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Forward
Introduction

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In this edition of *Forward*, we present excerpts from four important book publications that are engaged in exploring transnational American studies contexts in fresh ways. The books conjoin noncontingent spaces of the transnational. Recent transnational American studies work has identified the way the US state is able to exercise political and legal power from afar, extending the US border into the space of other nations. As Harsha Walia (*Undoing Border Imperialism*, 2021) and in a different mode Brian Russell Roberts (*Borderwaters*, 2023) demonstrate, through the allocation of border control to Guatemala, and the interventions of the US in Indonesian politics, the borders of the US now enmesh not only the borders of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Indonesia but also create new juridical-political borderlands.[1] This ability of the US to intervene in the domestic policies of another sovereign nation is what Jodi Kim in *Settler Garrison: Debt Imperialism, Militarism, and Transpacific Imaginaries* (Duke University Press, 2022) names metapolitical authority.

We are pleased to share an excerpt from this incisive new book. Kim challenges our understanding of the transpacific US empire with a series of evocative readings of cultural texts from the continental North America to Guam to South Korea. The book argues that the US empire after World War II is best thought of as a militarist settler empire that conjoined settler colonial projects with military occupation. US militarist settler imperialism, in this reading, functioned through a series of temporal and spatial exceptions. For example, Kim explores US debt imperialism in the Pacific whereby US-occupied countries, such as South Korea, were forced into financial straitjackets while the US paid for its global military empire through perpetually postponed government debt. Among the spatial exceptions of US settler empire, Kim focuses on the unincorporated territory of Guam, the extraterritorial military base in South Korea, and the POW camp. For Kim, the US uses *metapolitical authority*—the ability to define and prescribe the very content and scope of law and politics—to "not simply create these temporal and spatial exceptions but to discursively obfuscate and render these

exceptions as precisely their opposite, as unexceptional" (18). As Kim illustrates, full incorporation of Indigenous lands from Turtle Island to Hawai'i as US states "naturalizes" US militarist settler empire and domesticates dissent.

Through her analysis, for instance, of the military base as a modality of US influence over what should be the sovereign space of a foreign country, Kim argues that US settler colonialism and US military imperialism conjoin in the Asia Pacific, home to a disproportionate number of US military sites, to form what she terms the "settler garrison." Enabled through dispossession of land, maintained through debt relations, and managed under bilateral treaties that are de facto structures of subjugation, the military bases are typically sprawling complexes of "militarized maldevelopment" (*Settler Garrison*, 95) that recreate American suburbia, complete with golf courses, swimming pools, and football fields. They are spaces of aesthetic and cultural exception within the broader context of the Asian "host" countries. Officially under the control of the host nation, bases nevertheless exist under the terms of SOFAs (Status of Force Agreements) whereby the US has the discretionary power to mobilize the host country's military facilities. Moreover, they are also spaces of extraterritoriality where the military can act with impunity, as Kim shows.

The focus of our excerpt, "The Military Base and the Camptown: Seizing Land 'by Bulldozer and Bazonet' and the Transpacific Masculinist Compact," maps the controversial relationship between the bases in South Korea and the public secret of camptowns with an estimated one million sex workers, many of whom are trapped through imposed debt whose terms are set impossibly high. The excerpt examines how camptowns produce a particular Asian female subject who is both highly visible (experiencing social exclusion) and invisible (without recourse to rights and the rule of law); under biopolitical medical surveillance; and positioned as guest worker even within her place of birth. Reading the camptowns alongside cultural works such as Jane Jin Kaisen's video *Reiterations of Dissent* (2011/2016) and Gina Kim's VR film *Bloodless* (2017), Jodi Kim argues that US metapolitical authority is not a completed project but one whose failures are apparent in these works that imagine another transpacific future. Throughout her book, Kim pays close attention to local, regional, and transnational solidarities that challenged and sometimes outright resisted the exceptionalist claims of US militarist settler imperialism. Overall, *Settler Garrison* exemplifies transnational American Studies at its best: transcending spatial and disciplinary boundaries to unsettle US exceptionalism and imagine a decolonial future. It demonstrates how Asian American studies productively expands the field of transnational American studies and vice versa.

The second book excerpt we feature in the issue is from Heidi Kim's *Illegal Immigrants/Model Minorities: The Cold War of Chinese American Narrative* (Temple University Press, 2021). It compellingly illustrates how US imperialism shaped the legal and social experiences of immigrants at home, particularly during the era of the Red Scare and anti-communist sentiment. Kim explores how Chinese Americans were caught between the fear and stigma of being labeled "illegal immigrants" and the

pressure of embodying the post-World War II ideal of the "model minority." Through close readings of literary texts, unpublished drafts, editorial correspondence, and overlooked short pieces, Kim uncovers hidden family histories and emotional narratives within the Chinese American community—stories marked by fraudulent immigration, buried secrets, and obscured pasts. The excerpt from Chapter 1, "Narrative Cold War," centers on the government's so-called Chinese Confession Program, implemented by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to counter communist infiltration among Chinese Americans in the 1950s. The program ostensibly offered a path to legal status for those who disclosed their undocumented pasts, yet ultimately bred confusion, distrust, and anxiety. These tensions surface in the writings of authors like Jade Snow Wong (*Fifth Chinese Daughter*) and Maxine Hong Kingston (*The Woman Warrior*), whose works reflect the deep personal and communal impacts of surveillance and suspicion.

In examining the fraught tension between public narratives made to hew to an unimpeachable family image and the complexity of lives lived in the face of anti-Chinese racism, or in Heidi Kim's words, how the Confession era "ruptured the divide between illegality and exemplarity through suggesting that one could lead to the other" (*IIMM*), the excerpt we feature takes up the story of Jade Snow Wong.

While *Illegal Immigrants/Model Minorities* deals with a specific historical moment and immigrant group, the themes it addresses—illegal immigration, documentation, and government crackdown—remain strikingly relevant today. Current political and social developments continue to reveal the precariousness of US citizenship. Even those who lead law-abiding, fully "Americanized" lives are not guaranteed security or belonging. The persistent stigma of illegitimacy, illegality, and foreignness can render immigrants vulnerable at any moment, often forcing them into silence and concealment. The voices of Chinese American authors poignantly reveal not only the enduring costs of such narratives of illegality, but also the courage it takes to tell them.

The above publications map the afterlives of US empire in Asia and Asian America; the third publication traces the transnational afterlife of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Shelley Fisher Fishkin's new book, *Jim: The Life and Afterlives of Huckleberry Finn's Comrade* (Yale University Press, 2025), maps the cultural afterlives of the novel's antiracist critique through a fascinating survey of translation studies approaches, varied performances of Jim in filmic and theatrical adaptations from 1920 to 2012, a review of the debate on the reception and pedagogy of teaching *Huckleberry Finn*, and a chapter retelling the main plot through Jim's perspective. In the excerpt here, Fishkin explores how varied the interpretation of Jim and of Twain's novel could be, from the Soviet embrace of Jim as protagonist in his own right and one who shows up America's moral shortcomings while modeling the Soviet ideal of interracial solidarity; through a revisionist TV production in postwar Germany; to Jacky Ido's portrayal of Jim as a resourceful figure in Hermine Huntgeburth's 2012 film. In its long view and with its focus on the varied careers of performers Wayland Rudd, Feliks

Imokuede, Serge Nubret, and Jacky Ido, the excerpt provides insight into the complex ways media and performance manifest, are shaped by, and contribute to the flexing of soft power and the ways that cultural values, for better or worse, are transformed and appropriated as they cross borders.

Finally, in a work that is part of a turn towards performance studies as an epistemic site that can extend the archives into encompassing the cultural lives of individuals,[2] Anita Gonzalez in *Shipping Out: Race, Performance, and Labor at Sea* (University of Michigan Press, 2025), uses an ethnographic approach to add to knowledge about the lives of those who have worked and are working on ships that traverse international waters. Her approach joins ethnography, performance studies, and African American studies in order to work with material objects and archival documents to emphasize the histories of free Black sailors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while also reading these alongside the lived experience of modern-day cruise ship laborers. Her present-day focus is on the Caribbean cruise ship as an entertainment world with porous borders. Showing how encounters are always already laden with social meaning, Gonzalez demonstrates that shipboard relations nevertheless have a certain fluid capacity to remake definitions and to momentarily recalibrate the usual order of things. Akin to what Christina Sharpe describes as the "untethering space, between times and places" of the airplane,[3] maritime travel productively loosens the ties of belonging and unsettles conventions because parameters for engagement are made anew each time the ship docks in a different port. Typical transactions involving local merchants, taxi drivers, and tour guides produce situations where cultural stereotypes can be adapted, exaggerated, tested, or sidelined. Identity is performative, Gonzalez asserts, but not only in transactional exchanges; the cruise ship itself, as a space styled after Disney parks, has an abundance of rooms and corridors as well as popular entertainment activities where passengers and crew mingle, and where performances of identity are richly complicated by differing knowledge, linguistic ability, historical memory, and social skill. Varying practices of freedom are enabled or constrained, with the ship's space being crafted as a space of continuous leisure for passengers and a more ambiguous space for those who work onboard. In the excerpt presented here, reflecting on how the ship's spaces of leisure are gendered and raced, Gonzalez describes how she creates a persona, "Dr. Anita," to express and negotiate the liminal role of being a Black woman academic working (also as part of scholarly research) as a "destination lecturer" for predominantly white tourists alongside a multilingual crew who are primarily Afro-Caribbean and Central American. As we are in a time where, as historian Vincent Brown puts it, "distortion [of truth] has become a strategy of power,"[4] it becomes increasingly important to have research that can add nuance and especially in the case of Black laboring men and women, can underscore the creativity, innovation, dignity, and humanity of their labor.

Notes

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[1] Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism*, with Foreword by Robin D.G. Kelley and Afterword by Nick Estes (Haymarket Books, 2021); and Brian Russell Roberts, *Borderwaters: Amid the Archipelagic States of America* (Duke University Press, 2021). See also Harsha Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism*, with Foreword by Andrea Smith (AK Press/Institute for Anarchist Studies, 2013).

[2] Alongside Gonzalez, see, for example, Freddie Rokem, *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (University of Iowa Press, 2000); and Katharine A. Zien, *Sovereign Acts: Performing Race, Space, and Belonging in Panama and the Canal Zone* (Rutgers University Press, 2017).

[3] Christina Sharpe, "The Shapes of Grief: Witnessing the Unbearable," *Yale Review* 110, no. 3 (2024): 12, https://yalereview.org/article/christina-sharpe-shapes-of-grief

[4] Vincent Brown, "Black History's Warning to the World," UCSB Interdisciplinary Humanities Center Key Passages Talk, February 20, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9JsUB5Aq6s, uploaded April 9, 2025, 08:26–08:29.

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