

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

Issue Editors' Introduction: Shifting Landscapes

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8hp845kz>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 10(2)

Authors

Morgan, Nina
Fishkin, Shelley Fisher

Publication Date

2019

DOI

10.5070/T8102046359

Copyright Information

Copyright 2019 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/>

Shifting Landscapes

NINA MORGAN and SHELLEY FISHER FISHKIN

Publishing Transnational American Studies scholarship has given us many opportunities to develop the complexity of the field as well as discover its depth. Scholars publishing in *JTAS* are collaboratively exploring what new knowledges Transnational American Studies approaches may yield and produce through their innovative, often transdisciplinary thinking—and we are excited to share the wonderful harvest of our second issue of this year with you.

Foremost in our Winter/Spring issue of *JTAS*'s tenth year, we celebrate the remarkable career of one of our founders, **Shirley Geok-lin Lim**, with a Festschrift dedicated to her poetry upon the occasion of her seventy-fifth birthday. It is also a privilege to be able to include several of Lim's new and previously unpublished poems here for the first time. This Festschrift—edited by **Mohammad A. Quayum**, Editor-in-Chief of *Asiatic* and Professor of English at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM or الجامعة الإسلامية العالمية بماليزيا) whose scholarship has been fundamental to interpretations of Lim's *oeuvre*—attends to Lim's poetry in its most transnational manifestations and representations.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim is a globally recognized and distinguished literary critic as well as an award-winning poet and warmly embraced writer of many genres: novels, short stories, poems, and a popular memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces*. Lim's work as an imaginative writer pushes the boundaries of nation-based critical traditions, but her talent has not shielded her from the realities of those national traditions—from language politics to exclusive literary canons. These tensions help make her insights as a critic distinctive and generative.

When Lim's first book of poems, *Crossing the Peninsula*, won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 1980, she was the first woman and the first Asian to win that prize. But despite the fact that Lim's memories of Malaysia take center stage in *Crossing the Peninsula*, she intuited that her award would not be celebrated in Malaysia as a national milestone, simply because the book was not written in the national language, Bahasa Melayu. When the prize committee suggested that Malaysia would pay for her travel to London to accept the award, Lim knew otherwise. Although she writes about her birth country, Malaysia, she was not then and still might not now be

considered a Malaysian writer because she writes in English. And although she is of Chinese descent, she is not recognized as a Chinese writer because she was born in Malaysia. In the early 1980s, Lim was not widely seen as an American writer, either, perhaps in part due to her subject matter and birthplace, although she is, of course, an American. Lim's writing inhabits what she has described in her essay "Immigration and Diaspora" as "a tradition of 'global literature' complexly differentiated from the tradition of nationally bounded and divided identities that has conventionally organized our understanding of 'world literature.'"¹ Rather than reading her work as relatively peripheral to these various national literary traditions, we should view her work instead as central to what Lim defined by the mid 1990s as "the literature of the transnational."²

The essays in this Festschrift—by **Boey Kim Cheng** (Nanyang Technological University), **Dennis Haskell** (University of Western Australia), **Pauline T. Newton** (Southern Methodist University), **Grace V. S. Chin** (Universiti Sains Malaysia), **Walter S. H. Lim** (National University of Singapore), **Andrew Hock Soon Ng** (Monash University Malaysia), **Tamara S. Wagner** (Nanyang Technological University), and **Joan Chiung-huei Chang** (National Taiwan Normal University), along with the introduction by **Mohammad A. Quayum**—speak to Lim's transnational poetics through analyses of her poems in relation to her individual and representative experiences, from her life at home to her alliance with protestors in the streets of Hong Kong, from her family history to her relationship with the natural world around her.

Lim's lifelong experience as both a writer and literary critic gave impetus to her insight for the need to pay greater attention in the field of American Studies to scholarship as well as to creative work that bridges oceans, so to speak, in a world in which scholarship and the journals that publish that scholarship tend to bind nation, language, and writing. Lim cofounded *JTAS* to create a space in which transnational, interdisciplinary work can find a home. Thus Lim has been central to every aspect of *JTAS*, and she has played a unique and generative role in transnationalizing the field of American Studies. It is a genuine pleasure for us to honor her brilliance as a scholar and as a writer, as well as to recognize her wisdom and energy as an editor. Above all, this issue marks a special moment for us to raise our glasses to toast Shirley Geok-lin Lim as our dearly loved family.

In addition to the Festschrift and the new poems by Lim, this issue includes original scholarly articles offering new perspectives on sites of transnational encounter involving Mexican tourists at Niagara Falls; Black American travelers, soldiers, and artists in Paris; and an American physician-writer in Laos.

In **Astrid Haas's** "Currents of Progress, "Toy Store for Tourists—Nineteenth-Century Mexican Liberals View Niagara Falls," the encounter with and representation of the natural phenomenon of Niagara Falls and its transformations as depicted in the travel writing of prominent Mexicans provides the occasion for insight into the complex relationship between the USA and Mexico. Haas offers perspectives on how the US in the Mexican imagination came to be formed in part by the reception of its impressive geography (framed in a manner that pushed Canada as a coequal site of the

Falls to the margins). She explores how, for Mexican visitors, questions of American-ness seemed to be reflected in the US's natural world and how that nature was put to use, thus forming linkages that significantly shaped Mexican ideas of who Americans were and what America was to become.

Anndretta Lyle Wilson's reading of the tourist industry in Paris, "Between Duty and Romance: The Attraction of Sounding 'Black' in Paris," attends to the ambiguous relationship between black American soldiers—and bodies—and the idea of La France historically, exploring the reliance of the contemporary tourist industry on the ambivalent bonds of black Americans to an idealized Paris, where race and identity seem to exist outside the familiar ramifications of race in the USA. With Wilson as our guide, we see the ways in which the popularity of tourism dedicated to the memory of a France that welcomed black Americans is ironic in light of the absence of historical markers that might testify to the presence of black American singers, writers, and performers in Paris. Taking the tourist "attraction" to another level, Wilson explores how gendered and racialized ideas of heroism slip from one form of social and political structure to another in the attachments formed in romantic nostalgia and transnational memory.

Davorn Sisavath in "What kind of place was Laos?' The Construction of Race and Space in Thomas Dooley's Writing" revisits the historical moment when Laos becomes a terrain upon which US fears, US racism, and US power are enacted, setting that moment in the context of the role of Dr. Thomas Dooley's nonfiction in defining Laos in the American imaginary. Although (as other scholars have observed) Dooley's writing may have seemed outside the political discourse, Sisavath adroitly senses a Saidian imagined geography informing and perhaps even feeding the US perceptions about a specifically Asian vulnerability to communism. Sisavath argues that Dooley's writing produced an orientalist knowledge that underwrote a political agenda of partition and containment.

JTAS warmly welcomes our new *Forward* Editor Jennifer Reimer who in this issue shares her selections of recently published scholarship. The *Forward* section includes selections from the *Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies* (2019); *Developing Transnational American Studies* (2019); *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental Railroad* (2019); *Performing America Abroad: Transnational Cultural Politics in the Age of Neoliberal Capitalism* (2018); *After American Studies: Rethinking Legacies of Transnational Exceptionalism* (2017); and *Oceanic Archives, Indigenous Epistemologies, and Transpacific American Studies* (2019). *Forward* is an exciting resource made available to our readers through the generosity of both authors and publishers that support our open-access philosophy. Jennifer Reimer's Introduction sheds light on the specific essays and excerpts featured in this issue. She invites authors and publishers to contact her about their latest Transnational American Studies research.

Reprise, a section of our journal that republishes important, difficult to obtain, or digitally unavailable works, is guest-edited by Selina Lai-Henderson. In concert with

our dedication of the issue to Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Reprise* revisits a twenty year-old interview, "Locating Shirley Geok-lin Lim," conducted in her home in Santa Barbara, California. This interview was originally published in *India* in 2000 as part of a three-volume study of Asian American writers and writing edited by Somdatta Mondal. Additionally, Lai-Henderson gives us access to a fascinating decade-long project organized by Yu Jianhua, *A Companion to American Literature*, published under the title 美国文学大辞典 (2005), an ambitious anthology of American literature translated into Chinese, with commentaries by Chinese scholars, designed to speak to the needs and interests of Chinese readers—a venture that might be said to embody the Chinese canon of American literature. In addition to including the table of contents of the massive collection, Lai-Henderson solicited a new essay, "Connecting a Different Reading Public: Compiling 美国文学大辞典 [A Companion to American Literature]," to give our readers a deeper and direct insight into the project; more details can be found in Lai-Henderson's Introduction to *Reprise*. Additionally, *Reprise* features two articles excerpted from Priscilla Roberts's *The Power of Culture: Encounters between China and the United States* (2016): **Stacilee Ford** writing on Chinese blockbuster films' subversions of Hollywood formulas in regard to Asian masculinity and the recent notion of the "Chinese Dream," and **Teng Jimeng** writing on transnational American rock music of the 1960s and its misreading in 1980s China.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge and thank *JTAS*'s amazing team, starting with our managing editor, Sabine Kim, whose graceful collegiality, care, and attentiveness to all of the moving parts of this global *JTAS* effort is deeply appreciated. Sabine works with our staff of associate managing editors, Aiko Takeuchi-Demirci and Selina Lai-Henderson, and for this issue supervised the joint work of copyediting and proofreading. Sabine Walter in particular deserves special thanks for her excellent copyediting. Finally, for his work in seeing one of the articles through peer review, we would like to express our appreciation of former *JTAS* associate managing editor Jonathan Leal. For all the time and energy they and our peer reviewers devote to the journal, we are immensely thankful!

JTAS is now ten years old. We hope that the journal's second decade will be as stimulating as its first, and rely on you—our readers—to make that happen by contributing your scholarship and your expertise. Along with *JTAS* editors Alfred Hornung, Erika Doss, Kevin K. Gaines, Hsuan L. Hsu, Greg Robinson, and Takayuki Tatsumi, we thank you for being here!

Notes

¹ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Immigration and Diaspora," in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. by King-Kok Cheung (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 289–311, 299. See also Pin-chia Feng, *Diasporic Representations: Reading Chinese American Women's Fiction* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2010), 114.

² Lim, "Immigration and Disapora," 297.