

Tanfer Emin Tunc & Bahar Gursel (eds)



The Transnational Turn in American Studies



Peter Lang

Turkey and the United States

Introduction – The Transnational Turn in American Studies: Turkey and the United States

In her 2004 Presidential Address to the American Studies Association (ASA) entitled “Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies,” Shelley Fisher Fishkin called on scholars to move away from a nationalist and/or nation-centered model of reading, teaching and researching the United States that prioritized the agendas of Americanists working in the United States. Her speech, which was inspired by Robert A. Gross’s “The Transnational Turn: Rediscovering American Studies in a Wider World,” and later published as an article in the *American Quarterly*, focuses on the central question: “What would the field of American Studies look like if the *transnational* rather than the *national* were at its center?”¹ In Fishkin’s opinion, American Studies was (and perhaps still is) divided into “us” and “them,” the “domestic” and the “foreign,” the “national” and “international,” marginalizing what another former ASA President Paul Lauter called a global academic “system in which the exchange of commodities, the flow of capital, and the iterations of cultures [should] know no borders.”² Seeking to erase these borders and create “a web or contact zone” that could displace (or at least resist) American power by re-framing American Studies transnationally, Fishkin and Lauter spearheaded a global movement which stresses the “multidirectional flows

-
- 1 Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroads of Culture: The Transnational Turn in American Studies.” *American Quarterly* 57 (2005): 17–57 (21); Robert A. Gross, “The Transnational Turn: Rediscovering *American Studies* in a Wider World.” *Journal of American Studies* 34 (2000): 1–21.
 - 2 Paul Lauter, “A Call for (at Least a Little) American Studies Chauvinism,” *ASA Newsletter*, June 1996.

of people, ideas, and goods, and the social, political, linguistic, cultural, and economic crossroads generated in the process.”³

Since this call to action, scholars around the world have attempted to define “Transnational American Studies.” According to Winifred Fluck, *transnational* actually has three meanings – “an institutional, a conceptual and a methodological one...[the first] emphasizes...increased international cooperation and exchange, so that scholarship in American Studies will escape the parochialism that is one of the legacies of American exceptionalism. Conceptually, the goal is no less than the redefinition of the field of American Studies as transnational, transatlantic, transpacific, hemispheric or even global studies. On the methodological level, the term *transnationalism* is usually employed to support claims for a comparative perspective that will help broaden our interpretive options in American Studies.”⁴ Thus, at its core, the transnational turn in American Studies represents a constant current of “peoples, identities, cultures, and concepts” across fluid boundaries – what Emory Elliott in his 2006 ASA Presidential Address would envision as “genuine inclusiveness and broad international collaboration.”⁵ It arose out of “deconstruction’s relentless attack against essentialisms, binary oppositions of self and other, outside and inside, [and] center and periphery.”⁶ Transnational American Studies seeks to destabilize these binaries by eliminating borders, especially those which separate the national from the international, promote American exceptionalism/arrogance, and construct restrictive definitions of “America(n).”

Over the past five years, two key movements have emerged from within the “turn”: the first centers on the efforts of US-based Americanists to conduct transnational and comparative research; the second around the recognition that non-American scholars, working outside

3 Fishkin “Crossroads of Culture,” 21, 22.

4 Winifred Fluck, “Inside and Outside: What Kind of Knowledge Do We Need?” *American Quarterly* 59.1 (2007): 23–32 (23).

5 Emory Elliott, “Diversity in the United States and Abroad: What Does it Mean When American Studies is Transnational?” *American Quarterly* 59.1 (2007): 1–22 (6).

6 Thomas Claviez, “European American Studies as Non-American Studies.” *American Studies/Shifting Gears*, eds. Birte Christ, et al. (Heidelberg, Germany: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2010), 24.

the geographical boundaries of the US, have just as much to contribute to American Studies as those within its borders. Accordingly, US-based Americanists have grappled with “rejecting [their] own nation-centric biases, ...reckoning with sources in languages other than English, with archives located outside of the United States, and with scholarship published abroad by non-US academics.”⁷ They have moved away from viewing “the United States as a static and stable territory and population whose most characteristic traits it [is Americanists’] job to divine, [towards seeing] the nation as a participant in a global flow of people, ideas, texts, and products.”⁸ Moreover, these “New Americanists” have begun to value the opinion of those who may not necessarily call the US home, rejecting the archaic notion that “gifted foreign critics” more often than not “get it all wrong” because they “read America out of context.” Instead, along with their non-American colleagues, they are questioning who decides what the context actually *is*.⁹ These scholars have come to realize that transnationality can broaden American Studies without losing the focus on America, and have also asserted that distance from America may even be an advantage for non-American scholars working in American Studies.

Transnational American Studies and Turkey: The Case of James Baldwin

When, as Fishkin posits, the transnational is taken as the center of American Studies, what emerges is a metaphoric “place where diasporic imaginations are valued for the dazzlingly hybrid syntheses they produce; a place where the term ‘American’ is understood in its broadest hemispheric sense; a place where it is recognized that there is an important body of American literature written in languages other

7 Mae M. Ngai, “Transnationalism and the Transformation of the ‘Other’: Response to the Presidential Address.” *American Quarterly* 57.1 (2005): 59–65 (60).

8 Fishkin, “Crossroads of Culture,” 24.

9 Claviez, “European American Studies as Non-American Studies,” 36.