

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

Forward Editor's Note

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6fr8j4ph>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 6(1)

Author

Robinson, Greg

Publication Date

2015

DOI

10.5070/T861025808

Copyright Information

Copyright 2015 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Forward Editor's Note

GREG ROBINSON

One of the great pleasures for me of being an Editorial Board member of *JTAS* is my assignment as editor of the Forward section, which contains excerpts of outstanding newly published or forthcoming texts in American Studies with a transnational focus. I am sometimes asked how the various pieces make their way into Forward. Although I am formally responsible for the selection, in fact I rely on recommendations by friends and by authors themselves for a fair amount of what appears there. I also tour book exhibits and scan book review sections in search of material. When I approach potential authors and publishers, it is not without trepidation, as I am entirely dependent on their goodwill for rights: Not only is *JTAS* not a for-profit operation, but we generate no income whatsoever, so I cannot pay any licensing fees. I am profoundly grateful and proud that so many authors and editors have recognized the value of what we do and the potential publicity generated by their association with us, and are willing to allow us to run excerpts from their publications.

In addition to putting together the selection of works for each issue's Forward section, to me falls the duty of writing the introductory note (a foreword to the Forward?) in which I try to consider them as a group. Interestingly enough, the pieces that come together within a particular issue do tend to form a natural set, but this is largely a matter of serendipity. I do not set out to collect works that speak to common themes. On the contrary, I usually only discover what these connections are in retrospective fashion, when I sit down to consider the contributions as a whole.

Two separate but related themes seem to jump out of this issue's selection. The first is that of cosmopolitanism. One of my favorite lines from the movie *Casablanca*, if a less-quoted one, is the exchange in which Humphrey Bogart's character, asked his nationality, cracks, "I'm a drunkard," whereupon Claude Rains's Captain Renault remarks, "That makes him a citizen of the world!" On a somewhat less facetious level, there are various ways in which American individuals and groups build connections and form allegiances outside of national identity. The authors here explore some cases of the international ties of American creative figures that startle us out of our easy tendency to view them entirely within a domestic context. For example, this issue's Forward section includes a chapter from Abdelmajid Hajji's *Arabs in American Cinema*

on Rex Ingram, the Irish-born American silent film director (not to be confused with the African American actor of the same era). During the 1920s, amid a vogue for exotic “orientalist” films in Hollywood, Ingram left the movie colony and traveled to Morocco to make movies about Arabs. Attracted by the life there, he took up residence, ceased making films, and ultimately even converted to Islam.

Another extract is from the introduction to Emron Esplin and Margarida Vale de Gato’s *Translated Poe*. This detailed study of translations of Edgar Allan Poe (like Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s enthralling Library of America anthology of international authors’ writings on Mark Twain) reminds us of the worldwide stature and public of a quintessentially American artist. Poe is a particularly striking case, inasmuch as it was poet Charles Baudelaire’s epochal settings of his works into French that rescued the American from obscurity even in his native land. Indeed Esplin and Gato suggest provocatively that the presence and dissemination of so many translations make us reconsider whether we should even classify Poe solely as a part of American literature. What is certain is that the encounter between author and translator can bring about odd and unsuspected connections. It is astounding to discover that Ze’ev Jabotinsky, the spiritual founder of Revisionist Zionism, was an admirer of Poe who translated “Annabel Lee” and “The Raven” into Hebrew.

Another take on transnational connections is that of Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo’s work *Black Cosmopolitanism*. This study traces the powerful impact of the Haitian Revolution on nineteenth-century black American writers and intellectuals such as David Walker, Mary Prince, and Frederick Douglass. Not only did the presence of the Black Republic inspire these opponents of American slavery to dream of liberation, but it also forged a feeling of the essential interconnectedness of peoples within the African diaspora. Nwankwo’s work suggests that forms of black nationalist and Pan-African ideology existed well before the start of the twentieth century. I am particularly intrigued by Nwankwo’s argument because of my own work as editor of a forthcoming anthology of writings by James Theodore Holly, an African American abolitionist who actually led an emigrationist movement to Haiti shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War, and who later founded the Haitian Orthodox Apostolic Church.

A particularly interesting contribution to the literature on cosmopolitanism is the text of Zareena Grewal, taken from the introduction to her recent book, *Islam Is a Foreign Country*. Grewal connects her research to her own experience growing up in various Arab and Islamic communities in the Detroit area. Grewal recounts the racial landscape that surrounded her—and how it was that, to the surprise of her parents, the English that she began speaking was Black English. Grewal’s memoir evokes the experiences of countless Asian immigrant children to inner-city America. Because blacks represent the only large population of American-born native speakers of English whom they encounter on the streets and in school, they not only adopt Black English but African American cultural styles—most visibly in their wardrobe tastes or in their taking up of basketball.

The other theme that seems to dominate the selections in this issue is that of Pacific connections and historical struggles against anti-Asian discrimination. Teemu Ruskola's *Legal Orientalism* explores the history of "extraterritoriality": As the United States and other Western nations extended their control over China during the mid-nineteenth century, they forced the Chinese to include in all treaties provisions for legal impunity in the shape of guarantees that foreign nationals in China would not be subject to the jurisdiction of Chinese courts but would be judged for any offenses by courts of their own nation. Although the United States finally renounced all claims to such "extraterritoriality" during World War II, as a diplomatic gesture to the nation's Chinese ally, Professor Ruskola argues provocatively that the legacy of such unequal treatment continues to shape global politics today.

Similarly, in *Looking Like the Enemy*, Jerry Garcia traces the complex history of Japanese Mexicans. As is indicated by Professor Garcia's subtitle, *Japanese Mexicans, the Mexican State, and US Hegemony, 1897–1945*, their lives were shaped not only by the nature of relations between Mexico and Japan but also the influence of the United States. Professor Garcia demonstrates how American policy in relation to the Japanese Mexicans played an important role in the wartime expulsion and dispossession of Japanese Mexicans from the nation's Pacific coast. United States government efforts to monitor Japanese Mexicans and the negative campaign against Japanese "spies" in the *Inter-American Monthly*, a propaganda magazine of the US government's Office for Inter-American Affairs, targeted people of Japanese ancestry in Mexico.

Conversely, in *The Color of Success*, author Ellen D. Wu investigates the postwar history of Chinese American and Japanese American communities, and ponders the origins and meaning of what has come to be known as the "model minority" stereotype. Although many historians have identified the flourishing of the "model minority" as a response to the Civil Rights Movement and the demands of blacks and other racialized minorities for equal access, Wu demonstrates that it also rested on the triangulation that Asian Americans operated during the Cold War years, positioning themselves as cultural ambassadors to a rising Asian continent. In the excerpt here presented, she reviews the international travels and connections of Hiram Fong and Daniel Inouye of Hawaii, the first two American-born Asians in Congress. Following their respective elections, they undertook transpacific missions to laud the US melting pot and liberal democracy as a model for Asia, even as on the domestic side they each produced a self-narrative that underlined the American values of their respective Asian ethnic groups and their fitness for first-class citizenship.

Finally, the excerpt from Stephen Sohn's study *Racial Asymmetries* examines the fictions of Sabina Murray, a mixed-race Asian American writer of Spanish-Filipina background. While Murray drew from her heritage in her first novel, *Slow Burn* (1990), her later novels have been devoted to themes as diverse as the Spanish colonization of the New World, the looting of artifacts from post-World War II Greece, and Hiroshima in 1945, just before the city was destroyed by the atomic bomb. Sohn defends with brio the thesis that Murray's works, despite their diversity in setting and

action, are linked by a concern with ethnic subjugation and the complex dynamics and legacy of colonialism (including the colonial projects of Europe, America, and Japan). They thereby highlight a larger strain of transnationalism that underlies a good deal of current-day Asian American literature.

We are grateful as always to the publishers of the works excerpted here: University of Arizona Press, University of Pennsylvania Press, Lehigh University Press, Harvard University Press, Princeton University Press, New York University Press (twice), and to Abdelmajid Hajji for allowing a selection from his self-published work.