

# UC Santa Barbara

## Journal of Transnational American Studies

### Title

Forward Editor's Note

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8bx9m29t>

### Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 10(2)

### Author

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### Publication Date

2019

### DOI

10.5070/T8102046341

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# Forward Editor's Note

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JENNIFER REIMER

Hello *JTAS* readers!

As the new *Forward* Editor, I am thrilled to be joining *JTAS*, a journal that discovers and disseminates the most engaging work in the field of Transnational American Studies (and throws the best ASA parties!). Before I kick off this issue's *Forward* section, I'd like to thank the editors, especially Nina Morgan, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, and Sabine Kim for welcoming me on board. I'd also like to express my gratitude to Greg Robinson, our former *Forward* editor, for his parting words of wisdom on all things *Forward*.

2019 has been a stellar year for our field, and we have the recent publications to prove it. Two long-awaited projects finally made their debut: *The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies* (eds. Nina Morgan, Alfred Hornung, and Takayuki Tatsumi), and *The Chinese and the Iron Road* (eds. Gordon H. Chang and Shelley Fisher Fishkin), the latter part of the Chinese Railroad Workers in North American project out of Stanford University (Stanford, CA, USA).<sup>1</sup> I am thrilled to include excerpts from both in this issue.

In their introduction to the 2019 *Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies*, Nina Morgan and Alfred Hornung distinguish TAS "by its intellectually collaborative as opposed to ideological genesis, its transdisciplinary method, and transnational thinking."<sup>2</sup> All five parts—*Part I. Theorizing Transnational American Studies*, *Part II. Culture and Performance: Histories and Reciprocities*, *Part III. Translating Texts and Transnationalizing Contexts*, *Part IV. Political Imaginaries and Transnational Images of the Political* and *Part V. Remapping Geographies and Genres*—and more than thirty essays await the courageous reader!

Karim Bejjit's compelling "The Barbary Frontier and Transnational Allegories of Freedom" brings readers Transnational American Studies

scholarship out of Morocco.<sup>3</sup> Bejjit engages “fresh critical explorations of the Barbary frontier” that focus less on the US’s historic diplomatic and naval interventions in North Africa and more on how this particular geography influenced early American conceptions of freedom and democracy. The essay considers a series of American plays from 1794 to 1817 to point out an unlikely and ambivalent “global narrative of democracy cutting across racial and national lines.”<sup>4</sup> Through allegory, Bejjit argues, the Barbary frontier served as an “elastic site” upon which early American playwrights negotiated the political-ethical implications of slaveholding at home and in the world.<sup>5</sup>

As a lifelong and inveterate devourer of genre literature, I eagerly read Hsuan L. Hsu and Bryan Yazell’s fascinating essay on speculative fiction, “Post-Apocalyptic Geographies and Structural Appropriation.”<sup>6</sup> The authors gather a series of contemporary dystopian novels to underscore the difference between those whose postapocalyptic worlds employ structural appropriation as the basis for their world-(un)making, and Indigenous novels and film where apocalypse is framed as “a condition to inhabit and learn from.”<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, Cormac McCarthy appears here as part of the appropriating project. In contrast, Native Apocalypse fiction treats apocalypse as nothing new for Indigenous people, who have actually experienced the near-end of their worlds via colonial and racial violence. Apocalypse, then, becomes the catalyst for not only survival but also for the inventions of “new methods of ecological and cultural reproduction.”<sup>8</sup> Hsu and Yazell bring an urgent and much-needed focus on Indigenous perspectives in speculative fiction, highlighting artists such as Indra Sinha and Benjamin Ross Hayden. (Click here if you or someone you know needs ideas for holiday reading that passes as work!).

The final excerpt featured from the *Routledge Companion* collection is Nina Morgan’s essay, “Laws of Forgiveness: Obama, Mandela, Derrida,” one of two recent publications that consider autobiography and cultural memory/forgetting through Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father*.<sup>9</sup> Morgan asks, “What is it that ‘political autobiography’ does for us today, in our precarious nation-states?”<sup>10</sup> To answer these questions, Morgan turns to Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* to read political autobiographies as historical archives, constructed narratives that ironically enable the work of “organizing amnesia.”<sup>11</sup> In our frantic need to collect and document under the guise of saving the future from historical amnesia, we often overlook what Derrida saw as the very acts of forgetting contained with, or performed by, the archive itself, which are later subject to a kind of “hauntology.” The implication for the political autobiography, then, is a question of form as much as content, as Morgan

demonstrates in her reading of texts by both Mandela and Obama in the context of racism and nation; thus, as she observes: “As far as the political future is concerned ... we would do well to remember that ghosts do not disappear, they *appear*.”<sup>12</sup>

For Mita Banerjee, Obama’s autobiography reads the “tragedy” of Obama’s presidency as the failure of the United States to, like Obama, understand their difference as related to the difference of others (“A Kaleidoscope of Color or the Agony of Race?”).<sup>13</sup> Banerjee invokes the kaleidoscope as trope to capture the “relativity and relationality of difference”; namely, race, class, religion, gender, and degrees of enfranchisement.<sup>14</sup> This creates “an agony of race”—the social reality of persistent racial antagonism in the US.<sup>15</sup> The essay includes an elegant rereading of Obama-the-author as simultaneously autobiographer and biographer, a nuanced role that, according to Banerjee, came to shape Obama-the-politician’s understanding of difference.

And on the topic of “difference,” the excerpt from Leopold Lippert’s *Performing America Abroad: Transnational Cultural Politics in the Age of Neoliberal Capitalism* charts the potential of “transnational difference” in performances of America abroad by pointing to the “political implications of transnationalism in the context of neoliberal capitalism.”<sup>16</sup> “By turning something *different* into something *exceptional*, the hermeneutics of American exceptionalism provides a mechanism which folds the transnational critique of a narrowly conceived national culture back into the exceptionalist national logic.”<sup>17</sup> But this doesn’t mean throwing the “critical logics” of transnational critique out with the neoliberal bathwater: “If we want to take seriously the transnational turn, we need to acknowledge the connections between molecular transnationalism and the new spirit of capitalism.”<sup>18</sup>

In the interest of presenting a balanced view of the scholarship and criticism in this field, I would like to share “Colonial Problems, Transnational American Studies,” excerpted from Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera’s *After American Studies: Rethinking Legacies of Transnational Exceptionalism* (Routledge, 2017).<sup>19</sup> Herlihy-Mera calls for a serious rethinking of transnational paradigms which threaten to gloss over other modes that are “more sensitive to individual agencies.”<sup>20</sup> “When a more atomized, individual approach to a text or the work of an author is employed as a critical apparatus (instead of a cultural, national, or transnational approach),” he argues, we are less likely to rely on overly broad metrics.<sup>21</sup> Herlihy-Mera engages compelling studies in social psychology and cultural neuroscience that “[examine] the cerebral variances in chemicals and electrical signals in terms of specific social and cultural situations” and posit “that the way that an

individual behaves is not necessarily reciprocal or even consistent with their surroundings or presumed demographics."<sup>22</sup> (This may be interdisciplinarity at its best and most promising!). Paying close attention to "when and where the thoughts are forming in the mind" of authors, artists, and culture-makers, Herlihy-Mera argues that the individual context matters because "(trans)national statuses as legal, social, and rhetorical constructs have very real consequences for human beings," particularly when it comes to legal rights and social inclusion.<sup>23</sup> [Click here and join the debate!](#)

I wrap up this issue with two new collections that engage the transpacific, Oceania, and Asia—the site and theme of this year's American Studies Association's Annual Meeting in Honolulu, HI: "Build As We Fight." And also poetry. If, like me, you have been following the Chinese Railroad Workers Project at Stanford University, you may already have a copy of *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental Railroad* in your hands. If not, read on! The coeditors, Gordon H. Chang and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, join Hilton Obenzinger in introducing the book as "the first comprehensive effort to recover and interpret the work of the Chinese railroad workers" and "the largest effort to study any aspect of nineteenth-century Chinese American history generally."<sup>24</sup> The book brings together more than one hundred scholars in North America and Asia from a diverse range of disciplines from Archaeology to American Studies. The book undertakes the necessary work of placing the Chinese at the center of the history of the American West while also filling a notable gap in Chinese-language historiography. Everything from scattered business records, fragmentary payrolls, oral history without textual documentation, and an overall paucity of textual evidence threatened to stand in the way of the transpacific connections and intertwined histories of nineteenth-century China and the US. No spoilers here on how it all turned out.

The selection offered here, by Zhang Guoxiong, with Roland Hsu, "The View from Home," argues that the Pacific passage for those workers who went to build the railroad mirrored the travel of those prospectors who went in search of gold in the US, and that those who returned to China deeply influenced their hometowns in ways that persist today.<sup>25</sup> I was moved by the translations of letters and poetry by disillusioned workers, mourning relatives, and, in particular, women's laments for their absentee husbands that became translated into popular ballads. Perhaps my favorite lines, though, are from "The Good Wife Anticipates the Return of Her Husband": "One day if I become shameless, / I will shyly peek at a handsome man."<sup>26</sup> Note to husbands: Good Wives won't wait around forever.

Bonus: This selection includes a photograph of the author, taken by Fishkin, at the spot in Taishan from which every Chinese worker from Guangdong departed for the journey to the US. You're welcome!

It is a pleasure to bring your attention to *Oceanic Archives, Indigenous Epistemologies, and Transpacific American Studies*, edited by Yuan Shu, Otto Heim, and Kendall Johnson (Hong Kong University Press, 2019).<sup>27</sup> This impressive, four-part anthology includes work by well-known figures such as Viet Than Nguyen, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, and Rob Wilson. The collection's scope is broad, covering historical terrain from the eighteenth century to the present moment, yet maintains a focused intervention "for rethinking indigenous epistemologies and regenerating non-Western production and dissemination."<sup>28</sup> The introduction by Yuan Shu offers a comprehensive history of the transpacific—no doubt a resource that will be added to many course syllabi.

I have chosen Rob Wilson's essay on ecopoetics, "Oceania as Peril and Promise," for this issue due to its interdisciplinarity, its timely relevance to current conversations within the ASA and elsewhere, and because Wilson writes gracefully, with voice and style.<sup>29</sup> The essay figures a planetary solidarity as its call to action, yet far from being sweeping or naïve, Wilson carefully historicizes "planet ocean" as both "bioregional site of coalitional *promise*" and "geopolitical danger zone of antagonistic peril."<sup>30</sup> I appreciate Wilson's inclusion of "experimental ecopoetics" aka "transpacific ecopoetics" as part of his oceanic epistemology.<sup>31</sup> Wilson's survey (or depth-sounding?) of a transpacific experimental ecopoetics includes established poets and poets that may be new to some *JTAS* readers but shared ecopoetics, Wilson suggests, offer "a new framework for ecological solidarity, an alternative site for modes of belonging and an oceanic imagination for transforming social and regional practice."<sup>32</sup>

A final note: I am committed to bringing attention to a wide variety of recent TAS scholarship from anywhere and everywhere people are doing it, making it, living it. So, please be in touch! Send me your reports from the field; let me know when you or another excellent scholar publishes a must-read in TAS. Until then ... read fierce, be well.

In solidarity,  
Jennifer Reimer  
Graz, Austria

## Notes

*JTAS* thanks the following publishers for granting permission to reprint these excerpts: Hong Kong University Press, Routledge, Stanford

University Press, Taylor & Francis, and Universitätsverlag Winter. Thanks to Shelley Fisher Fishkin for permission to print her photograph of Zhang Guoxiong; Mita Banerjee's "A Kaleidoscope of Color or the Agony of Race? Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*" is excerpted from *Developing Transnational American Studies*, edited by Nadja Gernalzick and Heike C. Spickermann (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2019) and is reprinted with the permission of the publisher; Karim Bejjit's "The Barbary Frontier and Transnational Allegories of Freedom," Hsuan L. Hsu and Bryan Yazell's "Post-Apocalyptic Geographies and Structural Appropriation," and Nina Morgan's "Laws of Forgiveness: Obama, Mandela, Derrida" are excerpted from *The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies*, edited by Nina Morgan, Alfred Hornung, and Takayuki Tatsumi (Routledge, 2019) and are reprinted with the permission of the publisher; Zhang Guoxiong and Roland Hsu's "The View From Home" is excerpted from *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental Railroad*, edited by Gordon H. Chang and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, with Hilton Obenzinger and Roland Hsu. ©2019 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University. All Rights Reserved; Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera's "Colonial Problems, Transnational American Studies" is excerpted from *After American Studies: Rethinking the Legacies of Transnational Exceptionalism* by Herlihy-Mera (Routledge, 2017) and is reprinted with the permission of the publisher; Leopold Lippert's "Towards a Theory of Transnational Difference" is excerpted from *Performing America Abroad: Transnational Cultural Politics in the Age of Neoliberal Capitalism* by Leopold Lippert (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2018) and is reprinted with the permission of the publisher; Yuan Shu's "Introduction" and Rob Wilson's "Oceania as Peril and Promise: Towards Theorizing a Worlded Vision of Transpacific Eco-poetics" are excerpted from *Oceanic, Archives, Indigenous Epistemologies, and Transpacific American Studies*, edited by Yuan Shu, Otto Heim, and Kendall Johnson (Hong Kong UP 2019) and are reprinted with the permission of the publisher.

<sup>1</sup> *The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies*, ed. Nina Morgan, Alfred Hornung, and Takayuki Tatsumi, (Oxford/New York: Routledge, 2019); and *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental Railroad*, ed. Gordon H. Chang and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, with Hilton Obenzinger and Roland Hsu (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Nina Morgan and Alfred Hornung, "Introduction: Recognizing Transnational American Studies," in *The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies*, ed. Nina Morgan, Alfred Hornung, and Takayuki Tatsumi, 1–8. Oxford/New York: Routledge, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Karim Bejjit, "The Barbary Frontier and Transnational Allegories of Freedom," in *The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies*, ed. Nina Morgan, Alfred Hornung, and Takayuki Tatsumi (Oxford/New York: Routledge, 2019), 96–105.

<sup>4</sup> Bejjit, "The Barbary Frontier and Transnational Allegories of Freedom," 102.

<sup>5</sup> Bejjit, "The Barbary Frontier and Transnational Allegories of Freedom," 104.

<sup>6</sup> Hsuan L. Hsu and Bryan Yazell, "Post-Apocalyptic Geographies and Structural Appropriation," in *The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies*, ed. Nina Morgan, Alfred Hornung, and Takayuki Tatsumi (Oxford/New York: Routledge, 2019), 347–56.

<sup>7</sup> Hsu and Yazell, "Post-Apocalyptic Geographies and Structural Appropriation," 355.

<sup>8</sup> Hsu and Yazell, "Post-Apocalyptic Geographies and Structural Appropriation," 352.

<sup>9</sup> Nina Morgan, "Laws of Forgiveness: Obama, Mandela, Derrida," in *The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies*, ed. Nina Morgan, Alfred Hornung, and Takayuki Tatsumi (Oxford/New York: Routledge, 2019), 266–81.

<sup>10</sup> Morgan, "Laws of Forgiveness," 267.

<sup>11</sup> Morgan, "Laws of Forgiveness," 268–69.

<sup>12</sup> Morgan, "Laws of Forgiveness," 278.

<sup>13</sup> Mita Banerjee, "A Kaleidoscope of Color or the Agony of Race? Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*," in *Developing Transnational American Studies*, edited by Nadja Gernalzick and Heike C. Spickermann (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2019), 161–76, here 161.

<sup>14</sup> Banerjee, "A Kaleidoscope of Color or the Agony of Race?" 161.

<sup>15</sup> Banerjee, "A Kaleidoscope of Color or the Agony of Race?" 166.

<sup>16</sup> Leopold Lippert, *Performing America Abroad: Transnational Cultural Politics in the Age of Neoliberal Capitalism* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2018), 20.

<sup>17</sup> Lippert, *Performing America Abroad: Transnational Cultural Politics in the Age of Neoliberal Capitalism*, 49.



- <sup>18</sup> Lippert, *Performing America Abroad: Transnational Cultural Politics in the Age of Neoliberal Capitalism*, 56.
- <sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera, "Colonial Problems, Transnational American Studies," in *After American Studies: Rethinking Legacies of Transnational Exceptionalism* (New York/Oxford: Routledge, 2017), 149–70.
- <sup>20</sup> Herlihy-Mera, "Colonial Problems, Transnational American Studies," 150.
- <sup>21</sup> Herlihy-Mera, "Colonial Problems, Transnational American Studies," 151.
- <sup>22</sup> Herlihy-Mera, "Colonial Problems, Transnational American Studies," 156.
- <sup>23</sup> Herlihy-Mera, "Colonial Problems, Transnational American Studies," 160, 162.
- <sup>24</sup> Gordon H. Chang, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, and Hilton Obenzinger, "Introduction," in *The Chinese and the Iron Road*, ed. Gordon H. Chang and Shelley Fisher Fishkin with Hilton Obenzinger and Roland Hsu (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 3.
- <sup>25</sup> Zhang Guoxiong, with Roland Hsu, "The View from Home: Dreams of Chinese Railroad Workers across the Pacific," in *The Chinese and the Iron Road*, ed. Gordon H. Chang and Shelley Fisher Fishkin with Hilton Obenzinger and Roland Hsu (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 55.
- <sup>26</sup> "The Good Wife Anticipates the Return of Her Husband," anonymous, l. 14, qtd. in Guoxiong and Hsu, "The View from Home," 70.
- <sup>27</sup> *Oceanic Archives, Indigenous Epistemologies, and Transpacific American Studies*, ed. Yuan Shu, Otto Heim, and Kendall Johnson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019).
- <sup>28</sup> Yuan Shu, Introduction, in *Oceanic Archives, Indigenous Epistemologies, and Transpacific American Studies*, 2.
- <sup>29</sup> Rob Wilson, "Oceania as Peril and Promise: Towards Theorizing a Worlded Vision of Transpacific Ecopoetics," in *Oceanic Archives, Indigenous Epistemologies, and Transpacific American Studies*, ed. Yuan Shu, Otto Heim, and Kendall Johnson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019), 261–82.
- <sup>30</sup> Wilson, "Oceania as Peril and Promise," 261.
- <sup>31</sup> Wilson, "Oceania as Peril and Promise," 262.
- <sup>32</sup> Wilson, "Oceania as Peril and Promise," 274.

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