

Transnational American Studies in the Digital Age

YANOULA K. ATHANASSAKIS and ERIC LARS MARTINSEN

Technology is moving at lightning speed, and as editors of an online journal we find ourselves trying to keep up with the pace and scope of both life and work, all of which hold so much more than we had imagined. Near the end of a talk on robotics and warfare at the University of California at Santa Barbara in January 2010, international relations scholar Peter W. Singer motioned to the stream of images behind him that displayed machines and robots resembling those of the *Star Wars* movies (old and new).¹ Cognizant of the audience's awestruck reaction, he commented that, while we might assume he was speaking of the future, he was actually referencing the past. We, too, seek to use the past, and the ever-changing present, to illuminate the future.

The second issue of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, or *JTAS*, comes in the wake of worldwide outbreaks of natural and manmade devastation and economic depression. These events are global in scope, yet hit close to home, thereby crystallizing what the editors of *JTAS* are working hard to illuminate: the multivalent entangled connections between and among events and cultural phenomena across the world—or what Shelley Fisher Fishkin points to as the “transnational turn” in American Studies.² We write this at a critical time in American Studies, when warring ideologies seem to be drowning out reasoned public policy, and purveyors of divisive rhetoric from around the world are outshouting voices of reason and compromise. We write this at a time when it has become increasingly obvious that American bodies, American borders, and American policy are all being submerged in acts of violence both perpetrated against the US and stemming from it.³

This turbulent epoch calls ever more for an examination and reflection of the seismic shocks that remain and have manifested themselves in the stories of our times. Theorist Judith Butler suggests in her 2004 book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* that most Americans “have probably experienced something

like the loss of their First Worldism as a result of the events of September 11 and its aftermath.”⁴ In dialogue with the series of events leading up to and following 9/11, historian Thomas Bender urges Americanist scholars to consider postnational conceptualizations of their collective history inscribed in global terms; what the United States needs, he suggests, is “a better form of national narrative.”⁵ It strikes us that Bender’s request for a “better form” of narrative implicitly acknowledges what we know to be true: historiography is malleable and fluid in ways that we often ignore *and* it is the stories of our nation that shape us. Bender implies that the elided global dimensions of this narrative past—and its various moments of contact and friction—must be taught as US history. That is to say, examining American Studies across formal national borders is not merely a fruitful method, but actually a necessary recognition of a historical reality.⁶

It is in hopes of a “better form of national narrative”—and transnational perspectives—that we publish this second issue of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* and look to recent scholarship from around the globe.⁷ Even a casual glance at the issue’s table of contents suggests the geographic and intellectual range of both subjects and authors active in the field. Topics examined extend from the slums in a modern Turkish metropolis to folk dancing in San Francisco’s Chinese diasporic community, from the global “problem of the color-line” that W. E. B. Du Bois long ago observed to Leo S. Rowe’s hemispheric statecraft, and from the transnational and “transnatural” turn in ecocriticism to the residue of American exceptionalism within transnational American Studies. Scholars contributing to this issue are situated in cities around the globe, from Toronto to Buenos Aires to Berkeley to Kyoto; from Corunna, Spain, to Richmond, Virginia, to Brookings, South Dakota. Less visible but integral to our mission are the efforts of *JTAS* reviewers, whose intellectual and physical backgrounds and living spaces are perhaps even more diverse than the topics addressed here.

One central component of the journal’s mission is to recover and reconsider past scholarly and creative texts that speak to transnational American Studies. In our second issue, *JTAS* is particularly honored to present a previously unpublished manuscript by Du Bois, entitled “The Afro-American,” and written circa 1894. In a perceptive introduction to the new work, Nahum D. Chandler argues that this text represents the earliest formulations of Du Bois’s global “problem of the color-line” and prefigures his description, in the celebrated 1903 volume, *The Souls of Black Folk*, of the experience of “double-consciousness” among African Americans. Emphasizing the centrality of transnationalism in Du Bois’s thinking, Chandler writes that, for Du Bois, “orchestration of thought and practice in this dimension would always be of at least two continents,” that it would always be “beyond or otherwise than the simple form of a here and now.” At the same time, a comparison between the views Du Bois expresses in the text, such as advocacy of mass disenfranchisement of working-class black *and* white voters, and those in his later published writings reveal the intellectual development Du Bois underwent in the last years of the nineteenth century.

The commitment to rediscovering past works that is so powerful in the Du Bois piece is also evident in “Reprise,” a recurring section edited by Nina Morgan that “republishes difficult-to-obtain critical works in transnational American Studies that merit a global readership online.” For a full description of the pieces presented in this issue’s “Reprise,” please see the section introduction. In addition, *JTAS* provides a venue for the critical issues that should be addressed in an ongoing dialogue regarding the future of the field. In each issue, the “Forward” section publishes excerpts from a selection of new or forthcoming books that “signal important developments and directions in transnational American Studies.” Greg Robinson’s introduction to the “Forward” section, joined by a note from the *JTAS* editorial board, provides complete details on this issue’s offerings.

Several of the issue’s original articles also represent thought pieces on the state of transnational American Studies. For example, in his imaginative and bold commentary on metaphors in American Studies, “Housing the ‘Other’ Half: American Studies’ Global Urban Turn,” David Faflik offers “the global city, or, more accurately, the global slum, as a post-‘border’ metaphor.” Buttressing his exploration of the “multiethnic, multinational world metropolis,” Faflik investigates common features characterizing late-nineteenth-century New York, the modern Turkish city, and contemporary ethnic ghettos in Germany. Bryce Traister’s provocative article, “The Object of Study; or, Are We Being Transnational Yet?” critiques certain forms of scholarship in transnational American Studies as they “affirm or recycl[e] aspects of the exceptionalist narratives of American identity they would replace.” Through an appraisal of prevailing transnational approaches, Traister urges that the United States could function as “an object of study without invariably reproducing antiprogressive political narratives about that identity.”

Beyond critical engagement with the field as a whole, this issue also offers fascinating case studies that speak to the issues of transnational American Studies from the concrete details of a text, community, or historical phenomenon. Rooting its case study in a conversation between the 1962 Hollywood film *The Manchurian Candidate* and its 2004 remake, Junghyun Hwang’s article, “From the End of History to Nostalgia,” reflects on the ways in which nostalgia as well as racial and gender stereotypes are used within popular culture to “relegate the historical events of the Korean War and the Gulf War into floating background images” in the twenty-first-century version of this story. Gender stereotypes are also a key focus in Mariela E. Méndez’s “Disorienting the Furniture,” which recovers the early-twentieth-century contributions to journalism of two women—Argentina’s Alfonsina Storni and the US’s Charlotte Perkins Gilman—both of whom are better known for their poetry and fiction, respectively. Méndez imagines a “transnational dialogue between these two writers” to demonstrate how they each “subvert traditional definitions of gender through a transgressive use of discursive spaces that are heavily coded as ‘feminine’ by patriarchal ideology.”

A second piece in this issue deals with the United States and Argentina: in his insightful article, “The Making of a Hemispheric Intellectual and Statesman,” Ricardo D. Salvatore examines Leo S. Rowe’s travels, writing, and scholarly contacts in order to tease out strands of both progressivism and imperialism in the Pan-American intellectual movement in the early twentieth century. Centered on Rowe’s engagement with Argentine intellectuals, Salvatore’s research unpacks his concept of “intellectual cooperation” to demonstrate how the US sought, at one and the same time, to supplant imperial Europe in South America and to establish collegial and lasting inter-American relations.

In “The Junkyard in the Jungle,” an astute study of Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, a thoroughly hemispheric novel, Begoña Simal identifies a *transnational* and a *transnatural* turn within the emerging theory and practice of ecocriticism. Critically engaging with Leo Marx’s concept of “the machine in the garden,” Simal argues that Marx’s paradigm remains useful even as it is “filtered by the sieve of globalization and shaken by the emergence of cyborg ecosystems.”

Turning from ecocriticism to performance studies, Sau-ling C. Wong’s “Dancing in the Diaspora: Cultural Long-Distance Nationalism and the Staging of Chineseness by San Francisco’s Chinese Folk Dance Association” features stunning images as a part of its analysis of the intricacies of cultural practices in the Chinese diaspora. Wong shrewdly interprets the complexities involved in the performance of national identity from a distance, particularly when the originating culture itself is undergoing rapid and radical transformation, as is the case with China.

Among the many benefits of being an online journal is the ability to publish lengthier issues at no extra cost, as well as to include images, links to audiovisual material, RSS feeds, etc. Sponsored by the University of California at Santa Barbara’s American Cultures and Global Contexts Center (ACGCC) and Stanford University’s Program in American Studies, *JTAS* is hosted by eScholarship, which is part of the eScholarship initiative of the California Digital Library.

Not only is Web 2.0 revolutionizing the face of social networking, but the same tools allow scholars to interact, access, and download articles from *JTAS*—all at no cost to them—through our open-access system. The technological infrastructure behind *JTAS* comes with a slew of interactive opportunities: imagine that an author located in Turkey submits an article online. Instantly notified of the submission, a managing editor logs into *JTAS*’s system to invite scholars in South Africa, Taiwan, and Brazil to review the manuscript. Committed reviewers then log into our system to view the manuscript, post their reader’s reports, or even anonymously contact the author with points for clarification. Once the review is complete and the manuscript is accepted, the author corresponds with editors via our system and revises and resubmits the piece. While the experience of the readers may seem fairly conventional, behind the scenes, we are busily employing many of the applications that Web 2.0 has to offer.

Working with the patient and ever-helpful staff of the California Digital Library (CDL) has led us places we could not have imagined a year ago. CDL's full redesign in October 2009 resulted in a new interface, more publishing services, enhanced functionality, and a dedicated URL: www.escholarship.org. "Authors" (whether of the written word, online art, or multimedia poetry) can now publish/post in a hybrid digital/print format. Furthermore, searching for something in *JTAS* will also yield results across the CDL of articles with similar keywords, and visual excerpts or snippets (KWIC Pics) from the areas matching a keyword search.⁸

As managing editors we are all too aware of the incredible amount of collaborative effort it takes to keep the journal running smoothly. We would like to take the opportunity to thank those without whom we would not exist: Shelley Fisher Fishkin (Stanford University, USA), Alfred Hornung (Johannes Gutenberg University, Germany), Shirley Geok-lin Lim (University of California at Santa Barbara, USA), Greg Robinson (Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada), Takayuki Tatsumi (Keio University, Japan), Nina Morgan (Kennesaw State University, USA), Caroline Kyungah Hong (Queens College, City University of New York, USA), Nigel Hatton (Stanford University, USA), and Steven S. Lee (University of California at Berkeley, USA). We have had to face decisions that have both surprised and delighted us. Even as scholars in a digital age, who communicate with our editorial board, contributors, and reviewers online, we are engaged with the print model insofar as we "launch" a whole issue online rather than posting articles piecemeal as they are finalized. A discussion we are having now is as to whether we will allow *JTAS* to go live in a more organic and immediate manner. That is, as articles are submitted, reviewed, accepted, revised, copyedited, and polished, why not post them immediately to their slated issue? Should we wait until the cluster of articles we have planned for the issue are all ready? Or might we begin to post articles as soon as they are ready for publication? How do we maintain our academic credibility as an online, peer-reviewed journal as we balance between the established conventions of academic culture and the new demand for instant access in a digital age?

Lively, engaged discussion is at the heart of this journal. It is the far-reaching, palpable, and contagious energy of our founding editorial board that has led to another kinetic aspect of the journal: the Special Forums. As this issue goes live, we have four Special Forums underway. And as with the journal itself, any doubts or reservations about receiving quality submissions or getting reviewers to generously commit their time have all fallen to the wayside, as we are now happily and busily fielding the many strong pieces coming our way. The guest editors for the Special Forums, a mix of both well-recognized and emerging scholars, powerfully illustrate the future of a "wired" and connected academic circuit that runs from Taiwan, the United States, Turkey, Mexico, and Italy, and whose reviewers circumnavigate the globe.

Reconsidering ideas of nation, sovereignty, and "post-sovereignty" in relation to arguments that position nations within a colonizing Western frame, our Special

Forum on “Charting Transnational Native American Studies: Aesthetics, Politics, Identity” is coedited by Philip J. Deloria (University of Michigan, USA), Hsinya Huang (National Sun Yat-sen University, Taiwan), John Gamber (Columbia University, USA), and Laura Furlan (University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA).

Guest-edited by Hsuan L. Hsu (University of California at Davis, USA), a second Special Forum, “1898 and Transnational American Studies,” explores US imperialism in and around 1898, including but not limited to US interventions and acquisitions in Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Guam, and Hawai’i, and the Spanish-American War of 1898.

Continuing to explore the history of political dissent, war, occupation, and independence, a third Special Forum on “Revolutions and Heterotopias” marks 2009–2010 as a time to reflect on the multiple anniversaries of revolution (the 1959 Cuban and 1979 Nicaraguan revolutions, the centennial of Mexico’s 1910 Revolution and the bicentennial of its independence). Coedited by David Sartorius (University of Maryland, USA), Leslie Jo Frazier (Indiana University, USA), and Micol Seigel (Indiana University, USA), this forum brings pressure to bear on the many meanings of radicalism across the hemispheric “Americas.”

A fitting forum to mention last is one which speaks to the very connective tissue between pioneering scholarship, rigorous mentorship, and meaningful teaching. Dedicated to Professor Sau-ling Wong as she accedes to emeritus status from the University of California at Berkeley, “Redefining the American in Asian American Studies: Transnationalism, Diaspora, and Representation” is guest-edited by Tanfer Emin Tunc (Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey), Elisabetta Marino (University of Rome, Italy), Daniel Y. Kim (Brown University, USA), and Te-sing Shan (Academia Sinica, Taiwan). While she is perhaps best known for her groundbreaking monograph, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (1993) and her provocative essay, “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads” (1995),⁹ the guest-editors for this Special Forum felt that the most appropriate way to honor her work would be through a conversation on the future of Asian American Studies that takes Professor Wong’s work as a point of departure.

As the speed of communication and rampant pace of technological interconnectivity have been widely discussed in recent years, so has the threat of cultural homogenization and “Westernization.”¹⁰ Globalization theorist and literary critic Giles Gunn points to the increasing anxiety over the sentiment that globalization will lead to the elision of diversity.¹¹ Yet literary critics and artists propose that it is sometimes in the moments of cultural transference and appropriation that “third-world” communities and individuals redefine and express themselves most fully.¹² As *JTAS* launches its second issue, its editors have found that our ability to quickly communicate with scholars from around the globe through Skype, Gmail chat, e-mail, and, yes, even face-to-face meetings, has greatly contributed to the breadth and scope of the work we receive. Meanwhile, the

rhizomatic nature of *JTAS* 1.2, of the Special Forums, and of the Reprise and Forward sections all leave us with a sense of excitement in terms of our future growth—we cannot wait to see what comes next.

Notes

¹ P. W. Singer spoke about his book, *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Penguin, 2009), on January 21, 2010, at UC Santa Barbara's Campbell Hall. Singer is a senior fellow in foreign policy and the director of the 21st Century Defense Initiative at the Brookings Institution.

² Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 17.

³ The linkage of one's flesh to the nation-state is a worldwide phenomenon. Arjun Appadurai offers, "there is a growing tendency to link American bodies, American cultural glitz, and the known power of the American state." Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 120.

⁴ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 39.

⁵ Thomas Bender's post-9/11 work reflects the shift of many intellectuals in the face of global violence and unrest: to question what an "unmooring" of the US means and what we can learn from it. In *A Nation Among Nations* (2006), Bender tests the integrity of the borders that confine America's national experience; he questions national historiography and seeks to track it in terms of global movements that overturn antiquated understandings of the nation as the "natural, sometimes the only carrier of historical meaning." Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 297.

⁶ To clarify, Bender is not suggesting that US history be taught as global history. This might in fact defeat his aim of combating US global hegemony. Bender suggests approaching history with "appropriate humility" and a "cosmopolitan appreciation of American participation in a history larger than itself" (Bender, *Nation Among Nations*, 298).

⁷ The study of America as a transnational cultural production and the study of transnationalism itself have erupted in the last decade, so much so that it would be impossible to provide a comprehensive list or bibliography. In terms of monographs, we have found the following to be methodologically suggestive: Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); and part of Routledge's outstanding series on transnationalism, Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (New York: Routledge, 2009). The following collections of essays are also not meant to be comprehensive: Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell, eds., *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Shirley Geok-lin Lim, John Blair Gamber, Stephen Hong Sohn, and Gina Valentino, eds., *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits* (Philadelphia: Temple University

Press, 2006); Michael Peter Smith and Luis Eduardo Guarnizo, eds., *Transnationalism from Below* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998); Sonita Sarker and Esha Niyogi De, eds., *Trans-status Subjects: Gender in the Globalization of South and Southeast Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); and Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, eds., *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). Lastly, the number of special issues in journals and journals themselves that have formed around the idea of transnational approaches (such as our own) is growing.

⁸ Although eScholarship is no longer called the eScholarship “Repository,” it still disseminates postprints—or previously published work by UC scholars—and thus while it continues to function as a repository, its very name change signals the idea that it is much more than a digital warehouse.

⁹ Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads,” *Amerasia Journal* 21, no. 1–2 (1995): 1–27.

¹⁰ Ghanaian philosopher and cultural critic Kwame Appiah fears that globalization “contaminates” local cultures and challenges local homogeneity: “People who complain about homogeneity as a product of globalization fail to see how globalization is a threat to homogeneity.” Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 101.

¹¹ See Giles Gunn, “Globalizing Literary Studies,” *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 16–31, in which he comments on “the erasure of local differences and the integration of more and more of the world’s people, as well as of entire sovereign states, into a geopolitical system that inevitably erodes their ability to shape their own destinies” (19).

¹² See Arjun Appadurai, who makes the argument that “the consumption of the mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and, in general, *agency*” (Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*, 7).