

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

A Community of Thought: Connecting with Transnational American Studies

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5740x64n>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 7(1)

Author

Morgan, Nina

Publication Date

2016

DOI

10.5070/T871031803

Copyright Information

Copyright 2016 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

EDITOR'S NOTE

A Community of Thought: Connecting with Transnational American Studies

NINA MORGAN

American Vikings; Irish Westerns; Swedish crime novels in America; binational Chinese/American artists; interplanetary border imaginaries; the performance of transnational Arab American womanhood; Richard Wright in Indonesia; Borges and Poe; the relationship of transnationalism to different formations of political power; the development of new genres and theoretical perspectives—all of these topics and more feature in the current issue of *JTAS*—a vast and compelling compendium that is our largest to date, with thirty separate pieces (not including the editors' notes), edging eight hundred pages!

JTAS, like the field of Transnational American Studies, is growing in exciting ways: the Editorial Board is delighted to welcome two new members, former ASA president Kevin Gaines (Cornell University) and Hsuan Hsu (University of California, Davis). The Editorial Board is also happy to announce a new partnership: both the Departments of American Studies and English at UC Davis have now joined Stanford University's Program in American Studies and UC Santa Barbara's American Cultures & Global Contexts Center as cosponsors of *JTAS*. We are therefore grateful to our new colleagues at UC Davis for their support and especially to new *JTAS* Editorial Board member Hsuan Hsu and department chairs Julie Sze and Elizabeth Miller for their commitment to our shared endeavor.

As recent global events such as the EU referendum or "Brexit" reveal, again, that transnational issues are at the forefront of today's political power dynamics, they also serve as a harsh reminder of what is at stake in the work we do as scholars. The many areas of research in the Humanities and Social Sciences that have been informed by Transnational American Studies cannot be seen or misunderstood as merely

modified areas of expertise, refashioned to suit a new trend. As this volume demonstrates, Transnational American Studies—which not only by the rules of grammar places its adjective “transnational” before the word “American”—is by method, approach, and strategy non-monolithic, even “anti”-monolithic.

Defining, sometimes defending, yet always deliberating how Transnational American Studies transforms and informs our observations and interpretations—that is, our role in the production of meaning in the humanities, in our institutions, and across societies—many of the essays in this issue propose new language in order to elucidate the complex logic of their material. Jennifer Reimer, for example, offers “transa”—a new metaphor; Joyce Brodsky observes that “trans-experiences” are part of the new calculation of binational life; and Jesús Ángel González proposes that cinema today has already produced its first “transnational post-Western.”

Without doubt, our research—the work we do to demonstrate the multitudinous, uneven, and fraught ways in which discourses and representation and we, ourselves, *are* connected—is more relevant and urgent than ever. Faced with an exceptionalist nostalgia for “greatness” as a code for an exclusive American hegemony, researchers in Transnational American Studies, like the authors of the essays in this issue, constitute one of the forces at work against the totalizing regime of the “monolingualism” of the political far-right wing in US politics today, a kind of speech that has ebbed and flowed throughout the history of US political discourse. It may be the case, for example, that the American Studies Association will soon change the name of its International Committee to the “Transnational American Studies Committee,” in an effort to focus more on the academic “mission” and scholarship of the American Studies Association rather than mere “demographics.” *JTAS* and the work published here have no doubt been influential in developing a community of thought for such an evolution.

Our Special Forum on Sweden and America, a collection of seven thought-provoking essays edited by Dag Blanck (Uppsala University) and Adam Hjorthén (Stockholm University), challenges us not only to rethink our “cross-border interactions” but to reconceptualize the multiple contexts in which the relationship between Sweden and the United States transcends national boundaries, and thus to focus less on crossing and more on connecting the empirical evidence through which we might build an understanding of the dynamics—the different “asymmetries” and influences—that the editors read as in “circulation” between the two cultures. The Special Forum serves as an introduction to the field of transnational Swedish American Studies, offering historical research from the mid-seventeenth century to the present; analyzing popular culture, from the sport of hockey to crime fiction and cinema; and theorizing the impact of transnational identities from the figure of the Viking to the remigrating Swedish American. *JTAS* is grateful for the careful and conscientious work of Dag Blanck and Adam Hjorthén, and we thank Brian Goodman, the *JTAS* Special Forums Managing Editor, for diligently directing this Special Forum throughout the

editing process. The Editorial Board invites readers to contact Brian Goodman with proposals for future Special Forums.

Our collection of new articles opens with Joyce Brodsky's "The Transnational Artists Yun-Fei Ji, Hung Liu, and Zhang Hongtu: Globalization, Hybridity, and Political Critique." Rereading the now familiar signs of a hybridized aesthetic form in the artwork of three contemporary artists, Brodsky makes the compelling case that these artists transcend the commonplaces of hybridity when analyzed transnationally, as artists whose own experiences undermine the constructions of the "local" and the "global" in ways that synchronize the time and space of their binational influences. Redefining the relationships between China and the US in the context of these artists' cosmopolitan lives and the aesthetics that evolve therein, the essay relies on concepts developed by Homi Bhabha and Arjun Appadurai to elucidate a sense of how the local is saturated by the global, a condition that Brodsky suggests is part and parcel of a political critique rendered aesthetic in the work of these three artists.

Pablo Gómez Muñoz argues in his "Interplanetary Border Imaginaries in *Upside Down: Divisions and Connections in the American Continent*" that the genre of science fiction cinema, in creating spaces for alternative worlds, also imagines alternative responses to and relationships within the lived realities of economic and national division. His analysis of *Upside Down* suggests that the reorganization of space and reconstellation of the architecture of power politics that together symbolize what is intrinsic to the genre of the science fiction film is particularly coherent in Juan Solanas's representation of US–South American relations. Gómez Muñoz deftly explores the difference between the film as an "international" product and interpretations of the film as a "transnational" text.

Interpreting the transnational and the post-Western as concerned with the prominence of land and landscape as threshold metaphors through which ideals of nationality and masculinity find both common ground and haunted terrain, Jesús Ángel González's "Transnational Post-Westerns in Irish Cinema" highlights *Mickybo and Me* and *Into the West* as examples of a new genre in cinema studies that the essay, with its careful balance of theory and close reading, introduces in the context of Transnational American Studies. González argues persuasively that the recent confluence of two significant trajectories in film—the post-Western and the transnational—is particularly apparent in contemporary Irish cinema, where the two forms meet to suggest what the author defines as a new category, "the transnational post-Western."

"Towards a Worldly Post-9/11 American Novel: Transnational Disjunctures in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*" by Bimbisar Irom makes a new contribution to the literature on post-9/11 fiction, a subgenre of increasing interest to Transnational American Studies scholars. Irom argues for a reading of the ambivalent, fraught negotiations of the historical imaginary and state power in *Netherland* as a dynamic productive of a resistance to state hegemony, an effect specific to the genre of post-9/11 fiction that suggests a transnational step toward the status of the "worldly."

Focusing on the novel's representations of the immigrant and exilic consciousness of its characters, their transnational "passing" or mobility (what Shirley Geok-lin Lim, citing Lin Tai-Yee, described as "shuttling" in an interview published in 2000²), Irom explores the novel's representation of colonial traces—the sport of cricket, for example—transformed via the globalized marketplace and technologies of dissemination, as a metaphor for transnationalism, playing ambivalently in the lives of those whose sense of location is always already accompanied by the optical illusions of the nation. The essay highlights the work of counternarratives as indicative of a transnational aesthetic that, in fiction, puts into play an anti-hegemonic politics.

Martina Koegeler-Abdi, in "Performing Transnational Arab American Womanhood: Rosemary Hakim, US Orientalism, and Cold War Diplomacy," explores the discursive role of "womanhood" and "modernity" as experiences that mediate the midcentury transnational identity of the Arab American woman, offering insight into how a specifically Transnational American Studies perspective might produce an analysis of constructs such as "womanhood" that is not merely comparative in nature. The essay traces the career of Rosemary Hakim, the first crowned pageant queen of the Miss Lebanon-America pageant in 1954. Hakim's unpublished memoir, "Arabian Antipodes," tells the story of her identity formation as a complex dynamic, which Koegeler-Abdi identifies as employing and encountering both "adaptive agency" and auto-orientalism. According to Koegeler-Abdi, it is Hakim's "strategic adaptations of various imagined womanhoods that allow her to negotiate . . . her Arab and American heritage into a transnational identity." This original research contributes new material to important discussions on the topics of cultural ambassadors, the midcentury conceptualization of race in the US, and the social mobility of women post-WWII. In her close reading of the narrative of Hakim's tour of the Middle East, Koegeler-Abdi demonstrates and highlights the impact of reading transnationally as a way of gaining insight into the complexity of the conditions of racial and gender politics.

Originally published in English in 2005, Luis Alberto Urrea's novel *The Hummingbird's Daughter* (published in translation in 2006 as *La Hija de la Chuparrosa*) serves to illuminate, according to Christina Garcia Lopez, the spirituality inherent in and particular to indigenous and mestizo political resistance in Mexico. In "'This Land Is Holy!' Intersections of Politics and Spirituality in Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Hummingbird's Daughter*," Lopez observes that the novel lays bare the racialized violence experienced by the Tehueco, Yaquis, and other native peoples "not as voyeuristic sadism but as a form of witnessing that recalls and recognizes the racialized violence and suffering that official history erases." Lopez boldly asserts that the history of historians cannot effectively represent the conditions of existence nor adequately relay the power of the counterdiscourse of the oppressed; likewise, neither can traditionally structured American Studies—as opposed to the transnationalism of Américo Paredes, José Limón, Héctor Calderón, Ramón Saldívar, and José David Saldívar—appropriately examine the cultural production and differences of citizen-subjects of "Greater Mexico" or "the borderlands." Lopez's

discussion of *curanderismo*, which functions outside the traditional borders of religious and national distinctions, reveals how other forms of knowledge and social practice can be the source of contestation, witnessing, and memory, as exemplified in the life-story of Teresa “Teresita” Urrea, the antiestablishment folk hero and healer of the novel’s title.

In her beautifully articulated reading of *Here Is Tijuana!* (2006), Jennifer Reimer argues that the sense of location particular to and embedded in the conditions of the US–Mexico borderlands produces both an interpretive strategy and an aesthetic that represent the unique and complex network of economic, environmental, political, and social dynamics in transaction—in “*transa*,” as the authors suggest—that can and should be read as a larger and broader new metaphor appropriate to Transnational American Studies. Reimer’s “Tijuana Transa: Transa as Metaphor and Theory on the US–Mexico Border” develops what *Here Is Tijuana!*, a genre-bending photo-essay, presents as its dominant conceptualization (the *transa*) such that the polyvocality, interdisciplinarity, and multiperspectival elements of the text and its images are understood as also an affect—an emotional, intellectual, and sensory experience of space, proximity, distance that is neither in a facile manner absorbed nor resisted in the *transa* zone. Reimer is careful not to idealize *transa* as metaphor nor to overtly abstract the very real material conditions of border lives; she suggests “*transa* as a metaphor for cultural productions of and from the borderlands, not to contain them within neat theoretical concepts but to more fully inhabit them and enliven them with potentially radicalizing diversity.”

Robert Shaffer, in “Feminist Fiction in a ‘Non-Feminist’ Age: Pearl S. Buck on Asian and American Women, 1930–1963,” resituates and complicates the relationship of Buck to US feminism. Shaffer here suggests that Buck did not see the lives of US women as any evidence of US exceptionalism when compared to the lives of Asian women; she instead worked through her fiction to develop a sense of “sympathetic understanding” in her American audience and thus to diminish responses that might be akin to a “women’s Orientalism.” Shaffer also draws interesting connections between Buck’s writing and her responses to political changes before and after World War II in both Chinese and American society, demonstrating the complexity of Buck’s portrayals of women in domestic and public life.

The Reprise section of *JTAS* recently republished Udo Hebel’s essay on interpictureoriality, a concept well suited to the intersections inherent in the work of Transnational American Studies scholars, whose perspectives may involve “interpictureorial readings [that] perform acts of re-situating and aim at revealing the contexts and presuppositions governing the visual rhetoric of specific pictures.”³ In this issue, we close the articles section with Klara Stephanie Szlezák’s “Old Masters’ Madonnas in ‘New World’ Photographs: Instances and Impact of Interpictureoriality in Lewis W. Hine’s Photography,” a reexamination, through the lenses of interpictureoriality and transnationalism, of the visual themes, references, and mobilities of Hine’s oeuvre. Szlezák demonstrates through a careful consideration of three significant

photographs the complex ways in which Hine sustained a relationship to both social documentary and artistic photography, at a time when his reformist politics of social justice made headway specifically, she argues here, through his photographs' references to universal icons, as in the case of *A Madonna of the Tenements*. Hine's US photographs, as well as those taken in Europe, are further understood as commentaries on the xenophobia and intolerance of his day—and perhaps of ours as well.

As in every issue, our newest essays are preceded by Editorial Board member Greg Robinson's selections for Forward and followed by my Reprise section. Greg brings *JTAS* readers a remarkable ensemble of ten new and significant studies covering a range of timely and powerful topics: the African American community and identity; citizenship and the national imaginary; Richard Wright and Indonesia; film, photography, and the colonial Philippines; teaching resources related to nineteenth-century Anglo-American print culture; Jorge Luis Borges and Edgar Allan Poe in Spanish America; intersections of literary history and public history on the US–Mexico border; the ethnic avant-garde; and jazz in Paris post–World War II. The Reprise section offers republications of three unique and strongly interdisciplinary essays by Nassim W. Balestrini, Susanne Leikam, and Magdalena J. Zaborowska.

As a recently named fellow of the Regensburg European American Forum at the University of Regensburg in Germany—where Birgit Bauridl leads a bustling American Studies program—I attended an international symposium in honor of the work of Americanist Udo Hebel, held in April of 2016. There, among other fine lectures presented, *JTAS* Editor Alfred Hornung gave the keynote lecture on “Transnational Journeys of Life: En Route to Refuge,” focusing on questions of mobility, identity, and hospitality. The piece gave insight into the role of visual testimony and technologies of communication and representation that accompany the crossings and passages of people and time. The complexity of the experiences of refugees and the moral dimension of spaces and occupations may require a visually and discursively transnational narrative to bring together what is by politics or nature fragmented, thus compelling new research to move beyond documentation to analysis, and beyond analysis to understanding. During my visit, I also had the opportunity to meet with MA and PhD candidates in American Studies at the University of Regensburg—all impressive young scholars moving the field forward with excitement and expertise (see Figure 1). No doubt students need more opportunities to network into the professional work we do.

At *JTAS*, we have recently welcomed several new members of the team as Associate Managing Editors: Dr. Sabine Kim has a PhD in American Studies from the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (*summa cum laude*), where she is now a lecturer; she also has an MA in Contemporary Literature from the University of York, a BA Honours in English from the University of Regina, and a BAA in Journalism from Ryerson Polytechnic. Dr. Selina Lai-Henderson has a PhD in American Studies from the University of Hong Kong, where her dissertation won a Li Ka Shing Prize and where

she is now a Research Assistant Professor of American Studies; she also has an MA in American Studies from Heidelberg University and a BA in English and Comparative Literature from the University of Hong Kong. Dr. Aiko Takeuchi-Demirci has a PhD and MA in American Studies from Brown University, an MA and BA in American Studies from the University of Tokyo, and is currently a lecturer in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Stanford University. Brendan Shanahan is completing his PhD in United States History at the University of California, Berkeley, where he also earned an MA, and has a BA Honours in History from McGill University, where he was co-valedictorian. Max Suechting is a doctoral candidate in Modern Thought and Literature at Stanford and holds a BA in English and Interdisciplinary Studies (summa cum laude) from Amherst College. It is a privilege and a pleasure to have the opportunity to work with these immensely talented scholars.



Figure 1. Dr. Nina Morgan meeting University of Regensburg's American Studies graduate students for a "Research Roundtable" (May 2016).⁴

However, we also know that managing editors cannot stay forever, especially when book manuscripts, administrative work, teaching, and family responsibilities make increasing demands on their time. We have been graced with the attention and presence of managing editor Caroline Kyungah Hong since the earliest days of *JTAS*, when she was a graduate student at UC Santa Barbara. An up-and-coming professor and Director of Graduate Studies in English at Queens College, CUNY, and a new mother, Caroline will step down from her position as managing editor, making room for our newest colleagues. We have been loath to release her, though we remain grateful to her for her dedication and intellectual leadership. *JTAS* would not exist if

Eric Martinsen, then a graduate student at UC Santa Barbara, had not recognized the potential of UC's eScholarship Repository (part of the eScholarship initiative of the California Digital Library) as a platform for the journal. We are deeply indebted to Eric for having gotten *JTAS* launched and for having served, with Caroline, as its co-managing editor for many years. Now Chair of the English Department at Ventura College and the father of two little girls, Eric has also stepped down, passing the leadership on to a new team of gifted colleagues. We cannot thank Caroline and Eric enough for all they have done to make *JTAS* possible. We would also like to express our deepest thanks to our colleague Tom Bender, Professor of History at NYU (recently retired!) who is rotating off the Editorial Board. *JTAS* benefited greatly from his wisdom and guidance.

Finally, the year 2016 is fated to provide Americanists everywhere with a great deal of material. This election year has been challenging. The powerfully emotional and highly volatile social conditions in the USA today surrounding police violence and race relations—matters that concern all of us who study and teach in our field—make these difficult and unpredictable times. Under these conditions, I, for one, especially appreciate and value the *JTAS* family: our colleagues, students, and readers worldwide comprise a constituency that strives to engage critical questions respectfully, connecting and collaborating with one another in our shared world of Transnational American Studies. Thank you for the work you do and for making *JTAS* a part of your intellectual life.

Notes

¹ John Stephens, Executive Director of the American Studies Association, email to the ASA International Committee, May 17, 2016.

² Nina Morgan, "Locating Shirley Geok-lin Lim, an Interview," in *Asian-American Writing: The Diasporic Imagination*, vol. 1, ed. Somdatta Mandal (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2000), 107.

³ Udo J. Hebel, "'American' Pictures and (Trans-)National Iconographies: Mapping Interpictorial Clusters in American Studies," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015): 17, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/02x2r3zx>.

⁴ Image from Regensburg European American Forum, updated July 14, 2016, <http://www.uni-regensburg.de/language-literature-culture/regensburg-european-american-forum/>.