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Introduction: Translating and Transnational American Studies

ALFRED HORNUNG

The *JTAS* Fall issue 12.2 (2021) featured the immensely productive Special Forum on worldwide translations of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Mark Twain scholars from around the world followed Shelley Fisher Fishkin's invitation to account for and reevaluate the reception of this classic nineteenth-century American novel in different languages, different countries, and different political, historical, and cultural contexts. In a prime practice of transnational American studies collaboration, Shelley and her coeditors based in China, France, Germany, and Japan collected contributions from scholars in nine world regions on four continents, providing new insights into the reception of American literature abroad.

Many of the contributions to this current issue reemphasize the importance of translation for the practice of transnational American studies, extending the linguistic definition of the word to its etymological Latin source *transferre* "to carry across." Transferring / translating cultural goods across many boundaries includes the work of translators, their linguistic and cultural competence, their intentions and/or missions. Their work ranges from attempts to reproduce the literary nature of the original, to conscious or unconscious alterations, and the pitfalls of mistranslations captured in phrases of "lost in translation" or the Italian "traduttore, traditore," with translation representing a form of treason. Especially translating between distant frames of mind and extremely different cultures renders the task almost impossible, as the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset early knew.

The first three articles of this issue exemplify all of these features of an extensive concept of translation. Obviously, foreign-language translations of John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* have to consider the different layers of translation involved in the Nebraskan poet's rendition of this told-to autobiography of the Oglala Lakota heyoka Black Elk of the 1930s. [Frank Kelderman's astute analysis](#) of its Dutch translation by the Dutch Indonesian writer Beb Vuyk in the 1960s carefully exfoliates the

different levels involved in transferring the Native American's voice from his Indigenous environment in the United States via the mediation of an American poet to Europe and Indonesia using the Dutch language in *Zwarte Eland spreekt* (1964). Kelderman's persuasive treatment of these translating activities between three continents not only reveals the parallel negotiations taking place between Indigenous knowledge and colonizing powers, between Indigenous languages and hegemonic languages, but also the way in which the gradual recognition of Indigenous peoples of the Americas in the 1930s as part of American modernism influenced independence movements in the 1960s of Asian and African people colonized by Europeans.

American modernism of the 1930s also serves as the cultural background against which the reception of American literature in the Soviet Union could be measured. Cassio de Oliveira's perceptive analysis of translating the Russian usage of Mark Twain is a case of transnational American studies. In "[Mark Twain on the Soviet Silver Screen](#)," he examines the amalgamation of Twain's novels *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) into the film *Tom Soier* (1936) for Russian audiences under Stalinist rule to provide entertainment and an antiracist mission directed at the ideological enemy of the US. This translation of a political message as part of an intended cosmopolitan alliance of the avant-garde coincides with the embracement of communist ideas in modern American literature and culture in the 1930s, beginning with muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens's remark "I have seen the future, and it works" after his 1919 visit to the Soviet Union. The quote featured as the title page of a report by Ella Winter, his Austrian British wife of German descent, of her Russian visit in 1932, *Red Virtue: Human Relationships in the New Russia* (1933). These communist messages were echoed in the literature and culture of the "Red Decade" and on stage by productions of *The Living Newspaper* as the performance of agitprop.

Postwar conditions between East and West offer new spaces of translation with uprisings against Soviet rule in Eastern Europe, taken up in the clandestine transferring of manuscripts in both directions. Occasionally, authors became translating agents, including John Updike, who records his trip to Eastern Europe in the 1960s in the autofictional short story "The Bulgarian Poetess" (1965). [Alexandra Glavanakova](#) reviews the many attempts to detect the factual basis of Updike's "representation of the people and places behind the Iron Curtain," where he also met the Bulgarian poetess Blaga Dimitrova, to focus on the genre of autofiction and its illustration of "how one culture translates into another 'at the opposite side[s] of the world' (Updike "The Bulgarian Poetess")." Translating between vastly different areas and minds informs Updike's autofiction and represents a special case of transcultural relations and transnational American studies work.

Special Forum

A dual impetus of translating seems to have motivated the idea for the special forum on "[Diagnosing Migrant Experience: Medical Humanities and Transnational American](#)

[Studies](#).” The very concept of migration to, from, and within the United States in the collection of articles assembled by Special Forum guest editors [Mita Banerjee](#) and [Davina Höll](#) implies the personal or reported transfer across political and cultural borders as the task of transnational American studies. At the same time, the aspect of diagnosis refers to the methodological act of translating between disciplines and new approaches developed in the transdisciplinary medical humanities. Their previous publications immensely qualify both editors in guiding this dual translating exercise in a series of articles covering hemispheric, transpacific, legal, and medical transfer matters. The familiar form of a doctor’s diagnosis relies on anamnesis, a patient’s relating of a medical history to be translated into medical cures. Hence all forms of life writing involving medical issues play a major role in all contributions to this special forum. They range from concrete travels between countries, experiences of personal and communal diseases, and transfers to different disciplines beyond conventional and national frames of reference. The examples chosen for analysis address these translating issues at a time when the notion of the American nation is challenged by waves of im/migration transforming the “health of a nation” at the last and the present turn of the century. It is the migrants’ stories of Eastern Europeans and Asians represented in the works of writers such as [Upton Sinclair](#) and [Jack London](#) which accompany the muckraking journalists’ campaign against President Theodore Roosevelt’s Anglo-Saxon ideology of “100 percent Americans” to recognize the unhealthy situation of foreigners and the fate of “unassimilable aliens.” And it is [the genre of illness narrative](#) which records the personal case of dementia as the result of “traumatic experiences of US violence, abuse, and exploitation in the Caribbean” and the unfulfilled integration into Canadian society” in [David Chariandy](#)’s novel *Soucouyant* (2007). The five insightful analyses summarily support the editors’ convincing assumption that “transnational American studies and medical humanities can be mutually complementary” and that they “may work in tandem in turning this planet into a more humane place.” We would like to thank Special Forum Editor Pia Wiegink for carefully and expertly guiding all steps of this process in tandem with the guest editors from the initial conception of the topic via blind review to the preparation for print.

Forward

A great variety of translating between different national contexts and the United States underlies the excerpts from recent publications in transnational American studies put together by *Forward* Editor [Jennifer Reimer](#), who sees them as an alternative to “a world turning towards toxic ethnonationalism.” Their authors’ political and cultural background predestines them for the exploration of translating cases, including Markus Heide’s American travel reports of the Early Republic, Yu Tokunaga’s study of Japanese-Mexican relations in Los Angeles between the world wars, Brian Goodman’s account of interrelations between American and Czech writers in the Cold War period, also covered in Harilaos Stecopoulos’s analysis of using American literature for cultural

diplomacy, and Kay Kaufman Shelemay's study of the forced migration of musicians out of the Horn of Africa after 1974 and the establishment of an Ethiopian American diaspora. Most spectacular in Jennifer's collection is Y-Dang Troeung's translating of the American engagements in Cambodia and the fate of Cambodian refugees in the Cold War. It is very opportune that the ASA's International Committee has selected Y-Dang Troeung for the [2023 Shelley Fisher Fishkin Prize for International Scholarship in Transnational American Studies](#). And it is equally opportune that Christopher B. Patterson, Shelley Fisher Fishkin Prize awardee in 2020, will introduce his late wife's *Refugee Lifeworlds: The Afterlife of the Cold War in Cambodia* (2023) at the award ceremony in Montreal in November. We extend our sincere condolences to Christopher and are very grateful to him for providing the background of this groundbreaking research and contextualizing it to accompany the excerpt. We would like to thank Jennifer for her lucid introduction and her valiant efforts in negotiating with presses to obtain copyright, which has become increasingly difficult. We express our gratitude to all publishers who responded positively to her requests.

Reprise

Reprise Editor [Brian Russell Roberts](#)'s new format of republishing excellent foreign-language articles also lends itself to the formula of translating and transnational American studies. This time the topic for his selection of essays by accomplished international scholars is the worldwide reception of the American Nobel laureate Bob Dylan. The wide range of Bob Dylan's oeuvre already represents a composite array of examples of translation. The contribution by German comparatist Heinrich Detering, "[Odysseus in Liverpool: Bob Dylan's 'Roll On John'](#)" traces Dylan's translating from Homer's *Odyssey*, English and American literary sources, Biblical references for his musical lamentation of John Lennon's assassination—transferring classical antiquity from the Mediterranean sea to Liverpool and New York City. Likewise, a [Japanese](#) and [Argentinian scholar](#) account for their reception of Dylan in their respective countries and commonalities with Jorge Luis Borges. Two essays by [Goenawan Mohamad](#) present the continued appreciation of Bob Dylan's work by an acclaimed Indonesian poet-critic. All five *Reprise* essays are English translations from the original language by transnational American studies scholars.

We congratulate Brian for this excellent choice of articles on Bob Dylan's work, supreme examples of many translating levels in the service of transnational American studies.

The editors of *JTAS* would like to thank all authors for their valuable contributions to this issue of translating and transnational American studies. And we continue to recognize the labor of scholarly love of the editorial team, Aiko Takeuchi-Demirci, Ahngeli Shivam, Vanessa Evans, Mai Wang, Mahshid Mayar, and Helen Yang, guided by the expertise of our managing editor Sabine Kim, without whose untiring work the issue would not appear.

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