

Introduction

ASJ DOI 10.18422/68-01

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What specific challenges does the study of social movements and race/ethnicity in the United States pose for non-US-based scholars? Does distance afford non-US-based scholars possible rewards that make their research a unique contribution to the study of the United States? This edited issue is designed as a symposium in which eleven French-based specialists of various chronological and thematic domains share their experiences and insights on a variety of issues of concern to non-US-based American studies scholars. These relate to the distance between researcher and object, objectivity and engagement, the challenges and rewards of foreignness, as well as the epistemological and methodological positioning of American Studies scholars within the broader field of social science.

- 1 The dossier comprises six academic articles on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century women's movements, twentieth- and twenty-first-century political and religious conservatism, and hyper-contemporary protest movements for racial, civil, and economic justice—with the authors responding to each other's papers two by two. The issue's second section consists in open-ended discussion on fieldwork among four scholars working on a variety of racial and ethnic minorities—viz. African American, Latinx, Arab, and Native American.
- 2 What specific challenges does the study of social movements and race/ethnicity in the United States pose for non-US-based scholars? Does distance afford non-US-based scholars possible rewards that make their research a unique contribution to the study of the United States? These questions are especially relevant for American Studies scholars, whose work is often not fully known or recognized by either the general public or other social science scholars such as historians, sociologists, or political scientists. The latter's research often focuses on their own countries of origin—much as *US-based* American studies scholars' work—or sometimes examines American society from the standpoint of a comparison with their countries of origin. Non-US-based American Studies scholars, by contrast, face the double challenge of investigating a society that is not their own and doing it for the sake of probing its foreignness, rather than seeking to overcome foreignness in order to, more or less, 'domesticate' the United States into their respective cultures. Paradoxically, this is both mitigated and enhanced by the fact that the above-mentioned disciplinary and academic frontiers are porous, as many American studies scholars also identify as anthropologists, geographers, historians, political scientists, sociologists, etc.—either due to their original training in these disciplines, or because their work borrows from and appears in publication outlets of, these disciplines. *Mitigated* in that labels defined in terms of academic disciplines tend to matter less in a twenty-first-century academic world where

borders between nations as well as branches of knowledge are more and more easily being crossed. *Enhanced* insofar as American Studies scholars risk losing visibility, hence legitimacy in the process—witness the fact that, unlike American literature specialists, American Studies scholars who focus on US society from within a social science paradigm lack a broadly recognized disciplinary identification, a recurrent subject of debate and questioning among French specialists of American civilization (Rossignol; Caron and Rolland-Diamond).

- 3 What then are the specificities of a non-US-based American Studies scholar's research? Characteristic of area studies in general is their structural interdisciplinarity, as the field gathers not only social scientists—sociologists, historians, political scientists, etc.—but also literary, visual, and cultural studies scholars. Their practitioners display attentiveness to any given country or region's broad cultural context and the intermixing of political or social with historical or political dynamics, and a willingness to emancipate themselves from the sometimes crippling constraints of heavily structured academic fields. This institutional malleability notwithstanding, conducting fieldwork or archival research in a foreign language and distant country can be an especially critical endeavor. Distance entails a variety of related issues, often having to do with the very material and financial conditions of research, such as the difficulty of carrying out longitudinal inquiries, follow-up interviews, fact-checking missions, or spillover investigations. Foreignness may also shed doubt on the legitimacy, credentials, or even agenda of a non-American scholar of the United States. Perhaps in no other field of research is this more sensitive than in the study of social movements, race, and ethnicity—thorny fields if ever there be any, both in the United States itself and in, sometimes erroneous or flawed, perceptions and representations of 'America' abroad.
- 4 In France, for example—where universalism has the status of a quasi-civil religion and many view anything resembling communitarianism as a major threat to social harmony, if not civil peace—US policies, mobilizations, and general attitudes regarding racial and ethnic diversity are frequently represented as an American bogeyman that many French people think they abhor, but they in fact largely ignore. Likewise, the black freedom movement—including, but not limited to the civil rights movement—is widely lauded for its egalitarian humanism, while its more radical expressions—e.g. Black Power, the Black Panthers, and today's Black Lives Matter—can be seen as too differentialist and sectarian for France's self-proclaimed human rights political ethos. Yet, they do represent a heroicized model of identification for France's largely invisibilized and disenfranchised black and Arab denizens, especially French youth of West African, North African, or Caribbean descent.
- 5 If distance matters for the study of social movements and race/ethnicity in the United States, we hypothesize, French-based scholars may have valuable insights and experiences to share with their American Studies peers. Social movements and race/ethnicity have indeed played an important role in the structuring of American Studies in France. The 1960s and 1970s were both a time when

American Studies were expanding as an autonomous research field and when social movements represented a large share of the French scholarship on the United States. A great deal of research focused on the then-contemporaneous civil rights and feminist movements, as well as other mobilizations. For example, the second issue of the *French Journal of American Studies* (*Revue française d'études américaines*), published in 1976, is entitled "American Radicalism: How Radical?" It consists of articles on populism and anarchism, as well as the labor and antiwar movements, which propose a critical appraisal of American radicalism by placing late twentieth-century movements into historical, geographical, and cultural perspective. In 1980, the same journal's thematic dossier, entitled "L'étranger dans la culture américaine" ("Foreigners and Foreignness in American Culture"), included articles ranging from the role of culture as a tool of emancipation in black urban ghettos, to the black analogy in feminist language, and ethnic conflict over the environment in northern New Mexico.

- 6 The fact that the development of American Studies was coincidental with these movements partly explains this emphasis. In the past few years, interestingly, social movements seem to have generated less scholarly interest in France among American Studies scholars than among researchers affiliated with history, geography, sociology, and political science departments. On the one hand, American Studies scholars have increasingly tended to address the collective identities that are strategic to many social movements—ethnic and racial, but also religious and based on sex, gender, or sexuality—in terms of cultural representations rather than collective mobilizations. The richness, inventiveness, and resulting attractiveness of cultural studies has contributed to a growing interest in such objects of study as popular music and television series, which have become legitimate terrains for the study of race, sex, gender, and sexuality, but also social class (e.g. Crémieux; Djavadzadeh; Gonzalez; Lacoue-Labarthe; Laurent; Mauray). On the other hand, many American Studies scholars typically approach mobilization agendas and issues from a political and institutional viewpoint, such as legislation and jurisprudence, rather than as the foundation of social protest. For example, electoral politics or the US Supreme Court's jurisprudence are off-employed angles to study women's, African Americans', and Native Americans' rights (e.g. Boulot; Coste; Delgenre; Gergaud; Richomme), while sexual politics was considered through the lens of electoral politics long before the 2016 presidential election's scandals related to Donald Trump's unapologetic machismo (e.g. Merchant).
- 7 The study of social movements and race/ethnicity in the American past and present, however, has by no means disappeared from the scope of American Studies in France. This was perceptible, for instance, at the 2016 annual meeting of the French Association of American Studies (Association Française d'Études Américaines, AFEA), "America in the Works," which put the spotlight on recent trends, challenges, and prospects in American Studies. Several discussions pointed at converging concerns, such as the theoretical, methodological, institutional, and pragmatic challenges scholars face when engaging in fieldwork. Herein lies the origin of this edited issue, with a view to presenting both a very

hands-on and reflective conversation. That is why this dossier has been designed as a symposium among eleven specialists of various chronological and thematic domains: nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century women's movements; twentieth- and twenty-first-century varieties of political and religious conservatism; hyper-contemporary protest movements for racial, civil, and economic justice; African American, Latinx, Arab, and Native American minorities.

- 8 In relation with the above-mentioned questions of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, these contributors discuss their methods. Recent developments such as Black Lives Matter, environment-related Indigenous resistance, labor-related Latinx mobilizations, and the Occupy movement have inspired more and more French scholars to conduct fieldwork in order to regroup discourses on, and analysis of, social movements in empirically-based research and convey the voice of movement actors. The challenges they face in the process are in part due to the relative paucity of ethnographic fieldwork methodology training in undergraduate American Studies programs. From the articulation of a research question to the analysis of data gathered in the field, through the design of a research protocol that may include such varied strategies as participant observation or the use of mental maps, methodological difficulties can turn into impracticalities, even impossibilities, and lead researchers to reconsider or interrupt their projects. Additionally, non-US-based scholars of the United States often encounter such basic material difficulties as travel costs, and the constraints of a teaching schedule leave them scarce time to travel overseas. Conversely, when confronting on-site reality after preparing their field research 'in the lab,' researchers may discover a wealth of data and research angles that were not planned, which may lead them to transform their protocol and/or research question.
- 9 Not only geographical and cultural distance, but also the specificities of each national academic tradition influence what research American Studies scholars do and how they do it.^[2] Yet, while distance from one's object of study undeniably generates biases, blind spots, and other barriers that this volume purports to discuss, it may also endow non-US-based scholars of the United States with a form of built-in objectivity that is conducive to fresh insights on American society. Besides, the difference in historical, social, political, and cultural contexts between one's country of origin and one's country of study endows American studies scholars conducting research from abroad with a disposition to consider themes, issues, structures, demographics, or dynamics that might tend to remain blind spots for academics based in the US. The first section of this dossier comprises six academic articles discussing these questions. H el ene Quanquin and Claire Delahaye reflect on the complex, ideologically fraught interpolations of past feminist movements in subsequent political disputes, be they internal or external to feminism, and the methodological issues these raise for scholars of American feminisms. Marie Gayte and Marion Douzou discuss the methodological apparatus that helps scholars dealing with conservative movements position themselves in regard to their object of study and avoid the complementary pitfalls of stigmatization and fascination. Audrey C elestine and Nicolas Martin-Breteau, and Charlotte Thomas H ebert put their research in both epistemological and

autobiographical perspective, as they analyze how their respective backgrounds as well as the practical and institutional contexts in which they conduct research inform their methodologies.

- 10 In this special issue, not only do scholars working on various social and political movements individually discuss ways of overcoming such hurdles, but the editors have also conceived this edited issue as a symposium. The authors of the six articles presented above thus respond to each other's papers two by two. Additionally, the dossier's second section consists in an open-ended discussion on fieldwork among scholars working on a variety of racial and ethnic groups. Mathieu Bonzom, Rim Latrache, Caroline Laurent, and Yohann Le Moigne debate why and how they chose to conduct fieldwork, its challenges and rewards, as well as how they sometimes had to let themselves be led by the field, while being attentive to boundary-setting—in order to handle the political implications of empathy—and cultural distance—so that their status as outsiders to the studied groups would be for the best.
- 11 Besides addressing questions relevant to any such research—be it archival or fieldwork-based—such as designing a protocol, accessing the desired observation object, or gathering and analyzing data, the contributors also reflect on their position as researchers and as French scholars. What is an appropriate relationship between a researcher and his/her object? In what ways does being non-US-based condition the distance researchers feel necessary to guarantee objectivity? When their focus on a social movement is informed by their own activism, how does being non-US-based affect the way they deal with their double status as researchers and activists? How does being non-American determine their position toward, and perception by, the groups they study? How is one's research informed by the specificities of one's country's academic tradition? Does distance imply a *de facto* objectivity that allows non-US-based scholars to compensate for scarce time spend on the field? They thereby provide, we hope, useful insights on a variety of issues of concern to non-US-based American Studies scholars.

Notes

[1] See the [Conference Webpage](#).

[2] The question of national academic histories was the focus of the *European Journal of American Studies*' [very first issue](#) in 2006. It was also debated during an international workshop on “European Historians of the United States and European History, Culture and Public Life” that took place at the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi in Turin, Italy, on 10 and 11 September 2015 (“[The Historical ‘Dispute of the New World’](#)”).

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Suggested Citation

Baudry, Sandrine, Guillaume Marche, and Céline Planchou. "Introduction." *American Studies Journal* 68 (2019). Web. 29 Sep. 2021. DOI 10.18422/68-01.



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