

UDO J. HEBEL, ed., *Transnational American Studies* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2012), *American Studies Monograph Series*, no. 222. 644 pp.

In his often-cited essay “Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism” Steven Vertovec broadly defined transnationalism in 1999 as the “multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of the nation-states” (447).<sup>1</sup> Since then, international and interdisciplinary scholarship has provided further insights on transnationalism as theory, concept, and experience. In the field of American Studies, Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s famous and influential call for “a transnational turn” in 2004 contributed to the end of the so-called “American Century,” with researchers challenging long-established and multifaceted boundaries and national foci over the past years and institutionalizing that very idea of a transnational turn in the first decade of the third Millennium.

In June 2011, significant academic representatives in the ongoing debates about the “present state and future transnational agenda of the discipline of American Studies” (3) gathered at the University of Regensburg for the 58<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the German Association for American Studies. There they discussed and critically assessed from an international and interdisciplinary angle how “transnational approaches and comparative perspectives support and emphasize the exploration of multidirectional processes of cultural and political interaction and transfer” (4).

*Transnational American Studies*, the conference topic, became also the title for the collection of thirty papers chosen and developed out of that conference and published a year later by the Universitätsverlag Winter in Heidelberg.

Edited by Udo Hebel, a leading German Americanist and current president of the University of Regensburg, *Transnational American Studies* with its overall 644 pages makes a substantial and insightful contribution to the debate as it documents numerous changes and challenges inherent in a transnational conception of American Studies at that time.

In his nine-page-introduction, Hebel first quickly sketches “the multifaceted history of the theoretical paradigm of transnational

<sup>1</sup> Steven Vertovec, “Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22.2 (1999): 447-61.

American studies” (3) in a national and global context and then briefly touches on the three-day conference in Regensburg, the design of which corresponds to the setup of the book. The publication of the conference proceedings is divided into three sections, with the five keynote lectures in section one, twenty-four revised workshop papers in section two entitled “Voices, Perspectives, and Projects in Transnational American Studies” (145), and finally the six opening statements from the panel discussions at the end of the conference. That later are compiled under the heading “Visions for Transnational American Studies” (613) and are grouped together with Klaus Benesch’s summary assessment.

Overall, the contributors to *Transnational American Studies* come from four different countries and three continents, whereby keynote speaker Ian Tyrrell’s plenary paper adds a welcoming and refreshing historical perspective from ‘Down Under’ to his colleagues’ transnational agenda in American Studies situated in North America (five in the U.S. and one in Canada) and in Europe, above all here in Germany. In fact, more than three quarters of the contributors (~ 76 %) are German Americanists, nine of them leading and well-established academics and fourteen young and aspiring doctoral and postdoctoral researchers. In this manner, the volume is perhaps a little more intergenerational and a little less international than one might expect based on the introductory words in the preface.

Yet, regardless of the academic contributors’ geographical and disciplinary locations, overall the collection takes stock of influential and by now almost classic transnational approaches and outlooks,<sup>2</sup> while also venturing out to new vistas and new research agendas that go beyond familiar approaches and contemporary trends.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> As offered, for instance, in section one by Shelly Fisher Fishkin’s “Mapping Transnational American Studies” or Mita Banerjee’s “A Whiter Shade of Transnationalism: Diaspora and Undocumented in *The Game*.”

<sup>3</sup> For instance, in section one Alfred Hornung’s “ChinAmerica: Intercultural Relations for a Transnational World” or, in section two Susanne Leikam’s “Transnational Tales of Risk and Coping: Disaster Narratives in Late-Nineteenth-and-Early-Twentieth-Century San Francisco” or Shane Denson’s “Comics in Plurimedial and Transnational Perspectives.”

In many instances, the transnational is unthinkable without a critical reassessment of the local, regional, and national, which makes many contributors move between these realms. In “Transnationalizing the Heartland Myth,” Kristin Hoganson, for instance, offers a transnational reassessment of “the hidden history of animal mobility” that lets us perceive the U.S. Midwest in the nineteenth century less as an isolated heartland than as a place of encounter and circulation within an integrated North American history where the problematic of “border-crossing animals” (139) further helps to explain why “the United States came to regard its borders with Canada and Mexico so differently” (126). In “Towards a National Drama,” Stefanie Schäfer examines James K. Paulding’s play *The Lion of the West* to revisit the nationalism of the Jacksonian Age and to call for a “reassessment of cultures of performance and travelling concepts like the clown and the stock figure in a yet to be defined transnational field of American drama and theater studies” (183; 202-03).

Whereas Timo Müller assesses the transnational aesthetic in Derek Walcott and Rita Dove’s poetry, claiming that the “transnational paradigm offers a way [...] to redefine the relations between Caribbean and European ‘discourse’ in terms other than antithetical” (251), Barbara Buchenau moves back in time to the nineteenth century and some selected white man’s representations of North American Indians in New England and New France (165). According to Buchenau, these representations illustrate “major rifts and conflicts in the imaginary construct of America” (165), which, if read “within subcontinental rather than transatlantic contexts [...],” speak to hemispheric and North American struggle, such as the conflict over “CanAmerica” (167). Buchenau introduces this new and promising term for the “body of land that comprises Canada and the part of America that is today coterminous with the U.S.A.” (167). One would have wished for a theoretical foundation of the term “CanAmerica,” though, to make it more accessible for further transnational approaches in a hemispheric and inter-American context. Josef Raab, like Buchenau, is a specialist of the latter. In “Mythologizing the Exotic: Brazil in Twentieth-Century U.S. American Literature and Film,” the founding President of the International Association of Inter-American Studies provides a very knowledgeable study of four types of “U.S.

mythologies of an exotic Brazil [...] from the 1940s through the 1990s” (403-04)—two as expressed in U.S. literature and two as expressed in U.S. film. Illustrating that mythmaking on either side (US-American and Brazilian) does not stop, Raab claims that creations of Brazil in multiple media “need to be scrutinized for their motivations” (420). Inter-American Studies, Raab concludes, needs to put such myth-making in the context of the empire writing back, or rather in the context of Brazilian myth-making as well as Brazilian myth-making about Brazil itself” (420). One would have hoped for a comprehensive consideration of the very concept of the transnational in the inter-American context in this well-written paper as well. Raab, however, confines himself here to keep the reader alert with his closing reminder that “[i]n practicing transnational American Studies, we need to be aware of mechanisms of othering and of the reasons behind them” (420), which is, by the way, the only time the term ‘transnational’ is ever mentioned in this study.

Some other contributors, too, open up interesting vistas without focusing closely on the very concept of the transnational, whereby twelve entries don’t even mention it in their titles. The latter may not necessarily be required for contributing to this collection at hand. Difficulties arise, however, in those few cases in which the authors (esp. René Dietrich and Andrew S. Gross) refrain from providing a brief conceptual clarification of the term or specify at least their particular approach to and engagement with the transnational in the opening paragraphs of their otherwise quite interesting readings of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller* (Dietrich) and W.H. Auden’s *The Age of Anxiety* (Gross).

At least in this connection *Transnational American Studies* could be more clearly focused on its central concept and theme. On the other hand, the collection also further benefits significantly from the illuminative debates on the conceptual and methodic entanglements of the transnational in general and the transnational turn in particular as well as the future chances and challenges involved with it in numerous entries and specifically provided by Helmbrecht Breinig, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Kristin Hoganson, Alfred Hornung, Barry Shank, and Ian Tyrrell in the concluding section. The German Americanist Klaus Benesch, who chaired this final panel discussion, offers a summary assessment of this debate.

His succinct entry entitled “Transnational American Studies—Looking Backward to the Future” ends with a call to continuously reassess the role of transnationalism in a relentlessly globalizing world” (619).

In sum, the book under review provides the reader with a very valuable overview and comprehensive discussion of the transnational turn and raises awareness of the ongoing chances and challenges of transnationalism in American Studies in Germany, Europe, and worldwide. It offers a great variety of interdisciplinary debates about what was going on in Transnational American Studies in

Germany, Europe, and internationally in (Inter-)national American Studies in the first decade of the third Millennium. It is regrettable, though, that the editor refrains from providing an index and a thematic subdivision of the main part to make this highly recommendable 644-page-volume more user-friendly and thus more easily accessible, especially for students. Overall, this is a publication that will definitely serve as a valuable springboard for future studies in the demanding field of Transnational American Studies.

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