

# Introduction: Transnational American Studies in the Time of Covid-19

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This is the third year of the global reach of Covid-19. Its pervasive impact on the health of the world population and its economic, social, and political repercussions, visible in precautions taken and the unequal distribution of vaccination and medication, have also affected the academic world. In response to the global presence of the molecular virus transnational dimensions have influenced the objects of research and stimulated the application of transdisciplinary methodologies.

In this vein, the current issue of *JTAS* extends and intensifies the transdisciplinary scope of Transnational American Studies. The ten contributions to the Special Forum on “The Molecular Intimacies of Empire” and the manuscript of the 2021 Shelley Fisher Fishkin awardee exemplify this new turn. We are grateful to the editors Hsuan L. Hsu and David J. Vázquez for having collected a great variety of contributions that reveal the invisible but biochemically ingrained working of the imperial forces of colonizers in past and present in their appropriation of Indigenous lands and knowledges. In line with the overall assumption that “empire expresses itself and is reproduced [in] the literally microscopic scale of biochemical interactions,”<sup>1</sup> the editors cite in their introduction the transnational circulation of the Covid-19 virus as the current proliferation of molecules that have absorbed all our public and intimate spaces.

As the collection of articles shows, these microstructures operate in all aspects of our lives from eating habits and food preservation to multiethnic communication, intimate sexual relations, the experience of infections, and healing efforts. It is the purpose of these investigations to trace the origin of this molecular infiltration in our daily activities to historical stages of settler colonialism, the emergence and progress of colonial, racial, or toxic capitalism by way of exploiting the resources and expertise of Indigenous peoples. Hence, the authors of these perceptive essays make us aware of the often unknown and hidden molecular workings and repercussions of imperial

powers in our own lives. Many of the amenities we enjoy are based on Indigenous achievements whose origin is consciously submerged for commercial industrial reasons, such as the invention of deep-freezing technology as derived from the natural freezing of fish experienced by an American explorer among the Inuit. The appropriation and commercialization of Inuit thermocultural knowledge also extends to claiming origin stories told by Inuit narrators for the explorer's narrative in American magazines (Marcel Brousseau). The geographical locations of the display of imperial powers extend from the American continent to the Philippines, South, and Southeast Asia, where the ingredients of favorite consumption patterns are produced. Vice versa, the smell and taste of American food takes on a similar function for American GIs abroad when they consume the burgers of fast food restaurants next to the barracks in Afghanistan or Iraq (Zaynab Quadri). The feeling of "home in a hostile land ... an ersatz America"<sup>2</sup> offsets the effects of imperial powers and military violence as experienced by the victims of the nuclear fallout in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which lends itself to biomedical studies on Japanese consanguinity (Aiko Takeuchi-Demirci).

In conclusion, the editors of "Molecular Intimacies of Empire" interview Beatrice Glow and Sandy Rodriguez, the two artists with an Asian and Latin American background, and suggest in their conversation ways in which the molecular working of imperial powers can also be geared to decolonial practices. The activation of different sensoriums, which the artists plan for their exhibitions, open up insights from "multimedia sense-scapes."<sup>3</sup> The potentialities of print and performative media for initiating such decolonial processes figure in three essays and impressive analyses of Latinx HIV stories, women-led initiatives in contemporary Indigenous media in Nunavut, and Ocean Vuong's 2019 debut novel, *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous*. That the double-edged experience of Covid—whose "microbes link people from across the world"<sup>4</sup>—is connected to "sickness, suffering, and death" requires a different form of care and the inclusion of "Shared Selves" as an alternative to Western humanist individualism.<sup>5</sup> The production of an Indigenous mediascape in Nunavut and efforts to reconstruct the Inuit heritage of language counteracts the military engagements of imperial forces to carry out seismic tests at sea in search of resources, regardless of the natural habitat of animals (Amber Hickey). Rachel Lee's interpretation of Vuong's novel as a decolonial rewriting of Melville's *Moby-Dick* connects the migration and existence of Vietnam War refugees in Connecticut with the contemporary situation of former tobacco planters and the interethnic reorientation of their offspring.

The decision of the American Studies Association's International Committee to award the 2021 Shelley Fisher Fishkin Prize for International Scholarship in Transnational American Studies to Pdraig Kirwan's chapter "Recognition, Resilience, and Relief: The Meaning of Gift" from *Famine Pots: The Choctaw-Irish Gift Exchange, 1847–Present* (Michigan State University Press, 2020), which Kirwan coedited with LeAnne Howe (Choctaw Nation), was timely and felicitous because this manuscript represents an historical addition to the overall concern of this Special Forum issue. Pdraig Kirwan retraces not only the remarkable story of the financial support of the Choctaw Nation

to the Irish people to alleviate the suffering in the famine of the 1840s, but it also aligns the treatment of Native tribes by the American government with that of the Irish by the British monarchy. In his analysis, Pádraig Kirwan reconstructs “the connection between experiences including the loss of land, life and language in our two cultures”<sup>6</sup> and draws a line from the nineteenth century to the present in the Choctaws’ recognition of a “shared ... common bond with the poor, landless, the dispossessed and the dying in Ireland.”<sup>7</sup> We congratulate Pádraig Kirwan for establishing a dialogue with Choctaw author LeAnne Howe to substantiate a new form of research.

As editor in chief, I would like to express my gratitude to Hsuan L. Hsu and David J. Vázquez, the two editors of this Special Forum, and their contributors as well as to Pádraig Kirwan. My thanks equally go to all of my colleagues on the editorial board of *JTAS* and the very competent work of our managing editorial team, coordinated by Sabine Kim, who deserves a special recognition of her incredible investments in the progress of our journal. We invite our readers to follow this new turn of Transnational American Studies. At this time, we would like to announce that *JTAS* will change its publication schedule. Starting this year, we will move to publishing the next issue in the fall (September / October) and the first issue of 2023 in the spring (March / April). We hope that this new schedule will also meet with your approval and allow you to continue reading our articles and to become our future authors.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Hsuan L. Hsu and David J. Vázquez, “Introduction: The Molecular Intimacies of Empire,” *Special Forum on The Molecular Intimacies of Empire*, edited by Hsuan L. Hsu and David J. Vázquez, *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 13, no. 1 (2022): 6.
- <sup>2</sup> Zaynab Quadri, “TGI Fridays in Kandahar: Fast Food, Military Contracting, and the Intimacies of Force in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars,” *Special Forum on The Molecular Intimacies of Empire*, edited by Hsuan L. Hsu and David J. Vázquez, *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 13, no. 1 (2022): 149.
- <sup>3</sup> Hsuan L. Hsu and David J. Vázquez, “The Materials of Art and the Legacies of Colonization: A Conversation with Beatrice Glow and Sandy Rodriguez,” *Special Forum on The Molecular Intimacies of Empire*, edited by Hsuan L. Hsu and David J. Vázquez, *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 13, no. 1 (2022): 225.
- <sup>4</sup> Suzanne Bost, “Viruses, Vaccines, and the Erotics of Risk in Latinx HIV Stories and Covid-19,” *Special Forum on The Molecular Intimacies of Empire*, edited by Hsuan L. Hsu and David J. Vázquez, *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 13, no. 1 (2022): 125.
- <sup>5</sup> Bost, “Viruses, Vaccines, and the Erotics of Risk in Latinx HIV Stories and Covid-19,” 124.

- <sup>6</sup> Padraig Kirwan, “Recognition, Resilience, and Relief: The Meaning of Gift,” in *Famine Pots: The Choctaw–Irish Gift Exchange, 1847–Present*, ed. LeAnne Howe and Padraig Kirwan (Michigan State University Press, 2020), reprinted in *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 13, no. 1 (2022): 269.
- <sup>7</sup> Kirwan, “Recognition, Resilience, and Relief,” fn1, 270.