TRANSOCEANIC AMERICAN STUDIES

Conference at the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI), May 17-18, 2018. Conveners: Juliane Braun (University of Bonn/GHI), Benjamin Fagan (Auburn University/GHI). Participants: Alvita Akiboh (Northwestern University), Ernesto Bassi Arevalo (Cornell University), Sarah Beringer (GHI), Hester Blum (Pennsylvania State University), Michelle Burnham (Santa Clara University), Ananya Chakravarti (Georgetown University), Christopher Connelly (University of California, Santa Cruz), Eric Covey (Miami University), Marlene L. Daut (University of Virginia), Alexandra Ganser (University of Vienna), Matthew Hiebert (GHI), Axel Jansen (GHI), Ryan Tucker Jones (University of Oregon), Mark B. Kelley (University of California, San Diego), Atiba Pertilla (GHI), Nicole Poppenhagen (University of Flensburg), Brian Russell Roberts (Brigham Young University), Martha Elena Rojas (University of Rhode Island), Chelsea Stieber (Catholic University of America), Jens Temmen (University of Potsdam), Sören Urbansky (GHI), Nicole Waller (University of Potsdam), Andrea Westermann (GHI West), Maria A. Windell (University of Colorado), Kariann Akemi Yokota (University of Colorado, Denver).

The Transoceanic American Studies conference was organized to provide an interdisciplinary forum to explore the interconnectedness of the Americas to the Pacific and Atlantic oceans and of those oceans to one another. The conference brought together scholars working in Atlantic Studies, Pacific Studies, and the emerging field of transoceanic studies to comment on current trends and introduce new methods and perspectives to better understand the transoceanic American world. In their introduction, Juliane Braun and Benjamin Fagan remarked on the transnational turn and the significance of applying this framework to oceanic American studies. Towards this end, the conference incorporated papers that developed a theoretical and methodological framework for transoceanic studies, explored specific accounts of interconnectivity between the Americas and the surrounding oceans, and further integrated the voices of indigenous oceanic communities into a narrative of the Americas. The first panel introduced innovative theories and methodologies that could help scholars reorient their view of American studies within a transoceanic perspective. The subsequent four panels offered a series of case studies that incorporated many of the new theories and methods, while also touching on key themes within the field of transoceanic American studies.
The first panel explored “Theories and Methodologies” related to the field of transoceanic studies. Michelle Burnham’s talk, “Trans-oceanic Thinking and American Literary History,” began with a gripping anecdote of the oceanic practice of wave piloting as a way of navigating from point to point. The anecdote served as a metaphor throughout her paper as she argued for scholars to approach trans-oceanic history in a similar way, that is, by exploring new routes that deviate from linear and land-locked narratives of American literary history. Christopher Connery followed by introducing the theory of Psychohydrography and its potential as a new field practice for exploring the transoceanic world. Connery argued that by physically tracing the space where water and land meet, scholars can find the hidden histories of aqueous communities. Nicole Waller’s paper presented a method to connect the Pacific and Atlantic oceans by looking to the Arctic. Waller’s analysis of the region explained the Arctic’s importance in the geopolitical world as both a transit space and a terraqueous world. The complexity of this area is a source of contention for the region’s indigenous communities as well as others claiming the territory. Hester Blum continued this discussion with her paper on “Polar American Studies.” Blum highlighted the crucial role the Arctic plays in discussions of American security, economy and even identity. Both Waller and Blum’s critical analyses of the Arctic highlighted the importance of oceanic spaces for nations. This panel presented essential and innovative theories, methods, and trends in transoceanic American studies and provided an effective foundation for the remainder of the conference.

The second panel, “Interrogating Empire,” focused on instances of American imperialism. Kariann Akemi Yokota challenged Atlanticist approaches to American history and urged scholars to consider the importance of the Pacific Ocean to early American national and imperial formations. Yokota’s paper used the ginseng root to explore the relationship between America and China in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from the perspective of both countries. Echoing Yokota’s effort to analyze the American imperial narrative, Alvita Akiboh examined the materiality of imperialism in the United States’ Caribbean and South Pacific colonies. Akiboh tracked the Americanization of offshore territories through the implementation of a national material culture (i.e. flags, currency, and the United States Postal Service). She also explored how the adaptation of this American material culture by indigenous communities underscores the issue of dual identities. Eric Covey concluded the panel with his paper,
“Main Currents of American Studies off the Shores of Africa.” Covey focused on two cases of America’s expanding intervention in and around Africa: America’s relationship with the Ottoman Empire and its reaction to increased Chinese industry in Africa. Covey argued that the United States has consistently framed its engagements with Africa as military interventions rather than attempts to assist in economic development.

Ernesto Bassi Arevalo began the third panel on “Transoceanic Archipelagos” with his paper, “The Sea as Territory and the Creation of a Trans-imperial Greater Caribbean.” Arevalo invited scholars to consider the sea as a primary site of information and interaction for historical research. Moving from the Spanish to the French Caribbean, Marlene L. Daut focused her paper on the Haitian Atlantic. Similar to Yokota and Arevalo, Daut sought to decolonize transoceanic histories of experience by examining the work of prominent nineteenth-century Haitian writers and their efforts to align themselves with the Confederación antillana, an organization formed to end European and U.S.-American domination of the Caribbean. Brian Russell Roberts similarly challenged continental approaches to the study of the Americas with his paper, “Borderwaters, Polynesian-Arawaks, and Remembering Los Alamos.” Roberts looked to Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, the migration of Polynesian-Arawaks from Melanesia to Latin America and the Caribbean, and Los Alamos to analyze the critical role of water, shorelines, and archipelagoes for the formation of borders, governmentalities, and identities.

The fourth panel, “Transoceanic Mobilities”, focused on oceanic narratives as a way to explore the transoceanic experience. Maria A. Windell’s paper on early U.S. naval writing focused on travelogues as a means to challenge traditional political narratives. Windell argued that naval writings could uncover unconventional histories as they described accidents of power but were also used to authenticate authority, and thus illuminated, both in content and context, the unpredictability and shifting nature of transoceanic power in the nineteenth century. Mark Kelley echoed the importance of travel writing in transoceanic studies by considering the sea as a sentimental space for sailors. Kelley provided an analysis of sailors’ writings to explore the complexities of experience at sea and highlighted the importance of material objects to tease out the affective dimension of seafaring. Alexandra Ganser concluded the panel with her discussion of “Maritime Mobilities in North American Refugee Narratives.”
Ganser argued for the significance of the idea of unsettlement in transoceanic American studies with her analysis of refugee literature. Each of the panelists focused on different narratives of the sea, but the diversity of the works studied revealed the size and complexity of the oceanic archive.

The fifth panel, “Transoceanic Seascapes,” focused on the ocean itself as an object of study. Ryan Tucker Jones’ paper on animal migration in the Pacific incorporated an environmental perspective. Similar to many presenters at the conference, Jones denationalized his approach to Pacific history and argued that by looking at migration patterns, scholars can further understand the interconnectivity of the Pacific World. Martha Elena Rojas followed with her discussion on “Decolonizing the Ocean.” Rojas explored the surprising presence of the ocean in artworks created by prisoners detained at Guantanamo. She argued that the context and stories of these images provide a transoceanic history from a subaltern perspective. Nicole Poppenhagen and Jens Temmen concluded the panel with a joint presentation entitled “Navigating the Pacific and Atlantic Currents: Towards a Transoceanic Perspective in American Studies?” Poppenhagen explained her work on the Chinese-American diaspora and Temmen focused on American territorial expansion. Both argued for fluid conceptions of land and sea and emphasized the need for an American studies practice that highlights indigenous and minority perspectives.

In the concluding panel, the participants reflected on five issues that had emerged as recurring themes throughout the conference: the questions of archive, language, theory, scale, and sites of transoceanic American studies. The scholars discussed the need to explore new archives and to recover materials related to transoceanic studies as a way to gain different and more diverse perspectives on the history, literature, and culture of the Americas. These archives may include texts that were written and published outside the Americas and do not contain obvious thematic links to the American continent as a geographic space. They may also extend beyond the textual to include material objects. In this vein, the issue of language was raised as participants argued that scholars engaged in transoceanic studies must incorporate sources from languages other than English in order to work against one-sided discourses. On the question of theory and the development of a transoceanic methodology, the participants agreed that it was important to recover and honor the genealogy of oceanic thinking as it has emerged from indigenous and minority
communities, as well as from scholars in Oceania, Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. The question of the distinction between global and transoceanic approaches to history, literature, and culture animated the participants’ discussion on the scale of transoceanic studies. A global framework, some participants pointed out, analyzed its object of study from above, while the strength of a transoceanic approach lay in its geographic situatedness and its focus on the connections between at least two oceans. In the discussion on transoceanic spaces, the conference participants collected a number of sites that lent themselves especially to transoceanic studies. These sites include oceans, islands, littorals, archipelagoes, edges, cliffs, beaches, and ships. Finally, the conference participants reflected on the creativity and comingling of scholars from overlapping fields, and offered possibilities for utilizing this new community for ongoing collaborations within transoceanic American studies.

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