as “American Africanism.” The author first introduces liminality as a narrative strategy especially suited for the genre of the nineteenth-century romance and contemporary fantasy fiction. Seuberth subsequently shows how both works make use of liminality to reflect on Whiteness and anti-Blackness. The article argues that while both novels critically negotiate “the Africanist presence” as an equally liminal one, they differ in their endings. These more or less hopeful and promising endings, Seuberth argues, portray a persistent struggle to envision a post-White-supremacist future. At the same time, it is contemporary fiction that reminds us to not stop believing in and imagining better futures and better worlds.

In her paper “‘Distribution is the Key’: Transatlantic Networks of Audiopoetry in the Postwar Era,” Ulla Stockmann investigates the formation of a postwar audio scene, with a special focus

on the distribution channels of spoken poetry via cassettes and LPs. Stockmann delineates how, from the 1950s to the 1980s, innovative audio technologies provided a platform to reconsider conventionalized artistic practices, and how they facilitated more immediate expressions of poetry and performance. As a case study, Stockmann examines the communication between the German label *S Press Tonbandverlag* and the audio magazines *Audio Arts* (London, UK), and *Black Box* (Washington D.C.). She argues that their correspondence exemplifies that the postwar audio scene was not organized along national lines but constituted a transnational network of artists sharing and discussing their audio poetry. Stockmann's research thereby provides new perspectives on the significant work of small postwar audio labels as hitherto rarely explored practices that contributed to a medial reorientation of poetry in the twentieth century.

Annika M. Schadewaldt's article "Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* and the Zany Postwar Novel" advocates for a new understanding of the text as zany, "a writing style of 'desperate playfulness' that is characterized by its ludicrous imitation." In opposition to previous literary analyses of the novel, Schadewaldt identifies the text's formal inconsistencies and bizarre mix of comedy and exhaustion as inherent components of its aesthetic agenda. The paper argues that Bellow's use of meandering plot lines, intertextuality, and comical imitation points to the changing role of the American literary field post-1945. According to Schadewaldt, it is the protagonist's satirical mimicking of Ernest Hemingway, one of the 'grandmasters' of modernist literature, that exemplifies Bellow's resentment toward the literary system, and the distinct self-fashioning of American literature in the global arena. Schadewaldt's article thereby not only offers a new conclusive reading of *Henderson the Rain King* as a zany postwar novel but contextualizes Bellow's polarizing text as a reaction toward a misled self-conception of American modernism abroad.

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We would also like to express our gratitude to the GAAS for continuing to support the PGF and the efforts of (post)graduate students and early-career scholars in the field of German American Studies. We are particularly thankful to Marc Priewe for his support and guidance throughout the process of putting the conference together. Along with Marc Priewe, we are grateful to the University of Stuttgart for their support of the conference and their help in our planning it as a hybrid event, even if that ultimately was not possible.

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We are also pleased to announce that we have now officially handed over the PGF responsibilities to Team Regensburg, which consists of Verena Baier, Markus Diepold, Lena Gotteswinter, Tamara Heger, Bill Henderson, Christian Knittl, Jon Matlack, Efthalia Prokopiou, Katharina Röder, and Jiann-Chyng Tu. We are excited to see what they do with the PGF conference in 2022, as they carry on the transnational tradition with their conference theme, “Remembering: Transnational Memory Cultures and American Studies.” It is sure to be another inspired event, which will undoubtedly lead to more illuminating papers on the transnational turn in American Studies.

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