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A New Beginning? Transnationalisms

Winfried Fluck

IN RECENT YEARS, DEBATES ABOUT the theory and method of American studies have gone in a new direction called transnational American studies. This transnational project can be seen as a response to an impasse that prior approaches in American studies had reached. Analyses of American society and culture by the New Americanists had been carried to a point where subjection by means of interpellation through the nation-state seemed to be all pervasive, so that resistance had to resort to ever more marginalized subject positions as possible sources of disinterpellation. At this point, transnationalism could become the logical next step in what may be seen as a story of continuous retreat, “because all other options to find a point of resistance within the U.S. have been critically unmasked and dismissed.”¹ Since the search for subject positions that would not yet be subject to the power-effects of interpellation had already led to border regions and intercultural spaces, why not go beyond the border altogether into spaces like the Southern hemisphere, the Pacific Rim, or the transatlantic world, or still even further, to reconfigure the object of analysis as global or planetary?

The relief in the field at the transnational turn has inspired a set of narratives about new beginnings. Transnationalism promises a regeneration of the field and its long overdue liberation from what Amy Kaplan has called the tenacious grasp of American exceptionalism. Almost all approaches within the field of American studies share this view, intellectual history as well as social history, critical race and gender studies as well as liberal multiculturalism, New Americanists as well as aesthetically minded literary scholars (if there are still any left). One of the key components of this “cutting-edge” consensus is the assumption that the term transnationalism has a commonly shared meaning and that when we use the term, we refer to the same phenomenon and procedure: to pursue a transnational approach means to go beyond the borders of the nation-state as an object of analysis. In an age of globalization, such a project is obviously timely and the description of transnational studies as a bold step across borders is ideally suited to serve as a common-sense legitimation.

Indeed, there is an eminently commonsensical dimension to claims for a transnational perspective. It is certainly true, for example, that “nation-states were never as politically self-contained as their leaders represented them to be.”² Consequently, “an American-centered view of the USA, understanding the US as a *sui generis* formation is insufficient to understand the US past or present; such an understanding requires constant attention to the entanglement of the USA in the world and of the world in the USA.”³ The nation and other historical phenomena we examine must thus be “resituated in larger contexts because the movements of people, money, knowledges, and things are not contained by single political units.”⁴ This flow of ideas includes agendas of reform, such as abolition, women’s rights, and labor unionism.⁵ Immigration, too, can now be seen for what it always was, namely a multidirectional movement. It seems reasonable to say, then, that an acknowledgment of transnational dimensions will “enhance our capacity to explain past and present social change.”⁶ Or, as Erika Lee and Naoko Shibusawa put it in reference to Asian American studies: “As the examples above show, a transnational framework deepens Asian American history and has allowed Asian Americanists to make their narratives more complex, nuanced, and historically accurate.”⁷

However, to describe the potential of an approach does not yet tell us for what purpose this potential is being used and what “more complex insights” we can expect when a transnational perspective is applied in concrete analyses. In the following essay, my question is therefore not whether transnational studies are, in principle, a good thing or not, but what uses are being made of this new perspective in American studies. Like any other term, transnationalism can acquire different meanings in different contexts, depending on the interests (in the hermeneutical as well as in the political sense) that motivate scholars to pursue this approach. It is thus not sufficient to discuss transnationalism merely as an interpretive procedure that is open-minded enough to go beyond the borders of the nation-state. A method or interpretive procedure is always used for certain purposes and always stands in the service of certain interests, so that a term like transnationalism can actually hide very different agendas. I think it is therefore time to move on in the discussion of transnational American studies, from the mere celebration of its potential (which should by no means be denied), to a closer look at its actual uses. There is not just one approach called transnationalism; there are several different versions of transnationalism that give different reasons for going beyond the borders of the nation-state and envision different rewards in doing so. The transnational can thus not be separated from the national from which it takes its point of departure.

In effect, one constitutes the other, and both remain interdependent. Seen from this perspective, transnational American studies, despite their own programmatic claims to go beyond the American nation-state, also imply theories for and about “America.” The transnational project is not just innocently aiming at a cosmopolitan broadening of interpretive horizons. It also pursues the goal of reconceptualizing America—that is, the very thing from which it apparently wants to escape or distance itself. Consciously or not, there is always—inevitably and always already—an underlying assumption at work about the current state, not only of American studies, but also of “America,” and this assumption will determine the direction in which a transnational approach is taken.

I have made a similar point about transnationalism before on the basis of my reading of what were then considered major theoretical statements on the new approach.⁸ In this essay, I want to look at concrete examples of historical and literary analyses with a transnational claim. For such an analysis, I can draw on a faculty seminar at the University of Richmond, funded by the Mellon Foundation, that brought together colleagues from eleven different disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities in order to develop new courses with a transnational perspective. In the seminar, we read transnational scholarship on such topics as race, slavery and empire, migration, Native Americans, social policies and reform movements, anthropology and the media, American art history, and American literature.⁹ It is a scholarship filled with transnational flows and movements,¹⁰ but also a literature that repeatedly provokes the question of why it is important to study these flows. The answer is usually provided by means of a narrative, and despite the surface appearance of a wide variety of original readings, there is, at a closer look, really only a limited number of narratives that are being told again and again. In analyzing these narratives, my goal is not to arrive at a normative definition of what the “right” kind of transnational studies are but to identify the underlying assumptions on which different versions are based and the interests they pursue. For that purpose, I will analyze those narratives that seem to me the currently dominant ones,¹¹ and in order to do this in a fairly systematic manner, I will discuss them in the context of two basic paradigms that I call aesthetic transnationalism and political transnationalism.¹²

Aesthetic Transnationalism

By the term aesthetic transnationalism, I do not necessarily mean a form of transnationalism that focuses on cultural or aesthetic objects

but one that describes transnational phenomena in terms of an enriching, revitalizing, sometimes almost intoxicating experience. In her essay "The Changing Landscape of American Studies in a Global Era," an essay that is of interest not for its substance but for its rhetoric, Caroline Levander provides an example when she highlights transnationalism's "essential dynamism" and then continues: "Geographic areas become dynamic, fluid, and multilayered research fields."¹³ This, in turn, has led transnationalism to methodological innovations to explore this "spatial and temporal dynamism" (29). In effect, transnationalism leads to accelerations of all kinds by opening up not only borders but also "rich" new archives, by transforming graduate education and by making "new research communities" "spring up," as Levander puts it. Honoring its obvious fascination with movement for its own dynamic sake, we may call this version of transnational studies turbotransnationalism. As represented by Levander in this particular essay, turbotransnationalism has hardly anything to say about the research agenda transnational American studies should pursue. Nevertheless, it is of interest for an analysis of narratives of transnationalism, because—and this is a key feature of aesthetic transnationalism in general—it forcefully articulates a promise of rejuvenation on two levels: a rejuvenation of the field and its "tired" practices, but also of the researcher who has been stuck in these old routines for too long. All of a sudden, there is hope for the field, and so for America, since other forms of aesthetic transnationalism extend the narrative of rejuvenation to include America itself.

The Presidential Address to the American Studies Association by Shelley Fisher Fishkin provides a case in point, as for example in the following quote: "The United States is and has always been a transnational crossroads of cultures . . . African, African American, and Eastern European musical traditions met and mixed in the United States to produce jazz, which travelled back to Europe to shape, among other things, a large swath of twentieth-century Czech poetry and the architecture of Le Corbusier. The story of these apparently 'American' phenomena—civil disobedience and jazz—are stories of transnational flow, as is the story of America itself."¹⁴ Transnationalism here focuses on the rich diversity of new and interesting objects that is produced by transnational encounters and exchange. It wants to recover a world of cultural cross-fertilization that holds the promise of fuller, more meaningful experiences—experiences that American studies have suppressed for too long and to their own disadvantage. By redirecting our attention to the fact that the "United States . . . has always been a transnational crossroads of culture," aesthetic transnationalism helps us to return to that plenitude and thereby also rejuvenates an America that has lost its multicultural vigor because of a narrow-minded nationalism.

Another example of this argument can be found in the most recent history of American art, coauthored by Angela Miller, Janet Berlo, Bryan Wolf, and Jennifer Roberts, entitled *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity*, and published in 2008 with great fanfare as a major revisionist history of art based on the idea of transnationalism. In the volume's theoretical self-description, we encounter the same aesthetic emphasis as in Fishkin's Presidential Address and find a similarly animated rhetoric, as, for example, in this quote taken from the introduction:

The visual arts articulate meeting points between cultures. New England silver and porcelain drew on Chinese decorative traditions; the crazy quilt was inspired by the crazed glazes on imported Japanese ceramics; the adobe building of northern New Mexico fused Native traditions of mud building with those brought to Spain by Muslims in the eighth century. Such processes were at work among European forms as well: mansions on plantations in Tidewater, Virginia, represent a migration of an architectural form from Italy to England to its overseas colonies, changing at each point in its global journey to accommodate local tastes and conditions.¹⁵

To be sure, more could be said about the mansions of slaveholders than that they represent a migration of architectural forms. But for the authors, the important point that made them temporarily disregard other aspects is that these forms can be seen as part of a chain that links porcelain, crazy quilts, adobe buildings, and planters' mansions as abundant evidence of America's transcultural roots—with the implication that American culture now appears richer, more diverse, and hence liberated from the confines of American exceptionalism. In aesthetic transnationalism, the word transnationalism is basically a code word for an America reinvigorated by an aesthetic plenitude made possible by cultural flow and exchange. Transnationalism here refers to an extension of the promises of diversity beyond national borders to arrive at fascinating new aesthetic objects that have emerged out of the contact of cultures.

When American culture is no longer explained on narrow national grounds but reconceptualized on the grounds of a multitude that extends beyond national borders, it can appear more creative and aesthetically much more interesting than the white WASP culture canonized by American exceptionalism. A "Puritan" culture gives way to a culture of sensuous abundance. Moreover, American culture gains a quasi in-built cosmopolitan dimension. It is now part of a happy global *mélange* in which it feels quite at home, because the global dominance of American culture receives an entirely new explanation: it can now be attributed to the fact that American culture is already in itself constituted by diversity

and has thus anticipated an international trend toward cosmopolitanism.¹⁶ Ironically enough, it is thus the transnational dimension that can provide American society with a new promise, perhaps even a sense of superiority, because the United States has made possible forms of cultural exchange that have not been possible to the same extent in other, less multicultural nations. As I have written in a different context, “America becomes a world leader again, but paradoxically enough, no longer as the America of American exceptionalism but as ‘Transnational America.’”¹⁷

The celebration of movement and diversity for their own sake is not restricted to literary or cultural analyses, however, and therefore aesthetic transnationalism is not restricted to the fields of literary and cultural studies. Consider, for example, the following description by Donna Gabaccia in her study *Italy's Many Diasporas*: “In New York and Buenos Aires, furthermore, the accents of Palermo, Naples, Bari, and Turin intermingled. In Stuttgart migrants heard Schwäbisch (the native Swabian dialect), and in the Ruhr the Polish accents of transplants from Germany’s eastern empire. In Paris, on Chicago’s North Side, or New York’s Elizabeth Street, migrants’ push-carts and shops offered familiar goods. In southern Brazil or northern Colorado, by contrast, a company store or plantation store offered the only wares, often in an unknown tongue.”¹⁸ Before considering a career move to Stuttgart, one should not lose sight of Los Angeles, however, as Henry Yu advises us: “I think of Los Angeles as an intersection on a larger grid. In this world, migration is a process without end, comings and goings rather than the singular leaving of one place and arriving at another by which we mythically understand the immigrant’s story. Los Angeles is one street corner, one intersecting node for many journeys.”¹⁹ There is poetry in the air here, the poetry of ever-renewed beginnings, of permanent movement, of never standing still, of the constant rebirth of an America that may yet regenerate itself by learning no longer from Las Vegas but from Los Angeles.

Johannes Völz has provided an astute analysis of the starting premise and normative base of this aesthetic transnationalism in an analysis of the recently published essay “Transnationalism: A Category of Analysis,” cowritten by Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick, and J. T. Way. As Völz claims, these authors suggest, as does Shelley Fisher Fishkin, that life is always already transnational when they describe their starting premise by saying, “Economics, politics, subjectification, and the family all exceed the nation.”²⁰ “If this is the case,” Völz argues, “what the category of the nation at the core of the signifying system does is to render these transnational dimensions invisible or inaccessible.”²¹ The nation-state has erected a border in the form of a dam that has cut off the water from the river, so to speak. To overcome this artificial barrier means to

get the water flowing again, to restore the river to its full nourishing life and beauty. The narrative of transnational rejuvenation is, therefore, also a narrative of enrichment and empowerment, and in this respect comes uncomfortably close to a neoliberal celebration of free flow. In fact, as Völz points out, it then becomes difficult to criticize a global, transnational flow of capital, commodities, and consumer goods directed by an exterritorialized capital, and transnationalism “is in danger of overlooking the extent to which it actually interacts with economic globalization” (18).

In all of the examples of aesthetic transnationalism discussed so far, the subjects are (actual or metaphorical) places: the United States in Fishkin’s case, planters’ mansions in the case of Miller and her collaborators, Italy’s many diasporas in Gabaccia’s text, and transnational street corners for Yu. But we also find narratives in aesthetic transnationalism in which the self is the hero. These are narratives in which transnationalism makes self-expansion possible and, by doing so, provides new possibilities of agency that were suffocated before and that may now be mobilized as protection against subjection by the nation-state. Often, these narratives are built on a basic dichotomy between identity formation in the nation-state, which is always associated with a stable, monolithic identity, and identity formation in a transnational world which promises to unsettle stable identities as a necessary precondition for regaining agency.

One such example in which transnationalism functions as a source of self-empowerment is the case of Black Atlantic religion, described in the book with the same title by J. Lorand Matory who says in his introduction, “I have chosen to tell a story about the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé not simply because it presents some of the most beautiful spectacles of black divinity in the world but also because it illustrates black ingenuity under duress, an ingenuity that created its transnational, trans-imperial, and transoceanic networks before the word ‘transnationalism’ was ever known.”²² Transnationalism, in other words, was there before the nation-state, and if this original transnational dimension is recovered, then the self can recover crucial resources to protect himself successfully against the nation-state’s impositions. But even when the nation-state is already in place and no borderless past can be regained, transnational subjects like the Chinese-American “cosmopolitan entrepreneur” Hong Sling were able to forge a new kind of agency and subjectivity because of their skillful use of transnationality, as Mae Ngai has pointed out in her response to the Presidential Address of Shelley Fisher Fishkin.²³

Political Transnationalism

Narratives of transnational agency already point to a second interpretive frame in current transnational American studies that may be called political transnationalism. By using this term, I do not want to imply that some things are political and others are not. However, in many cases transnationalism is not used to outline a new aesthetic configuration (which undoubtedly has political implications) but to envision new ways of political change. This political transnationalism may also be called transnational radicalism, because it is an extension of cultural radicalism beyond the nation-state.²⁴ This body of work is strongly influenced by the New Americanists. Because Americans are interpellated into an exceptionalist national identity by the American nation-state, including the disenfranchised who should actually be offering resistance, the only remaining political hope lies in an effect of disidentification that catapults the subjected individual out of interpellation. Transnational studies could be this catapult, or, at least, it could be the study of how this catapult works.

As far as I can see, there are two models competing with each other on the basis of this premise. One envisions a move beyond the borders of the nation-state to “collectivities not subsumed by the nation-state—whether the borderlands, the Black Atlantic, the Pacific Rim, the American hemisphere, diasporic communities, or urban networks.”²⁵ Such a move will increase the size of those on the margins who have not been interpellated, because they have been excluded from the American nation-state to start with.²⁶ If one considers the work of Saskia Sassen, one could add “new types of political actors,” such as illegal immigrants or “the disadvantaged in global cities,” who, in Sassen’s view “can gain ‘presence’ in their engagement with power, but also vis-à-vis each other.”²⁷ To link up with these groups via transnational studies can thus strengthen social movements for political and social change by adding new political actors.²⁸

Examples are plentiful in the current transnational literature.²⁹ In an essay on “New Orleans and Transamerican Catastrophe, 1866/2005,” Anna Brickhouse calls Hurricane Katrina “a paradigmatically transamerican event” and then explores “the possibilities of transnational political alliance across racial lines,” “a politics of transnational affiliation and collaboration” for which the bilingual African American daily newspaper *La Tribune de la Nouvelle Orleans* served as an exemplary medium.³⁰ In a similar vein, Rebecca Scott in “The Atlantic World and the Road to *Plessy v. Ferguson*” concludes: “It is common to view the *Plessy* challenge as quixotic and to see the defeat in court as a coda, formalizing the end of

a battle long lost. But if we look at Louisiana as part of a larger Gulf of Mexico, we see that for the *Plessy* activists the claim to rights and standing was part of an ongoing and multinational struggle.³¹ Transnational solidarity is also the focus of Shari Huhndorf's recent book *Mapping the Americas: The Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture*, in which she defines transnationalism as referring to "alliances among tribes and the social structures and practices that transcend their boundaries" and envisions the possibility of "global political alliances," including "the possibilities that transnationalism creates for indigenous feminism."³²

Huhndorf could have referred to a growing literature focusing on "transnational indigenous activists" (Muehlebach 241) and a feisty "transnational indigenous movement" (244), or to the concept of indigenous cosmopolitanism, as it has been developed by Robin DeLugan and others in order to evoke a shared social imaginary of contemporary indigeneity.³³ For this political transnationalism, the goal is the extension of the new, post-1960's social movements in the United States beyond national borders in order to find new allies, now on a transnational basis.³⁴ And as is the case in the new social movements within the United States, the most frequently invoked common ground for bringing these potential allies together is not class interests but the misrecognition of otherness, and, hence, the denial of full equal rights and full equal recognition.

In their study *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States*, the authors Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Christina Szanton Blanc pin their hopes on the "transnational" transformation of immigrants into migrants as a possible source of resistance: "Within the situations of political and economic domination and racial and cultural differentiation, building transnational social fields and imagining a deterritorialized nation-state can be seen as a form of resistance on the part of Caribbean and Filipino immigrants."³⁵ To be sure, "the issue of resistance is a complex one," since "subordinated populations may internalize many of the meanings and representations that pervade their daily surroundings." But "that internalization remains partial and incomplete" and transmigration can be an important source of undermining it. Thus, in their conclusion the authors can focus "on two hegemonic constructs, race and deterritorialization, by which transmigrants resist and re-appropriate nation building processes even as they accommodate to situations of power." Transnational movement allows migrant workers and other marginalized or subaltern groups to resist internalization at least partially and thereby to become political and social actors again. In doing so, they can become potential political allies in the struggle against the power of the American nation-state.

Nations Unbound is a theoretically ambitious book that moves in the direction of a second version of political transnationalism, for which political progress cannot simply be achieved by going beyond the borders in search of other political actors and a comforting sense of international solidarity. Transnationalism, in this second version of political transnationalism, is the counterprogram to the state of exception that characterizes the American nation-state and manifests itself in the formation of a national identity that is based on racialization, violent exclusion, or enforced deterritorialization. In this context, Donald Pease has presented his own powerful version of transnational studies exemplified by the figure of C. L. R. James who, in 1952, was accused of leftist political activities and was deported to Ellis Island: "Rather than categorizing him under any of the legal positions—resident alien, national subject, prospective citizen—through which colonial immigrants were empowered to exercise their rights and liberties, the state's dis-interpellation rendered James subject to the force of the law but deprived of the rights and privileges of a legal human subject. . . . After the state pronounced him a security threat, James underwent a drastic change in juridical status that might be described as dis-interpellation."³⁶ This experience of dis-interpellation made James discover new subject positions in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, which he then described in his study *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*: "In adding accounts of the knowledges produced by mariners and renegades on Ellis Island at the conclusion of his interpretation of Melville, James imagined a different ending for the crew on board the *Pequod*," and thereby transformed the ending of *Moby-Dick* into a heroic narrative which could no longer be integrated within a Cold War narrative. Instead, it goes beyond America and unites the outsiders of the world in a new kind of transnational communality: "James thereby directly linked these alternative forms of literary production to the international social movements whose imperatives they corroborated" (31–32). The state of exception has created a man of exception, the outsider "in-between" nation-states who has managed to transform trauma into a source of disinterpellation, and in doing so, has been able to envision a new international communality constituted by "transnational" subject positions.

Transnational Identities: The Politics of Transnational American Studies

Transnational flow and exchange is not always and not automatically benign, as such phenomena as slavery, eugenics, or, more recently,

neoliberal economics demonstrate. Moreover, as Amy Kaplan reminds us, empire also is “a form of transnationalism.”³⁷ There is, however, in current transnational American studies very little acknowledgment that a rhetoric of flow and transnational communities may mirror and reinforce a neoliberal ideology. It is striking to what extent this transnationalism avoids references to globalization as a new world order that may also undermine visions of a happy postnational communality. Critics have repeatedly pointed out affinities between the free-flow ideology of globalization and transnationalism, but so far transnational American studies have not been very interested in analyzing these affinities. The reason may be that they are still responding to a different set of problems that reflects the close connection between a post-1960s revisionism in American studies and the new social movements in the United States. Even in 2009 that agenda seems to remain unchanged, as Janice Radway points out in the introduction to a new American studies reader: “As a result, some of the newest work in American Studies focuses on the ways racialization and gender and sex discrimination have been fundamental to the construction of the American national subject.”³⁸

Radway’s characterization of “the newest work in American Studies” can be a useful point of departure for another look at transnational American studies in terms of its political agenda—a politics that aesthetic and political transnationalism share, although they take different routes to pursue it. From this perspective, the main interest of the transnational American studies I have discussed does not lie in the phenomenon of transnational flow itself, but in how it affects the question of identity. One may even go one step further and claim that it is not a matter of how transnationalism affects the nation-state but how it affects identity formation in the nation-state. Thus, for Dirlik transnationalism “is not just about going beyond the nation, or across national boundaries, which is neither a new phenomenon nor a novel analytical idea.”³⁹ Instead, the relevant fact about transnationalism is its potential for forging new identities: “Transnationalism, in other words, raises basic questions about the meaning of national belonging and identification, or cultural identity, when a population is dispersed broadly spatially, following different historical trajectories in different locations. It also assigns a formative power to encounters between people of different and national backgrounds, who are transformed by the encounters in different ways” (296).

The interesting question that emerges at this point is: if the nation-state shapes identities decisively by engendering and racializing them, what kind of identities do we get when we go transnational? In her Presidential Address “What’s in a Name,” Janice Radway comes up with

the idea of an Inter-American Studies Association, because “if the field were organized in this way, it might better foster the study of non-national and transnational forms of identity construction. . . . It might seek to foster fluidity and flexibility in a mobile, always changing subject who lives both here and there, in the present and in the past, for the future and for others.”⁴⁰ Interestingly, this liberation from the entrapment of a national identity is no longer tied to multicultural concepts such as hybridity or *mestizaje*—possibly because their blending of two or more identities can still be said to lead to a third position. In contrast, Radway seems to want to go all the way by accelerating the movement between subject positions. Her vision is one of flow and flexibility in which the individual is constantly in movement and no longer tied to any subject position that may define and trap her. As Charles Bright and Michael Geyer point out, this accelerated mobility can be seen as the most promising way of preventing identification: “Subjectivities become less fixed and more fluid as people assemble meanings and identity from everywhere (and nowhere).”⁴¹ And this means that “Flexibility, migration, and relocations, instead of being coerced or resisted, have become practices to strive for rather than stability.”⁴²

Transnational spaces, then, are of special interest for transnational American studies, because they can be considered privileged spaces for unsettling stable identities. And the political promise of this unsettling is that flexible identities make agency possible again. We can see here a consequence of the power analysis of cultural radicalism. Its starting point is the claim that in modernity state power is no longer exercised primarily through coercion but through subject formation by means of interpellation. How, then, can one hope to regain agency for subjected subjects? Traumatic disinterpellation is one way but not the dominant one offered in transnational American studies. The more frequent response is a vision of disidentificatory mobility that opens up the possibility of an individual transformation. In fact, one may look at the narratives of aesthetic and political transnationalism as two different scripts for achieving such a transformation. Sometimes, as in turbotransnationalism, it is achieved simply by pulling the individual scholar out of professional routines in which she has settled all too comfortably. Transnationalism promises to liberate her from this routine by putting her on the path to new professional adventures, such as the discovery of new archives, new technological possibilities, and trips to Morocco and China. A related promise is made or implied by those forms of aesthetic transnationalism that praise movements of peoples and ideas for their own sake, as if movement were a good thing in itself. But the reason why it is good is that it prevents the individual from being arrested in one confining identity.

In aesthetic transnationalism, the main goal is to recover a transcultural dimension of America in which national barriers of exclusion are erased, so that what we get is a freedom from artificially imposed constraints, a radical egalitarianism without borders, so to speak. The solution here seems to lie in the return to a prior and “natural” transcultural condition before and beyond the nation-state. The American nation-state and its regimes of identity formation have obscured this prior condition by means of an exceptionalist narrative of American self-creation. Literary and cultural studies can play their part in deconstructing this exceptionalist myth by drawing attention to a transcultural reality. They do not even face an uphill battle in doing so. All they have to do is to point out the transnational dimension of cherished cultural artefacts, so that people realize that they have admired transnational phenomena all along. The dominant rhetorical mode in aesthetic transnationalism is therefore that of a revelation of things forgotten or suppressed. This is the imaginary rebirth of a utopian America, albeit newly, that is, “transnationally” defined. In the vibrant gestalt patterns of nodal intersections, “America” itself becomes an aesthetic object with the potential to rejuvenate and transform identities. This presentation of long ignored riches as exciting rediscoveries draws on a basic promise of literary studies and aesthetic theory: the claim that the encounter with an aesthetically rich object will have a transformative effect—on the recipient as well as on the recipient’s culture and society as a whole.

Political transnationalism, on the other hand, cannot resort to a forgotten state of plenitude. Its point of departure is precisely the opposite: an America defined as a continuing state of exception for which American exceptionalism provides the ideological cover-up and against which transnationalism may therefore provide an effective political antidote. The antidote consists in a transformation of identity (and the process of identity formation) that can be achieved in two ways. One way consists of what David Gutiérrez calls the “transnationalizing” of the identities of people “who habitually travel through the social spaces transformed by transnational trends.” Linked with that movement is the creation of a third space as an unstable, interstitial social place, where “marginalized people have forged new identities in reaction to, and often in opposition to, their marginalization.”⁴³ For Kevin Bruyneel, what he calls the third space of sovereignty also transcends an “imperial binary” and thus helps “indigenous people to give their political identity and agency fuller expression, one that is less constrained by colonial impositions.”⁴⁴

The other way of reconstituting identity in political transnationalism is via collective action and experiences of solidarity. Contrary to expectations, this promise did not really materialize in the fragmented

political world of the new social movements in the United States, but transnationalism seems to open up the chance of another and this time more successful try. For Gutiérrez, for example, the first steps of political activism in the third space “provided critical templates for a new kind of multiracial, multiethnic, transnational politics that are currently reverberating with much greater force among an increasing number of ethnic Mexican and Latino community activists.”⁴⁵ The quote is instructive, because in its juxtaposition of a “multiracial, multiethnic, transnational politics” and its positive impact on ethnic Mexican and Latino activists it inadvertently draws attention to an interesting conceptual difference to earlier forms of movement activism. Despite the use of multicultural terms, the new political collective envisioned in political transnationalism is no longer that of a coalition on the model of the rainbow coalition, but an extension of one’s own group—African American internationalism, feminist internationalism, hemispheric Latino internationalism, cosmopolitan indigeneity, etc. Instead of looking for other groups that may be willing to join a political coalition, one can now hope to solve the problem by an extension of one’s own group. And the ultimate result, again, will be one of individual transformation, because a transnational politics, by “reverberating” among activists, provides something that social movements of the old, pretransnational variety could not offer, namely an imaginary investment in a “multiracial, multiethnic, transnational politics,” and, hence, a new cosmopolitan identity.

However, one should add that in political transnationalism, envisioning the liberation of the subject from interpellation by the nation-state is not restricted to collective action and political internationalism. In the New Americanist version of transnationalism, as I have presented it here, the final goal (and promise) is also that of a liberation, but in this case through a complicated trajectory in which exterritorialization or other forms of exclusion compel the subject to work through a trauma in a way that can result in an effect of disinterpellation.⁴⁶ Disinterpellation here is hard won: in his recent book *The New American Exceptionalism*, Pease devotes chapters to the Gulf War, the Oklahoma City bombing, the Patriot Act, Homeland Security, Abu Ghraib, and the protests of Cindy Sheehan, that is, events in which the state of exception is highlighted in an especially dramatic (and traumatic) manner.

In the final analysis, what we encounter in these visions of new transnational identities is, surprisingly, a modernist narrative, albeit revamped for present times. Modernism, we recall, promised to shake us out of our habits by means of defamiliarization in order to negate the instrumental rationality of modernity. The contemporary American studies equivalent of modernism’s idea of habit is the stable and unified

identity. Transnational American studies want to provide conceptual tools for unsettling these stable and unified identities, no longer by defamiliarization, however, but by movement, sometimes benign and sometimes enforced, yet always undermining the stability of national identity formation. Movement can generate a multiplication of identities and thus subvert subjection by adding new subject positions; potentially it may even contribute to the creation of new subjectivities. The classical modernist model of individual transformation was a response to experiences of bourgeois immobility; the new, transnational one can be seen as response to a global world in which the individual needs to be flexible and mobile in order to still be of use. As it has been argued, such a flexibility can also be seen, not as subversion of the political system but, on the contrary, as adaptation to a neoliberal logic in which movements of peoples and ideas are now the instruments of a new order of global capital.

Are movement and flow really sufficient to undermine national identity formation? In an essay written for an international project on transnational studies, I have shown how the German-American artist Emanuel Leutze used a whole array of transnational sources when he created his famous painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* during his extended stay in Duesseldorf/Germany: for his view of history, he drew on Hegelianism; iconographically, he borrowed from a long tradition of European history painting; and politically, he responded to the failed German revolution of 1848. At a closer, “transnational” look, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* is really a comment on that failed revolution.⁴⁷ The painting was therefore first exhibited in Germany, but when Leutze took it to the United States, it was appropriated by Americans as a gratifying image of national self-definition. Leutze, who had been born in Germany but grew up in the United States, easily crossed national borders and his work provides an interesting case of continuous transnational exchange. However, the result was not the deconstruction of exceptionalist images but, quite on the contrary, their even more powerful reinstatement. Obviously, a transnational perspective, or a position “in-between” nations, cannot automatically provide what current transnational American studies would like to claim, namely a progressive politics.

The forms of transnationalism that are currently dominant in American studies are not a new beginning, then. On the contrary, the main project remains that of a struggle against interpellation by the U.S.-American nation-state in order to construct new identities. In most of the cases presented here, transnational American studies have merely extended long-dominant paradigms beyond borders, and by doing so, they have created the false impression, perhaps also to their practitioners, that they

are doing something new and potentially revolutionary. The perspective may be new, but the project in whose service it stands is familiar, because it has dominated American studies over the last decades. It is the agenda of the new social movements that has been an important force of emancipation in the United States, but that has also had some problematic consequences for work in American studies. I am thinking, above all, of the tendency to reduce questions of power to questions of identity formation; of the continuing reliance on the concept of interpellation for explaining identity-formation, a concept that is constantly criticized, revised, and modified but hardly ever replaced as a model; of the tendency to reduce identity formation to racialization and engendering, perhaps because these are phenomena where the concept of interpellation can be most convincingly applied; and correspondingly a mythology of the marginalized and excluded who have become exemplary reference points for envisioning disidentificatory mobility and subject positions "in-between."

For literary and cultural analyses in American studies, this focus on identity formation has meant that concepts of identity and subject positioning have remained central in literary interpretations, without, however, ever clarifying the relation between fictional texts and identity, or between the reading experience and identity formation. In all of these instances, the transnational sphere is conceived as a privileged counterspace to the nation-state, although it is a sphere which is in itself dominated by imperial designs, social conflicts, the "free play" of an increasingly mobile capital, and other manifestations of economic and political power. For an outside observer, the most surprising thing about current transnational American studies in the United States is that they hardly focus on such transnational reconfigurations of power. The long-term prospect of transnational American studies may be to enhance our knowledge and capture the full complexity of America's international entanglement, but the short-term goal seems to take up the question of identity-formation again and extend it to elusive transnational identities.

In a way, I am arguing against my own interests here. Clearly, transnationalism has been good to me and other American studies scholars from outside the United States. Before, when we came to the United States, we were poor relatives, now we are sought-after messengers from another world who seem to possess the magical power of leading Americans into a new age of cosmopolitanism. And there is indeed an important gain in international exchange for which the term cosmopolitanism may be an appropriate word. We cannot have enough of such encounters. However, I have not been talking about the institutional level here, but about a possible reconceptualization of the field of American studies. On that

level, it seems to me that the current versions of transnational American studies, useful as they may be in complementing and extending existing approaches, can also be seen as a new way of running away from the challenge of critically analyzing American history and culture in a way that goes beyond the identity agenda of the new social movements. The good thing about transnational American studies is that it allows us to look at the United States no longer in an insular way but in terms of international embeddedness. But that is not yet progress in itself. It all depends on what conclusions we draw from this embeddedness. And this means that we will have to continue examining the uses to which transnationalism is put.

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NOTES

- 1 Winfried Fluck, "Inside and Outside: What Kind of Knowledge Do We Need? A Response to the Presidential Address," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2007): 26.
- 2 Daniel T. Rodgers, "Worlds of Reform," in *America on the World Stage: A Global Approach to U.S. History*, ed. Gary W. Reichard and Ted Dickson (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2008), 148.
- 3 Arif Dirlik, "American Studies in the time of Empire," *Comparative American Studies* 2, no. 3 (2004): 287.
- 4 Thomas Bender, "The *La Pietra* Report: Project on Internationalizing the Study of American History (Excerpt)," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 48, no. 1 (2003): 33.
- 5 Rodgers, "Worlds of Reform," 148–49.
- 6 Bender, "The *La Pietra* Report," 33.
- 7 Erika Lee and Naoko Shibusawa, "Guest Editor's Introduction: What is Transnational Asian American History? Recent Trends and Challenges," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8, no. 3 (2005): xii.
- 8 Fluck, "Theories of American Culture (and the Transnational Turn in American Studies)," in *Romance with America? Essays on Culture, Literature, and American Studies* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2009), 69–85; "American Literary History and the Romance with America," *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (2009): 1–18; "Inside and Outside," 23–32.
- 9 I want to thank my colleagues at the University of Richmond for bringing this rich literature to my attention.
- 10 In her Presidential Address "What's in a Name," Janice Radway at one point suggests the possibility of renaming the American Studies Association as the Inter-American Studies Association, because "by focusing on transnational American social and cultural relations, inter-American studies could foster the investigation of regional cultural flows, of peoples, ideas, institutions, movements, and products" (62). This can be seen as an exemplary programmatic statement. "What's in a Name? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association," *American Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1999): 1–32; repr.: *The Futures of American Studies*, ed. Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2002), 45–75.
- 11 Of course, there are always more convincing and less convincing versions of any narrative. This does not change the fact that as interpretive strategies both kinds are grounded in a set of assumptions about what transnationalism should be. Because of this

theoretical focus, I am not aiming at a discussion of the merits or flaws of individual interpretations. The fact that there are always good or bad versions of a particular approach is no argument against the necessity of looking at the premises by which the approach itself is constituted. As Rita Felski puts it: "Theory simply is the process of reflecting on the underlying frameworks, principles, and assumptions that shape our individual acts of interpretation"; *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 2. Instead of going through an endless array of individual interpretations, it remains crucial for any field and approach to analyze the patterns of explanation that emerge from these interpretations.

12 In their introduction to a special issue on transnationalism of the *Journal of Asian American Studies*, Lee and Shibusawa provide a useful differentiation of transnational projects by distinguishing between the conceptual frames "transnational," "global," "international," and diaspora. However, very different projects can be pursued in diaspora studies, for example. Differentiating the field according to different objects of analysis does not yet clarify the research agendas in whose service analyses of these different objects stand.

13 Caroline Levander, "The Changing Landscape of American Studies in a Global Era," in *Working Together or Apart: Promoting the Next Generation of Digital Scholarship: Report of a Workshop cosponsored by the Council on Library and Information Resources and the National Endowment for the Humanities* (Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2009), 27–33.

14 Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Crossroads of Culture: The Transnational Turn in American Studies. Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004," *American Quarterly* 57 (2005): 43. Shelley Fisher Fishkin has been a major force in internationalizing American Studies, and I certainly do not want to put her achievements in question. As I already said at the beginning, my purpose is not to criticize individual interpretations but to analyze the narratives and explanatory patterns that are currently dominant in transnational American studies. This goes for all scholars whose work I discuss in this essay, many of which have been important pioneers in the field.

15 Angela Miller, Janet Berlo, Bryan J. Wolf, and Jennifer L. Roberts, *American Encounters, Art, History, and Cultural Identity* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, Prentice Hall, 2008), xii.

16 For another way in which the charge of Americanization can be rejected by a reference to transnationalism, see Kristin L. Hoganson who argues in her book *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2007): "But the fundamental premise of this book is that the traditional choice of subjects has advanced the Americanization-of-the-world-argument while deflecting attention from the globalization of the United States" (10).

17 Fluck, "Theories," 70.

18 Donna Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2000), 100.

19 Henry Yu, "Los Angeles and American Studies in a Pacific World of Migrations," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2004): 531.

20 Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick, and J.T. Way, "Transnationalism: A Category of Analysis," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2008): 642.

21 Johannes Völz, "Utopias of Transnationalism and the Neoliberal State," *Transnational American Studies*, ed. Winfried Fluck, Donald Pease, and John Carlos Rowe (Lebanon, NH: Univ. of New England Presses, 2011), 362. In my view, Wai Chee Dimock's vision of planetary studies provides another version of aesthetic transnationalism. As Susan M. Ryan has argued in a review of Dimock's *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Time*, the "book's astonishing proliferation of spatial metaphors" adds up to a "non-hierarchical and multi-directional conception of global literary / cultural interpenetration" that is modelled after aesthetic avant-garde models: "The literary relations Dimock charts are described as 'connective issues' (3), 'a densely interactive fabric' (5), 'tangled pathways'

(80), 'cross-stitched and gyrating paths' (91), 'sinuous fiber' (166), 'pits and bumps' (78), 'loops and layers of filiation' (78), 'fractals' (77–84), and 'coils' (80). "Blood and Treasure: A Response to Eric Lott," *American Literary History* 20, no. 1–2 (2008): 129. However, one should add that Dimock's version does not aim at a regeneration of America but at a transcendence of America provided by world literature (which could also solve America's problems).

22 James Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Condomblé* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), 3.

23 Mae M. Ngai, "Transnationalism and the Transformation of the 'Other': Response to the Presidential Address," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 59–65.

24 In political radicalism, dominant until the late 1960s in critical theories, there are still institutions like progressive political parties or the labor unions or the student movement or simply the institution of art that hold a promise for resistance or negation against "the system." In cultural radicalism, typified by poststructuralism, new historicism, race and gender studies, and the New Americanists, such hopes are rejected as liberal self-delusions, because for this type of radicalism the actual source of power does not lie in the power of particular institutions but in culture and its processes of subject formation. For a more extensive discussion of these two forms of radicalism, see my essay "The Humanities in the Age of Expressive Individualism and Cultural Radicalism," in *The Futures of American Studies*, ed. Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2002), 211–30.

25 Amy Kaplan, "Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today. Presidential Address to the American Studies Association," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2004): 12.

26 In such visions of transnational agency, the image is often that of various local streams flowing into a river that then swells to an imposing size, as, for example, in the following passage from Rodgers's essay "Worlds of Reform": "Other networks played a key role in the mobilization of the postwar civil rights movements, joining local struggles in the United States with anti-imperial movements in Gandhi's India and postcolonial Africa. Transnational social networks linked the student movements of the 1960s, as they do the environmental, human rights, anti WTO, and anti-sweatshop movements of our own day" (155).

27 Saskia Sassen, "The Repositioning of Citizenship: Emergent Subjects and Spaces for Politics," *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 61.

28 As Richard Ivan Jobs argues in his essay "Youth Movements: Travel, Protest, and Europe in 1968," this happened already with the student and youth movements of the 1960s: "In the late 1960s, international youth movements, in the sense of both mobility and activism, crossed national borders repeatedly. . . . An alternative community was developing on the basis of informal interchanges and transnational cooperation." *American Historical Review* 114 (2009): 378.

29 Apart from the essays discussed here, see also John Carlos Rowe, ed., *Post Nationalist American Studies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2000) as an example of this form of political transnationalism.

30 Anna Brickhouse, "'L'Ouragan des Flammes' ('The Hurricane of Flames'): New Orleans and Transamerican Catastrophe, 1866/2005," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (2007): 1097–1127.

31 Rebecca J. Scott, "The Atlantic World and the Road to Plessy v. Ferguson," *American Historical Review* 94, no. 3 (2007): 731.

32 Shari Huhndorf, *Mapping the Americas: The Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2009), 2, 13.

33 Andrea Muehlebach, "What Self in Self-Determination: Notes from the Frontiers of Transnational Indigenous Activism," *Identities* 10, no. 2 (2003): 241, 244. Robin Maria

Delugan, "Indigeneity Across Borders: Hemispheric Migrations and Cosmopolitan Encounters," *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 1 (2010): 83–97.

34 Sidney Tarrow, too, sees "a structure of opportunities for transnational activists" and envisions "transnational campaigns and movement organizations." From this perspective, "internationalism provides an opportunity structure within which transnational activism can emerge." *The New Transnational Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), 3, 6, 8.

35 Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Christina Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound. Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1994), 46.

36 Donald E. Pease, "From American Literary Studies to Planetary Literature: The Emergence of Literary Extraterritoriality," *REAL* 23 (2007): 9–35.

37 Kaplan, "Violent Beginnings," 10.

38 Radway, "Introduction," *American Studies: An Anthology*, ed. Janice Radway, Kevin K. Gaines, Barry Shanks, and Penny Van Eschen (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 4.

39 Dirlik, "American Studies," 295.

40 Radway, "What's in a Name," 64.

41 Charles Bright and Michael Geyer, "Where in the World is America? The History of the United States in the Global Age," in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2002), 70.

42 Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1999), 19. For Ong, transnational mobility means "that there is a new mode of constructing identity, as well as new modes of subjectification that cut across political borders" (18). And although she concedes that "the disciplinary norms of capitalism and culture also constrain and shape strategies of flexible subject making" (19), her fascination with "flexible" subject-positioning is unmistakable.

43 David G. Gutiérrez, "Migration, Emergent Ethnicity, and the 'Third Space': The Shifting Politics of Nationalism in Greater Mexico," *Journal of American History*, 86, no. 2 (1999): 488, n. 13.

44 Kevin Bruyneel, *The Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial Politics of U.S.-Indigenous Relations* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2007), 21.

45 Gutiérrez, "Migration," 499.

46 In his recent book *The New American Exceptionalism*, Pease writes: "A state fantasy successfully takes hold when it transposes these sites of trauma into the inaugural spaces within a newly configured order" (5). State fantasies and New Americanists are thus in a struggle over who can put trauma to political use.

47 Fluck, "Men in Boats and Flaming Skies: American Painting and National Self-Recognition," in *Transnational American Studies*, ed. Winfried Fluck, Donald Pease, and John Carlos Rowe (Lebanon, NH: Univ. of New England Presses, 2011), 141–63.