EDITORS' NOTE

Historical Consciousness and Transnational American Studies

CHRIS SUH AND GREG ROBINSON

FROM THE EDITORIAL BOARD: With this issue of JTAS*, the Editorial Board is delighted to welcome Dr. Nina Morgan, our Reprise section editor, as a full-fledged board member. Nina is Associate Professor of English at Kennesaw State University, where she is also affiliated with American Studies and Asian Studies. She is also the former chair of the Women's Committee of the American Studies Association. We salute as well the arrival of Chris Suh as Associate Managing Editor for Special Forums. Chris, who has a BA from Brown University, is an ABD student in the doctoral program in History at Stanford University.*

We are proud to present issue 4.2 of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*. It features a set of striking essays, including several original peer-reviewed articles as well as the contents of our Forward and Reprise sections, which offer reprints of texts that have appeared or will shortly appear elsewhere. In addition, we include as our marquee feature a Special Forum on "Revolutions and Heterotopias" (similarly peer-reviewed). The Special Forum is a distinctive section of *JTAS*, and by all evidence it has become a favorite among our readers (one cheerful aspect of online publishing is that we and our authors receive monthly statistics from eScholarship on the number of views and downloads of each article on our site, so we can keep tabs). Another notable feature of the current issue is the presence, in both the Forward and Reprise sections, of works by the late Günter Lenz, a renowned German specialist in American Studies.

As Americanist historians, both of us—Chris Suh and Greg Robinson—are intrigued to note how the current issue of *JTAS*, throughout its various sections, brings to the fore the role of history in transnational American Studies, and vice

versa. In the editor's note for Forward, Greg mentions some of the tools that historians bring to American Studies. Of course, the giving is not simply one way. Indeed, the special value of an interdisciplinary field such as American Studies for historians is how it gives us the opportunity of being exposed to other methods and approaches, and it seems to us that a transnational model of historical development encourages such cross-pollination.

For the American story is, among other things, a story of movement in time and space: movement of goods and capital along trading networks; movements of laborers between rural areas and cities, or cities and other cities; and spreading of ideas. Perhaps most importantly, it is the story of migrations of people across oceans and borders, and not just in one direction. If historians choose *AMERICA* as our field of study, we are looking not at a particular place across a given period, as we may fondly imagine, but at the interactions between people from different places at various moments. The late historian Oscar Handlin opened *The Uprooted*, his Pulitzer Prize–winning study of immigration to the United States, with a celebrated epigram: "Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants *were* American history."[1] If we were to substitute the (admittedly clunkier) phrase "transnational subjects" for "immigrants" in Handlin's words, we might actually get a more complete and accurate sense of what he was driving at. As we learn from various of the selections in this issue of *JTAS*, American history is not simply the experience of those who come and remain but also of those who come, go back, and then spread sets of ideas of America. Still more, it is the contribution of those Americans who move outside the borders of the United States but find various ways (willingly or otherwise) to take their country along with them.

For example, among the articles appearing here, Miranda Wilkerson and Joseph Salmons' contribution, "Linguistic Marginalities: Becoming American without Learning English," provides wonderful testimony into the ways in which a transnational vision, anchored in historical research, can lead us to reexamine conclusions we often take for granted. Wilkerson and Salmons challenge the politically dominant narrative that learning English, historically, has been a prerequisite for immigrants' integration into the American economy and society, as well as a central marker of being American. Through use of census data, church records, and local history books, they present the case of German immigrants in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Wisconsin. These German immigrants' inability to speak English, the two authors demonstrate, did not prevent them from entering professions largely dominated by "Anglo-Americans" or from interacting with non-German-speaking members of their communities. What is more, Wilkerson and Salmons show that the immigrants displayed patriotism toward the United States by taking part in Fourth of July celebrations, even when the country was not at war with Germany and they were not under pressure to conform. There was a time, in short, when it was possible for an immigrant to be "a German

monolingual" and also to be recognized as a "good American." Perhaps such a time can come again for non-English-speaking citizens, the authors imply.

Meanwhile, Sheila Croucher's article, "Americans Abroad: A Global Diaspora?" uses historical examples of Americans living overseas to extend the notion of American belonging, thereby suggesting a more expansive sense of the concept of "diaspora." Although rarely recognized as "diasporic," many native-born US citizens, Croucher argues, have led lives similar to those of the migrant groups usually described by that term: they crossed international borders, maintained cultural and political ties to their places of birth, and formed social networks with their compatriots scattered across the globe. If these Americans can be considered "diasporic," the term "diaspora" perhaps can be detached from the classic "trauma" narrative, as well as from the problematic assumptions that migrants only move from poor countries to rich ones and that migrants' bonds with one another are largely ethnic. Croucher's argument is more suggestive than definitive, but her essay already pushes us to study American experiences abroad more rigorously and to interpolate them into the national history.

In the same vein, Joshua Parker examines contemporary American writers' imaginative use of a foreign place in his article, "Eros, Thanatos: Amsterdam in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction." In his comparative reading of the fictional works produced by three Americans—Lynne Tillman, John Irving, and David Liss—as well as those by the English Ian McEwan and the formerly South African, now Australian J. M. Coetzee, Parker argues that the city of Amsterdam functions as a space for these authors to project certain ethical concerns that do not arise frequently in public debate in their "home" countries. These fictional works open up conversations about issues, from prostitution to euthanasia, that are not considered as "American" in the United States but are in actual fact "domestic" and "transnational," and not simply "foreign." Amsterdam, the author suggests, stands in for their home spaces, and even spiritually pervades them.

In "Gesturing beyond the Frame: Transnational Trauma and US War Fiction," Ruth A. H. Lahti proposes a transnational approach to reading Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien's work, arguably the most canonical fictional text on American experiences in the Vietnam War, is frequently taught within a nation-focused frame, with the goal of explaining this traumatic and complicated event. Unlike other scholars, Lahti focuses on the few scenes from the text in which American soldiers interact with Vietnamese people, and she argues that the inability of O'Brien's American characters to understand the gestures of the Vietnamese "Others" mirrors the inadequacy of the American-centered frame to incorporate the various complexities of the war experience. These few moments of interactions, in other words, are critical in that they gesture beyond the nationalist frame and toward a transnational one. This insight, Lahti asserts, is relevant to war writings in general, including those being produced today.

Another take on historical issues is manifest in this issue's Special Forum, "Revolutions and Heterotopias." Guest-edited by Micol Seigel, Lessie Jo Frazier, and David Sartorius, the forum aims to reinvigorate both scholarly and political interests in transformative revolutions, which, as the editors note in their powerful introductory essay, have dwindled in recent years due to scholars' focus on "everyday forms" of resistance as well as their misplaced association of revolutions with nations and nationalisms. As a remedy for this "revolution fatigue," the forum encourages us to see outside national boundaries and search for "potentially emancipatory ways of thinking and organizing."

As its guide, the forum adopts Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia." The term has certainly not gone through "the hullabaloo that accumulated around other Foucaultian concepts," but it is an appropriate one for the forum to adopt. Unlike "utopia" (which, in the original Greek sense, means "no place"), a "heterotopia" (meaning "other place") actually exists, although it might not be a single definite location on a map. As a "plurality of intersecting, asymmetrically-organized spaces," heterotopia is a fluid, and at times liminal, site of coordination, and hence it is able to encompass and accommodate various transformative movements taking place but not easily describable in our usual spatial terms.

The essays in the forum seek to expand our conventional notion of "revolution" by interrogating its spatial politics, or by identifying their locations and sizes outside, across, and within national boundaries. In this sense, the forum as a whole substantiates, and at times even complicates, the notion of "heterotopia" by drawing from historical instances that may provide, if not prescribe, examples of transformative revolutions. The contributors of the forum recover from history a wide range of historical actors—jazz musicians, film directors, gay and immigration activists, exiles, and academics—who built and relied on heterotopic spaces for their envisioned transformations in various places around the world, in particular the places we conventionally call "Latin America," "North America," and "Europe." Not all the contributors are historians—in fact, the majority of them are not—yet they all display a kind of "historical consciousness": their belief in "revolution as praxis" is predicated on the belief that one studies the past in order to change the present. One might even argue that, because revolution, by its nature, is often described as a break with history (or even, in Marxist teleology, as bringing history to a climax), unpacking that trope is itself a radical break.

The essays in the Reprise section also represent challenges to a conventional nation-state history framework. In his article "Radical Cosmopolitanism: W. E. B. Du Bois, Germany, and African American Pragmatist Visions for Twenty-First Century Europe," the late Günter Lenz examines the African American leader's intellectual engagements with Germany and argues that, by taking account of Du Bois's international experiences and his multicultural perspective that encompassed both western and nonwestern traditions, scholars in the twenty-first century can appreciate his prescience and take advantage of his perceptive writings in the

process of dealing with contemporary world problems, such as the European Union's attempt to redefine Europe's place in the postcolonial world. (One could even say that Du Bois was one of the historical actors who outlined a heterotopia for us!)

Mohamed El Amine Moumine turns our attention to the institutional and pedagogical challenges of teaching and practicing transnational scholarship in "Moroccan American Studies: Assets and Challenges." Moumine places his description of the Moroccan American Studies Program at Université Hassan II Mohammedia – Casablanca within the context of recent Moroccan history and the state of US–Moroccan relations. Although quite different in content and approach, his article is a wonderful reminder of the fact that "praxis" of our scholarship must be realized within and through our educational institutions, as well as our individual writings.

Finally, in "Making a Home away from Home: Traveling Diasporas in María Escandón's *Esperanza's Box of Saints*," Marc Priewe teases out another theme that has appeared in this introductory essay already: diaspora. Priewe closely reads the Mexican American novel and suggests that life in the liminal space of the US–Mexico borderlands, at least for the novel's protagonist, leads to "transculturation and reinvention of the self" in ways that is not possible in a national setting.

There is less occasion than usual to discuss the Forward section in this general introduction, as Greg covers it in the Forward editor's note. It is worth examining, however, the ways in which several of the extracts in that section intersect with the themes that recur elsewhere in this issue. For example, several pieces touch on the theme of diasporas. Godefroy Desrosiers-Lauzon examines the "snowbirds" who migrate to Florida on a seasonal or permanent basis and their impact on the host society. Gerald Horne's chapter from *Negro Comrades of the Crown* demonstrates the central participation of the Black diaspora, not only in reinforcing British military might throughout the Americas, but in shaping international politics by projecting Britain's international power on the side of antislavery, and thereby checking American influence. Kathy Peiss reveals how the zoot suit, a dress and cultural style developed among diasporic Mexican American youth, not only formed a distinctive badge of identity and belonging for youth in Mexico as well, but spread in modified form throughout the world. Annette Kolodny and Mary Nolan each deal, in different ways, with encounters between New World people and Europeans, and reverse the traditional narrative of one-way metropolitan cultural domination of the (American) periphery.

At the same time, some selections point to the theme of "revolutions and heterotopias." Prudence Carter's comparative exploration of the role of race in schools in both the United States and South Africa recalls the connections drawn between the two countries by antiracist activists, who turned to each other at different times for inspiration and models for radical change (at the time that Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, there was a rash of t-shirts produced in the USA showing his picture alongside those of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm

X). Ramón Saldívar and Günter Lenz inquire into alternate and transformational ways of envisioning cosmopolitan identities, Saldívar in regard to the "postethnic" and Lenz the "transcultural."

Notes

[1] Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 3.