

ALFRED HORNUNG, ed. *Obama and Transnational American Studies* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2016), 528 pp.

American Studies have come a long way, as have American politics. In a geopolitical sense, the new millennium began on September 11th 2001, a date that has been regarded as marking the end of the American Century, and reached a decisive new stage with the election of Barack Obama in November 2008. At the convention of the American Studies Association in 2004, Shelley Fisher Fishkin in her Presidential Speech declared the necessity of Transnational American Studies. The historical moment had come to shift gears and negotiate the post-1989 geopolitical constellation after the official end of the East-West confrontation. While the West and liberal capitalism seemed to have won, and some authors such as Francis Fukuyama even fantasized about the end of history, this optimistic decade ended with 9/11. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the economic success of China, and more generally shifting global power relations led leading members of important U.S. think tanks to speak of a multipolar world in which the U.S. is still the strongest nation, yet no longer in an unchallenged position.

Transnational American Studies can be understood as a shift of focus within US-American Studies, and also as an opening up towards American Studies abroad. As the editor of *Obama and Transnational American Studies* writes: “The conception and proliferation of TAS by the American Studies Association and partner associations on a global scale were part of an intellectual and academic procedure to provide an egalitarian basis of scholarly cooperation in discussing the role of U.S. culture and politics in the world (Fishkin; Hornung 2004)” (ix). The notion of transnationalism began its ascent after the debates about multiculturalism had reached their peak in the 1980s, yet can already be found in Randolph Bourne’s 1916 claim for a “Transnational America.” While the concept is linked to the call for the equality of different cultures, the focus on plurality within one nation is no longer able to capture the increasing divided and multiplied identities of people who continue to have allegiances with several countries at once. In a globalizing world, being characterized by increasing time-space compression and a high level of interconnectedness, digitalization and high-frequency

trading, national boundaries no longer seem to be of the first priority. Moreover, American culture and literature have not only been made up of traces of many cultures from its beginning, but there have always been people who had allegiances to several nations, moving back and forth between them.

The election of Barack Obama as 44th President of the U.S. can be understood as the realization of these developments and the beginning of a new era in American politics (even while seen from the present perspective maybe only be a temporary one). His biography and multinational family make him a perfect persona for transcending barriers and boundaries, encapsulating “the principal features of a Transnational American Studies approach,” (ix) as Alfred Hornung states in his preface: “His successful political campaigns [...] were run on an all-inclusive and innovative agenda in line with the transnational turn in many academic, cultural, and political areas [...]” (x). His life triangulates three continents—America, Africa, and Asia—and thus exemplifies a life beyond the narrow limits of national borders. As has been stressed by himself and others, however, this transnationalism does not keep him from acting and speaking from within the tradition of the United States.

The essays collected in the present collection “are revised and extended versions of papers given at a conference in October 2014 in preparation of the founding of the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University” in Mainz, Germany. They “address the assumption of a correlation between the extended Obama family, the Obama presidency and Transnational American Studies” (xi). The volume is subdivided in four sections entitled “Transnational Family and Life Writing,” “Transnational Literatures and Laws,” “Transnational Media,” and “Transnational Affinities.” Short paragraphs introducing the respective subsections would have been helpful for positioning the essays within a wider context. The ‘and’ in the title has to be emphasized, as many essays are taking the person and presidency of Obama as the starting point for reflections about Transnational American Studies.

The first section begins with an essay by Barack Obama’s sister Auma Obama who was the honorary speaker of the conference and presents her foundation Sauti Kuu for helping young people in Kenya. She discusses the potentialities of development and emphasizes her

focus on “what local resources the people can use to get what they need” (11). As she studied in Germany for several years, her life and autobiography are excellent bridges between Transnational American Studies in Germany and the transnational Obama family. Alfred Hornung investigates her autobiography and relates it to Barack Obama’s autobiography, stressing the movement between the three continents Africa, Europe, and America. In Birgit Bauridl’s reading of Auma Obama’s text, these multiple connections call for a triangulation and what she calls, with Udo Hebel, “transangular American Studies” (42). Carmen Birkle interrogates Auma Obama’s experience in conjunction with Oprah Winfrey’s performance-oriented life and discusses possible ways of success in the context of “the glass ceiling” still keeping women from access to top positions and with regard to racial difference. She considers Michelle Obama as a representative African American woman and discusses her successful projects as First Lady. The section ends with an essay by Greg Robinson who takes his start from a 1998 essay by Toni Morrison on Bill Clinton in *The New Yorker* in which she argues that “white skin notwithstanding, this is our first black President. Blacker than any actual black person who could ever be elected in our children’s lifetime” (82). In contrast to Clinton, “Barack Obama should more properly be considered our first Asian American president. [...] his portrait resonates in fundamental ways with [...] [what] we might call ‘tropes of asianness’” (83). This is an interesting point, as Obama is mostly discussed with regard to his African ancestry.

In the second section, “Transnational Literatures and Laws,” the focus is shifted to the field of American Studies. The first essay by Kristina Bross and Laura M. Stevens interrogates the notion of transnationalism and its relevance for Early American Studies that are mainly concerned with the times before the emergence of the nation. By using four spatial paradigms, “the Atlantic, the contact zone or middle ground, the Western hemisphere, and the globe” (99), the authors criticize the emphasis on the global as “it neglects local influences.” Rather, they prefer a suggestion by Lynn Hunt to focus on “a series of transnational processes in which the histories of diverse places can become connected and interdependent” (109). Taking into account the pre-national might help us to move

towards the transnational. Elizabeth J. West quotes several definitions of transnationalism, yet writes that “race” introduces a challenge to the concept. She considers three “literate, Muslim, world travelled men” who were recognized by whites only because of their high their social standing (122). Diagnosing an analogy, West argues that “President Obama’s ‘acceptable’ blackness rests on his ability to transform that blackness into the nation’s mythical exceptionalism that is framed in whiteness” (131). Birgit Däwes is interested in a “trans-Indigenous oceanic imagination” (137). “Transmotion” and the ocean are the central terms in her investigation of three works of art, and the sea is understood as “a space of semiotic resonance in which other layers of meaning are embedded” (143). Charles Reagan Wilson takes, among others, a cookbook that combines Asian and Southern cuisines as a symptom of an increasing “transnational creolization” of the U.S. South (176).

Glenn T. Eskew discusses Obama’s relationship to the Civil Rights Movement which was essential to his development. Yet he identifies with the Joshua Generation and the hope for a “post-racial meritocracy that would secure the American Dream for everyone” (184-85). Eskew argues that Obama led a “raceless” campaign, even while he was always identified as black by the media. Declaring his candidacy for the presidency from the same spot where President Lincoln had given his famous “House Divided” speech, Obama later pointed to “the complexities of race in this country that we’ve never really worked through [...]” (190) Eskew sums up that “Obama’s calls for unity embraced inclusiveness as a trait of American exceptionalism, finding in it a model for the world” (202). Rüdiger Kunow reads the health care reform “as a case of American exceptionalism” (205), as the U.S. system is not only “the most expensive and least efficient health care system in the world” (204), but also curiously different from almost all others. As it has been attacked from the right and anti-government forces, Kunow argues that “Health care in the U.S. [...] has become a symbolic battleground on which conflicting notions about American identity and purpose, about citizenship and the social compact are being fought out” (207). Linking the law to recent developments in the bioeconomy, Kunow associates it with the struggle about neoliberalism. His claim that Obama Care may be

decisive for the future condition of the U.S. population underlines that biopolitics is a crucial determinant.

The third section is entitled “Transnational Media.” Mita Banerjee reads the Bollywood film *My Name is Khan*, set in the Swiss Alps and featuring Presidents George W. Bush as well as Barack Obama, with regard to a non-Western view of the “war on terror” as well as in the context of whiteness studies. Paul Giles introduces the category of the “cross-temporal” as an analogue to the transnational and claims “that the dilemma of the Obama administration [...] has involved uneasy attempts to reconcile these structural conditions of transnational and crosstemporal disjunction with a more traditional American rhetoric of pragmatism and optimism, and in this sense I will argue that Tarantino’s cinema speaks aptly to the historical situation of the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century” (248). The ambiguity of a severe critique of American racism on the one hand and a contemporary aesthetics and recognition of racism’s status within a complex global world crisscrossed by a multitude of other injustices on the other, connects Obama and Tarantino on a certain level. Or, as political scientist Renford Reese is quoted, “At some point after watching this film, I realized that politically speaking Obama *is* Django” (257).

While SunHee Kim Geertz interprets Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” speech by comparing it to Sönke Wortmann’s film *Das Wunder von Bern*, Carola Betzen analyzes Obama with reference to the rapper Kendrick Lamar. With a look at *Black Lives Matter* and young black people’s problems she argues that “the once ground-breaking uniqueness of Obama’s biography now appears to render him too far removed to alleviate their despair” (303). While Obama stressed personal responsibility in today’s globalized market, black youths’ experience of ongoing racism might even be aggravated by the fact that a black president seems to prove that African Americans can make it in a supposedly “post-racial” society. Betzen, therefore, argues that Hip Hop artists gave a voice to the feelings after the police killings of young black men. Nevertheless, she detects some hope for “post-racialism” in Lamar’s album *To Pimp a Butterfly*, as he also calls for self-respect as the main means of empowerment. Udo Hebel locates the Obama presidency within the history of iconic representations of Ameri-

can presidents and discusses their forms and functions within inter pictorial readings. He concludes that the “inter pictorial iconography of President Barack Obama holds the power and potential to contribute [...] to the perception of Barack Obama as a global American president.” The pictures that are discussed include a specifically American political iconography as well as transnational associations (349). Gesa Mackenthun reads Obama’s “audacity of hope,” for her a sign of his idealism, and Edward Snowden’s political act against the surveillance of individuals as related and traces “the origins of their thinking to a fundamental American right to rebel against conditions that they regard as unconstitutional” (354-55).

The last subsection is entitled “Transnational Affinities.” Lothar von Falkenhausen reports on his work as a member of the Cultural Property Advisory Committee, the mission of which it is to build cultural capital. Juxtaposing Mandela, Obama, and Derrida seems rather bold at first sight. Yet Nina Morgan, in her essay, investigates if a political autobiography such as Obama’s or Mandela’s allows past cruelties to be forgiven and forgotten at a time of “the Googlization of globalization of geopolitics” (392). With Derrida, Morgan claims that “one can only forgive that which is unforgivable” (409). Gerd Hurm focuses on Obama and the photographer Edward Steichen as two important figures who “took on the challenge of creating an all-inclusive transnational American political vision within the national discursive constraints of the New Deal master narrative” (423). He points out that Obama tends to stress the dimension of hard work, “the work ethic that can enable anyone, regardless of race, class, gender, or creed, to participate in the American success story” (427). But he also associates him with the 1930s “dust-bowl folk populism” (428) and emphasizes that for Obama the family unit is the “model for an inclusive American community” (429). Nicole Waller reads Obama’s autobiographical life writing as a symptom of a transnational America, yet at the same time detects “a discursive ambiguity which reflect[s] exactly the potential oscillation of transnational American studies between the critique of American national paradigms and the complicity with a new version of American exceptionalism and global control” (457). This argument is pursued by looking at Sonia Sotomayor’s autobiography and the situation

of Puerto Ricans with regard to “American-ness.” Translation, in a linguistic as well as cultural sense is the focus of Jutta Ernst’s contribution in which she approaches Obama by way of the autobiography of Eugene Jolas, a German-French-American author whom she regards “as a precursor of the globally embedded American in the twenty-first century” (487). Obama, in her view, is thinking in a similar vein when he speaks of “Building the American Mosaic” (488). The last essay by Christa Buschendorf draws on Nobert Elias’s figurational sociology and uses his concept of a we-identity to reflect on ethnic identity within larger contexts. Buschendorf investigates transnationalism in the work of Shirley Graham Du Bois, W.E.B. Du Bois’s wife, and emphasizes her conviction that “white supremacy was a transnational phenomenon” (516).

The collection covers a lot of ground and shows that Obama’s life and presidency are linked with a wide spectrum of cultural and intellectual issues. The essays open up many new directions of thinking about contemporary America, yet an analysis of Obama’s actual politics can only be found in a few of them, and there is no comment on the often radical resistance to his politics. Concerning the perspective of transnationalism, many essays either remain within the United States or compare an American phenomenon or life story with one located outside of the U.S. borders. A stronger global perspective might also have analyzed the geopolitical changes to

which Obama responded and which he initiated, for example the move to the Pacific Rim, and the decreasing American involvement in international affairs and its cultural consequences.

The book is an important contribution to American Studies in Germany. The founding of the Obama Institute at Johannes Gutenberg-University in Mainz marks a significant step within the relationship between American Studies in the U.S. and abroad. As the view from outside has not been much acknowledged in the U.S., the establishment of an Institute for Transnational American Studies in Europe is timely. It has often been noticed that President Obama has been more admired in countries other than the U.S., particularly in Germany, which might be a sign that he was in fact the first American president with a truly global view. The book as a whole has an explicit political function in international relations within American Studies. It is worth noting that the conference where the papers were read (2014) and the publication of the collection (2016) predate the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president. This temporal location of the essays’ perspectives is crucial, as the criticism leveled against Obama in some essays might have been different in view of the present situation of US-American politics. It will be interesting to see which of the achievements of the Obama presidency will continue to shape the future of the United States.

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