

JAH Forum

AFRICA IN IMPERIAL AND TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY: MULTI-SITED HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE NECESSITY OF THEORY*

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Abstract

A multi-sited, but nonetheless locally grounded, transnational history breaks with older modes of imperial history that treated Africa as little more than a setting for the history of colonizers. More recently, critical approaches to imperial history have pointed to, but not adequately pursued, the treatment of colonizer and colonized as coeval subjects of history and objects of analysis. Historians of Africa and the diaspora, however, moved beyond imperial history decades ago, and these fields provide important resources and models for transnational historians. Transnational history, nonetheless, always risks reproducing the boundaries between colonizer and colonized that it seeks to overcome. The need to think outside of empire from within a world structured by empires requires that historians embrace critical theory, but in a manner consistent with the groundedness of multi-sited historiography.

Key Words

Historiography, transnational, method, West Africa, imperialism, slave trade.

I did not train as an Africanist. I only began studying African history as I moved from my original research focus, the history of German overseas imperialism, to transnational German history. The shift from the imperial to the transnational meant, for me, engaging at a similar level with the historiographies and archives of all three regions whose entanglements I studied, namely, West Africa, Germany, and the southern United States.¹ This move meant that my transnational German history was not particularly German. Nor, however, was it particularly un-German, and I hope I have contributed to the historiography of Germany, as well as, and equally, to those of West Africa and the United States. Transnational history does not break with national or regional historiographies, but rather engages them intensely, brings them into dialogue, and seeks to contribute to each of them

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1 This project resulted in A. Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton, NJ, 2010). My work on imperial history was *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* (Chicago, 2001).

in ways that might have been impossible by focusing on any one historiography individually.

Transnational history thus involves not a generalized global perspective, but rather a critical and theoretically informed multi-sited historiography that can learn much from similar approaches in anthropology and sociology. Writing transnational history that includes Africa in the period of European colonization similarly involves breaking, not with history focused on the nation or any other specific region, but rather with an older type of imperial history that sorted actors into colonizer and colonized in a way that privileged the agency of the former over that of the latter.

African history became a field in the late 1950s and 1960s when historians, following African independence movements, broke with a type of imperial history that portrayed the history of the continent as the history of its colonizers.² The resulting national histories of Africa included African, as well as European, actors, and did not make European ‘discovery’ the zero hour of African history.³ This perhaps made good politics in postcolonial African states, but it also made better history, for it treated all agents in a given era symmetrically, without assuming different explanatory responsibilities toward Africans, Europeans, and other groups.

African historians hardly ignored European imperialism in those cases where it was relevant. Indeed, I can think of no better studies of the German overseas empire, for example, than those by Africanists working on areas that happened also to be German colonies. To give just a few examples: Jan-Bart Gewald on German Southwest Africa;⁴ the volumes written by the department of history at the University of Lomé, Togo, under the direction of Nicoué Lodjou Gayibor;⁵ as well as works by Sandra Greene, Dennis Laumann, Pierre Ali Napo, Paul Nugent, and Peter Sebald on German Togo;⁶ Jonathon Glassman, G.C.K. Gwassa, John Iliffe, Isaria N. Kimambo, Michelle Moyd, Thaddeus Sunseri, and Marcia Wright on German East Africa;⁷ and Ralph A. Austen,

2 F. Cooper, ‘Conflict and connection: rethinking colonial African history’, *The American Historical Review*, 99:5 (1994), 1516–45. Cooper also criticizes the limitations of the national histories that resulted from this initial decolonizing maneuver.

3 R. Reid, ‘Past and presentism: the “precolonial” and the foreshortening of African history’, *The Journal of African History*, 52:2 (2011), 135–55.

4 J.-B. Gewald, *Herero Heroes: A Socio-Political History of the Herero of Namibia, 1890–1923* (Athens, OH, 1999).

5 N. L. Gayibor (ed.), *Histoire des Togolais, Volume I, Des Origines à 1884* (Lomé, 1997); N. L. Gayibor, *Le Togo Sous Domination Coloniale (1884–1960)* (Lomé, 1997).

6 S. E. Greene, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter: A History of Meaning and Memory in Ghana* (Bloomington: IN, 2002); D. H. Laumann, ‘Remembering and forgetting the German occupation of the Central Volta region of Ghana’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1999); P. A. Napo, ‘Le Togo à l’époque allemande (1884–1914)’, 5 vols. (unpublished PhD thesis, Sorbonne, 1996); P. Nugent, *Smugglers, Secessionists and Loyal Citizens on the Ghana-Togo Frontier: The Life of the Borderlands since 1914* (Athens, OH, 2002); P. Sebald, *Togo 1884–1914: Eine Geschichte der deutschen ‘Musterkolonie’ auf der Grundlage amtlicher Quellen* (Berlin, 1988).

7 J. Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856–1888* (Portsmouth, NH, 1995); G. C. K. Gwassa, ‘African methods of warfare during the Maji Maji War, 1905–1907’, in B. A. Ogot (ed.), *War and Society in Africa* (London, 1972), 123–48; J. Iliffe, *Tanganyika under German Rule, 1905–1912* (Cambridge, 1969); I. N. Kimambo, *Penetration and Protest in Tanzania: The Impact of the World Economy on the Pare, 1860–1960* (Athens, OH, 1991);

Jonathan Derrick, and Andreas Eckert on German Cameroon.⁸ Not all of these are portraits of entire colonies, but rather focus on processes that take place in, but are not entirely defined by, a colonial situation. Only a few works on German colonialism by German studies specialists engage with these and other relevant works by Africanists.⁹ This points to one of the central differences between transnational and imperial history. Many Europeanists whose work touches on African topics have yet to make the break with the imperial history against which much African history has defined itself.

Many of the Europeanists who have most successfully broken with imperial history have come from within the field of imperial history itself. Their critical reflection on colonial knowledge helped to undermine those binary oppositions on which earlier imperial history also depended, including modern/primitive; history/tradition; knowledge/culture; politics/tribalism; and cosmopolitanism/autochthoneity.¹⁰ Their critique of imperialism became a critique of imperial history, as many answered Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler's call to 'treat metropole and colony in a single analytic field'.¹¹ Critical imperial history itself provided one of the routes beyond imperial history, toward transnational history.

This is not to suggest that imperial history should serve only as a way station on the road to transnational history. Imperial politics are inseparable from most European politics; the wealth and labor extracted from Africa and other extraterritorial regions was a foundational component of European capitalist development; colonial experiences, knowledge, and representations were essential to the creation of European cultures and identities. As Frantz Fanon observed half a century ago, 'Europe is literally the creation of the Third World.'¹² Works like Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* or, more recently, John Short's *Magic Lantern Empire* show how empire functioned as a component of

M. R. Moyd, 'Becoming Askari: African soldiers and everyday colonialism in German East Africa, 1850–1918' (unpublished PhD thesis, Cornell University, 2008); M. Moyd, 'Making the household, making the state: colonial military communities and labor in German East Africa', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 80:1 (2011), 53–76; T. R. Sunseri, *Vilimani: Labor Migration and Rural Change in Early Colonial Tanzania* (Portsmouth, NH, 2002); T. R. Sunseri, *Wielding the Ax: State Forestry and Social Conflict in Tanzania, 1820–2000* (Athens, OH, 2009); M. Wright, 'Local roots of policy in German East Africa', *The Journal of African History*, 9:4 (1968), 621–30.

8 R. A. Austen and J. Derrick, *Middlemen of the Cameroons Rivers: The Duala and their Hinterland, c. 1600–c. 1960* (Cambridge, 1999).

9 Two important exceptions are the work of Nina Berman, who continues a multi-year fieldwork project in Kenya as part of her transnational studies, and that of Michelle Moyd, whose work is an important contribution to German history as well as to East African history. See N. Berman, *Impossible Missions? German Economic, Military, and Humanitarian Efforts in Africa* (Lincoln, NE, 2004); N. Berman, 'Yusuf's choice: East African agency during the German colonial period in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Paradise*', *English Studies in Africa*, 56:1 (2013): 51–64; N. Berman, K. Mühlhahn, and P. Nganang (eds.), *German Colonialism Revisited: African, Asian, and Oceanic Experiences* (Ann Arbor, forthcoming 2013); Moyd, 'Becoming Askari'; and Moyd, 'Making the household'.

10 Pioneering for this critical imperial historiography were works by the anthropologists J. Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York, 1983); S. W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1985); and E. R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley, CA, 1982); and by the literary scholar E. W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978). Historians have since produced a vast critical literature. For examples, see the works cited in fns 11, 13, 14–16, and 18.

11 F. Cooper and A. L. Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, CA, 1997), 4.

12 F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. R. Philcox (New York, 2004 [orig. pub. 1961]), 58.

gender-, race-, and class-specific struggles inside of Europe.¹³ There have been, and continue to be, more excellent works in this vein than it is possible to mention here. To cease doing imperial history would make the study of European history virtually impossible. European imperial history, moreover, is also an important component of some periods of African history.

Yet, while the study of empires as elements of European history contributes significantly to European history, it sometimes portrays the histories of regions colonized by Europe as less real than European history, even if this is far from the intention of most scholars writing imperial history. Somehow Fanon's above-cited formulation gets reversed, especially in some cultural studies of imperialism: *Europe is literally the creation of the Third World* becomes *The Third World is the literary creation of Europe*.¹⁴ Edward Said's monumental and path-breaking *Orientalism* took many scholars in this direction, although it was written in the first place as a kind of preparatory ideological ground clearing to help scholars think more precisely about the military, political, and economic history of the Middle East in the age of imperialism and of Zionism specifically.¹⁵ However, such a culturalist approach, when it becomes an end in itself, obscures not only African history, but also military, political, and economic history as phantasmagoric European cognitive processes.

George Steinmetz, in an analysis that includes an extensive discussion of Namibia under German rule, has not just applied Said's culturalist approach, but developed it in an extraordinarily sophisticated way to argue that the nature of the colonial experience was shaped by a native policy that was in turn shaped primarily by precolonial ethnography.¹⁶ Steinmetz's book, precisely because it is perhaps the most astute culturalist study of imperialism to date, reveals the fundamental difference between imperial and transnational history, for it treats the histories of Namibia and other colonized regions only indirectly, as components of an analysis of European history.

Global history, though it promises more serious consideration of regions other than Europe and the United States, may nonetheless reproduce the worldview of imperial history. Steven Feierman has suggested that African history does not simply augment, but rather fundamentally disrupts, previous Eurocentric narratives of world history. 'The study of African history', he writes, 'presses us to move beyond forms of historical representation in which the energy driving the story originates in Europe, while African history ... provides local color, a picturesque setting for the central drama.'¹⁷ Members

13 A. McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York, 1995); J. P. Short, *Magic Lantern Empire: Colonialism and Society in Germany* (Ithaca, NY, 2012).

14 Sumit Sarkar made a similar point when he complained that subaltern studies had shifted focus from the history of Indian societies to 'critiques of Western-colonial power-knowledge'. S. Sarkar, 'The decline of the subaltern in Subaltern Studies', in *Writing Social History* (Delhi, 1997), 82–108.

15 See especially E. W. Said's first work on the topic, 'The Arab portrayed', in I. Abu-Lughod (ed.), *The Arab-Israeli Confrontation of June 1967: An Arab Perspective* (Evanston, IL, 1970), 1–9.

16 G. Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (Chicago, 2007).

17 S. Feierman, 'African histories and the dissolution of world history', in R. H. Bates, V. Y. Mudimbe, and J. O'Barr (eds.), *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Chicago, 1993), 167–212, esp. 197.

of the subaltern studies collective, perhaps Dipesh Chakrabarty most forcefully, have made similar points about the difficulty of separating universal history from the Eurocentrism that once underwrote it.¹⁸ Even self-consciously anti-Eurocentric versions of global history, Feierman's discussion suggests, include African history in terms that reproduce earlier exclusions of Africa from Eurocentric narratives. Whether this gloomy assessment of the possibility of a post-Eurocentric global history is accurate or not, transnational history, at least as I conceive it, is not an attempt at global history. Transnational history remains tied to specific locations, even as it shows how the histories of these locations have distant causes and consequences.

In contrast to its fraught relationship to narratives of global history, as well as to narratives of imperial history, African history may have a particularly privileged place in transnational history. Indeed, historians of Africa and the African diaspora have been producing transnational histories beyond the confines and categories of European empires well before this became a desideratum of the broader historical profession.¹⁹ If we focus too much on the obvious flaws of Melville Herskovits's concepts of 'African retentions' in the Americas, we risk missing the importance and precociousness of this early transregional approach. J. Lorand Matory and Stephan Palmié, among other scholars of Africa and the diaspora, reveal a field well in advance of many others in developing transnational approaches.²⁰ Both go well beyond an idea of Africa as a static 'source' for African American cultures and demonstrate ongoing, dynamic connections, both material and imaginary, between Africa and the Americas. Any historian interested in transnational approaches to any region would do well to learn from the approaches of these and other scholars of African history. African historiography, precisely because it stands in contrast to imperial and global historiography, is particularly well suited to, and exemplary of, transnational approaches.

The transnational historian Sebastian Conrad, adapting the concept of multi-sited ethnography from anthropologist George E. Marcus and others, has called for a 'multi-sited historiography'.²¹ The practice of multi-sited historiography will be familiar to Africanists whose research has taken them, for example, to both Germany and Tanzania or to both Brazil and Angola or to both the United States and South Africa. Marcus proposed multi-sited ethnography as a way for ethnographers to account for the relationship of the regions they studied to transregional, or even global, political,

18 D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2000). See also R. Guha, 'The prose of counter-insurgency', in R. Guha and G. C. Spivak (eds.), *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York, 1988), 45–86.

19 R. D. G. Kelley, "'But a local phase of a world problem": black history's global vision, 1883–1950', *The Journal of American History*, 86:3 (1999), 1045–77.

20 J. L. Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton, NJ, 2005); S. Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham, NC, 2002).

21 S. Conrad, *Globalisation and the Nation in Imperial Germany*, trans. S. O'Hagan (Cambridge, 2010), 22; G. E. Marcus, 'Ethnography in/of the world system: the emergence of multi-sited ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24 (1995), 95–117. See also G. E. Marcus, 'Multi-sited ethnography: five or six things I know about it now', in S. Coleman and P. von Hellermann (eds.), *Multi-Sited Ethnography: Problems and Possibilities in the Translocation of Research Methods* (New York, 2011), 16–32.

economic, and cultural processes without treating these macro-processes as a static exterior context, knowable through social theory or through the imperial archives of the metropole.

Multi-sited ethnography, as Marcus explains it, produces ethnographies of the world system by looking at topics whose explanation requires research in multiple, connected sites in the world system. This would not be a conventional comparison, which juxtaposes sites within a framework of static categories, but rather a study of specific, interconnected, sites. These interconnections need not, of course, run through European metropolises. The global, for Marcus, would not be the context in which the local takes place, but rather ‘an emergent dimension’ of multi-sited ethnography.²² Transnational historians similarly pursue multi-sited archival and other forms of historical research. While Marcus places metropolitan archives on the same level as macro-social theory, I would instead treat these archives as those of just another location. Central here is that the global, the imperial, and other transregional factors are neither static contexts of, nor all determining forces on, the local but rather ‘emergent dimensions’ of specific localities. Matory’s *Black Atlantic Religion* is one excellent example of such an approach.

It should be emphasized that Marcus, though he cautions against employing theory, and particularly theoretical accounts of the capitalist world system, as an unmoving, external context to the multi-local research he advocates, does not advocate an empiricist turn against theory nor does he suggest abandoning the attempt to understand the capitalist world system. Marcus, instead, offers multi-sited research as a way for ethnographers (and, I would add, historians) to employ their specialized research methods to contribute to our understanding of the capitalist world system. He advocates, as his title suggests, a move from ethnography *in* the world system to ethnography *of* the world system. Specialists in the local, the concrete, like historians and ethnographers, Marcus suggests, ought to participate in the construction of theory and not simply use (or not) theory.

Such a theoretically engaged approach is especially urgent for transnational history that deals with areas whose connections are characterized by unequal power relations, such as studies that include European colonists in Africa. My own experience presenting my work to specialists in African, European, and US history has put me into an especially good position to report, with much regret, that the spirit of Hugh Trevor-Roper is alive, if not well, among many non-Africanists. Even the most Eurocentric would likely blush at Trevor-Roper’s infamous dismissal of African history as the study of the ‘unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe’.²³ A typical response by a non-Africanist, however, would be to explore the European racist discourses that inform this statement rather than the African histories that it seeks to obscure. On the one hand, this is as it should be in our profession: Europeanists study Europeans and Africanists study Africans. Racism is an essential part of European culture and thus a worthy topic of study and critique. On the other hand, this very disciplinary structure reproduces, and thus only inadequately explains, imperial structures of knowledge.

In part, the difficulty of some Europeanists and US Americanists to recognize that African histories often matter to their own topics of inquiry is simply their loss, and

22 Marcus, ‘Ethnography in/of the world system’, 99.

23 H. Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (London, 1965), 9.

perhaps Africanists not pursuing transnational history need not worry (except when it comes time for departments to create new faculty lines, and except for students who would like—even if they do not always know it—more courses in African history). But the inability of many of the 95 per cent of history faculty in the United States who are not Africanists to discern African history within transnational histories means that those histories will be read as imperial histories, with Africa serving primarily as a setting for European stories.²⁴

Clearly this methodological challenge for historians seeking to write transnational histories that include Africa (and many other regions as well) has a structural basis in ongoing global political and economic inequalities. Writing about Orientalism 15 years before Edward Said, in the evidently more optimistic year of 1963, Egyptian scholar Anouar Abdel-Malek argued that the passivity much Western scholarship attributed to Arabs would end with the victory of anti-colonial struggles in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America.²⁵ Yet, the theoretical critique of Orientalism and other Eurocentric forms of knowledge, like philosophy in Theodor W. Adorno's 1966 judgment, 'which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed'—or perhaps because this moment has not yet arrived. In any case, philosophy—or theory—does provide transnational historians with essential resources for writing histories that explain, rather than reproduce, global inequalities.²⁶ These are resources that every historian should make use of, but that are especially urgent for transnational historians.

For all the virtues of empiricism in history, including multi-sited history, it is also empiricism that, in part, helps reproduce imperial hierarchies in our discipline: historians, like their subjects, live in a world structured by a range of hierarchies, and it is easy to naturalize them in the past as hegemonic power necessarily does in the present. In some cases, these large inequalities have specific effects on the archives that historians use, so that documents written by Europeans, about Europeans, and archived by Europeans may seem to contain more empirically reliable truths than documents from African archives or, indeed, oral history sources.²⁷ Such epistemological *naïveté* has no place in any field of history, but it is especially harmful when it reifies, rather than explains, structures of inequality.

Theory helps us here because it challenges the immediacy of empirical experience, a feature that has caused some historians to reject theory. Yet, by binding our empiricism to theory we also force ourselves outside what Joan Scott has rightly criticized as the 'evidence of experience'.²⁸ This experience includes the immediate perceptions—always conditioned ideologically—of historians and of the individuals they study. At the very

24 See Fig. 3, 'Proportion of listed faculty specializing in geographic region, 1975 to 2005', in R. B. Townsend, 'What's in a label?: changing patterns of faculty specialization since 1975', *Perspectives: Newsletter of the American Historical Association* 45:1 (2007), 7.

25 A. Abdel-Malek, 'Orientalism in crisis', *Diogenes*, 11:44 (1963), 103–40.

26 T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York, 1973 [orig. pub. 1966]), 3.

27 N. Kodesh, 'History from the healer's shrine: genre, historical imagination, and early Ganda history', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 49:3 (2007), 527–52.

28 J. W. Scott, 'The evidence of experience', *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991), 773–97.

least, theory makes available to the historian the ‘rational derangement of all the senses’ that Arthur Rimbaud recommended to a fellow poet.²⁹

Transnational approaches also help overcome the danger, suggested by Dipesh Chakrabarty and many others, that theory imposes Eurocentric categories on any local history to which it is applied, whether European or otherwise. This has not dissuaded Chakrabarty from using theory, and his work is one of the most important examples of a self-conscious and critical engagement with theory.³⁰ Theory does not really come from nowhere, but rather from specific locations, and a multi-sited historiography can, therefore, bring together on a single, historical plane what other approaches might distinguish as abstract theory and concrete reality. Theory, like the global in Marcus’s account, becomes ‘an emergent dimension’ of multi-sited historiography, not some master schema standing over history.

Two especially helpful bodies of theory, Marxist political economy and approaches to biopolitics associated with Michel Foucault and others, emerged from the very transnational encounters among Europe, Africa, and the Americas that especially interest me. We thus need not reject either of these bodies of theory as non-generalizable artifacts of a European modernity. We can, instead, follow historians of African and African diasporic societies in locating this modernity in an Atlantic history whose basis is not British industrial society but rather struggles over slavery and other forms of confinement not only in Europe but also in Africa and in the Americas.³¹ Both political economy and the analysis of biopolitics have demonstrable origins in Africa and in diasporic African societies. These were not, moreover, European theories built of African ‘raw materials’, but rather developed, and continue to develop, in dialogues that include Europeans, Africans, and Americans.

The fetish, a core concept not only in Marxism, but also in psychoanalysis, has already been subject to exemplary treatment by William Pietz. The concept of the fetish, according to Pietz, emerged from, and helped mediate, the encounter of ‘radically different social systems’ – ‘Christian feudal, African lineage, and merchant capitalist’ – on the West African coast, beginning in the sixteenth century.³² Slavery remained an especially important mediator between Africa, Europe, and the Americas, not only in the economics of exploitation but also in politics and culture. Karl Marx remained actively engaged with the question of slavery, at least from the 1840s, when Marx chastised the French socialist

29 Arthur Rimbaud to Paul Demny, 15 May 1871, in S. A. Whidden (ed.), *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. W. Fowlie (Chicago, 2005), 377.

30 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*. For a response defending theory, see V. Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London, 2012). My own defense of theory differs from Chibber’s.

31 This literature is too vast to cite here. Especially important for me are I. Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC, 2005); P. Linebaugh and M. Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (London, 2000); and Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*. See especially Palmié’s definition of Atlantic modernity on p. 15.

32 W. Pietz, ‘The problem of the fetish, I’, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 9 (1985), 5–17, esp. 6–7. See also W. Pietz, ‘The problem of the fetish, II: the origin of the fetish’, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 13 (1987), 23–45; W. Pietz, ‘The problem of the fetish, IIIa: Bosman’s Guinea and the Enlightenment theory of fetishism’, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 16 (1988), 105–23; E. S. Apter and W. Pietz (eds.), *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse* (Ithaca, NY, 1993).

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon for speaking of wage slavery rather than actual slavery in Brazil, Suriname, and the United States.³³ Marx's interest in the struggle against slavery in the United States, especially during the Civil War, shaped many of his concepts and political strategies, and African American anti-slavery politics must thus count as an African contribution to Marxism even from an era before African contributions to Marxism became too numerous to cite individually.³⁴

A similar point can be made about the origin of the analysis of biopolitics from the encounter, mediated by slaving, between Europe, Africa, and the Americas.³⁵ The central concept here is social death. Though rightly criticized as an incomplete and even misleading explanation of slavery, the concept of social death nonetheless did emerge from trans-Atlantic discussions about slavery and remains an important component of Atlantic social theory. Orlando Patterson's now classic discussion of *Slavery and Social Death* roots the concept in the dialectic of lord and bondsman from Hegel's 1832 *Phenomenology of Spirit*.³⁶ Susan Buck-Morss has traced Hegel's text, in turn, to the attempt of the German dialectician to come to terms with the Haitian Revolution.³⁷ Hegel, however, was not the first to connect slavery to death. The idea of slavery as a form of death or as suspended death appears also in the figure of the zombie common to Dahomey, Haiti, and other parts of the world of Atlantic slavery.³⁸ Understanding certain forms of social power through the concept of bare life, of politically unqualified life as a form of animated death, has been articulated perhaps most explicitly by Italian theorist Giorgio Agamben and Cameroonian theorist Achille Mbembe, but includes also the work of the Haitian René Depestre and the Europeans Hannah Arendt, Primo Levi, and Michel Foucault, and many others.³⁹ Like Marxist political economy, the analysis of biopolitics offers important methods and concepts for working out transnational histories that include Africa, in part because it also emerges in African histories. These theories offer approaches

33 Letter from Karl Marx, Brussels, to Pawel Wassiljewitsch Annenkow, Paris, 28 Dec. 1846, *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe*, III/2 (Berlin, 1972), 70–80.

34 I am currently exploring the relation of Marxism and the antislavery struggle in my own research. On this topic, see also K. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago, 2010). For an important work on the broader tradition, see C. J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000 [orig. pub. 1983]).

35 We do not yet possess an account of this process equivalent to that produced by William Pietz for the fetish. I am currently working on this theme.

36 O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA, 1982). For one important critique of this concept, which nonetheless highlights the centrality of death in slavery, see V. Brown, 'Social death and political life in the study of slavery', *The American Historical Review*, 114:5 (2009), 1231–49. Even more influential than Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* has been A. Kojève, Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. A. Bloom, trans. J. H. Nichols, Jr (Ithaca, 1980 [orig. pub. 1947]).

37 S. Buck-Morss, 'Hegel and Haiti', *Critical Inquiry*, 26:4 (2000), 821–65.

38 See especially J. Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley, CA, 1995), 36–9.

39 G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Palo Alto, CA, 1998 [orig. pub. 1995]); J.-A. Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', trans. L. Meintjes *Public Culture*, 15:1 (2003), 11–40; R. Depestre, *Hadriana dans Tous Mes Reêves: Roman* (Paris, 1988); J. Dayan, 'France reads Haiti: an interview with René Depestre', *Yale French Studies*, 83 (1993), 136–53; H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (2nd edn, Chicago, 1998 [orig. pub. 1958]); M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley (New York, 1990 [orig. pub. 1976]); P. Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. S. Woolf (New York, 1993 [orig. pub. 1958]).

to Atlantic history; they are also primary sources of Atlantic history; and they are also Atlantic optics with strong non- and anti-imperial potentials.

Both as an approach to history and as an approach to theory, transnationalism has much to offer historians of Europe and other colonizing nations as they seek to follow their colleagues in African history in breaking with imperial history. What transnationalism has to offer specialists already working in African history may be less obvious. Africanists were, in many cases, transnationalists for decades before other academic historians began describing themselves in such terms. Transnationalism presents new possibilities for collaboration between Africanists, Europeanists, and other historians, but collaboration, as the history of imperialism teaches us, does not always benefit all parties equally. I would never advocate that African or any other subfield of history dissolve itself into some generalized transnational matrix. This is not only because many non-Africanist scholars continue, despite significant progress against Eurocentrism, to marginalize African histories, but also for the sake of transnational history itself: I could not have done transnational work without learning from Africanists (and Americanists, and Europeanists). Transnational historians, however, should also try to be collaborators rather than tourists. They can contribute to African history by bringing new knowledge from European, American, and other archives; by opening terrain on which the historiographical methods of various subdisciplines can cross-fertilize; and also by serving as double- and triple-agents, 'spying' on each subdiscipline they engage for the benefit of the others, and also, of course, for themselves.