

# The Shape of Transnational American Studies: Good and Excellent News

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I begin this editorial with a sense of relief and congratulatory delight, coming out of a slew of good news.

First, a piece of excellent news: in 2010, *JTAS* was selected as one of 85 born-digital scholarly publications (of over 5,000) to be included in the Library of Congress's mandatory deposit program for e-publications. Copies of *JTAS* will be permanently housed in print form at the Library of Congress in recognition of our journal's distinctive contribution to scholarship.

On a second happy note, this year we move to a biannual publication schedule; the current issue is thus numbered *JTAS* 3.2. As our readers, contributors, reviewers, and numerous associate and advisory editors know, since publishing its inaugural issue in 2009, the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* has appeared once yearly for the past three years. This seemingly minor change in numbering, signifying the release of a second yearly issue, is in fact an excellent sign of stability for a new publication. Furthermore, the swifter publication schedule means that the journal will process submissions (including the lengthy and rigorous process of at least two peer reviews, revision, a second round of peer reviews, editorial board review, and copyediting) in a more timely manner. *JTAS* has attracted an increasing flow of submissions from both junior and senior scholars, and, with the open access provided by the internet, these submissions come from an ever-expanding domain of international universities and research centers. The biannual schedule, while still allowing us to choose the best pieces for inclusion, will permit our contributors to get their articles out in circulation globally before delays in publication begin to dull the cutting edge of their scholarship!

The third piece of good news appears in this issue in the shape of a Special Forum. The idea of Special Forums focusing on particular US transnational subjects, guest-edited by outside scholars, and vetted by the editorial board, was first

conceived in 2009 at the California American Studies Association conference. Yanoula Athanassakis quickly took responsibility for launching the initiative in *JTAS* 2. Since then, she and the editorial board have fielded numerous proposals for such Special Forums, where the guest editors are responsible also for peer review and copyediting with the editorial board reserving final approval, to be included in general *JTAS* issues. She has capably assisted with the completion of at least three Special Forums as of this November.

*JTAS* 3.2 serves as an inaugural issue for the *JTAS* Special Forums. Guest-edited by Hsuan L. Hsu (University of California, Davis, USA), who works on nineteenth-century American literature and transnational American literature, “Circa 1898: Overseas Empire and Transnational American Studies” structures eleven articles and Hsu’s excellent introduction around one date in US history. “Circa 1898” offers a crucial temporal conceit and turning-point vantage from which to investigate the cultural productions that were produced from and themselves were productive of US imperial trajectories. Beginning with the War of 1898 and the US–Philippine War and moving up to contemporary political discourses, the eleven articles in this Special Forum argue collectively that past and current American cultural works remain embedded, reified, and productive through and in these histories of imperial acts. Together, these studies recuperate a breadth of cultural texts—canonical and literary classics, mass culture and popular ephemera, photographs, letters, and travel accounts—each offering a significant contribution to a specifically transnational history in which US military and economic incursions and colonial presence in Panama, Cuba, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, Guam, Hawai’i, China, and the Philippines are freshly analyzed and critiqued from multiperspectival positions.

This Special Forum also includes selections of poems by Craig Santos Perez, a native Chamorro from the Pacific Island of Guam, author of several books/chapbooks of poetry and cofounder of Achiote Press. Although *JTAS* does not publish creative writing in any genre, Perez’s poems form the object of scrutiny for Paul Lai’s engaging challenge to “trouble the logic of an American hemisphere [when] the great expanse of the Pacific Ocean separates [Guam] from North America’s west coast.” This vexed status of Guam within the US nation, according to Lai, interrogates the relevance of an American Studies as “an intellectual project to comprehend such absences of unincorporated territories.” This is the kind of provocation and challenge that *JTAS* is particularly attuned to, and we are pleased to waive our policy against publishing creative work to include Perez’s poems, works that may themselves be read as theoretical and intellectual challenges to given paradigms of transnational American Studies.

This issue also anticipates the appearance of two other completed Special Forums to appear in *JTAS* 4.1. One is on Chinese American cultural productions and forms a kind of festschrift to honor and mark Professor Sau-ling Wong’s retirement from the University of California, Berkeley, and her immense contribution to the literary history and discourse of Asian American literature and ethnic studies; the

other is a Special Forum on indigenous/Native American Studies from a transnational location, featuring coeditors from Taiwan, Michigan, Massachusetts, and New York.

The subjects explored in the *JTAS* 3.2 Special Forum articles resonate with those in other parts of this issue of the journal. For example, four of the six pieces that Greg Robinson has included in “Forward” focus on analyses of US transnational/Asia-Pacific contact histories, and at least three are also arguably linked inextricably to the 1898 fulcrum. Jennifer M. McMahon’s *Dead Stars: American and Philippine Literary Perspectives on the American Colonization of the Philippines* and Andrea Geiger’s *Subverting Exclusion: Transpacific Encounters with Race, Caste, and Borders, 1885–1928* are located in the era of US expansionism and Asian immigration to its shores; and while Setsu Shigematsu and Keith L. Camacho’s introduction to their anthology, *Militarized Currents: Toward a Decolonized Future in Asia and the Pacific*, treats US occupation of Pacific Islands during the twentieth century, it places this colonizing move, as Robinson writes, “in conversation with the imperial role of Japan in the region and the conflict between the two [powers],” a conflict that, to my mind, may be iconically represented in the US–Japanese rivalry over Hawai’i and its annexation by the US in 1898.

The other Forward selections illustrate the remarkable kinds of questions that a transnational American Studies methodology can elicit and the consequent understandings that their investigations may then produce. Wen Jin’s study in *Pluralist Universalism: An Asian Americanist Critique of U.S. and Chinese Multiculturalisms* is in some ways a work of comparative cultural studies that, by placing two different national practices of multiculturalism in competitive relation to each other, raises opportunities for subtle readings of contemporary ethnic Chinese fictionists from both sides of the Pacific. In so doing, Wen Jin’s study helps to characterize the particular cultural styles that distinguish one nation’s multicultural practice from the other.

Robinson’s last two selections emphasize how much transnational American Studies continues to draw on US relations with its two immediate neighbors, Mexico and Canada. David J. Vázquez’s *Triangulations: Narrative Strategies for Navigating Latino Identity* reads Latino/Latina first-person fiction, memoir, and *testimonio* to bring full attention to the cross-border navigations of identities that compose and explain much of the history and processes of racial formations in the United States. In a similar manner, Brendan Shanahan’s essay on Honoré Beaugrand’s 1878 *Jeanne la fileuse*, a novel of French Canadian migration to the US, recuperates the complex crisscrosses that marked (and continue to mark) US–Canadian “emigration,” in the shape of the nineteenth-century French Canadian community set down in an industrial New England. At least a third of Quebec’s population, and perhaps as much as one-half, emigrated south at some time during these decades, and many later returned. The transnational associations and multilayered identities they forged reshaped culture in both nations.

As with Shanahan’s essay, three of the “Reprise” articles—by Pia Wiegink,

Nicole Waller, and Silvia Schultermandl, selected by Nina Morgan—are drawn from American Studies scholarship generated in a non-US space: Germany and Austria, specifically. Lázaro Lima (University of Richmond, USA), author of the first selection in *Reprise*, “*Locas al Rescate: The Transnational Hauntings of Queer Cubanidad*,” analyzes the spectrality of the body politic inside the place-bound, transnational community of Cuban Miami/South Beach, and post-Cuban-refugee-influx of the late twentieth century. All four selections in *Reprise* underline the remarkable power inherent in the investigative methodologies that characterize interdisciplinary American Studies, methodologies drawn from and aligned with those in performance and cultural studies, history, literature, sociology, urban studies, gender and queer studies, immigration studies, Asian American, Trans-Atlantic, and Hemispheric Studies, and more.

The texts included in both *Forward* and *Reprise*, in contrast to the historical frame insisted upon in the Special Forum, suggest the wide reach of transnational American Studies’ contemporary concerns. In doing so, they also map how transnational American Studies traverses horizontal and vertical dimensions, horizontal in its open inclusiveness of scholarship across national borders, and vertically in its temporal staging and palimpsestic nuances.

The substance of the general issue represents the kinds of topics that a transnational American Studies practice seeks to foreground. The first article in the general issue, “Cultural Nationalism, Orientalism, Imperial Ambivalence: The *Colored American Magazine* and Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins” by Yu-Fang Cho, complements the Special Forum topic, “Circa 1898,” very well. Cho’s reading of the *Colored American Magazine* illuminates the transnational dimension of interracial discourses that are deeply resonant today, in light of President Obama’s life story and what his story represents for American identity. Transnational interracial constructions, whether as representational and ideological mix-ups, mash-ups, or plain cut-ups, were always already historically present in a nation of immigrants from diverse geographical regions; but Cho’s study underlines how such transnational inter-raced discursive dynamics may be only just now coming into critical consciousness, and as such it opens up space for further new examinations.

Three of the general articles offer studies in twentieth-century and contemporary cultural texts, figures, and social phenomena. Bradley M. Freeman’s “Threatening ‘the Good Order’: West Meets East in Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Cheat* and John Updike’s *Terrorist*” places two very different cultural texts, an early twentieth-century popular Hollywood movie and a late twentieth-century high-culture novel, in dialogue with each other. It examines how US aesthetic practices, whether in literature or in film, have worked to “deploy and reinforce” an Imaginary that constructs a fantasy of American national unity in opposition to an Other (the East, terrorists), in order to secure an “immutable and irreconcilable spatial separation” of the American nation from the rest. This thesis owes some of its light to Edward Said’s earlier unpacking of the operations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Orientalist

discourses in the West, but Freeman has brilliantly folded this initial recognition of the operations of ideology in cultural productions into twenty-first-century transnational dynamics in which hypermobile populations continue nonetheless to be constructed and constrained by imaginaries of “territorial divide.”

Frank Mehring’s “‘All for the sake of freedom’: Hannah Arendt’s Democratic Dissent, Trauma, and American Citizenship” can be read as a vigorous counter to such commodified (whether as popular or high culture) productions that Freeman critiques. Mehring undertakes a quasi-biographical study that sympathetically portrays Arendt’s evolving subject positions, as German national, then transatlantic refugee, and finally US citizen (from being “a more or less neutral observer to an active promoter of the American democratic promise”), to excavate the transculturality inscribed in her major works. Arendt’s dissenting texts treating political developments that threaten, contest, or support freedom and equality in the US and other democratic societies, Mehring argues, are rooted in the trauma of her German national history. Her identity as naturalized US citizen together with her transnational past thus offers her a uniquely negotiable position from which to launch her democratic dissent. Mehring’s thesis that for Arendt “it is not so important to address what is remembered but how it is remembered” argues that her transatlantic, bicultural history explains her provocative confrontations with those forms/norms of traumatic responses that were commonly circulated in US public, jurisdictional, political, and personal discourse.

The title of Claudia Sadowski-Smith’s article, “Neoliberalism, Global ‘Whiteness,’ and the Desire for Adoptive Invisibility in US Parental Memoirs of Eastern European Adoption,” is in fact more modest than would be indicated by the actual scope of her very full study, which looks at large-scale transnational adoption to the United States through much of the twentieth century, when such adoptions became common. Sadowski-Smith’s motivation was to investigate the transnational adoption of Eastern European children. Her essay, however, also synthesizes important data and information on the historically largest group of adoptees, from South Korea since the 1950s, and more recent adoptees from China, in order to contextualize her analysis of race as a post-adoption risk factor in the adoption of children from Eastern Europe. Because this risk factor has been virtually ignored with this population, Sadowski-Smith turns to the new literary genre of the parental transnational adoption memoir. While such memoirs appear to provide direct parental control over the representation of adoption experiences, they also offer narrative links to explain the adoption failures that have dominated US media coverage of these transnational experiences and, more significantly, a point of entry to understanding the role of race in adoptions from Eastern Europe. Sadowski-Smith reads the three selected memoirs as testimonies to the idea that adoptions from Russia and the Ukraine may be viewed “as acts of consumerism designed to . . . fulfill . . . desires to create monoracial families.” This desire for “adoption privacy”—that is, the ability to “retain the prerogative of disclosing our adoption status to the

world”—is framed in a neoliberal ethos that underlies the myth of a global “whiteness” to erase historical, ethnic, and class differences. Such deliberate consumer-oriented discourse may account for abuse cases and adoption failures for Eastern European adoptees, when “the adoption market promises to fulfill . . . parental fantasies of substitution by transforming children into replaceable commodities.” Documenting that “international adoption extends the domestic practice of placing voluntarily relinquished children through largely unregulated third parties or private commercial or nonprofit agencies,” Sadowski-Smith’s essay is not simply a powerful study of troubling transnational adoption apparatuses. It also serves to show how the best in American Studies profoundly implicates our work in its relation to the humanitarian ideal of social justice and the role of our knowledge-making in upholding that ideal.

Finally, as a kind of afterword/foreword to *JTAS* 3.2, Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s article, “‘DEEP MAPS’: A Brief for Digital Palimpsest Mapping Projects,” and Karen Elizabeth Bishop’s commentary on Fishkin’s theoretical/pedagogical/methodological brief further elaborate on the new horizontal–vertical dimensions of a twenty-first-century transnational American Studies practice that has been enabled chiefly by the digital technologies that have transformed how our knowledge industries work. Technological innovations are creating a universal virtual library, open to all with access to these tools. At the same time, the dialogue between Fishkin and Bishop is mediated by the ancient technologies of books and maps and illustrative of the power of intergenerational and interdisciplinary exchange. Fishkin, a senior and distinguished Stanford University professor, and 2004–2005 president of the American Studies Association, writes from her considerable experience with extensive international partnerships of her vision for collaborative “digital palimpsest mapping projects” (DPMPs, or “Deep Maps” as figured in the title) to be undertaken across national, institutional, language, and disciplinary borders. Seeking “multilingual digital archives around the globe,” she sees the opportunity in access to such archives, to create gateways to different ways of knowing, where our understanding of texts, histories, characters, actions, conflicts, and more “could be read as palimpsests, allowing multiple versions of events, texts, and phenomena to be written over each other—with each version visible under the layers.”

Karen Bishop, whose current scholarship on maps and the “disappeared” in the Southern Cone is exemplary of a Hemispheric Studies in which the US is always already situated, explicates the layers of complex interconnected practices that Fishkin’s paradigm of Deep Maps instates. She notes that Fishkin’s trope of palimpsests “depends on a scholarly methodology that privileges the transnational as a structure, a means, and a dynamic site of excavation for intellectual inquiry” and “provides for new forms of collaborative writing and new reading practices” in which scholars, students, and even members of the general public can build geo-archives together. Fishkin’s Deep Maps project, Bishop concludes, foregrounds a construction of place in a “self-reflective placial exercise” that accepts “other national literatures

and histories [with] . . . their own ways of understanding and engaging with the transnational.” Located outside of American Studies and inside the studies of other national literatures (Spain, France, Argentina, etc.) as a scholar housed in comparative literature and Spanish departments, Bishop responds to Fishkin’s Deep Maps project as a partner in the kind of transnational, transcultural, transdisciplinary, and intergenerational exchange that *JTAS* seeks to encourage and stage.

In farewell, I close with overflowing thanks to our current contributors, reviewers, and the many editors (editorial, advisory, guest, managing, copy, and assistant) who have made this issue possible.