

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

Forward Editor's Note

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8tp7v31b>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 8(1)

Author

Robinson, Greg

Publication Date

2017

DOI

10.5070/T881036725

Copyright Information

Copyright 2017 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/>

Forward Editor's Note

GREG ROBINSON

It is a great pleasure to present *JTAS* readers with the new edition of *Forward*. To the uninitiated, I might note that the *Forward* section was developed to feature extracts from newly published works in Transnational American Studies. As the editor of the *Forward* section, my role is to discover outstanding works, secure the generous agreement of authors and publishers for publication, select excerpts (often in collaboration with the authors), and then write my introduction.

In some ways, the process is rather like making up a conference panel. Not only must one find a panel theme (preferably somehow reflecting the conference theme or subject) but one must find a diversity of people to make presentations (and normally to pay for their own conference fees and transportation). The difference is that, in the case of the conference panel, there are only a few people involved, and they can be commissioned to write on common themes. The panel statement submitted to the conference program committee alongside the individual paper abstracts then elaborates on their shared premise.

Conversely, when I put together a collection for the *Forward* section, I am soliciting authors of texts that have already been completed and published, or at least set for publication. In keeping with *Forward's* mission to feature a diverse assortment of works, I cast my net wide, and seek a variety of subjects and approaches without worrying initially about how they will fit together. This means that when I write my introduction (the counterpart of the panel statement for a conference) I must then determine how the various works fit together, and what their common themes are.

While I do not consciously seek works that will fit together, once I put the *Forward* section together I tend to discover some common themes. In the current edition, for example, two common themes jump out, each of which links together multiple works in the collection. First, several of the texts revolve around narratives of African American travelers, including Gary Totten's book on African American travel narratives, of which the introduction is excerpted here, plus essays on such figures as Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, Eslanda Robeson, and Shirley Graham DuBois. Another common theme is the attempt to broaden the conversation on what

constitutes Transnational American Studies. Whether it is the question of understanding environmental studies, or reconfiguring early American history, or examining American literature, or the US influence on Turkish culture, or recovering Atlanticism or antifascism as transnational American history, the works here offer new approaches and striking insights.

The opening work in this issue's Forward section is by Yanoula Athanassakis—it is nice to welcome Yanoula, a former managing editor, back to the pages of *JTAS*. The work offers an analysis of literature by writers from John Steinbeck to Cherríe Moraga and Ruth Ozeki concerning how pollution and other ecological questions intertwine with social justice and international flows of capital. In the process, it offers a fresh and more relevant approach to environmental studies.

Kristina Bross and Laura M. Stevens's text on early American history poses the question "How do we understand transnational American Studies in the period before there was an American nation to study?" While there are many scholars of the eighteenth century who work on the Atlantic world, Bross and Stevens do not simply recapitulate American history as one of (British and other) empires. Rather, they playfully look at the multiplicity in the lives of figures from Benjamin Franklin to Cabeza de Vaca to Olaudah Equiano in terms of representing the idea of "America."

In the extract that follows, Wai Chee Dimock offers an introduction to a new kind of anthology of American literature. The goal, as she states, is to consider American literature "not as a self-contained archive underwritten by the jurisdictional map of a single nation, but as a multivariable and tangent-producing network, with many layers of narrative, pulled in different directions by different contributing players." In the process, she proposes to bring together clusters of texts (written primarily but not exclusively in English) grouped not by chronology or region but by themes such as war, food, work and play, and religion. The result is not simply a multicultural assortment but an exemplar of the many-faced nature of literature and its uses for expressing the narrative of the nation.

Like Wai Chee Dimock, Yogita Goyal offers a comprehensive look at American literature from a transnational perspective. Her anthology, as she states, is designed "to offer a comprehensive account of the scope, impact, and critical possibilities of the transnational turn, situating the study of American literature in relation to ethnic, postcolonial, hemispheric, and global studies." Her introduction focuses on James Baldwin, whose life and writings provide a framework for discussing a host of questions surrounding American identity beyond the frontiers of the nation.

Perin Gürel's text, extracted from her work *The Limits of Westernization*, traces the image of the United States and American culture in Turkey throughout the twentieth century. Through discussing jokes and folklore as well as government policy and political propaganda, Gürel elaborates the hopelessly ambivalent relationship of Turks—seen simultaneously as technologically advanced and barbaric—with the "West," and the process of "westernization" that is necessary but also corrupting.

The text by Marco Mariano is the author's own translation from his recently published Italian-language essay. In a thoughtful and well-reasoned polemic, Mariano asks the reasons for the decline of Atlantic History over the last decades, and simultaneously deplores the lack of attention paid to the Atlantic world as a category of analysis for the period after 1825. I feel that his analysis is quite logical, but that it would be a useful tool for his discussion if he integrated into it Canada, with its history of triangulation between Great Britain, France, Ireland, and the United States.

Peter O'Neill's extract explores the simultaneous connections forged by members of the African and Irish diasporas—what he calls the “Black and Green Atlantic”—during the early nineteenth century. One notable example he cites is the feeling of freedom and welcome that Frederick Douglass felt during his period of residence in Ireland, and Douglass's solidarity with nationalist leader Daniel O'Connell. O'Neill's work sheds light on the ways in which members of the two groups, marginalized and impoverished in their native land by white Protestants, were able to sense commonalities—a history obscured by the later history of rivalry and mutual hostility among African American and Irish immigrant workers in the United States.

The collection *Migrating the Black Body*, edited by Leigh Raiford and Heike Raphael-Hernandez, brings together a collection of scholars and artists to offer case studies of the ways in which the trope of blackness (including the bodies of real or imagined black people) is represented and reproduced in visual media worldwide. It is a fascinating, if exhausting, task to document and explore the production of images of people of African ancestry. I recall that my late mother, an amateur art historian, worked for many years studying the evolution of Nativity scenes in Medieval/Renaissance Western art, hoping to determine when and why the Magus Balthazar came to be depicted as African, before finally determining that the question was too vast and complex for her. Even more daunting is the task of analyzing the varying meanings assigned to such images by both their creators and their consumers (including people of African ancestry themselves).

Vaughn Rasberry's work focuses on challenges to liberalism by mid-century African Americans. Rasberry argues that a variety of writers and activists rejected a Cold War American focus on the totalitarianism of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union as the principal enemy, and remained skeptical over the claims of the United States for support as the leader of the free world. Instead they posited the world struggle as that of African and Asian decolonization. In a sense Rasberry documents and develops the argument sketched by Richard Wright in his introduction to George Padmore's 1956 book, *Pan-Africanism or Communism?*: “Black people primarily regard Russian Communists as *white* men. Black people primarily regard American, British and French anti-Communists as *white* people The Negro, even when embracing Communism or Western Democracy, is not supporting ideologies; he is seeking to use instruments (instruments owned and controlled by men of other races!) for his own ends.”¹ In this extract, Rasberry studies Shirley Graham DuBois, whose long career

and idiosyncratic writings on politics have been all but overshadowed by the work of her husband, W. E. B. DuBois.

Jayson Gonzales Sae-Saue's book *Southwest Asia* examines the important role of Asia and of Asians in Chicano and Chicana literature, and how Chicano/a writers use Asia to articulate their political vision. He explains that the persistent yet marginal role of Asians in the vision of Chicano/a writers reflects such authors' contrasting focus on the local and their participation in the global. In the process, Sae-Saue reveals the intellectual and artistic expression of the complex relations between Asians and Latinos as racialized populations within a white, Anglo-dominated society, an analysis which has been developed in recent years in historical works by such authors as Nicholas de Genova and Anthony Christian Ocampo. Sae-Saue also is in dialogue with historians such as Jason Oliver Chang and Jerry Garcia, who have examined the history of Asians and anti-Asian movements in Mexico.

Vince Schleitwiler's *Strange Fruit of the Black Pacific* traces African American, Filipino and Japanese American migrations within the US empire in the Pacific in the first half of the twentieth century. Schleitwiler mixes the study of literature, theater, journalism, and jazz culture to explore the ways that members of these different groups faced the cocktail of paternalistic racial "uplift" and hegemonic violence against nonwhites that marked US imperialism. In the process, he provides a larger cultural framework for understanding the ideological connections between events, such as the international reactions to the Scottsboro case in Alabama and the Massie-Kahahawai case (sometimes called the "Hawaiian Scottsboro") in Honolulu in the 1930s.

In the next excerpt, Gary Totten examines global African American travel narratives from the Jim Crow era. To be able to travel and to be liberated from the daily limitations and terrors facing Blacks in America gave a particular tenor to the writings of foreign travelers (in an interesting variation on the discourse of slave narratives, the first African American literary genre). At the same time, these authors, especially those producing for a mainstream white audience, had to deal with the limited discursive space and subject matter expected for their writings. Yet Totten insists that these authors managed to produce works that transcend the commonplaces of tourist literature and offer different forms of social criticism.

The last excerpt is by Christopher Vials, who looks at the ways in which antifascism, a political discourse with origins in the international left of the 1930s, remained in US popular culture after the Second World War. In order to look at antifascism as a longstanding and transnational movement (already an audacious project), he first discusses the international appeal and varieties of fascism as an ideology and practice. As with Perin Gürel and several of the other authors whose pieces appear in this edition of *Forward*, Vials's work takes on new currency in the circumstances of 2017, and the visible rise of illiberal and white nationalist groups and ideas around the United States and Europe.

The editors are obliged to the authors and to the following publishers for their kind consent to the publication of these excerpts: Columbia University Press (twice); Harvard University Press; Marco Mariano and the journal *Passato e Presente*; New York University Press; Routledge (twice); Rutgers University Press; Universitätsverlag Winter; University of Massachusetts Press (twice); University of Washington Press.

Notes

¹ Richard Wright, foreword to *Panafrikanism or Communism? The Coming Struggle for Africa*, by George Padmore (1956; repr., New York, Doubleday, 1971), xxiii.