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Forward
Introduction:
Modes of Interior Empire

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Interior empire may seem a contradiction in terms. As work in transnational American studies has shown, tracing the "undertow of US colonial and imperial formations"[1] tends to expand the field *outwards*; for instance, tracking the activities of tech companies in occupied lands,[2] or delving into the CIA archives on Latin America.[3] Conceptually as well, important work has turned critical attention to the ways US foreign policy in combination with increasing militarism make it necessary to rethink legal frameworks for refuge and refugee[4] to better reflect contemporary "refugeetude."[5]

In this edition of *Forward*, we want to take note of the operations of empire in a different register, *within* the continental United States. This strand of imperialism is what might be called *interior empire*. The three selections that follow—by Lina-Maria Murillo, Greg Robinson, and Gesa Mackenthun—can all be said to bring insights from transnational American studies to an examination of the way US imperialism operates within.

Conceptualizing empire as the nexus of finance and war, to draw on Manu Karuka's analysis in *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers and the Transcontinental Railroad*,[6] brings us onto the terrain of the layered histories and temporalities of the settler colonial state that has built its wealth with the labor of enslaved peoples and claims as its territory lands stolen from Indigenous peoples. Though the settler colonial state acts as if settlement has sealed the original act of dispossession and proffers the railroad and the land title as objects that materialize the claim to dominion,[7] the claims are shaky and the infrastructure requires constant renewal and reaffirmation in the face of treaties that have been abrogated and the existence of hundreds of Indigenous sovereign nations on the lands now named the United States and Canada.

This reality of Indigenous survivance in the heart of the United States, and the normalization of denialism by the settler colonial state, form the central argument of Gesa Mackenthun's monograph *Embattled Excavations: Colonial and Transcultural Constructions of the American Deep Past* (Waxmann Verlag, 2021), an excerpt of which we present as one of our three Forward selections. Critical Indigenous studies is one of the sites that destabilise the concept of nation from within. Working in consultation with the Klamath Tribes, who "have lived in the Klamath Basin of Oregon since time before memory,"[8] Mackenthun, a white German scholar, tells the story of Gi'Was—a sapphire-blue body of water known as Crater Lake by Americans—a place of sacred spirituality for the Klamath peoples and the site of a caldera lake, which is a geological formation created when the summit of a volcano collapses inward following an eruption, with rainwater collecting in the resulting depression. Various written histories, including on the website of the National Park Service, exist about the lake. Within Klamath oral tradition, variants also exist. Mackenthun examines the different narratives for the ways in which the stories borrow, contradict, confirm, and supplement each other in "transcultural contestation." Her comparative analysis demonstrates two things; first, that scientific testing of the site has comparatively recently confirmed details about the lake's formation found in the Klamath oral tradition, knowledge which goes back seventy-seven hundred years. In other words, Klamath oral tradition is consistent with and is itself a form of archaeological and geological documentation of the past, demonstrating the Klamath's deep connection to the land. Secondly, Mackenthun's comparison highlights the ways that these settler colonial stories/histories are invested in "ideological constructions of firstness."[9] This is an analytic that Mackenthun has extensively studied. Firstness, or "prehistory" as Mackenthun calls it, is a narrative of Euroamerican originary existence on settler colonial lands. As such, it is deeply entangled with the discourses of manifest destiny and Indigenous disappearance and with the legal frameworks of treaty-making that were a legal ruse for land-grabbing.[10] We include Mackenthun's chapter in its entirety to acknowledge Indigenous knowledge production; in highlighting the groundedness of Klamath epistemes, it works to, as Kim Tallbear has put it, "challenge the popular long-standing assumption that Native people have culture and others do science."[11]

In "Japan and the New Orleans Cotton Trade in the Early Twentieth Century," historian Greg Robinson centers the port city of New Orleans as an important early hub for US cotton exports to Japan and for Japanese shipping networks connecting Japan, the US, South Africa, and Latin America. Providing a counternarrative to cotton histories that focus on antebellum trade and trace a decline in the cotton trade following Emancipation, Robinson reads the archives with attention to the Japanese rather than the British market for cotton. He outlines the development from the late nineteenth century of a million-dollar commerce in Louisiana in cotton exports to Japan, a trade in raw cotton which undergirded the enormous growth of Japan's industrial revolution and which later contributed to New Orleans's position as the largest cotton market in the US in the first half of the twentieth century, with exports

reaching a volume of $100 million per year in 1929. The article shows that this dominance was due in no small part to New Orleans's ideal position, once the Panama Canal was open, for linking shipping routes between Asia and Latin America. But asking why the cotton trade in New Orleans defied the national "narrative of decline and ruin" also leads Robinson to shine a light on the Crescent City's Japanese community. Although few in number, they were pivotal in acquiring contracts with Japanese investors. Associated with this commerce between the US and Japan, these figures rose and fell in social status as trade relations flourished or stalled. Positioned somewhat ambiguously between whiteness and Blackness in the Jim Crow era, the Japanese population was however mainly sheltered from the murderousness[12] of anti-Black racism because of their perceived proximity to whiteness, as demonstrated by the anecdote in which the conductor of a segregated streetcar redraws the boundary separating white and nonwhite passengers because a Japanese man new to the city seats himself in the "colored" section, necessitating the performative reassignment of race through the gesture of placing the "colored" sign behind this man, thus symbolically moving him into whiteness. Although the focus of Robinson's article is on New Orleans as facilitator of a transcontinental, transnational trade in cotton that was a mainstay of not only the local economy but the country as a whole in the early twentieth century, there is much to be gleaned about interactions of the Japanese in the Crescent City and the ways they reshape histories of the Cotton King. Robinson originally published "Japan and the New Orleans Cotton Trade" in *Louisiana History* and was honored by the Louisiana Historical Association (LHA) with the President's Memorial Award for the best article of 2023.

These broader sets of relations that Robinson gestures towards nudge us to reflect on empire as the creation of capital under the threat of war, as theorized by Karuka in *Empire's Tracks*. Karuka examines the interrelated nature of both activities in the interests of racial capitalism: attempts at clearing the land, removing the Indigenous nations, and extinguishing Aboriginal title with the end goal of controlling territory for the capital it gives up.[13] Framing "Japan and the New Orleans Cotton Trade" are the Civil War and its afterlives of indentured labor and exploitative debt. Robinson notes that banks and mortgage holders, "largely from the Northern states," compelled southern landowners to grow cotton, even those who had no experience with cultivating cotton, by making it a condition of financing. During slavery, in the analysis of a historian of capitalism, "planter loans effectively remained debts drawn on [enslaved] bodies"[14]; the web of credit and finance continued to entangle lives after Emancipation because the capitalist system of production and exchange was sustained. Despite the revolutionary emancipatory movements of the postbellum nineteenth century, a "counterrevolution … in the 1870s in the US South instated new orders of racial oppression" and "Reconstruction gave way to a crusade against Indigenous peoples, consolidating US capitalism's postbellum 'alliance of white supremacism, industrial expansion, and permanent war.'"[15] These financing structures together with the economic decline of the South created an environment where few

options for work, let alone creation of wealth, existed for freed Black individuals, outside of sharecropping or working on former plantations. Robinson shows how New Orleans, in looking to Japan, was able to deviate from this trend.

Lina-Maria Murillo's *Fighting for Control: Power, Reproductive Care, and Race in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2025) examines the active participation of Mexican-origin women, alongside powerful institutional actors, in campaigns for reproductive control and care in the US–Mexico borderlands. The book traces the intertwined histories of birth control activism across Texas, Mexico, and Puerto Rico, while also foregrounding women's own needs, demands, and negotiations surrounding reproductive autonomy and access to basic healthcare within these marginalized communities. "*Se Aguanta*: Borderland Internationalism, Overpopulation, and Reproductive Control," the excerpt from Chapter 4 featured here, focuses on the birth control initiatives of Planned Parenthood of El Paso (PPEP), which functioned as a key site within the broader international population control movement aimed at addressing perceived threats of overpopulation in the 1950s and 1960s. Since its opening in 1937 until its closure in 2009, the clinic has served thousands of Mexican-origin women, many of whom made active use of the contraceptive technologies it provided.

Drawing on limited but revealing clinic records and patient data, the chapter foregrounds women's varied responses to these interventions, including resistance, ambivalence, and compliance. Murillo argues that the relative "silence" in the archive should not be read as an absence of agency; rather, it can be understood as a strategy through which women protected their privacy from the scrutiny of population control advocates, state authorities, and the Catholic Church. At the same time, patients expressed dissatisfaction with inadequate care, demonstrated ambivalence toward the Pill by withdrawing from clinical trials, and sometimes rejected outreach efforts—known as the "Knock on Every Door" campaign—in which fieldworkers distributed pamphlets and contraceptives like Emko spermicidal foam throughout South El Paso. The chapter also highlights the asymmetrical power dynamics within these programs. PPEP doctors and staff frequently dismissed women's concerns while reinforcing harmful stereotypes about Mexican-origin women's supposed hypersexuality, their laziness, or lack of motivation. Paradoxically, the organization also rejected some women's requests for contraceptives or their interest in participating more actively as advocates or fieldworkers in the family planning movement.

By situating these local dynamics within a broader transnational context—including parallels with population control efforts in Puerto Rico, India, and Japan—Murillo's chapter underscores both the global reach of these initiatives and the importance of recovering women's lived experiences. In doing so, it offers a nuanced account of agency that moves beyond simple binaries of choice and coercion.

Notes

For the next issue of *Forward*, we will be rejoined by Holger Droessler who returns from sabbatical leave in 2025–2026. We bid *Forward* editor Jennifer Reimer farewell and congratulate her on her new role as *JTAS Special Forum* editor. Above all, many thanks to the authors and the publishers, without whose generosity *Forward* would not be possible: in particular, thanks go to Lina-Maria Murillo for permitting us to republish excerpts from her monograph, *Fighting For Control: Power, Reproductive Care, and Race in the US-Mexico Borderland* (The University of North Carolina Press); to the Louisiana Historical Association and the journal *Louisiana History* for permission to reprint "Japan and the New Orleans Cotton Trade in the Early Twentieth Century," as well as to author Greg Robinson; and to Waxmann Verlag and author Gesa Mackenthun for allowing us to reprint a generous excerpt from Gesa Mackenthun's monograph *Embattled Excavations: Colonial and Transcultural Constructions of the American Deep Past*. The upcoming *Forward* edition will include an excerpt from Tina Chen and Charlotte Eubanks's edited volume *Global Asias: Tactics and Theories*, with appreciation to Tina Chen and Charlotte Eubanks and the University of Hawai'i Press, especially Melissa Ablon, for their positive response to our request. Finally, special thanks to *JTAS* editor in chief Alfred Hornung for unwavering support and inspiration and massive gratitude to Bowen Du for generative comments on the introduction.

[1] Alex Lubin, "American Studies from Elsewhere," *American Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (June 2026): 240n10, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/aq.2026.a991742

[2] See, for instance, Omar Zahzah, *Terms of Servitude* (Seven Stories Press, 2025).

[3] See, for instance, Marc Becker, *The CIA in Ecuador* (Duke University Press, 2020).

[4] A. Naomi Paik, *Bans, Walls, Sanctuary* (University of California Press, 2020); and Yến Lê Espiritu, Lan Duong, Ma Vang, Victor Bascara, Khatharya Um, Lila Sharif, and Nigel Hatton, *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies* (University of California Press, 2022). "We are at a moment of renegotiating what it means to be a refugee. While the definition of *refugee* stipulated by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees […] remains the international standard for the granting of refugee status, it emerged as a legal mandate that was shaped by the geopolitical exigencies of Europe and the historical conditions of World War II. The Convention has become increasingly irrelevant to today's crises and to the conditions and characteristics of refugees they produce" (Espiritu et al., *Departures*, 30).

[5] We draw on Vinh Nguyen in evoking this term; Vinh Nguyen, *Lived Refuge: Gratitude, Resentment, Resilience* (University of California Press, 2023); and Vinh Nguyen, "Refugeetude: When does a Refugee Stop Being a Refugee," *Social Text* 37, no. 2 (2019): 109–131, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7371003

[6] See Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (University of California Press, 2019), 67, 112, 140.

[7] Through land grants to the railroad corporations, "Congress is granting land … that the US federal government doesn't fully control, that US citizens are not inhabiting. […] The railroad companies go through, they raise the money, they build the tracks, and through the rails, they kind of materialize this claim on the land through the process of construction and maintaining these lines once they're built" (Manu Karuka in conversation with podcast host Brenden Rensink on *Writing Westward*; Brenden W. Rensink, "Manu Karuka—*Empire's Tracks*," Episode 15 of *Writing Westward*, podcast, Redd Center at Brigham Young University, November 1, 2019, 14:24–14:58, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbCJ3V1aZec&t=114s); see also Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

[8] "Our History–Klamath Tribal History: naanok ?ans naat sat'waYanaat ciiwapk diceew'a," *The Klamath Tribes: Klamath–Modoc–Yahooskin*, https://klamathtribes.org/history/. Mackenthun was granted permission by the Klamath Tribes to retell the stories that belong to the Klamath and notes that prior to publication the chapter had been read and approved by Klamath Elders.

[9] Gesa Mackenthun, *Embattled Excavations* (Waxmann, 2021), 11.

[10] Gesa Mackenthun and Christen Mucher, eds., *Decolonizing "Prehistory": Deep Time and Indigenous Knowledges in North America* (University of Arizona, 2021). As Max Ajl observes in a review of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, "the endlessly abrogated treaties the Indian nations signed with the United States were always about land: who owned it, where, and under what terms" (Max Ajl, "The Settling of the United States from the Perspective of its Victims," *Jadaliyya*, August 10, 2015, *https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32354/The-Settling-of-the-United-States-from-the-Perspective-of-its-Victims*). For a comprehensive analysis of treaty-making as land theft in the context of Canada, see Arthur Manuel and Ronald M. Derrickson, *Unsetttling Canada* (Between the Lines, 2015).

[11] Kim Tallbear, "Dear Indigenous Studies, It's Not Me, It's You," in *Critical Indigenous Studies: Engagements in First World Locations*, ed. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (University of Arizona Press, 2016), 71.

[12] We are following Ruth Wilson Gilmore in her oft-cited formulation of racism as "the state-sanctioned and/or legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death, in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies" (Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* [University of California Press, 2007], 107).

[13] Karuka uses the phrase "war-finance nexus" but makes clear in his book that the United States was never fully in control of the Indigenous lands which it granted to the railroad corporation; Karuka, *Empire's Tracks,* 67. Hence the centrality of Karuka's concept of *countersovereignty* as the settler colonial state's constant battle to contain and suppress the sovereignty of the Indigenous nations on whose territories the US seeks to lay claim to nationhood (this core concept runs throughout the book, starting with the first chapter, titled "The Prose of Countersovereignty.")

[14] David McNally, *Slavery and Capitalism* (University of California Press, 2025), 229.

[15] McNally, *Slavery and Capitalism*, 244.

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