

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

Introduction: Transnational American Studies as Transdisciplinary Collaboration

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/00q7x6k6>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 9(1)

Authors

Morgan, Nina
Kim, Sabine

Publication Date

2018

DOI

10.5070/T891042124

Copyright Information

Copyright 2018 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Transnational American Studies as Transdisciplinary Collaboration

NINA MORGAN and SABINE KIM

As *JTAS* and its readership demonstrate, research in Transnational American Studies is pursued globally. Understanding that the transnational frame of twenty-first century scholarship in Transnational American Studies leaves behind the “national” origin of reference as an analytical tool and thus results in different strategies of analysis and intellectual shifts that together produce an interpretive project less vulnerable to the ideological reproduction characteristic of American Studies’ peculiar form of American Exceptionalism and less confined to a bilateral or hierarchical model, it seems consistent to observe that “transdisciplinarity” is also a defining characteristic of Transnational American Studies scholarship as it suggests a collaborative methodology of different disciplines instead of interdisciplinary approaches which tend to preserve disciplinary boundaries.

Jeffery Sehume’s impression of the state of cultural studies and transdisciplinarity in South Africa might similarly be applied to Transnational American Studies and transdisciplinarity: They “are unsurprising bedfellows. Both recognise an incompatibility in keeping afloat structures and knowledge regimes of discrimination based on exclusion and inclusion.”¹ The essays in this exciting 2018 issue of *JTAS* are particularly given to this perspective both in their approach and in terms of their subject matter.

Our new scholarship section begins with “Collecting Native America: John Lloyd Stephens and the Rhetorics of Archaeological Value,” **Christian Mucher**’s careful tracing of the compelling history of Stephens’ nineteenth century construction of indigeneity through the archeological “tradition” of collected artifacts (this particular part of Mucher’s fascinating narrative is nothing other than tragic) as well as through their re-representation in the form of Stephens’ quasi-authoritative and quasi-proprietary textual depictions. His “true copies” of originals from the Copán (Honduras), Quirigua (Guatemala), Palenque (Chiapas) and Uxmal (Yucatán) meant that defining his work (with drawings of the English artist Frederick Catherwood) as authentic resources effected a kind of Saidian orientalism of Mexico and Central America—one that extended to mythologizing ancient peoples while simultaneously disregarding those present. Furthermore, Mucher’s essay beautifully articulates the mechanics

of how representation and discourse can act to transform and appropriate cultural identity—not only in the abstract, but specifically as a function of archaeological value; not merely as a function of commodification of culture, but one indicative and indeed characteristic of a nineteenth-century, transnational American consumption of indigeneity.

Westenley Alcenat in “‘to transplant in alien soil’: Race, Nation, Citizenship and the Idea of Emigration in the Revolutionary Atlantic” focuses on Haiti as an important influence and site of both political imagination and political action that emerged in the revolutionary age and which became a place where African Americans took refuge as emigres as well as inspiration as political activists. Observing “the underworld of sailors, debtors, and pirates who traveled across the Atlantic [and] carried news of the Haitian insurrections and the political ideals they inspired,” Alcenat argues that early transnational American history as it applies to nineteenth century black emigration from the US to Haiti should recognize that ideology and a shared political vision of universal rights were central to the African American interest in revolutionary Haiti, a reframing of historical interpretations that previously foregrounded black separatism instead. Alcenat’s essay offers a complex articulation of the ways in which the different issues of race, migration, nation, and philosophies of universal rights intersect at this historical moment in the revolutionary Atlantic to produce a specific manifestation of the then radical vision of racial equality in Haiti at the same time the newly formed United States failed to do so.

Like Alcenat’s study of the nineteenth century relationship between black emigres (some thirteen thousand) leaving the United States for postrevolutionary Haiti as a transnational link instigated by a US politics of exclusion, **Eric D. Larson’s** “Anticolonial Anti-Intervention: Puerto Rican *Independentismo* and the US ‘Anti-Intervention’ Left in Reagan-era Boston” examines the twentieth-century formation of “el Colectivo Puertorriqueño de Boston” politics. While Alcenat’s essay hints that Boston was already famous for more than one kind of protest, when “as early as the 1790s ... Prince Hall, a prominent African American freemason, urged Black Bostonians to heed the example of Haiti,” Larson’s focus on Boston’s Puerto Rican activists examines how their concerns with independence moved transnationally across the Caribbean and Latin America as they built a diasporic community that understood US empire as part and parcel of colonial-style exploitations at home which they questioned and resisted. Here, Larson’s original and thorough research demonstrates how members of el Colectivo applied their values transnationally as well as within diverse local communities, but even more interestingly Larson reveals the complexity within and amongst members of el Colectivo who while working for the concerns of the working class also struggled to make a lasting impact on competing systems of exploitation (colonialism and capitalism), while managing internal concerns regarding gender and sexuality and racism, and an ever-increasing awareness that both US foreign and domestic policies were strikingly similar when it came to lives of people of color, whether they were from islands, small countries in Latin America, or Boston itself.

Both Alcenat’s transnational history of African Americans emigrating to postrevolutionary Haiti and Larson’s study of Puerto Rican independence activism in the United States focus on people, their ideas and motives, but **Teishan A. Latner’s** study,

“Agrarians or Anarchists?’ The Venceremos Brigades to Cuba, State Surveillance, and the FBI as Biographer and Archivist,” which also takes us to the Caribbean, shifts to the government, specifically to the FBI surveillance of Americans travelling to revolutionary Cuba. Just as Larson observed the lack of scholarly attention paid to el Colectivo, Latner’s study also notes that while “the Venceremos Brigade ... continues to send delegations of Americans to Cuba every summer ... [and] is the longest-lived Cuba solidarity organization in the US, ... [it] has only recently been the subject of scholarly inquiry.” A Transnational American Studies approach certainly opens new ground for research! Interestingly, what Alcenat observes about the late eighteenth efforts in the US South to bar entry to people of color who had been in the islands for as little as a month, for fear of their revolutionary influence, is repeated in Latner’s deep understanding of the twentieth-century operations of the FBI and its attempts to limit the influence of and access to revolutionary thinking amongst the US population, seeing Venceremos as a “conduit for the spread of subversive ideas related to Marxism and Third World revolutionary theory inside the United States.” The full irony of the FBI serving as the archivist of an organization that it saw as a threat to be dismantled is even more fully realized as Latner reveals how such extensive resources can be read against the grain of their original intent.

Nir Evron’s “Foreign Means to Local Ends: Bialik, Emerson, and the Uses of America in 1920s Palestine” also considers ideas of the revolutionary spirit alongside nation-making, but in focusing on Haim Bialik, Evron takes up the question of how “the poet’s remarks about the American model should be read as a commentary on the self-ideal that lay at the core the Zionist metanarrative: the figure of ha’yehudi ha’hadash, the “New Jew.” Evron’s discussion of Bialik, who lived most of his life in Russian Ukraine, offers a fascinating insight into the influence of the idea of America on the pre-state imaginary of those like Bialik who emigrated to Palestine in the early part of the twentieth century. Furthermore, Evron explores the ways in which the national imaginary and political realities are not outside the poetic or philosophical considerations of time and space, two fundamentally fraught concerns of the identity of the Jewish people and state. To the transnational audience reading Bialik’s work or hearing his lectures, from the Jewish communities in the United States who lavishly welcomed the touring Bialik to New York in 1926 to those in Europe or even Tel Aviv, the “artifact” of the Emersonian America he put to use, as Evron observes, was at the service of distinguishing for the Zionist movement its own values and ideologies, and by comparison, its unique inspiration.

This issue of *JTAS* is unusual in that it boasts an invited essay by the prominent and award-winning American writer—and long-time friend of *JTAS*—**David Bradley**. Bradley’s special introduction following *JTAS*’s republication of Dr. Benjamin Rush’s eighteenth-century proposal “A Plan of a *Peace-Office*, for the United States” in the *Reprise* section of this issue speaks clearly from the perspective of a twenty-first century American writer whose patience with platitudes about freedom and excuses for racism has worn thin even as his regard for the American experiment remains steadfast. With a raised eyebrow and sideways glance, Bradley eyes the lifetime of Benjamin Rush, his medical and political career, his personal life and his war time experiences, on the way to re-envisioning for us the entire Revolutionary

period, giving us both fresh insight and, after nearly a hundred pages of a widely researched and documented narrative, much-needed context. Anyone wanting to grasp the Philadelphia of Rush's time and Rush himself as a statesman, physician, and signer of the Constitution should read David Bradley's "Benjamin Rush's Travels Toward Peace."

Our Special Forum, "Disrupting Globalization," is edited by **Begoña Simal-González** and **José Liste-Noya**, who together selected these essays for the ways in which they uniquely demonstrate what Simal calls for in her introduction: "a more flexible use of transnational reading practices"; the Special Forum essays, bookended by Simal's elegant and useful introduction, "Disrupting Globalization: Transnationalism and American Literature," and Liste-Noya's theoretically informed and highly skilled analysis in his "Being True to the *trans*: Samuel R. Delany's *Stars in My Pockets Like Grains of Sand* and the Transglobal Imagination," work to advance a number of theses regarding the transformative impact of the transnational in literary, social and political contexts. These sophisticated and compelling *Special Forum* essays by **Elsa del Campo Ramírez**, **Claire Gullander-Drolet**, **José Liste-Noya**, **Lori Merish**, **Mandala White**, and **Janet Zong York** offer attentive, close readings as they trace the ghost of the national in their different analyses of the specter of globalization that haunts the transnational. Finally, the *Forward* section provides excerpts from new books, generously shared with us by Stanford University Press, Palgrave, Sairyusha Press, Harvard University Press, University of Illinois Press, Bloomsbury Academic, and New York University Press.

The concerns in this issue of *JTAS* reflect the moral inspiration and political insight of Gary Okihiro's *American History Unbound* (University of California Press, 2015). In his book, Okihiro transnationalizes the conventional settler history of the United States and foregrounds the Indigenous peoples of the Americas as the rightful possessors of the land that has been largely appropriated by white colonizers and continues to be occupied by their descendants as well as by those on the social margins, i.e., African Americans, Asians, and other people of color. Thus, this issue of *JTAS* begins with Mucher's essay about Euro-American appropriation of Indigenous culture, i.e., theft in the guise of creating archeological value, because these themes—on the one hand, of capital and the surplus of value created through exchange, and on the other hand, of profound material and cultural appropriation—present an alternative origins story of the United States, reframing the vision of Founding Fathers throwing off the chains of British tyranny with an image of the deep entanglement of white settler colonialism with widespread and multiple forms of Indigenous dispossession.² Indigenous history should not be a footnote in the story of the Americas but rather is the foundation of a history which needs to be grasped. The urgency is evident when we know of the struggles of Indigenous peoples against corporate interests, such as the recent case of the Puyallup Tribe's battle to prevent volatile and polluting liquid gas fracking on their traditional territories or attempts to erode treaty rights and to enforce cultural assimilation in Canada, protested by the Idle No More movement.³

The struggle over the meaning and definition of wealth and poverty, ownership and appropriation, culture and commodity have also taken on a new urgency at a time when the Trump Administration is shielding the social power of whiteness and extreme wealth behind populist slogans that ironically paint journalists and academics as elites who act with impunity.

Thus, it is important to pay renewed attention to the performative power of language. In the revolutionary context of Haitian Independence, “Black” became an expansive category, as Alcenat observes in his essay. In the new Constitution of 1805, Haitians are considered Black, regardless of skin color, “[b]ecause all distinctions of color among children of the same family must necessarily stop” (Article 14). Coupled with a ban on white ownership of land and labor, this revolutionary concept of citizenship would be an important factor in African American emigration to Haiti, according to Alcenat. Even if Haitians and African Americans differed widely in their attitudes towards the United States, as Alcenat argues, migration nevertheless comprised a type of revolutionary transnationalism. In the new contacts that it creates, and the reconfigurations of what we conceive of as “everyday life,” migration has the potential to jar our consciousness, daring us to look over the edges of the borders of nations and received notions. The Great Migration in the US, for instance, was followed by a politicization and radicalization of African Americans.⁴

At a time of growing right-wing US nationalism, it may seem counterintuitive to turn towards transnationalism for insights. However, if the birth of the nation is necessarily accompanied by primitive accumulation, Marx’s term which David Harvey has reconceptualized as “accumulation by dispossession” to describe the contemporary context of wars manufactured primarily to benefit the oil industry and those in the business of destruction and “reconstruction,” then now is a good time to think about the debts owed to those who were forced to give up lives, labor, and loved ones in order to pave the way for the wealth of the nation.⁵ This would involve a rethinking of debts, along the lines José Liste Noya suggests in his essay for this issue. Debt is not, or not simply, a one-way relation of dependence. Rather, as David Graeber has argued in *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, lending and borrowing are ancient practices that make a fundamental social relationship.⁶ A focus on reciprocal relationships, not necessarily equal but all the same not one-sided, means that debts entangle not just the one who asks for a loan but also draws the lender into a social contract in which she or he acknowledges a belief that the borrower will pay back the debt; thus showing a certain reliance of the lender on the borrower (and not just vice versa). These relations of exchange are also a way of describing a messy, transformative transnational methodology that we believe this issue of *JTAS* embodies.

Notes

¹ Jeffrey Sehume, “Transformation of Cultural Studies into Transdisciplinarity,” *Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies* 27, no. 2 (2013): 173.

² Gary Y. Okihiro, *American History Unbound: Asians and Pacific Islanders* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 2, 18–19, 223.

³ Idle No More began in 2012 as a response to legislation extinguishing Aboriginal Title and disabling environmental protections and continues in the present as a broad-based movement for Indigenous,

environmental, and democratic rights, battling the federal Canadian government's attack on historic treaty rights and calling for the protection of Indigenous women and girls from violence. As the INM website makes clear, the Canadian state's unwillingness to recognize Idle No More's demands reflects the rejection of a juster relationship with Canada's Indigenous Peoples in favor of short-term profit (Idle No More manifesto, <http://www.idlenomore.ca/manifesto>).

⁴ Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture During the Twentieth Century* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

⁵ See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), where the creation of capital in the modern period is qualitatively different from Marx's time because it now includes not only war and invasion but practices such as stripping of worker rights, indebting of university students, the use of courts of law to quash title, and outright fraud. Harvey includes within his concept of accumulation by dispossession: "the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations (compare the cases ... of Mexico and of China, where 70 million peasants are thought to have been displaced in recent times); conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights (most spectacularly represented by China); suppression of rights to the commons; commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neocolonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources); monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; the slave trade (which continues particularly in the sex industry); and usury, the national debt and, most devastating of all, the use of the credit system as a radical means of accumulation by dispossession" (*A Brief History* 159).

⁶ David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2012).

Selected Bibliography

Gaines, Kevin K. *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture During the Twentieth Century*. Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Graeber, David. *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. New York and London: Melville House, 2012.

Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

———. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Okiihiro, Gary Y. *American History Unbound: Asians and Pacific Islanders*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015.

Sehume, Jeffrey. "Transformation of Cultural Studies into Transdisciplinarity." *Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies* 27, no. 2 (2013): 163–81.