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### **Reseña/Review**

Sandhya Shukla and Heidi Tinsman, eds. *Imagining Our Americas: Toward a Transnational Frame*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

## **Rethinking the Americas in a Globalized World: Connections and Divisions**

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In the last two decades, scholars from a variety of humanities and humanistic social science disciplines have grappled with the idea of the transnational. Continuing to write from within the homey confines of our national histories and cultures seems as quaint today as doing artisanal local handicrafts in the era of multinational *maquiladoras*. Not that there

isn't a niche market for local artisanal products, but clearly the world is heading in a different direction.

Given the rise of neoliberal free trade capitalist regimes governed by international bodies like the World Trade Organization, the increasing imperial footprint of the United States, and the global reach of non-state terrorist groups like Al Qaeda, this "transnational turn" in academia should not come as a surprise. Committed scholars have turned to a transnational approach to understand the world as it is, and perhaps even as it was.

The volume of essays, *Imagining Our Americas: Toward a Transnational Frame*, edited by anthropologist Sandhya Shukla and historian Heidi Tinsman, provides a richly textured roadmap to the lumpy new world of transnational studies. Nevertheless, given the heterogeneity of kinds of analysis and objects of study, the volume would have benefited from more explicit sections that link the essays together either regionally, thematically or chronologically. The editors do suggest some connections between groups of essays in their introduction, but a more explicit framework would help the reader to navigate through the volume.

The book, which began as a special issue of *Radical History Review*, takes the Americas as its geographical frame, but it also includes extra-hemispheric locales to which the US has extended its tentacles. In this way, the editors hope to bring Latin Americanists and US Americanists into dialogue, while at the same time recognizing Pacific connections to Asia and Atlantic connections to Europe and Africa.

In their introduction, Shukla and Tinsman point out what is ostensibly the central contradiction of our times: connection and division. As they argue, we are experiencing "a more profound sense of global connection and a more acute experience of national and regional division than world history has perhaps ever presented" (1). The simultaneity of globalization in the midst of heightened xenophobic nationalism in the US, Spain, and Russia to name just a few examples, seems like a contradiction. Yet the transnational always rests on the "national." Therefore, the seeming contradiction between connection and division is less of a contradiction than a foundation of capitalism. In spite of the rhetoric about a borderless

world trumpeted by neoliberal ideologues, global capitalism requires national borders and divisions in order to make its profits.

By taking the Americas as their frame of reference, the editors want to join the debate that has been shaped by neoliberal freemarketeers touting the Free Trade Area of the Americas, and anti-neoliberal Latin American leaders like Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales, who have tried to create some kind of quasi-socialist inspired alternative. They want scholars to “offer vigorous critiques of how regional and national categories of difference and dichotomy are politically generated” in order to be able to see beyond the simplistic globalization versus anti-globalization framework (3). Although this volume does not advance a monolithic political line, the vision that the authors offer is one principally inspired by Cuban poet and independence hero, José Martí, who articulated an anti-imperialist vision of American integration as opposed to US dominated Pan-Americanism. Beyond Martí’s vision of “Nuestra América,” the essays explore various strategies adopted by those struggling not only to oppose US empire, but simply to survive in its shadow.

The introduction raises the question of the extent to which the 1980s shift toward poststructuralism and transnationalism in the US academy is itself part of a US dominated Pan Americanism that sought to “defang Latin Americanist critiques of political and economic inequality” (13-14). The editors argue that it isn’t, but they caution that in their efforts to “organize solidaristic forms of knowledge,” they must clearly distinguish the expansionist America of the US and the anti-imperialist America of Martí (16).

The introduction includes a useful overview comparing US American studies and Latin American studies, taking the former to task for remaining blinded by US parochialism even as it seeks to transnationalize itself. Shukla and Tinsman argue that even though US American studies has done a good job of incorporating “difference” by including Chicano and Latino, African American, and Asian American stories, the nation remains the central focus of the field. They therefore raise the possibility that “accounting for difference within the US American nation has done little more than prop up the nation” (11). They also critique US American studies

scholars for their lack of knowledge of languages other than English and the “glaring absence of the appearance and thick description of other places in the world, not just as specters or victimized objects but as actors, producers, and sources within transnational circuitry” (12). While these critiques are certainly apt, the movement within US American studies to transnationalize itself will take time to bear fruit. Shukla and Tinsman are much less vigorous in their critique of Latin American studies, choosing to contextualize Latin American historians’ focus on the nation as a response to the US and European questioning of Latin American sovereignty and national fitness. Unfortunately, this line of reasoning, while certainly plausible, may ignore internal Latin American dynamics and thereby once again make the US the central actor in the Americas.

At times the authors seem to shift from viewing the Americas as a geographical region to a theory or a methodology. When they refer to “theories of the Americas” (17) or “the Americas as an interdisciplinary inquiry” (20), it seems like the Americas is more of an analytical lens rather than an object of study. In terms of defining the Americas, they insist that “surely the Philippines and Hawaii might, and should be considered part of the Americas,” ostensibly because of US colonial rule in those areas, but they leave open the question of what other locales under the influence of US domination may be considered part of the Americas (5). While we learn a lot about the US by not limiting our gaze to this hemisphere, allowing US domination to determine the boundaries of the Americas may make the whole concept of the Americas a guise for studies of US imperialism. And while there is nothing wrong with studying US imperialism, why then bother to frame it in terms of the Americas, a framework that seems to imply a multivalent history that doesn’t privilege the US as the central historical actor in the hemisphere.

### *The US South and the Americas South*

The chapters that help us to understand the connections between the US South and Latin America are a perfect example of the groundbreaking work that enriches the stories we have been told about the US South and about Latin America. Hailaos Stecopulos brilliantly explores

the career of African American writer James Weldon Johnson in terms of the US South and racism, and also in the context of Johnson's work as a representative of US empire as a diplomat in Venezuela and Nicaragua. Stecopulos suggests that Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) puts the US government's relations toward Central and South America in the beginning of the twentieth century in the same position as the North had been in with the US South during the nineteenth century. The North (US), in Weldon Johnson's view needed to intervene to bring order to a disorderly and unjust South (Latin America). However, a year after the publication of *Autobiography*, Weldon Johnson resigned from his diplomatic post to protest the Wilson administration's refusal to promote African Americans. Weldon Johnson would later begin a new political career in the NAACP, and offer a "more explicit critique of the relationship between white southern racism and US imperialism" (57). By tracing Weldon Johnson's complicity with, as well as opposition to, US empire, we gain a much more subtle view of the place that African Americans occupied in the larger context of the Americas.

Caroline Levander's chapter on "Confederate Cuba" places the US South in its hemispheric context by focusing on the importance of nineteenth century Cuba to the slaveholding South, to black activists, and to subsequent US governments. As she says, "Throughout the nineteenth century, Cuba served as a powerful site for imagining alternative models of race, nation and empire, even as Cuba was integral to the creation of an explicitly racialized US imperialism" (103). By expanding the frame of her vision beyond the US South, we can appreciate the extent to which empire building outside of the US helped to forge US nationalism as well as solidify its racist hierarchies.

In her chapter "Blackness Goes South", Rachel Adams explores the ways in which blackness has figured and been hidden in US-Mexican relations. Adams highlights the cases of fugitive slaves who headed South to Mexico instead of North to Canada, noting that US historians who have usually focused on Canada as the bastion of freedom have given short shrift to the movement of fugitive slaves to Mexico. Rather than just tell a US-centric story about fugitive slaves, however, Adams also examines the ways

in which ideas about *mestizaje* have served to erase and ignore the African presence in Mexico. She ends the essay with a series of haunting ethnographic style photographs by Tony Gleaton that document the African presence, at least in terms of phenotypical markers, in Mexico and other parts of Latin America. Of course, the notion that we can see blackness or identify “black” people in photographs suggests that blackness is a physical fact that can be revealed by the camera and not a historically contingent social construct. In the end, the Gleaton’s efforts to inculcate a diasporic African American consciousness among dark-skinned Mexicans with curly hair may both be an effort to uncover a hidden history of race and an invention of a new form of diasporic race consciousness.

### *Literature and Transnational Imagination*

Several chapters use literary analysis as their window into the transnational imagination of the Americas. John Blanco explores the themes of the bastard child in José Martí’s collection of poems *Ismaelillo* (1882), and José Rizal’s novels *Noli me tangere* and *El filibusterismo*, which center around a woman’s bastard origins as the catalyst for the hero’s struggle against the Spanish. Blanco’s comparison of these two writers who both died fighting against Spanish colonialism helps to link the Cuban and Filipino struggles for independence through their common engagement with the thought of Simón Bolívar.

Susan Najita’s chapter “Pleasure and Colonial Resistance” addresses the politics of pidgin languages in Hawaii through an analysis of Milton Murayama’s *All I Asking for Is My Body*. She shows how pidgin English allowed laborers to resist exploitation from within the plantation system. While this essay jibes well with the others in terms of its focus on the impact of and resistance to US imperialism, it is worth asking how it fits within the Americas more broadly.

In her chapter “Uprooted Bodies,” Michelle Stephens examines Leslie Marmon Silko’s epic novel *Almanac of the Dead* as a way to complicate the notion of the indigenous as rooted to the land. Stephens argues that the indigenous were “some of the most mobile populations, and tropes, in transatlantic space, subject to myriad forced migrations and

settlements across colonial space” (191). By focusing on the uprootedness of indigenous people, she is able to connect their history to that of Africans and Asians who were brought over the Atlantic and Pacific to the Americas. For Stephens, Silko’s novel provides a powerful example of how to bridge fields and disciplines as well as temporal divides.

Finally, Victor Bascara’s chapter “Panama Money” looks at the unexpected ways that imperialist projects, like the Panama Canal, have affected subaltern people. Bascara uses Paule Marshall’s 1967 short-story “To Da-Duh: In Memoriam” to explain how profits sent back home from migrants working on the canal “enabled an early twentieth-century Barbadian diaspora to move both horizontally (from Barbados to New York City) and vertically (into the middle class of the United States)” (367). Such a subtle reading of US imperialism from a particular subaltern perspective provides a more nuanced view of imperialism that recognizes the opportunities as well as the costs. Imperialism, like capitalism, may create the conditions for its own demise. All four of these chapters focusing on literature give useful examples for how historians and anthropologists may use literary sources to explore transnationalism.

### *The Cold War Context*

Three chapters follow transnational artistic, educational and political currents during the Cold War in three distinct locales: Cuba, Puerto Rico and Mexico. Ian Lekus’s fascinating chapter, “Queer Harvests,” explores the uneasy and often hostile reception that gay US activists received as part of the Venceremos Brigades to Cuba in the 1960s and 1970s. Lekus shows us how internationalists’ efforts to prove their anti-imperialist revolutionary credentials led to some pretty odious and discriminatory politics. However, he also suggests that this difficult experience in Cuba inspired many gay and lesbian ex-Brigadistas in their activism back in the US. And, although the essay doesn’t bring the story to the present, the situation for gays and lesbians in Cuba, while still repressive, is much more open than had been the case in the early years of the revolution. That is another queer harvest, thanks in part to the early gay activists both on the island and off, that is still ripe for the picking.

Rebecca Shreiber's chapter, "Dislocations of Cold War Cultures," explores the influence on US writers, poets and filmmakers who went to Mexico in the 1950s after being blacklisted in Hollywood and by the publishing industry. African American artists such as Charles White and Elizabeth Catlett found a much more receptive audience for their art in Mexico, and were in turn influenced to develop the transnational themes in their work.

Alyosha Goldstein's chapter, "The Attributes of Sovereignty," examines Puerto Rican politics during the 1950s to try to understand why Puerto Rican governor Luis Muñoz Marín believed that the island could prosper "in close association with the United States" (313). Goldstein juxtaposes Muñoz Marín's position to that of José Martí, the unabashed anti-colonialist. According to Goldstein, Muñoz Marín and the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) were able to mobilize community building as a populist cause while at the same time remaining tied to the US. The ability of the PPD to manage the tension between its populism and being a satellite of US empire faded by the 1970s, but this earlier period represents a useful case for understanding the peculiar relationship between Puerto Rico and the US. Many of the essays in this volume suggest ways of living within and with US empire, as Puerto Rico has done, rather than simply rejecting it.

### *Popular Culture*

A couple of the chapters focus on popular culture to explore the transnational world of the Americas. Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste's essay "All Cumbias, the Cumbia" provides an ethnomusicological analysis of the origins and diverse adaptations of cumbia throughout Latin America. His deft analysis shows that *cumbia* has been racialized and nationalized differently in different places. In Colombia, the birthplace of cumbia, the Afro-Caribbean rooted music came to represent the nation, but only after its style and meaning had been whitened and stripped of its most direct Afro references. In Peru, the music was linked to the urban poor, and disassociated from its African roots, while in Argentina it was associated with "los negros," a racialized term for the working class. And finally in



Mexico, cumbia has “integrated the aesthetic of black rock, rap, and hip-hop and stressed cumbia’s Afro-Caribbean essence” (354). Paradoxically, in spite of the transnational roots of cumbia that the author traces, he actually reinforces the notion of national cumbias by dividing the sections of his essay according to nations.

*Medical Experimentation and Discourses of Disease*

Nicholas Turse’s chapter “Experimental Dreams, Ethical Nightmares”, examines the controversial human medical experiments of George Fitch, a physician who infected children with syphilis and inoculated healthy people in Hawaii with live leprosy virus. Turse discovers that the lepers and native Hawaiians defended Fitch, who in addition to conducting dubious biomedical experiments, spoke out against enforced isolation of lepers and provided free medical care to the poor. The same biomedical establishment that condemned Fitch for his experimentation was vigorously and successfully resisted by native Hawaiians who refused to offer themselves up as guinea pigs for further scientific research. Turse’s historical research paints a complex portrait of native Hawaiian responses to western biomedicine that include but are not limited to resistance to outside influences.

Finally, in his chapter “Tracking the ‘China Peril’ along the US Pacific Rim”, Rob Wilson brings us on a roller-coaster ride tracing the ways in which “yellow peril” discourses have been deployed in recent popular culture through mass-market films and airport-store novels. While the analysis seems smart and the writing poetic, I have to confess a certain confusion in the face of sentences such as the following one:

Given the aggravated flows of globalization we experience on the home front, as well as the siren call of a postcolonial hybridity that often elides discrepant histories, semiotic mobility, market fusion, and cross-regional mixture help turn the framework of national belonging into a more riddled ethnoscape of transnational becoming. (168)

I’m not sure what Wilson means by this, but he does conclude by saying that he does not want the Americas turned into a “huge Las Vegas” (183). I think we can, Robert Venturi notwithstanding, agree on that much.

*Conclusion*

At the end of their introduction, the editors ask the reader to question the premise of the entire volume, that is “to ask whether, in fact, ‘the Americas’ are either really that different from ‘Asia’ or the ‘Middle East’ or are constructed so discretely, apart from other regions” (27). Perhaps what these essays describe in the Americas, and Hawaii and the Philippines, are echoed elsewhere. As such, the volume may be a starting point “toward a more productive, and perhaps utopian, sense of the global” (27).

*Imagining Our Americas* reminds us of the unexpected consequences of imperialism. The global connections that we see play out in the Americas have often benefited capitalism, but there have also been moments when these same transnational circuits have produced an anti-imperialist like José Martí or the popular *cumbia villera* music from Buenos Aires’ *colonias*. As the editors write, “these essays collectively suggest that confronting globalization is only one way of rethinking what we have come to call the Americas” (27). In tracing out the trajectories of transnational connections and divisions, this volume puts us in a better position not only to understand the world we live in, but also to change it.