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SPECIAL ISSUE:

AMERICAN STUDIES AND THE DILEMMAS OF MULTILINGUALISM



'WHO REALLY READS US?' NOTES FROM CALIFORNIA

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'Can we hear them now?' asked Jim Hicks at the 2006 Annual Meeting of the American Studies Association in Oakland, CA. More than 1,500 scholars came together to discuss 'The United States from Inside and Out: Transnational American Studies'. Since 2003, Hicks has been putting transnational American Studies into (teaching) practice: at Smith College he directs the one year 'Diploma in American Studies' program, which is only open to international graduate students and fosters a scholarly exchange across borders, disciplines and cultures.

In Oakland, few people heard Hicks speak: he presented his excellent paper on the hollowness of some practices of transnational American Studies on Sunday morning, a slot notorious for tiny audiences. Less than one percent of the registered conference attendees joined Hicks for the workshop on Transnational Pedagogies. In his paper, Hicks repeatedly challenged his audience by asking if voices from international academia are sufficiently heard within the United States. He referred to the voices of non-American Americanists. Voices like mine. And like those of many members of IASA. In this short position paper, I'd like to take up Hicks's inquiry and relate it to the theme of the current issue of *RIAS*: the question of language, which is so central to transnational American Studies.

Scholarship that transcends national borders and questions them as such needs to find a common language to address those issues in. In the field of American Studies this language has long become English. Professional organizations outside the United States conduct their conferences in English. At meetings of the 'Deutsche Gesellschaft für Amerikastudien' (DGfA, The German American Studies Association), which is the organization I am most closely affiliated with, you will not find a single paper presented in German. The association's journal, *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, also almost exclusively prints articles in English. The shift from mainly German to predominately English texts occurred towards the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. I could not identify a specific date (or issue), which marks the transition point. The change took place over the years culminating in the first issue of a newly elected editorial board in 1991: issue 1 of volume 36 is entirely in English, including the editor's note. Among those new editors was Alfred Hornung, later president of the DGfA, and found-

ing member of the ASA's International Initiative¹. In the following years, German texts can still be found in the journal, but the majority of printed articles are written in English. I'm limiting my observations to the European, specifically German context. This should not be understood as a value judgment, simply as an indicator of my cultural rearing and lack of extensive knowledge on other national American Studies associations and their publications. Giles and Ellis (2005) give a broad survey of regional American Studies journals, so I refer the reader to their excellent overview for a truly international perspective.

The reasons for establishing English as a *lingua franca* at the DGfA and in its journal as well as in other American Studies circles outside the United States are well known and need not to be discussed again. Accessibility, internationalization and marketability—these catch words should be sufficient to describe the current trend. Of course, there's also a scholarly explanation: in the age of transnationalism foreign journals of American Studies can provide the very outside perspective that former ASA president Shelley Fisher Fishkin put at center-stage in her 2004 presidential address². But are these journals actually read for this reason by US Americanists? And does a transnational exchange of ideas really take place within the pages of the professional journals of the six continents that engage in American Studies?

Hicks, determined to get at least a preliminary grasp on the extent of the transnational flow of ideas within the field of American Studies, conducted a small empirical survey: he 'compiled a comparative table which enumerates the times [American Studies] journals, both US and not, were cited annually, according to the *Arts and Humanities Search* database' (Hicks, 2006: 7). The result—especially for a non-US americanist like myself—was quite disillusioning. But before I go into Hick's findings, I want to briefly allude to a conceptual difficulty: so far, I have been writing as if a distinction between US americanists and scholars from outside the United States could be easily drawn. This is, of course, not the case. In the age of (literary and actual) transmigration it is almost impossible to distinguish who's inside from who's outside a given space such as the United States (whose boundaries are subject to discussion themselves). Should a German scholar publishing in a US American journal be considered a non-American americanist? And what about an American teaching and writing in Germany? Or maybe even in both countries? I leave the task of answering these questions to

¹Hornung and others approached Fishkin at the 2003 ASA Annual Meeting in Hartford, Connecticut. In the following year the International Initiative was launched, which Fishkin sees as 'an ongoing effort by the American Studies Association comprised of a series of special projects and activities involving international scholars and affiliated societies. We desire to encourage increased contact between international American Studies scholars and American Studies scholars based in the US, and to evaluate whether the existing offices, publications, and committees of the ASA are serving the needs of international members and affiliated associations. We would like to facilitate collaborations not only between the ASA and affiliated international American Studies associations, but also between international American Studies centers, programs, and journals and American Studies programs, centers and journals based in the US. And we would like to explore the possibility of new or revised mechanisms for supporting these ongoing and suggested activities, including seeking extramural funding' (Fishkin, 2004: par. 6).

²Fishkin said: 'Today American studies scholars increasingly recognize that understanding requires looking beyond the nation's borders, and understanding how the nation is seen from vantage points beyond its borders' (Fishkin, 2005: 20).



those who devote a more substantial study to this subject. In the context of this short position paper, a rather crude juxtaposition will have to do. So let's return to Hicks's survey and its disillusioning results.

Sure, I knew that US American journals are cited much more frequently than those published in other countries. I also expected that the number of references to the *American Quarterly* would be at least ten to twenty times as much as to, say, the German *Amerikastudien/American Studies*. I was not, however, prepared for such a difference: according to Hicks's research non-US journals are hardly read at all. In 2005, the database found a total of 109 citations from articles published in *American Quarterly*. During the same year, the British *Journal of American Studies* was only referred to 29 times, and that is the most popular non-US journal. All other journals Hicks searched for were not cited from more than five times. The *Japanese Journal of American Studies*, despite the fact that the Japanese American Studies Association is highly represented at the annual meetings of the ASA, was not even referred to once (Hicks, 2006: 8).

But what about 'my' journal, the German *Amerikastudien/American Studies*? Hicks did not include it in his research. Upon my return from Oakland, I consulted the *Web of Science*, which brings together the following databases: the *Science Citation Index Expanded*, the *Social Science Citation Index* and the *Arts & Humanities Citation Index*. I searched for references to articles published in *Amerikastudien/American Studies* within the past five years. The result was as discouraging as the findings of Hicks: according to my search only in two instances did authors of articles in American journals cite from articles published in the German journal. Both citations happened in the past two years. The optimistic reader discovers an upwards trend; the pessimistic one can't look past the incredibly low number.

I tend to be a pragmatist, so I immediately ask for the reasons behind such a finding and look for a way to improve the situation. I can think of three. First, the quality of articles in non-US publications is not high enough for an international audience. Second, the journals are not easily accessible outside the country in which they are published. And third, they are simply not high up on the priority list of (American) readers for various reason (lack of interest, time and /or critical acclaim)³. The first explanation can be ruled out easily. A look at a random issue of *Amerikastudien/American Studies* testifies to its scholarly sophistication. Articles address a wide range of topics, employ different methods of engagement with the subject of research, and renowned scholars of the field can be found as authors and editors. The second explanation deserves another database search before it can be refuted: according to *WorldCat* the journal *Amerikastudien/American Studies* can be found in 160 libraries worldwide. Its circulation is far smaller than that of *American Quarterly*, which is shelved in approximately nine times as many libraries and which is sent to every member of the ASA, the world's largest association of American Studies scholars. This ratio, however, does not correspond to the citations (that ratio was less than 1:50). Also, more than 800 libraries own the British *Journal of American Studies*, and still citations from that journal are

³The reason could also be linked to the method of research and the database consulted. It is possible that *Web of Science* is more thoroughly searching US-based journals than those from outside of the US. I thank Michael Boyden for pointing this out to me.

small in number. *WorldCat* gives numbers worldwide, but we can also get a glimpse at regional accessibility: in New England (excluding Maine), *Amerikastudien* is available in 24 libraries. *American Quarterly* can be read in 60 different libraries in the state of Massachusetts alone. Again, circulation is noticeably different, but I believe insufficient accessibility can't account for the small readership of non-American journals inside the US. Too many libraries own copies of *Amerikastudien*.

This leaves us with the third explanation: that (American) readers ascribe a low priority to foreign scholarly publications in the field of American Studies. Giles and Ellis note the high number of journals devoted to American Studies, a number that has grown exponentially within the last decade (2005: 1,033). Readers have to select: because of time constraints, importance, interest. They have to choose what to read, and they choose American publications over foreign ones. Whatever the reason behind this decision may be, the result remains the same: our journals are not widely read. And the transnational flow of ideas tends to tilt to one side⁴.

There is danger in generalizing, I know, as there always is. At conferences in the US, more and more non-Americans are presenting and US americanists listen eagerly to their points of view. At the 2006 ASA Annual Meeting, roughly 160 of the 1575 registered scholars came from outside the United States⁵. Also, recently published books quite frequently address transnational perspectives on the subject matter. There are many excellent examples of this, far too many to mention them all here. Just to give you one, I name a book from the field of my research: Lawrence Buell's *Emerson* which introduces the transcendentalist as a figure who 'anticipates the globalizing age' (Buell, 2003: 3) and integrates transhemispheric views on Emerson into the book's narrative. Buell also broadly discusses Emerson scholarship outside the United States.

Yet, I believe our attention still has to be drawn to the fact how little our ideas and journals seem to be read. The basic but telling research by both Hicks and myself indicates that. If further research—conducted in a more far-reaching and sophisticated manner—should support our findings, steps have to be taken to change the status quo. It does not seem to be enough to establish English as the *lingua franca* in national journals. As Giles and Ellis have outlined, editors may have to cede local power and create a continental journal to rival *American Quarterly*, as unsuccessfully attempted by the European American Studies Association (2005: 1,042). Also, US Americanists need to do more than to demand to see the inside and outside as 'interpenetrating' and to call for a bringing together of these distinct perspectives (Fishkin, 2005: 21). The transnational in American Studies has to be turned into a means of teaching, researching, and, yes, reading.

In this short statement, I did not offer any solutions. I raised questions—just as Hicks did in Oakland. Maybe the editors of our national journals have to step in and fol-

⁴ For the sake of emphasizing my point, I have not taken into account the transnational exchange of ideas within the pages of *American Quarterly* and other US-based journals, in which scholars from very different countries publish.

⁵ It is not entirely clear whether this number given by the conference registrar refers to non-US residents, scholars holding non-American citizenship or any kind of persons who came to the conference from outside the US (which could also include US scholars living abroad).



low Giles and Ellis's advice⁶. Or maybe *RIAS* can fill the (transnational) gap. Or maybe we at *RIAS* even have to start with the same question: 'Who really reads us?'

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⁶Recently, a first step was made in that direction: following the ASA 2006 Annual Meeting, 31 editors from 17 countries launched the Internet site *American Studies Journals*, which seeks 'to connect American Studies scholars and research across national borders'.