

The Networks of Transnational American Studies

CAROLINE KYUNGAH HONG

As co-managing editor and one of the founding members of the journal, it is my distinct pleasure to introduce the third issue of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* (JTAS). As we state in our mission, JTAS is a peer-reviewed, open-access online journal dedicated to “the interdisciplinary study of American cultures in a transnational context.” As part of that mission, JTAS strives to be transnational not only in content but also in practice, and this issue is no exception.

The third issue of JTAS is being published in the context of a world that is being rocked by revolution, as grassroots movements in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, as well as protests in Algeria, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Oman, Yemen, and elsewhere, continue to effect real change in the Middle East and North Africa, and beyond. These revolutions are profoundly local and yet undeniably global, thus exhibiting the inseparability of the two.

Much has been made in the media of the significant role of technology in these demonstrations, perhaps in response to the ways in which they have moved, activated, and resonated with the US, and likely out of a desire to claim some “American” linkage. As journalist Samantha M. Shapiro noted in early 2009, social-networking websites like Facebook, “which allows users to speak freely to one another and encourages them to form groups, is irresistible as a platform not only for social interaction but also for dissent,” particularly in places where freedom of speech and the right to assemble are restricted.¹ Along those lines, it was reported that the first antigovernment protest in Egypt on January 25, 2011, was organized largely online. But we must be careful not to overstate the importance of US-founded social media in these revolutions. After all, a few days after the “Day of Revolt,” Egypt’s then-government shut down nearly all Internet access and cellular-phone service, and local offline organizing and action were what facilitated continued protests. That said, we cannot deny that the existence of such online forums as Facebook and Twitter has played, and will continue to play, a crucial part in a world

that is rapidly changing. This phenomenon reveals the impossibility of separating the technological from the political, economic, social, cultural, and material.

Origins are not determinative, and although this journal was founded in and is largely managed in the US, this locality does not, and should not, limit the cosmopolitanism of its editorial and advisory boards, its contributors, or its readers. Though an academic e-journal is obviously not a social-networking website, *JTAS* shares with those forums commitments to open access, ease of use, speed of connection, facilitation of larger change, and we certainly envision the journal as a kind of a transnational network that links Americanists around the world. Our current global moment demonstrates how the concerns that animated the launching of *JTAS* in 2009 are just as (if not more) salient and urgent today. Transnational American Studies itself is a network, illuminating the connections and intersections of the here and now to the then and there, across past, present, and future, across increasingly contested borders, through a wide range of work, and continuously taking stock of itself from different approaches and perspectives. This is evidenced, for example, in the three articles on transnationalism and American Studies recently added to the *Encyclopedia of American Studies Online*, written by John Carlos Rowe and two of our own editors, Greg Robinson and Alfred Hornung.²

JTAS strives to demonstrate that there is no one narrative of transnational American Studies, that projects in this growing field are incredibly heterogeneous in topic, scope, and purpose. In this third issue, we are thrilled to publish an array of work by scholars in Canada, China and Hong Kong, Germany, the Netherlands, Romania, and all over the US. We are especially excited to publish the symposium on “Redefinitions of Citizenship and Revisions of Cosmopolitanism—Transnational Perspectives” by Günter H. Lenz, William Boelhower, Alfred Hornung, Rob Kroes, and Rüdiger Kunow, along with a response to these essays by Shelley Fisher Fishkin. Originating in a roundtable discussion at the 2009 annual meeting of the American Studies Association, each contribution to this timely and important collection of essays “reflect[s] on the boundaries, the perspectives, and the transdisciplinary dynamics of the field imaginary of transnational American Studies,” in particular through an examination of “new notions of citizenship and the parameters of a new cosmopolitanism beyond the limits of the Western tradition.” In her response, Fishkin engages each piece of the symposium and identifies areas for further development and exploration. She responds to their call to reconceive citizenship and cosmopolitanism by offering a proposal for a “next step” for the field of transnational American Studies—the creation of what she calls Digital Palimpsest Mapping Projects (or DPMPs, pronounced Deep Maps). For more on the symposium and this proposal, please see Lenz’s introduction and Fishkin’s response.

The symposium is not the only piece in this issue to reflect on new and divergent conceptions of citizenship and cosmopolitanism. Vermonja R. Alston, in her article “Cosmopolitan Fantasies, Aesthetics, and Bodily Value: W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Dark Princess* and the Trans/Gendering of Kautilya,” offers a reading of Du Bois’s 1928

romance novel in order to illuminate the transnational nature of Du Bois's political and aesthetic philosophies and practices, influenced not only by American racial politics and German theories of the aesthetic but also by the work of the fourth-century BCE Indian political philosopher Kautilya, the namesake of Du Bois's eponymous *Dark Princess*. Alston critiques the gender and sexual politics inherent in Du Bois's approach to cosmopolitanism, and implicitly in more contemporary approaches as well, particularly in what she identifies as "a constellation of cosmopolitan fantasies." As Alston studies the ways in which Du Bois's critical and literary work adjoin the aesthetic and the political, in a different vein, Sue Brennan, in her piece "Time, Space, and National Belonging in *The Namesake*: Redrawing South Asian American Citizenship in the Shadow of 9/11," illustrates the role of culture in redefining citizenship. Brennan looks at how Mira Nair's 2005 film and Jhumpa Lahiri's 2003 novel, which served as the film's source text, "challenge the erasure of South Asian American citizenship following 9/11" through the use of spatiotemporal clues. She ultimately argues that Nair's film is able to portray "multiple temporalities and histories through the representations of space," destabilizing the static and linear temporality, and thus the progressive and largely assimilationist logic, of Lahiri's novel.

Two other articles in this issue present case studies of significant historical figures who helped to construct and transform certain transnational American discourses. In "An Américain in Africa: The Transatlantic Creations of Paul Belloni du Chaillu," Adam Lifshy analyzes the fascinating nineteenth-century transatlantic figure of Du Chaillu and the impact of his bestselling 1861 *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa* during a time of national crisis. Lifshy notes that "Du Chaillu was not simply a European adventurer or American journalist or African homesteader, all of which he became," but an early example of the unstable and shifting nature of what it means to be "American," an ever-important question in transnational American Studies. In "A Transnational Temperance Discourse? William Wells Brown, Creole Civilization, and Temperate Manners," Carole Lynn Stewart explores nineteenth-century American temperance movements as a transnational discourse through the figure and work of African American writer and activist William Wells Brown. Though temperance movements were primarily "concerned with defining the purity of self and establishing a coherent national identity," Stewart traces Brown's belief in "the possibility of temperance as a defining characteristic of a transnational civilization and culture that would provide spaces for the expression of democratic freedom."

This issue also features original articles that address the larger ethical dimensions and political concerns that underlie transnational American Studies. In "Beyond K's Specter: Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*, Comfort Women Testimonies, and Asian American Transnational Aesthetics," Belinda Kong makes the case that Lee's novel "exemplifies both the conceptual gains and the potential pitfalls of current Asian American literature's transnationalism." To me, the most fascinating

section of her essay is her reading of Lee's novel alongside and against real comfort women's testimonies, blurring the line between testimony and the novel, history and fiction, the past and the present, and leading to her critique of the use of the comfort-woman figure in Asian American contexts. Kong offers as an alternative paradigm the model of *negative humanism*, "a transnational humanism that remains mindful of its own historical lapses and blind spots even as it continually seeks to actualize its ideals in practice." Crystal Parikh, in her study "Regular Revolutions: Feminist Travels in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *In the Time of the Butterflies*," reads these two novels together and outlines their "critique [of] the political constructions of the Latin American Third World as deprived and depraved." In exposing the limits of these kinds of constructions, so common in North American liberal feminism, and illuminating the imperial history between the US and the Dominican Republic, Parikh models what she calls a transnational feminist reading practice. These two pieces not only present important examples of transnational American Studies but also point us toward new methodologies and critical practices.

One of the ways in which *JTAS* also works to shape new practices and broaden conversations in the field is through the "Forward" and "Reprise" sections of the journal. Edited by Greg Robinson, Forward is devoted to publishing selections from new or forthcoming works "that signal important developments and directions in transnational American Studies." Edited by Nina Morgan, Reprise "republishes difficult-to-obtain critical works in transnational American Studies that merit a global readership online." For more on the stimulating pieces offered in this issue's Forward and Reprise, please see the respective editors' notes.

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One of our goals is to work harder to expand this network, which is of course not without its weak areas. As we continue the work of *JTAS* and especially as we embark on new initiatives, such as the Special Forums we will be publishing beginning with our next issue, our hope is to receive even more submissions from around the globe that deal with a wide range of subjects, including reflections on and analyses of the recent revolutions, and that exemplify radically different conceptions of what it means to be American or to do American Studies.

Notes

¹ Samantha M. Shapiro, “Revolution, Facebook-Style,” *New York Times*, January 22, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/magazine/25bloggers-t.html>. For more on the connections between the recent revolutions and social media, see Abigail Hauslohner, “Is Egypt About to Have a Facebook Revolution?” *TIME*, January 24, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2044142,00.html>; John D. Sutter, “The Faces of Egypt’s ‘Revolution 2.0,’” *CNN*, February 21, 2011, Tech section, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/TECH/innovation/02/21/egypt.internet.revolution/index.html>; and Chris Taylor, “Why Not Call It a Facebook Revolution?” *CNN*, February 24, 2011, Tech section, http://articles.cnn.com/2011-02-24/tech/facebook.revolution_1_facebook-wael-ghonim-social-media?_s=PM:TECH. For less celebratory perspectives on this topic, see, for example, Malcolm Gladwell, “Does Egypt Need Twitter?” *The New Yorker*, February 2, 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2011/02/does-egypt-need-twitter.html>; and Frank Rich, “Wallflowers at the Revolution,” *New York Times*, February 5, 2011, Opinion section, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/opinion/06rich.html>.

² John Carlos Rowe, Greg Robinson, and Alfred Hornung, “Featured Articles: Three Articles on Transnationalism and American Studies,” *Encyclopedia of American Studies Online*, http://www.theasa.net/project_eas_online/page/project_eas_online_eas_featured_article/ (accessed March 1, 2011).