UC Santa Barbara
Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title
Citizen of the World

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8226w3v5

Journal
Journal of Transnational American Studies, 16(2)

Author
Fishkin, Shelley Fisher

Publication Date
2025-12-21

DOI
10.5070/T8.61730

Copyright Information
This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Citizen of the World

SHELLEY FISHER FISHKIN
Stanford University

I can't recall when we first met, but I'll always remember our first dance.

And not because either of us was a good dancer. We weren't. There used to be a dance held at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association (ASA) every year (a tradition long gone, alas). On the evening of Friday, October 17, 2003, in Hartford, a fantastic Latin jazz band was playing their heart out but no one was dancing. I hated that. So I grabbed Alfred and pressed him into service as my partner on the dance floor in an effort to get the rest of the crowd to dance, too. In between sets I peppered him with questions. What I should do with the "bully pulpit" I had just been given? (I had just been elected ASA president and would take office in the coming year.) What's missing in the ASA? What could make it better?

Alfred suggested that it could be worthwhile to try to figure out ways of making the ASA's annual meeting a site where Americanists based in the US and those outside of the US could network in various ways, exchanging information, planning joint projects, figuring out how to conceptualize American studies scholarship in more global contexts. Maybe we could invite presidents of national American studies associations to come together at the ASA's annual meeting—and perhaps international journal editors as well.

That conversation with Alfred on the dance floor prompted me to think about how relatively isolated Americanists in the US were from work being done outside the geographic borders of our nation (it also prompted me to recall the role that scholars based outside the US had played in my own education).[1] But only a handful of international scholars ever came to the annual meetings of the ASA. Why weren't there more?

Scholars in the US had for some time been paying lip service to the idea of a "transnational American studies." But European scholars had been operationalizing it for decades, demonstrating the intellectual payoffs of abandoning the shallow pond

of provincialism. Was geography destiny? European Americanists had to cross an ocean—intellectually if not physically—to ply their trade while American studies scholars in the US, could remain, if they chose, in the comfort and privacy of their own backyards.

There is a risk to spending your life in Gopher Prairie, as Sinclair Lewis showed us in his 1920 novel, *Main Street*:

> The town is, in our tale, called "Gopher Prairie, Minnesota." But its Main Street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere. The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told Up York State or in the Carolina hills.
>
> Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters. What Ole Jenson the grocer says to Ezra Stowbody the banker is the new law for London, Prague, and the unprofitable isles of the sea; whatever Ezra does not know and sanction, that thing is heresy, worthless for knowing and wicked to consider.[2]

American studies scholars in the US may smirk at a passage like this one, confident that it has nothing to do with them. After all, hadn't the last decades of scholarship challenged that whole "climax of civilization" complex? But there was a part of Lewis's description of us that still was apt: the smug confidence that what the residents of Gopher Prairie don't know couldn't possibly be worth knowing—and the corollary that what they say ought to be "the new law for London [and] Prague."

Americanists in the US tended to be convinced that what they had to say was worth hearing and they pushed their publishers to advertise and distribute their books abroad. But when it came to reading, citing, and telling their students to read work by American studies scholars working outside the United States, they often looked quizzical or vacant. I had long been aware of the truly stellar series of monographs in American studies that Alfred edited, for example, but I was saddened and surprised to find that although Stanford had a nearly complete set of them, nobody had ever borrowed a volume in the series from the library. Americanists in the US were better at talking than listening. Work published outside the US was rarely cited in the US-based journals that I read. What would it take to change that?

We didn't know it at the time, but there, on the dance floor, as we caught our breath in between stints of dancing to the driving salsa beat of Ray Gonzalez y su Orquesta, we were laying the groundwork for the ridiculously ambitious goal of changing the culture of our profession. Alfred would become a key inspiration, cheerleader, instigator, and collaborator in this project for the next two decades and more. It is impossible to overstate how central Alfred has been to the flourishing of

the field of transnational American studies—or how important he has been to my own journey as a scholar.

*

I applied for a host of grants to help subsidize the travel of international scholars to the next ASA annual meeting—presidents of national American studies associations and editors of American studies journals from around the world, as well as other scholars who were simply doing interesting and important work. With help from the Mellon Foundation and other private funders, more international scholars appeared on the program in 2004 than ever before. Presidents and editors in the field from across the globe (along with many others) were there—and with funds I raised to help support the attendance of scholars from abroad for the next two years, as well, the kinds of networks Alfred had gestured to and envisioned increasingly took shape.

Several years later, recognizing that scholars in the US and beyond whose work was firmly grounded in transnational topics often still had trouble getting their work published, Alfred was central to the creation of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* in 2009, an online, open-access, peer-reviewed journal "that seeks to broaden the interdisciplinary study of American cultures in a transnational context." Cofounded by Alfred with Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Takayuki Tatsumi, and myself (along with Eric Martinsen and Caroline Kyungah Hong), the journal, hosted on UC Berkeley's eScholarship platform, functions as "a forum for Americanists in the global academic community, where scholars are increasingly interrogating borders both within and outside the nation and focusing on the multiple intersections and exchanges that flow across those borders." It sought from the start to "bring together innovative transnational work from diverse but often disconnected sites in the US and abroad," and has successfully done just that for the last sixteen years.

Alfred rolled up his sleeves and did the hard work of helping *JTAS* grow and develop over the years that followed, imagining new directions, proposing and securing new editors and contributors, editing special forums, trouble-shooting myriad problems and challenges, and serving as editor in chief himself. A few years ago, the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies, which Alfred founded in 2014, became sponsor of the journal (along with Stanford's Program in American studies and the University of California, Santa Barbara's American Cultures and Global Contexts Center, with support from the University of California, Davis's Department of American Studies and Department of English.) Alfred's generosity and energy, and the grace and good humor that he brings to everything he does—along with a humility that is truly rare in our profession—have had everything to do with its longevity and its success.

Indeed, Alfred's gifts as a visionary institution-builder are immense. The Obama Institute has become a major hub of transnational approaches to our field, knitting together a truly global community of scholars through conferences, talks, and re-search initiatives. The impressive monograph series he has nurtured as general editor

since 1989 (!)—*Amerikastudien/American* Studies—and the journal by the same name of which he has been general editor since 2002, testify to the selfless energy he has devoted to the profession.

And if that weren't enough, alongside his formidable talent at building institutions, Alfred has managed to remain an indefatigable scholar in his own right. Author or editor of innumerable books, essay collections, and articles on a host of intriguing topics, especially that of life writing, Alfred has been one of the most productive professors anywhere in the world for more than three decades. The invaluable *Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies*[3] that he coedited with *JTAS* editors Nina Morgan and Takayuki Tatsumi in 2019 is just one of many major contributions Alfred has made to defining and expanding our understanding of what our field of study is and can be.

Alfred richly deserved honor given to him by the American Studies association in 2013, the highest honor the organization awards: the Carl Bode–Norman Holmes Pearson Prize for outstanding contributions to American Studies, which he was awarded for all he has done to foster the internationalization and transnationalization of the field.

But there is another title that he deserves, as well. Mark Twain once made a comment about his friend, the remarkable Anson Burlingame, that I will steal here, because it applies equally to the remarkable Alfred Hornung: He has "outgrown the narrow citizenship of a state, and become a citizen of the world."[4]

Notes

111 At my first EAAS conference—in Seville in April 1992—I heard Josef Jarab probe the influence of jazz on Czech poetry. And I heard Stephen Mills explore how the UK represented the Irish at the World Columbian Exposition, a fair held in a city filled with Irish immigrants. In preparation for talks I was asked to give in Italy the following fall, I read up on what Italian scholars had been writing, and was surprised to find that scholars like Alessandro Portelli, Mario Materassi, and others had been light years ahead of US-based Americanists when it came to recognizing the important ways that oral culture, particularly of African Americans, had shaped our literature. At a conference hosted by the Laboratoire de recherche sur l'imaginaire americain at Université de Paris VIII, Paris in the winter of 1993 (and again in 1996) on "Reimagining the Racial Matrix of American Literature," I listened to Viola Sachs uncover—in her distinctive, free-flowing, associative manner—hidden images of the Yoruba god "Legba" in *Moby-Dick*. When my book, *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African American Voices* came out later that year, some of the most insightful reviews were from British scholars Tony Tanner, Stephen Fender, Peter Messent, and Malcolm Bradbury (Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African American Voices* [Oxford University Press, 1993]). At an international committee reception of

the ASA in the mid-90s, after regaling me with stories of her recent trip to Hannibal, Missouri, Japanese scholar Masako Notoji was shocked to learn that I'd never been there. "You *must* go," she scolded, derailing my research agenda in enormously fruitful ways. My 1996 book, *Lighting Out for the Territory*, was the result (Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture* [Oxford University Press, 1996]). Key parts of that book came directly out of conversations I had with Japanese novelist Kenzaburo Oe and Nigerian novelist Ben Okri; the book was also shaped by correspondence with scholars in China, Argentina, the United Kingdom, Israel, Greece, Brazil, India, Saudi Arabia, and Japan.

[2] Sinclair Lewis, [Preface], *Main Street* (Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), n. pag.

[3] *Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies*, ed. Nina Morgan, Alfred Hornung, and Takayuki Tatsumi (Routledge, 2019).

[4] After Anson Burlingame finished serving as US envoy to China, he accepted a position from China as their envoy to the West. No other diplomat has ever done something comparable. For more on Burlingame, see David L. Anderson, "Anson Burlingame: American Architect of the Cooperative Policy in China, 1861–1871," *Diplomatic History* 1, no. 3 (1977): 239–55, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24909964?seq=1; and John Schrecker, "'For the equality of men—For the equality of nations': Anson Burlingame and China's First Embassy to the United States, 1868," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 17, no. 1 (2010): 9–34, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23613330. Mark Twain described Burlingame as a "citizen of the world" in a eulogy he published in the *Buffalo Express* on February 25, 1870 (Mark Twain, "Anson Burlingame," *Buffalo Express*, February 25, 1870, https://sites.google.com/view/ansonburlingame/twain-eulogy).

Selected Bibliography

Anderson, David L. "Anson Burlingame: American Architect of the Cooperative Policy in China, 1861–1871." *Diplomatic History* 1, no. 3 (1977): 239–55. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24909964?seq=1

Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture*. Oxford University Press, 1996.

———. *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African American Voices*. Oxford University Press, 1993.

Lewis, Sinclair. [Preface]. *Main Street*. Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920.

Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies, edited by Nina Morgan, Alfred Hornung, and Takayuki Tatsumi. Routledge, 2019.

Schrecker, John. "'For the equality of men—For the equality of nations': Anson Burlingame and China's First Embassy to the United States, 1868." *Journal of*

American-East Asian Relations 17, no. 1 (2010): 9–34. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23613330.

Twain, Mark. "Anson Burlingame." *Buffalo Express*, February 25, 1870. https://sites.google.com/view/ansonburlingame/twain-eulogy