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TRANSNATIONALISM: THE AMERICAN CHALLENGE

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Much of what distinguishes the so-called 'transnational turn' in American Studies is encapsulated in Janice Radway's influential suggestion to re-think and maybe even abandon the name of our discipline so as to make it less dependent on nation-centered perspectives. To the extent that the label *American Studies* continues to identify the word *America* exclusively with the United States at the expense of all other Americas north and south of that country, this is a legitimate proposal. One would think, therefore, that greater accuracy could do the trick, such as changing the name of the discipline to *US Studies*. But chances are that Latin Americanists will not be satisfied with this far too simple solution. Neither is Radway. Correctly she notes 'the apparent lack of self-consciousness' with which we use the term *America* to denote the United States (Radway, 1998: 7). My claim in this paper is that transnationalizing American Studies in the sense proposed by Radway and others will not necessarily advance our understanding of this 'lack of self-consciousness'. I sympathize with Radway's uneasiness about the imperialist implications of this unthinking semantic habit. I sympathize, too, with her political project of turning parochialism into self-awareness. But I believe that if we want to understand the peculiar, indeed unique, status of the word *America* among national names in the world today, we need more than merely a desire to overcome national perspectives or to supplant them with supposedly more advanced models of trans– or even post-national hybridity. This is not because transnational approaches are somehow 'wrong', but, as I will argue, because in their current form and institutionalization they trigger critical practices unable to answer—and sometimes even to ask—the relevant questions. In other words: While there may be little wrong with what transnational approaches are saying, a lot may be wrong—or at least questionable—with what they are doing.

Radway, for instance, writes that to transnationalize American Studies means 'to show that American nationalism is neither autonomously defined [. . .] nor [. . .] internally homogeneous. Rather, it is relationally defined and historically and situationally variable' (Radway, 1998: 18). There is little that can be said against this statement. In fact, this is a supremely *unproblematic* statement in the sense that hardly anyone currently working in the field will disagree with it. In other words, this statement provides no problem: it contains no program of research, no question that points beyond its own self-verification. Radway's statement provides no question, I say, because it presents itself as an *answer* already—and, what is more, as an answer that claims to

supply radical and dangerous knowledge. This easy iconoclasm leads to academic practices that frequently belie their own best intentions of critical understanding.

In the foregoing paper in this forum, Jeffrey Hole questions Donald Pease's and Djelal Kadir's portrayal of the transnational as an antipode to US state power. I would like to take up this idea and relate it to the issues of territorial and semantic coherence in the construction of America. As we all know, nations and national borders are constructs: they establish, in Benedict Anderson's phrase, imagined communities. Few recent scholars of nationalism would debate this. And yet, transnational scholarship often finds it hard to imagine ways of studying the nation that are not indebted to organic conceptions of identity. What is lost here is the question of what it means to say that something is imagined or constructed. Obviously, to say that a border is a construct is not to say that a border is a fantasy. Borders exist; they produce powerful effects of reality. So do nations. Imagined communities are no less real for being imagined. Little is gained, therefore, by simply 'uncovering' or 'demystifying' American nationhood or American exceptionalism as imaginary constructs. Certainly it is important that we recognize American exceptionalism as an ideology—and not as a fact of nature—but the next question inevitably is how these effects of unity, how these fictions of territorial coherence, specifically emerged from competing ideologies of American identity, and from often violent contestations at the level of the subnational and the regional.

These issues require more than a well-intentioned desire to get rid of US exceptionalism and US imperialism; they require that we analyze the history, the conditions, and the specifics of US exceptionalism and US imperialism in their *differences* from non-US histories and non-US manifestations of exceptionalism and imperialism. These, I maintain, continue to be the genuine concerns and responsibilities of the discipline called American Studies—and this research program is not to be confused with a narrowly national or even nationalistic agenda. On the contrary, if taken seriously, it will force us to reassess our own motives in searching for a *trans*-national perspective. In particular, it will make us question some of our most routine ideological convictions, such as the widespread belief that to speak transnationally, or to evoke the transnational, automatically means to speak in a counter-hegemonic way. Similar to my colleagues on this forum, I consider it crucial that we doubt such knee-jerk assumptions, rejecting the myth of transnational living conditions as by definition more dissident—or even more real, in the sense of being less constructed—than national ones.

If my argument is valid, we should affirm (and have much to lose if we don't) that American Studies as an academic discipline is concerned with the specific histories, representations, meanings, and aesthetic constructions that have accumulated in and around this name: *America*. For the historical usages of this name are anything but self-evident, and the process by which *America* was appropriated by a self-aware culture within the territorial borders of the United States has been without historical model and is bound to remain without replica (a point that should serve to frustrate all missionary hopes of exporting US democracy abroad).

Thus, concerning the name *America,* I find it important that we ask *how* this term came to denote, in the ordinary speech of most people in the world today, the United

States of America. This was not achieved by a simple imperialist imposition, as much recent scholarship seems to imply. Neither is the word *America*, in our modern understanding of it, a direct heir to Renaissance conceptions of America as a 'New World'. True, the idea of American exceptionalism in its broadest, hemispheric sense is a European invention. But the seventeenth-century roots of modern American exceptionalism have been routinely exaggerated in the history of our field, chiefly by those who have been trying to trace a consistent American 'mind'—be it puritanical, capitalistic, ethnophobic or imperialistic—from the days of the early settlers to the Constitutional Convention and beyond.

At the risk of simplifying matters that I have tried to outline elsewhere in a more detailed manner, I hold that the modern notion of *America*, in the sense that we nowadays attribute to the term when we rally against American exceptionalism, surfaced in the late 1780s, when a new trans-*colonial* elite laid the ideological and institutional foundations for the first large-scale constitutional nation-state in the world (Kelleter, 2002). This nation-state became successfully aware of itself as *American* when it was forced to react to the most momentous *inter*-national event of the late eighteenth century, the French Revolution. The concept of American nationhood that emerged from this reaction was unique in the sense that it engendered practices of national invention, modes of national contestation, and ideologies of national distinctiveness that were markedly different from contemporary European conceptions of nationhood and national identity. To give just one example, again in an abridged manner: After it was no longer possible to legitimize US nationhood by taking recourse to established European models of cultural identity—that is, after the British Whig model had been discredited in the course of the Revolution (in the 1770s), after the classical Republican model had been thoroughly re-negotiated and effectively dismantled by the Federalists (in the 1780s), and after the French model of modern revolutionary universalism had re-introduced the fear of God in American politicians and intellectuals (in the 1790s), in other words, after various competing European conceptions of cultural identity had failed in North America, a victorious Jeffersonian party systematically *Americanized* the United States (mostly by expanding on strategies of self-invention already devised by the Federalists in the late 1780s). Central among these strategies was the public doctrine that the United States was no longer subject to the laws of European power politics, and that US politics therefore had to renounce European-style colonialism and imperialism.

This is explicitly not to say that the early US was a peaceful or non-imperial nation. Rather, it is to say that the ideological rejection of various European concepts of international strife culminated in entirely new, nationally distinct practices of political and cultural power—practices that in the long run have proven more successful, indeed more powerful, than most pre-American forms of dominance. What are these practices? Among other things, it bears mentioning that the cultural semantics of *America* confronts us with a phenomenon not easily accommodated within the clear-cut, often sentimental, matrix of contemporary identity studies: The cultural semantics of *America* confronts us with the phenomenon of a post-colonial imperialism—and even more remarkably: an anti-imperialist imperialism. My argument here is that most forms of US self-identification in the late eighteenth century, particular-

ly in the wake of the French Revolution, were driven not by *classically* imperial aspirations but by a double desire for national distinction and national isolation. Under these circumstances, union really meant and necessitated extension (as in Madison's unheard-of concept of an 'extended republic'). US post-revolutionary politics essentially aimed to escape from the violent entanglements of European national rivalries by conducting foreign policy as if it were conducting domestic policy. What this implied was spelled out in plain language by Joel Barlow in 1801, the first year of Jefferson's presidency: 'War [...] after the example of the states of Europe [...] may be avoided as long as we are out of the neighbourhood of independent nations' (Hyneman and Lutz, 1983: 1122, 1125). This, of course, referred to the territories bordering on the U.S in the West, North and South. What Barlow meant is that a truly post-European form of national existence is possible only if the United States acts as the unrivaled power on the American *continent*.

After the French Revolution and throughout the nineteenth century, this thought became a powerful topos in the cultural self-imagination of the American republic. I think that this is not a trivial development, and I think it is worth our notice and worth studying: The post-colonial desire to escape from European-style imperialism inevitably ended up imaging the United States as a hemispheric nation. As soon as independence was sought no longer just from England or Great Britain, but from Europe, the United States was bound to declare itself the single representative of 'America'. More than just implicit in this gesture is the linguistic omission of Canada, Mexico, and all of South America. And to the extent that US exceptionalism, including its vision of non-imperial imperialism, has become a global reality today, this omission still determines our languages worldwide and our mental maps of the globe.

In sum, I propose that as Americanists we re-engage with the unpopular notion of American exceptionalism, and thus with those aspects of US culture that are indeed unique to it. The question, of course, is what we mean by *exceptional* and *unique* Certainly there can be no return to essentialist notions of national identity—and no-one is seriously suggesting this. But it may be worth mentioning that in the case of American Studies, well-intentioned pleas for trans– or even post-national approaches are often based on a curious logic of wishful thinking. Disgusted with America's economic and military hegemony, today's anti-exceptionalists frequently refuse to face the very thing they object to. As if hoping to theorize the United States out of existence, they *dissolve* America's truly exceptional global position within any transnational constellation that comes in handy. In this manner, theory promises to do what is impossible to achieve in practice: to rid the world of US power. It seems to me that a sensible way of dealing with this dilemma is to recognize the hybridity of national histories as a self-evident starting point, and not as the subversive result, of our inquiries. Once we take the insights of transnational studies and postcolonial theory for granted, instead of fetishizing them, we can base our inquiries of globalization, cultural intermixtures, and 'entangled histories' (Lepeniez, 2003) and also our studies of America and American aesthetics on more realistic and less sentimental conceptions of national and regional distinctions. The United States of America appears to be a promising object of research in this regard, not only because US history invites a transnational and postcolonial reading, but also because the ideological orthodox-

ies of transnational studies and postcolonial theory are put to the test by the provocative example of this strangely post-European yet exceptionally powerful nation and culture.

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