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# "By definition political": Alfred Hornung and Transnational American Studies

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In her presidential address to the American Studies Association in 2004, Shelley Fisher Fishkin relates how she participated in a publishing project that sought to "examine landmarks, historic sites, and historic districts on the national register through the lens of the history and culture that informed them."[1] Initiated by Oxford publishing's trade book division and the US National Park Service, this project included a section that the publishers expected to contain landmarks from American literature. Fishkin's choice to include sites such as Angel Island, Wounded Knee, or the borderlands between Mexico and the United States, paired with literature such as the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, irritated the publishers and initiated a conflict that ultimately led to Fishkin's withdrawal from the project. Fishkin's critique of the publisher's desire for a "sanitized version of American literature" is developed, in her presidential address, into a larger call for repositioning American studies scholarship in a transnational network of relations.[2] The address thus engages in a project of remapping that interrogates not only what is mapped but also begins to ask how scholars undertake such acts of mapping. Connecting the material and metaphorical significance of places in a landscape formerly understood as "national," Fishkin suggests a transnational American studies repertoire that centrally includes the interrogation of histories of US empire, a field in which the methodological and epistemological challenges of transnational American studies emerge with particular urgency. This orientation reverberates with the text's own post-9/11 US context, marked by the aggressive assertion of US national borders and the simultaneous imperial reach of the US "War on Terror."

In his 2005 response to Fishkin's address, Alfred Hornung takes up the methodological challenge by positioning transnational American studies as a concept that is "by definition political," enabling a "reciprocal process of transcultural learning" via

multilateral networks of exchange that run counter to nationalist mappings of the "inside" and "outside" of the nation-state and the rhetorics of the nation.[3] In our own time spent with Alfred at Mainz University, both of us—albeit members of different scholarly "generations"—saw this conviction consistently put into action as Alfred embraced such reciprocal learning and its political call via exchanges with scholars and artists in the field of Caribbean studies, Atlantic studies, Turkish German studies, or Arab American studies. As Alfred himself describes, this approach was welcomed by many students of American studies in Germany, who embraced transnational American studies as a lens that not only complicated nation-state frameworks, but could also be drawn on to support the process of articulating the realities of their Turkish German, African German, or Asian German experiences and cultural work.[4] This conception of transcultural learning reflects an ongoing diversification of the motivation to engage with American studies among students and scholars in Germany, many of whom are attracted to the field due to its intersections with gender studies, feminist studies, queer theory, critical race theory, ecocriticism, the study of (US) imperialism, and post- and decolonial approaches.

For us as then-emerging scholars, Alfred's embracing of the political urgency of transnational American studies, combined with his insistence on attending to what it could mean for scholars and students situated in Germany, became important catalysts for our own thinking about positionality, methodology, and ethics. In addition, the field of transnational American studies nurtured our interest in studying colonial/imperial histories and their "otherwise" via land relations and questions of territoriality, as advocated in the 2004 presidential address. In our own work on "American Territorialities," which found a home in the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, we joined forces with scholars from the fields of Indigenous studies, Black geographies, legal studies, Caribbean studies, archipelagic American studies, and studies of American empire to further push the question of the "inside" and "outside" of the US, including the question of how official narratives of the US nation-state produce imperialist "transnational" constructs like "domestic dependent nations," "unincorporated territory," the circuits of the Atlantic slave trade, and carceral spaces like the detention camp at Guantánamo Bay, all the while ultimately and paradoxically employing these structures and practices to affirm the perceived coherence of the continental nation-state itself.[5] Most crucially, however, and as scholars from Native American studies, First Nations studies, and Indigenous studies have articulated for a long time, addressing settler colonialism and the various ways in which Indigenous conceptions and practices of sovereignty predate, resist, and survive it, is central to any critical thought about US nationhood. Teresia Teaiwa's words forcefully make this point:

> I know that there have been attempts to formulate hemispheric and transnational American studies, and more recently, aspirations for archipelagic American studies, but can an anti-imperialist American studies ever truly decenter the United

> States as a nation-state formation and recenter first people? Or is that a task best led by Native American and indigenous scholars and scholarly associations?[6]

In our joint work, we have been driven by the question of how scholars from other fields of inquiry can place their work in relation to these insights. This has led us to think about the possibilities (and the incommensurabilities) of relating work on Indigenous lives and land relations, and on a critique of the US as an ongoing settler colony, with questions more commonly addressed in transnational and transcultural approaches, such as the study of US empire's "in-between spaces" like Puerto Rico and the ongoing resistance of local communities and peoples, or of Afro-diasporic culture and politics in the Atlantic world during and in the afterlife of the Atlantic slave trade.[7] For both of us, the political urgency of transnational American studies has remained an important driving force in our work ever since, even if it has led us in different directions.

For one of us (Nicole), the transnational has inspired a shift to the decolonial and the anticolonial, including the question, inspired by Teaiwa's words cited above, of how non-Indigenous people and peoples can relate to and support decolonization as an Indigenous-led project from various and differing positionalities and standpoints—as settlers, migrants, or Afro-diasporic people in the wake of the Atlantic slave trade.[8] Métis scholar Max Liboiron has argued that in the context of Turtle Island, decolonization is an effort that follows Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang's definition of "repatriating land to sovereign Native tribes and nations, abolition of slavery in its contemporary forms, and the dismantling of the imperial metropole."[9] Both Tuck and Yang and Liboiron argue that appropriating Indigenous Land relations and using the term decolonization as an umbrella for other movements and agendas is, in this context, a colonial gesture that treats decolonization as an "and" instead of an "elsewhere."[10] Instead, Liboiron advocates the "anticolonial" as an approach "that does not foreground settler and colonial goals" and can include, among others, queer, feminist, or Afrofuturist agendas.[11] They write: "Different groups have different roles in alterlives, reconciliation, decolonization, and anticolonial work."[12]

One of the fields in which such issues are raised is Black geographies, which studies Afro-diasporic relations to land in North America against the racist and colonial representation of African Americans and African Canadians as being "out of place."[13] In the words of Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, the situated knowledges of Black people in North America have sociopolitical implications that can go beyond claims to be included in propertied settler land relations: "This is not to suggest that black subjects are free from espousing dominant modes of geographic thought, but rather that these sites, and those who inhabit them, can also trouble those modes of thought and allow us to consider alternative ways of imagining the world."[14] These insights feature in the often challenging but crucially important conversations and collaborations between Black and Indigenous activists, artists, and scholars.[15] Similar

work—including critiques pointing to incommensurabilities and addressing questions both of connection and refusal—is being undertaken by scholars in Black studies and Indigenous studies in relation to work in ecocriticism.[16] Learning from these conversations and critiques has led me, together with my colleague Anja Schwarz, to look more closely at how German scholars can relate to Indigenous texts from our location within German academia and our own historical implication in various settler colonial histories.[17] This attention to our own situatedness, a crucial lesson from Indigenous studies, reverberates also with Alfred Hornung's attention to the "where" of our scholarly work.

For the other (Jens), the transnational has inspired thinking about US empire's connection to current fantasies of "multiplanetary expansion."[18] The contemporary reinvigoration of space exploration, led by the billionaire "broligarchy" of Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and Peter Thiel (among others), is bent on forcefully reshaping humanity's planetary relations and on asserting dominance over humanity's imaginations of futurity. While built on a neoliberal desire for relentless autocratic deregulation of private capital and a utilitarian and deeply eugenical fringe theory of a moral imperative to proliferate an exclusive conception of humankind into digital and outer spaces ("longtermism"), the self-ascribed "NewSpace pioneer's" project has bought itself a seat at the table of the Trump administration's so-called political agenda, as voiced by Trump:[19]

> The United States will once again consider itself a growing nation—one that increases our wealth, expands our territory, builds our cities, raises our expectations, and carries our flag into new and beautiful horizons. And we will pursue our manifest destiny into the stars, launching American astronauts to plant the Stars and Stripes on the planet Mars … Americans are explorers, builders, innovators, entrepreneurs, and pioneers. The spirit of the frontier is written into our hearts.[20]

Trump's "manifest destiny into the stars" is uttered in same breath as the threat of military occupation of the Panama Canal and Greenland, as well as the general promise of territorial expansion, thereby connecting space exploration in the twenty-first century to the United States' imperial identity and its colonial campaigns past and present. Given the long-entangled history of "settler sciences" at the heart of Western space exploration, with colonial discourses of resource extractivism, territorial expansion and colonial logics of civilization, technology and progress, this connection is hardly surprising.[21]

What is worth noting, however, is how in the North American context this "astrofuturist" discourse, i.e., the notion of outer space as a utopian space of conquest and growth as well as a space of human transcendence in face of the anthropogenic

polycrisis, has been forced to the center of an American fascist ideology in which the dehumanization of trans people, of migrants and people of color, the slashing of reproductive rights of women, the destruction of our planetary environment, the violent assertion of US national borders, and the exploration of outer space share a discursive foundation of untethered eugenics, capitalist-colonial exploitation and unleashed neoliberalism.[22] In other words, "our manifest destiny in outer space" has taken its place next to "drill, baby, drill," "your body *my* choice" and "woke is broke" as a rallying-cry of neoliberal fascist discourse that fuses market-driven policies, authoritarian ideologies and technoliberal futurism.[23] This violent mix of an imperial ambition that dominates all futurity and that has outgrown our planet, and a simultaneous retreat to a white, chauvinist, national identity rooted in an imagined utopian past ("MAGA"), echoes and amplifies the political environment that led to Shelley Fisher Fishkin's and Alfred Hornung's dialogic interventions into American studies more than twenty years ago, and highlights that the work of countering nationalist mappings of the "inside" and "outside" is not only far from done, but also needs to reckon with its contemporary multiplanetary scale.

From where we stand now, Fishkin's and Hornung's seminal exchange marks one of the beginnings of our own trajectories of learning. Writing in the present, we take particular inspiration from two points raised in their textual dialogue: In the words of Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Whenever people with power act on visions of America that rest on oversimplification, myth, and a blind faith that America is always right—or, for that matter, always wrong—that is a call to us as American studies scholars to do our work."[24] This work, for Alfred Hornung, consists in "help[ing] to articulate" "transnational links and alliances."[25] For us, these alliances need to see and think beyond the settler colonial nation-state, but they also need to pay attention to the transnational repertoire frequently employed in colonial and imperial strategies. Our personal experience of working with Alfred at Mainz University and elsewhere was that he was always ready to be part of such conversations, and that he was generous enough to invite and welcome differing positions and perspectives. One evening, after a long day of conference talks at an American Studies Association meeting in Toronto, we encountered Alfred, map in hand, engaged in a vivacious dispute with a fellow scholar about the location of a venue for the conference evening program. For us, this is what we find most inspiring about Alfred: ready to attend to the relation between the map and the territory, ready to enjoy a heated debate over perspectives, and always ready to discuss where to go from here.

## 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): 17.

[2] Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures," 18.

[3] Alfred Hornung, "Transnational American Studies: Response to the Presidential Address," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (March 2005): 68.

[4] Hornung, "Transnational American Studies," 70.

[5] Jens Temmen and Nicole Waller, "Introduction: Mapping American Territorialities," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 11, no. 1 (Summer 2020): 23–49, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3js9b5td

[6] Teresia Teaiwa, "Postscript: Reflections on Militourism, US Imperialism, and American Studies," *American Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (2016): 852.

[7] On the "afterlife of slavery," see Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Macmillan, 2008).

[8] For scholarship that addresses this question, see, for example, Jeff Corntassel, Corey Snelgrove, and Rita Khaur Dhamoon, "Unsettling Settler Colonialism: The Discourse and Politics of Settlers, and Solidarity with Indigenous Nations," *Decolonization: Education, Indigeneity & Society* 3, no. 2 (2014): 1–32; Larissa Lai, "Introduction," in *Land / Relations: Possibilities of Justice in Canadian Literatures*, ed. Smaro Kamboureli and Larissa Lai (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2023), 9–37; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Robyn Maynard, *Rehearsals for Living* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2022).

[9] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 31, https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630

[10] Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," 36.

[11] Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism* (Duke University Press, 2021), 27.

[12] Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism,* 22.

[13] Rinaldo Walcott, "The Problem of the Human: Black Ontologies and 'the Coloniality of Our Being,'" in *Postcoloniality—Decoloniality—Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, ed. Sabine Broeck and Carsten Juncker (Campus Verlag, 2014), 93.

[14] Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, "No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the Ocean," in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, ed. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods (Between the Lines, 2007), 5.

[15] See, for example, Eve Tuck et al., "Geotheorizing Black/Land: Contestations and Contingent Collaborations," *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 52–74; Simpson and Maynard, *Rehearsals for Living*.

[16] See, for example, Dixa Ramírez-D'Oleo, *This Will Not Be Generative* (Cambridge University Press, 2023); Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*.

[17] Anja Schwarz and Nicole Waller, "Invaders, Tourists, or Visitors? Reading Indigenous Stories in a German University Context," *German Studies Canada* 61, no. 2 (2025): 79–84.

[18] Jens Temmen, "Scorched Earth: Discourses of Multiplanetarity, Climate Change, and Martian Terraforming in *Finch* and *Once Upon a Time I Lived on Mars*," *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 52 (2022): 477–488.

[19] Timnit Gebru and Émile P. Torres, "The TESCREAL Bundle: Eugenics and the Promise of Utopia through Artificial General Intelligence," *First Monday* 29, no. 4 (April 2024), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v29i4.13636

[20] Donald J. Trump, *The Inaugural Address*, The White House, January 20, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/

[21] See David Delgado Shorter and Kim TallBear, "An Introduction to Settler Science and the Ethics of Contact," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 45, no. 1 (2021): 1–8; Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Astrotopia: The Dangerous Religion of the Corporate Space Race* (University of Chicago Press, 2022); Fred Scharmen, *Space Forces: A Critical History of Life in Outer Space* (Verso, 2021); De Witt Douglas Kilgore, *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); William Lempert, "Phrenology in Space: Legacies of Scientific Racism in Classifying Extraterrestrial Intelligence," in *Reclaiming Space*, ed. James S. J. Schwartz et al. (Oxford University Press, 2023), 71–88; David Delgado Shorter and Kim TallBear, "On the Frontier of Redefining 'Intelligent Life' in Settler Science," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 45, no. 1 (2021): 19–44.

[22] See Alexandra Ganser, "Astrofuturism," In *Critical Terms in Future Studies*, ed. Heike Paul (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 35–43.

[23] See Alyosha Goldstein and Simón Ventura Trujillo, "Fascism Now? Inquiries for an Expanded Frame," in *For Antifascist Futures: Against the Violence of Imperial Crisis*, ed. Alyosha Goldstein and Simón Ventura Trujillo (Common Notions, 2022), 6–7.

[24] Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures," 20.

[25] Alfred Hornung, "Transnational American Studies," 69.

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