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Issue Introduction: Transnational American Studies as Antidote to Nationalism

ALFRED HORNUNG
Editor in Chief

Current authoritarian politics on a global scale notwithstanding, the contributions to this latest issue of *JTAS* exemplify that the national frame of political governments and scholarship is obsolete. The authors reconfirm convincingly the concept of transnational American studies (TAS) launched by Shelley Fisher Fishkin twenty-two years ago, in 2004. The traction and adaptability of the concept to historical documents before the formation of modern nations and outside of the geographical boundaries of the continental United States exceed the original intentions captured in Shelley's question, "What would the field of American Studies look like if the *transnational* rather than the national were at its center?"¹ Since then, many answers to this question have been offered and explored, such as these contributions which extend Shelley's scope for TAS. More than ever, TAS denationalizes the traditional concept of the United States as "one nation under God"² and foregrounds its interconnections with and interdependency upon the world, challenging American exceptionalism from *prenational* to nationalistic periods.

In "Abolitionist Traces, Interimperial Contexts: Briton Hammon's *Narrative* (1760) in Cuba and in Print," **John Rufo's** TAS analysis of Briton Hammon's 1760 *Narrative* challenges the familiar national claim of the "first slave narrative published in the United States" by pointing to the interimperialist politics of the British and Spanish colonial rule over nonwhite peoples in the New World. By placing Hammon's narrative in the dual context of eighteenth-century colonial mastery in the Caribbean and of familiar life narratives, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau's autobiography, Rufo particularly exposes Hammond's often neglected prison period in Cuba and his records of racial discrimination. **Christopher P. Wilson's** article, "Architects, Exiles, and Mega-

lomaniacs: Lawrence Weschler and the Post-Totalitarian Turn,” begins with the American journalist Lawrence Weschler’s visit to The Hague to cover the International Criminal Tribunal regarding the former Yugoslavia and the prosecution of totalitarian nationalistic excesses, which eventually leads to his account of Saddam Hussein’s similar rule in Iraq in connection with the American intervention. Rather than rehashing the familiar political conflict, Wilson situates the US–Iraq tensions in the intergenerational work of an Iraqi father and son and their professional skills as architects engaged in London and New York. **Jonathan van Harmelen**’s contribution, “Postcolonial Entanglements, Culinary Nostalgia: Dutch Indonesian Grocery Stores in Southern California After World War II,” addresses the memory of Dutch colonial rule experienced by Indonesian citizens by looking at the expat Indonesian and Dutch communities in Los Angeles and how foodways and nodes of exchange such as grocery stores carry the traces of Dutch imperialism. Here, the American context serves as a platform for debate about nationalistic intentions between immigrants from the Netherlands and its former Asian colony, a debate which could serve as a model for multiethnic citizenship in the US.

In turn, the Special Forum Transnational Circuits of Asian Religio-Philosophy: Reception and Racialization in the United States, edited by **Bowen Du** and **Varun Rangaswamy**, on the influence of Asian-religio philosophy in the United States, presents articles by **Shameen Black**, **Jonas Faust**, and **Amirtha Kidambi** that cover the rich and contradictory circuits that an object such as yoga pants represent—flexible but disciplining, transnational but disconnected from yoga as a South Asian practice, liberatory but implicated in extractive capitalism (“Yoga’s Material Power”)—as well as the importance of mostly South Asian sources for avant-garde American writers of the Beat Generation and second-generation Chinese American writers (“American Self, Asian Other”); and that place special emphasis on the interplay of Black music and Hindu thought (“Universal Consciousness”). Du and Rangaswamy have carefully selected a wide range of Asian sources reflected in the arts, popular culture, and sports design. In addition, they have included the transcript of two interviews which they conducted with experimental songwriters and music makers of South Asian heritage who express their mediation between Asian and Black music. In this frame, **Amirtha Kidambi** emphasizes her interrelation of Euro-American avant-garde and South Asian devotional music and her “crossethnic, crosscultural approach to music making,” which for her is a form of activism. **Aakash Mittal**, in turn, directs his artistic intention to forge a relationality between Black American experimental music, jazz, and Hindustani music, which for him represent a form of cultural healing. Ultimately, as the interviews amply suggest, both musicians set their practice of innovative transnational interrelations against a mainstream music industry organized to support a national agenda.

Special Forum editors Pia Wiegink and Jennifer Reimer have carefully shepherded this collection of essays in fruitful collaboration with Bowen Du and Varun Rangaswamy. We are grateful to all of them for covering an exciting new field for TAS.

Unfortunately, we also have to honor Pia Wiegink's decision to step down from her editorship because of her engagement as cochair of the prestigious excellence cluster of the Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies at the University of Bonn. We would like to thank Pia for her dedication to *JTAS* over the past five years in which she single-handedly improved the process of designing and preparing special forums. We wish her well for her important new position and gladly take up her offer to stay connected to the journal.

After Jennifer Reimer's editorial move from the *Forward* section to curatorship of *JTAS* Special Forums, the board designated Aiko Takeuchi-Demirci and Holger Droessler, both experienced members of the managing editorial group, as the new *Forward* editors. Aiko and managing editor Sabine Kim have selected three excerpts from new releases which equally address nonnational issues. **Lina-Maria Murillo's** work in *Fighting for Control: Power, Reproductive Care, and Race in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (University of North Carolina Press, 2025) takes us to the dangerous borderlands between the two nations of Mexico and the US, while *JTAS* editor **Greg Robinson** adds a new feature to his expertise on the fate of Japanese in the American system in "Japan and the New Orleans Cotton Trade in the Early Twentieth Century" (which originally appeared in *Louisiana History*). **Gesa Mackenthun** foregrounds Indigenous nations' deep connections to the land we today call the United States in "Ruins and Resilience: Re-Membering Gi'Was" (an excerpt from *Embattled Excavations: Colonial and Transcultural Constructions of the American Deep Past*, Waxmann Verlag, 2021). Book review editor Hsuan L. Hsu presents two reviews of publications which address the building of the imperial American nation-state from plantation society to the manifestation of US Empire in paintings: Bayley J. Marquez's *Plantation Pedagogy: The Violence of Schooling Across Black and Indigenous Space* (University of California Press, 2024) and Maggie M. Cao's *Painting US Empire: Nineteenth-Century Art and Its Legacies* (University of Chicago Press, 2025).

Last but not least, we are happy to include an excerpt from **Bridget Bennett's** *Antislavery in the Dissenting Atlantic Archives and Unquiet Libraries, 1776–1865*, which the International Committee of the ASA selected as the winner of the 2025 Shelley Fisher Fishkin Prize. We congratulate Bridget Bennett on this prize and the excellent study of yet another nonnational space for the exercise of TAS. She has written an introduction for *JTAS* that accompanies the excerpt.

The contributions to this issue, which represents a new phase of TAS as a stand against the abuses of the concept of nation, also implicitly move away from the conventional standards of the Western world and American leadership at a time of global reorientation. This practice of TAS conforms with recent challenges levied against Euro-American enlightenment as a dominant position in the world and the recognition of other knowledge systems.³

The editors of *JTAS* would like to thank all of the contributors to this issue for their valuable and innovative contributions. Our special gratitude goes to our section editors, Pia Wiegink and Jennifer Reimer, Aiko Takeuchi-Demirci, and Hsuan L. Hsu.

Last but not least, we thank the managing editors, Sabine Kim and Vanessa Evans, for directing the editorial process with the great support of Associate Managing Editors Ahngeli Shivam, Mai Wang, and Mahshid Mayar. For professional reasons in her academic career, Vanessa Evans had to give up her position, through which she had greatly enhanced the communication between authors and the journal. We wish her well for her promising career and are hopeful that she might return to the journal later in her career.

Notes

- ¹ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (March 2005): 21.
- ² Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954* (US Government Printing Office, 1960).
- ³ See, for example, Zhang Longxi and Omid Azadibougar, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Global Comparative Literature* (Routledge, 2025); and Shuchen Xiang and Martin Powers, eds., *How China Shaped the Enlightenment: A Transcultural History of Modern Thought* (Routledge, 2026).

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- Shuchen Xiang and Martin Powers, eds. *How China Shaped the Enlightenment: A Transcultural History of Modern Thought*. Routledge, 2026.
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