

Editors' Introduction

In some respects, one could argue that the very phrase “transnational black studies” is redundant: black studies has been “transnational” from its inception. Pioneering intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois, George Washington Williams, Anna Julia Cooper, Nicolas Guillen, C. L. R. James, Oliver Cox, and Zora Neale Hurston, to name a few, have shared a kind of diasporic vision or sensibility, shaped by the antiracist and anti-imperialist politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their politics and intellectual orientation have profoundly shaped historical scholarship on black people in the New World. For people of African descent, *diaspora* served as both a political term with which to emphasize unifying experiences of African peoples dispersed by the slave trade and as an analytical term that enabled scholars to talk about black communities across national boundaries. Black studies scholars examined the dispersal of people of African descent, their role in the transformation and creation of new cultures, institutions, and ideas outside of Africa, and the problems of building pan-African and Third World solidarity movements across the globe. Indeed, black internationalism cannot be limited to solidarity across the diaspora. There are numerous examples of African-descended people making connections with oppressed people around the world, particularly people enduring the wrath of American imperialism. We witnessed such sympathy when the U.S. occupied the Philippines and Cuba, and we have seen it again more recently during the invasion of Iraq. African Americans may not be the most visible antiwar activists, but they have pretty consistently opposed U.S. foreign wars in the Third World.

The essays, interviews, and reviews gathered together in this special issue represent the best of the new of this very old tradition. The contributors develop creative frameworks, reveal fresh archives, and move good theory forward in order to illuminate the transnational movement of people, ideas, and cultures. Because black studies has always been interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, the pieces included

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here emerge from a wide range of fields, not just history. Ifeoma Nwankwo, for example, labors at the cross-section of literature and anthropology; Michelle Stephens brings together literature and history; Mary Ebeling settles her research on black people and cyberspace within sociology; and Joseph Heathcott's explorations of ska exemplify the best in cultural studies scholarship. Not due to any specific outreach on our part, we nonetheless ended up publishing mainly young scholars, most of whom are just out of graduate school. This cohort of young minds is claiming transnational black studies as its own. At the same time, we've included a penetrating essay by Joseph Harris, one of the pioneers in African diaspora studies. Harris's piece appeals to scholars to move beyond the "black Atlantic" into other critical diasporic regions, notably the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

One of our goals in putting this special volume together was to explore the ways in which black studies is undergirded by a politics of liberation. After all, it was the black freedom movement that gave birth to black studies in the first place. Some of the pieces included here make the links very explicit—notably, Martha Biondi's powerful essay on black organizing and historical research around reparations, and the interviews with Amiri Baraka, radical activist, poet, playwright, and Bill Fletcher, longtime labor organizer and now head of TransAfrica Forum. The interviews, conducted by Van Gosse and James Early, respectively, reveal the extent to which the African American struggle remains linked to the larger black world. The Baraka interview, in particular, stokes the notion that artists, while gaining inspiration from their home space, inform and are informed by the larger world. So Chinua Achebe writes of Nigeria, Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya, and Amiri Baraka of the U.S., but their engagement is always a dialogue between the local and the global.

The impact of travel and transnational interactions on identity, politics, and citizenship are central themes in several of the essays. Focusing on the 1930s and 1940s, when antifascism was prominent and black people seemingly had more opportunities to travel, Frank Guridy's essay explores "racial citizenship"—the idea of belonging and solidarity across the black world developed as a result of knowledge formed out of transnational linkages. He illustrates how "racial citizenship" is employed in the relationship between Cubans of color and African Americans. His piece tells a story of how Cuban activists, fighting against racial discrimination in public spaces in Havana, seize upon a minor racist incident directed at a visiting African American congressman (the only one in Congress) to press their own claims for racial justice. The incident itself, of course, is less important than the ways in which Cubans interpret and use it.

Working roughly in the same period, Harvey Neptune is also looking at how African American visitors to the Caribbean shape and/or disrupt local race politics. He examines the encounter between African American military personnel, who resided in Trinidad as part of the U.S. occupation of the island during the Second

World War, and local Trinidadians. As Neptune demonstrates, African American men in Trinidad embodied “simultaneously the domestic oppression and imperial might” of the modern U.S., and Trinidadian women became a source of contestation between men. Black troops, he argues, became the object of desire on the part of Trinidadian women, or at least a discourse of such desire erupted during the occupation. The tensions played themselves out as a nationalist narrative whereby local Trinidadian men challenged American men for control of women they considered theirs.

Ifeoma Nwankwo further explores the theme of identity and racial/transnational belonging in her essay on Zora Neale Hurston. Arguing that “transnational engagements are born of juggling affinities,” Nwankwo shows how Hurston found herself in an unusual and tension-filled anthropological space. Hurston, she argues, tried to construct an image of her anthropologist self as one that was both close to and distant from her informants. Interestingly, anthropology is rife with such debates about the relationship of ethnographer to subject. How should an ethnographer situate her authorial or familiar voice? It seems, according to Nwankwo, that Hurston very consciously occupied an ambivalent place between objective distance and subjective engagement. The theoretical implications for understanding her transnational and black cultural work are therefore enormous.

Michelle Stephens also makes a vital theoretical contribution to this volume—one with import for all of the other essays. Her discussion of a paradigm shift from the national to the global places special emphasis on locating new spaces of identity formation “in transit.” She insists that the movement of peoples and cultures has never been just about what people carry with them or where they settle, but about the process itself. The act of travel and/or migration profoundly shapes human experience, adding more prominent temporal and spatial dimensions to transnational studies. Thus these identities “in transit” should be the starting point of analysis, not an afterthought. Indeed, Joseph Heathcott’s piece on ska beautifully illustrates how a music genre actually came to occupy and embody this space of “transit.” At the same time, he shows how commodification and consumption propelled this music, and other musical genres for that matter, into motion. Heathcott reminds us that the role of labor, money, and desire has often been central to the creation of these “traveling political spaces.”

Obviously, this volume represents just the surface of an ocean of scholarship in circulation or forthcoming. These are exciting times for scholars working in the fields of black studies, in part because the work continues to be informed by political struggle. As long as we continue to experience racism(s) and find allies on a global scale, scholars will continue to examine how and why black people connect with one another and occupy common spaces across national borders.

—Lisa Brock, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Karen Sotiropoulos

