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Editor's Introduction
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# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE IN AMERICA

## Where Do We Stand Twenty Years after Fishkin's Transnational Turn?

In 2004, the then-president of the American Studies Association, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, gave a presidential address titled "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies." In it, she explored the numerous ways that adopting a transnational perspective could benefit American studies. Among other things, she urgently pointed out that

> [a]t a time when American foreign policy is marked by nationalism, arrogance, and Manichean oversimplification, the field of American studies is an increasingly important site of knowledge marked by a very different set of assumptions—a place where borders both within and outside the nation are interrogated and studied, rather than reified and reinforced. (Fishkin 20)

As Donald Trump's second presidential term unfolds, it is becoming increasingly clear that this administration's policy, both foreign and domestic, not only relies heavily on a nationalistic vision characterized by arrogance and oversimplification, but has also led to what Fishkin, in her contribution to this special issue, succinctly describes as a "tsunami of bigotry, ignorance, ambition, and sheer malevolence that threatens all that we hold dear" (25). Outside the US, this tsunami has already caused a "visible erosion of US credibility—not just as a political actor, but as a symbolic anchor" (Reimer 7). Against such a backdrop, it has become even more pertinent to interrogate the concept of the nation state, its structures, borders, premises and promises. This is even more the case if we consider the anti-immigration sentiment and the various calls to "close the borders" that have become prominent and loud not only in America, but also in other anglophone countries, as well as across Europe. The present special issue thus aims to make its contribution by drawing on both Fishkin's transnational turn and its legacies and the more recent concept of transnational literature. Paul Jay sees transnational literature as "a particular type of literature [. . .] dealing, collectively, with a set of issues and themes associated with decolonization, globalization, postmodernity, and technology. [. . . T]ransnational literature is about the variety of forms of transnational experience produced by the convergence of these forces" (51). This kind of literature thematizes precisely such subjects as migration,

displacement, and border fluidity (52). The thematization of these subjects in transnational literature, then, becomes the starting point for this issue's examination of where the transnational in American literary studies stands today.

## The Transnational, Literary Studies, and American Studies

Rich in meaning and plasticity, the concept of the *transnational* lends itself to multiple and nuanced interpretations in a variety of fields. This term's beginnings have been traced to Edward Sapir's article "Culture, Genuine and Spurious" (1924), where it was used for the purpose of "reflect[ing] on the economic and political processes that framed the cultural changes of his era" (Besserer 111). Yet in a particularly American context, the terms *trans-national* and *transnationality* already appeared in 1916 in an essay by Randolph Bourne, who used them to describe America as a "federation of cultures" (Bourne 5). Despite having already appeared in the early twentieth century, the notion of the transnational first gained significant prominence as late as the 1990s, partially spurred by the 1994 publication of the book *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* by Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc (Mügge 109). This book challenges the notions of citizenship and nationhood by exploring the transnational existence of migrants, including their cross-border activities and communities. By 1999, the term had already accumulated numerous uses categorized by the anthropologist Steven Vertovec in his article "Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism." He recognizes six categories of use—as social morphology, type of consciousness, mode of cultural reproduction, avenue of capital, site of political engagement, and (re)construction of "place" or locality (449–55). The concept of the transnational has since also been widely discussed in literary and cultural studies. Some notable examples include Peter Hitchcock's *Imaginary States: Studies in Cultural Transnationalism* (2003) and *The Long Space: Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form* (2010), which together examine the relationship between cultural transnationalism, postcolonialism, and commodity circulation; Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih's anthology *Minor Transnationalism* (2005), in which a number of contributors re-examine the concept of minority cultural formations and their relationship to the binary modes of assimilation and/or opposition to the majority culture; Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani's anthology *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism* (2013), which examines the relationship between the two titular concepts from numerous vantage points; and Dagmar Vandebosch and Theo D'Haen's anthology *Literary Transnationalism(s)* (2018), which discusses the concept of world literature in relation to the transnational and takes up the various ways in which literature moves beyond borders, including translation, adaptation, and intertextual referencing. While in no way exhaustive, the above overview aims to showcase the multiple meanings that the notion of the transnational has had, ranging from migrants' transnational ties to cross-border commodity creation and circulation to the cultural objects and formations that surpass the national either by the virtue of their production, circulation, themes, aesthetics or all of the above. In this special issue, the concept of the transnational is understood as the product of an ongoing scholarly conversation about its various facets. Like Fishkin's address, the issue is thus meant to open up rather than limit the broad contours of the transnational in American studies and its implications.

The primary arena of investigation for this issue is the question of the transnational particularly as it has been understood in the literary academic domain. Therefore I wish to note here two

pieces of scholarship in particular: Kai Wiegandt's anthology *The Transnational In Literary Studies: Potential and Limitations of a Concept* (2020) and Paul Jay's monograph *Transnational Literature: The Basics* (2021). Drawing on Vertovec's article, the introduction to Wiegandt's anthology offers a useful overview of the ways the concept of the transnational has been used in literary studies in relation to identity, theme, aesthetics, reception, marketing, and critical perspective. Simultaneously, it attempts a delineation of the transnational against "rival terms" such as the postcolonial, the cosmopolitan, and world literature. Of course such a delineation can never be complete since there are always significant overlaps between these various categories. Yet discussions such as Wiegandt's create a meaningful entry point into transnational literary studies as a field that can often seem overly complicated and unruly. The same applies to Jay's monograph, whose entire first part discusses the various facets of the transnational, transnational literature, and how this kind of literature overlaps, interacts with, and in some cases subverts existing categories such as diaspora studies, globalization studies, border studies, and the like. Important to note in the context of this book is its dedication to "explor[ing] the rise of transnational literature as *both* a field of study and a kind of literature, stressing throughout the symbiotic relationship between the two" (Jay 4). Jay here sees transnational literature not as a genre in the traditional sense, but rather as a *kind* of contemporary literary production that remains in constant dialogue with transnational literary studies, forming a "reciprocal and co-constitutive relationship. What counts as transnational literature is constantly—and simultaneously—being worked out among writers, reviewers, and readers in the public sphere, and by critics and scholars in the academy" (Jay 23). In other words, transnational perspectives, scholarship, and literature exist in a close relationship with each other, shaping and supporting each other along the way. It is this kind of approach to the transnational, and to transnational literature, that this special issue takes, informed on the one hand by Fishkin's transnational turn and, on the other, by texts that can be seen as pertaining to the fast-growing body of transnational literature.

When it comes to American Studies more specifically, Shelley Fisher Fishkin was not the first to speak of transnationalism or of a transnational turn. However, her address did mark a significant turning point in the way the field of American Studies was being conceptualized by its own practitioners. Not everyone agreed with the points made in the address. In fact, the transnational turn has been criticized for, among other things, potentially glossing over the neoliberal component of transnational flows, inadvertently reinforcing American exceptionalism (albeit from a new vantage point), and being used as a kind of American rejuvenation project (see e.g., Fluck). Yet the impact of the address has certainly been significant enough to warrant "taking stock" of its aftermath twenty years later in the context of this special issue. In fact, Fishkin's address has shown itself to be a particularly suitable and productive scholarly through line for the issue for two additional reasons. Firstly, the address is informed by a profound understanding of both the history of American studies and the numerous meanings of the notion of the transnational—understandings which retain their validity despite the more recent developments in the term's interpretations and uses. And secondly, it calls for devoting more attention to American studies scholarship produced outside the US, which is what this special issue also wishes to highlight. Fishkin's invaluable contribution to this issue, "Transnational American Studies: The Last Twenty Years," highlights two projects in which she herself has participated—the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* and the "Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project" at Stanford—and which testify to the

importance of such transnational collaborations. These two major scholarly undertakings would have been impossible without the participation of numerous non-US-based American Studies scholars. To borrow her words once again, "the worry that it would be boring to talk with colleagues from around the world [is] simply dumbfounding—and absurd" (23). As another illustration of Fishkin's point, it is worth pointing out two anthologies which were published as a result of collaboration between US-based and non-US-based scholars. These works, which found publication in the years between Fishkin's address and this special issue, are part of Re-Mapping the Transnational: A Dartmouth Series in American Studies, edited by Donald E. Pease, and both have been significant in my own work on transnational literature and aesthetics. These two collections, in one way or another, center on the "transnational turn" in American studies primarily in connection with literature, and by their very nature speak in favor of Fishkin's call for more visibility of non-US-based American Studies scholars and scholarship—a call to which this issue strives to respond.

The first one is titled *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies* and was edited by Winfried Fluck, Donald E. Pease and John Carlos Rowe and published in 2011. Produced as the result of three transatlantic conferences held between October 2006 and October 2009 at the University of Southern California (2006), the Free University, Potsdam University, and Humboldt University in Berlin (2008), and Dartmouth College (2009), this anthology takes up the transnational turn in American Studies from a German vantage point and endeavors to remedy the observation that "transnational Americanists had not as yet added a coherent order of intelligibility to the field" (Fluck et al. 13). Ultimately the book mounts a dialogue that is both critical of the more traditional exceptionalist premises of American studies *and* aware of the potential limitations of an anti-exceptionalist stance. The second anthology was edited by Laura Bieger, Ramón Saldívar, and Johannes Voelz and titled *The Imaginary and Its Worlds: American Studies After the Transnational Turn* (2013). This book takes what I consider to be a very inspiring approach as it re-examines the concept of the imaginary in light of the changes brought on by the transnational turn rather than re-mapping the transnational turn directly. This collection offers a fresh look at the transnational turn that has been mapped and re-mapped numerous times since Fishkin's presidential address. It is my hope that this special issue will offer a likewise inspiring and thought-provoking perspective on the aftermath of the transnational turn through its almost exclusive focus on post-millennial texts that thematize transnational experience(s) in America and its call for creative scholarly approaches to the various facets of transnationality that they depict and/or embody.

In this context, I would also like to note the series Routledge Transnational Perspectives on American Literature, edited by Susan Castillo, which has also done some work of the kind this special issue aspires to. The series includes books such as the anthology *Ethnic Literatures and Transnationalism: Critical Imaginaries for a Global Age* (2015), edited by Aparajita Nanda, which focuses on the mutual influences of transnationalism, literary studies, and ethnic studies in the study of literature "defined in its broadest sense of being a documentation of culture" (Nanda), and *Ambivalent Transnational Belonging in American Literature* (2021) by Silvia Schultermandl, which rests on a dialogue between the transnational and the affective and warns against seeing the transnational as straightforwardly subversive. What is striking is that neither of these books takes its transnational perspective for granted. *Ambivalent Transnational Belonging* in particular strives to navigate the complex spaces between the usefulness of the transnational as a lens in American literary studies and the dangers of not

taking the criticism leveraged at the concept seriously.

## The Essays in this Volume

Here I would like to return to the connections and conversations between Fishkin's address and the essays in this special issue. The address points out a number of paths down which the transnational turn could lead American studies. As we will see, the essays in this issue speak to many of these points, but also to what Fishkin is writing today. In her contribution to this special issue, Fishkin revisits four of the points made in the address, responding to some of the criticism she received at the time: that the transnational turn would marginalize Native American Studies; that it would reinforce the nation rather than displacing it from a position of centrality and prominence; that her call to go beyond English-language material was not realistic given the inclinations of the current student body; and that including the voices of non-US-based scholars would be useless and boring. She goes on to show how each of the concerns has since proven to be unfounded, and thus provides a cross section of sorts of the state of transnational American Studies twenty years later. Let us then start from this end of the discussion, and with the point about the nation and its borders in particular, since the scholarship in this special issue largely supports Fishkin's claim that a transnational perspective has not reified the two, but rather continued decentering them (16).

In this context, the essays by Simar Bhasin and Henriette Rørdal contend with continued destabilization of the notions of citizenship and/or the American dream through their analyses of contemporary aesthetic representations of a precarious transnational existence. Bhasin's essay discusses two of Jonathan Escoffery's short stories—"In Flux" and "Independent Living"—from his 2022 collection *If I Survive You*. She argues that the autofictional mode and the interlinked short story genre as employed by Escoffery reflect a thematic deterritorialization and transnational precarity which arguably ruptures the borders of American literary fiction and (re)interrogates the myth of America as "a land where migrant dreams can come true" (43). Additionally, her essay considers the way that Escoffery's texts comment on the histories behind the contemporary migration flows from the Global South to the Global North. As such, it also speaks to multiple points made by Fishkin in her original address regarding global flows and crossroads and their histories, as well as the dynamics of the US as a territory, a population, and a culture subject to the effects and consequences of these flows (Fishkin 22–32). To put it more succinctly, Bhasin's essay studies the work of an author who couples the history of his family's migration from Jamaica to the US with the "what-if" affordances of the autofictional form to explore what it means to be a second-generation immigrant of color and an author in today's America. The complexity that arises from these explorations enriches our knowledge of what American literary fiction is and can be at the same time as it validates some of Fishkin's predictions for the transnational turn.

Rørdal takes a somewhat different approach as she explores Guy Standing's concept of the precariat to discuss the crumbling of the American dream for the protagonist of Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* (2007). Rørdal argues that Sepha (the protagonist) finds himself in a "perpetual state of becoming" as he strives toward two mutually entangled but equally unachievable futures—that of national belonging and that of financial security. What then emerges are "the outlines of a particular aesthetics in which liminal spaces force us to suspend, revise, and re-think old lines of thought" (59). Such a rethinking includes a reassessment of the relationship between migration and social mobility, but also a renegotiation of

the relationship between American Studies, the concept of American literature, and the concerns of transnational literature produced in America. Rørdal's essay particularly relates to Fishkin's points about the US as a nation state that is always at a crossroads of cultures (Fishkin 43) and about the effects and consequences of global flows of people, capital, and commodities (Fishkin 24). This relationship can been in the way the essay examines the aesthetic representation of the entanglements of a state of cultural and national liminality with the overall trend toward class-related and economic precarity. Whether or not the increasing levels of precarity and the simultaneously declining opportunities for social mobility for the average American worker can be tied to the global flows of goods and capital, the fact remains that the status of the migrant, whose mobility is intertwined with these global flows, in large part depends precisely on their place in the hierarchies of the current capitalist system. In this context, Rørdal's essay explores precisely the way Mengestu aestheticizes the dually precarious position of working-class migrants.

While Bhasin and Rørdal largely focus on the dynamics of a transnational existence in America, David Siglos's essay studies the phenomenon of sudden death among Filipino men known as *bangungot*, its resistance to the usual premises of diagnostic narratives, and its power to disrupt imperial and heteronormative ways of seeing. Through his analysis of R. Zamora Linmark's 2011 novel *Leche* and the experiences of its Filipino American protagonist, along with his own encounters with the phenomenon, Siglos offers a kind of "view from *el otro lao*" (Fishkin 23) and mounts a literary and cultural critique of the lingering impacts of American imperialism on Filipinos and Filipino Americans. The essay's methodological approach, which weaves together personal anecdotes and scholarship, mirrors its critique of imperialism and outlines an epistemic approach based on Filipino perspectives that can bring more nuance to post-transnational-turn American Studies scholarship. In this way, Siglos's essay also responds to an overarching question that Fishkin posed in her address: "What would the field of American studies look like if the transnational rather than the national were at its center?" (Fishkin 21) through its endeavor to decenter the ways of knowing that still dominate American Studies.

The final essay of the issue is by Elina Siltanen and takes up the various ways in which the other-than-human, both animate and inanimate, disrupts the border regimes of the Mexican-American border in Lorna Dee Cervantes's poetry collections *Emplumada* (1981) and *Sueño* (2013). She connects the movements of the other-than-human to posthumanist ideas, which in turn creates an alternative vision in which, perhaps paradoxically, even borders themselves move in ways that the border regimes of nation states attempt to prevent humans from doing. In exploring the borderlands between Mexico and the US from the perspective of the other-than-human, Siltanen expands upon the line of thinking that Fishkin's address seems to have been inspired by, dedicated as it was to Gloria Anzaldúa, "a brilliant theorist of the arbitrariness of borders and the pain that they inflict, of the harsh realities of internal colonization, and of the challenges and delights of embracing multiple psychic locations" (Fishkin 21). In the present moment, marked by an increased hostility towards migrants and immigrants in both the US and the rest of the world, as well as by the mass deportations being conducted by the US, it has become even more important to place the arbitrariness of borders in the spotlight, which is precisely what Siltanen does.

Together, the essays of which this special issue is composed speak not only to the ongoing decentering of the American nation and its borders, but also to the vitality and importance of American Studies scholarship conducted both

within and outside the US: the six participating scholars, including myself, are based in four different countries—India, Norway, Finland, and the US—and three continents, and as such bring in a significant range of perspectives. We hope that readers will find this issue as engaging to read as it was rewarding to develop.

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Transnational American Studies
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# TRANSNATIONAL AMERICAN STUDIES

## The Last Twenty Years

The task I've taken on in this article is an impossible one. So much has happened in the field of transnational American Studies over the last twenty years that I can touch only the surface in the space I have here. But I welcome the opportunity to reflect on a handful of the many intriguing developments that the last two decades have produced.

Let me begin by saying what this essay will *not* do. I will not offer a totalizing theory of what transnational American Studies is or ought to be, or of what it is not. It's too soon for that. Twenty years may sound like a long time, but it really isn't. The field of American Studies itself is nearly a century old. If American Studies itself is almost a centenarian, the phenomenon that I called "the transnational turn in American studies" in 2004—which just recently passed its twentieth birthday—is, in many ways, still a mere teenager. Like all teenagers, it has many moods. it can be passionate, energetic and engaged; it can also be cynical, blasé, and detached. It can be omnivorous and it can be a very picky eater. Like all teenagers, it is a work in progress—defined as much by its unrealized aspirations as by its achievements. It wants to be smarter, more just, and more sensitive than its parents, wary of the prospect of replicating their blind spots and myopia. And, like all teenagers, it is embroiled in a perpetual crisis of identity, plagued by constant self-doubt, and prone to endless questioning. What will it be when it grows up? We'll have to wait and see.

As I reviewed some of the fascinating and disparate works of scholarship that have come into being over the last two decades, I found myself recalling my favorite quote from Jorge Luis Borges:

> A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face. (327)

When the field of transnational American Studies is as old as American Studies is now, the array of texts its scholars will have produced will trace the contours of our field.

Many scholars were wary and suspicious back in 2004 when I gave my Presidential Address to the American Studies Association on "The Transnational Turn" in American Studies (Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures"). Let me mention four of their

concerns and suggest how unfounded they turned out to be.

- Some scholars of Native American Studies told me that they were worried that if the transnational became a central focus of the field of American Studies, Native American Studies would be left out, marginalized even more than it was at the time.
- Some warned that transnational American Studies would only have the effect of reifying the nation rather than decentering it.
- Others expressed concern that my suggestion that they broaden their work beyond English-language materials was out of step with students' growing disaffection with learning foreign languages; indeed, my own department at the University of Texas at the time had recently raised the possibility of eliminating the language requirement for the PhD—a proposal that I'm happy to say was voted down.
- And finally, some US-based scholars complained that having to listen to the voices of scholars from outside the US would be boring. Actually an ASA official said that, after hearing that I planned to raise funds to bring more international scholars to the annual meeting than had ever come before. Why would I want to do that? This person asked.

As it turns out, the last twenty years have seen a remarkable efflorescence of scholarship in transnational American Studies fostered by a broad range of institutions, journals, and initiatives, with a resulting cornucopia of books and articles that have demonstrated how baseless each of these concerns turned out to be. I'll address each of these concerns in turn.

First, the concern that Native American Studies would be left out of a new turn to transnational approaches. That simply hasn't happened. Indeed, two institutions devoted to transnational American Studies that were born during the last two decades have shown how unwarranted that concern really was: one is the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, a peer-reviewed, open-access journal that is now sixteen years old, which was co-founded in 2009 by Alfred Hornung, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Takayuki Tatsumi, and myself; the other is the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany, which Alfred Hornung founded in 2014. Both entities have demonstrated the fresh and important ways that transnational approaches can enliven and enrich Native American and indigenous studies.

In 2012, the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* featured a special forum on "Charting Transnational Native American Studies," edited by Hsinya Huang, Philip Deloria, Laura Furlan, and John Gamber. As these scholars point out in their introduction, "[f]rom a Native American perspective, the US has always been transnational, due to its relationships with sovereign Native nations within its borders," and, indeed "indigenous experiences may make much more sense if understood with less focus on national boundaries" (Huang et al., "Charting"). In their essay in this special forum, titled "The Trans/National Terrain of Anishinaabe Law and Diplomacy," Joseph Bauerkemper and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark acknowledge that there has been "extensive and enduring resistance to transnational theoretical and methodological frameworks" among Native American Studies scholars, largely because the efforts of "scholarly transnationalism" to "unmoor intellectual work from national(ist) affiliations" runs directly counter to the "extensive and enduring commitments to nationhood within Native American Studies." Yet, they go on to say, "the judicious use of

particular aspects of conventional transnationalism and the development of innovative conceptions of transnationalism can serve" the field of Native American Studies. The "mode of indigenous transnationalism" these authors propose "decenters the settler-state while recentering Native nationhood." It underscores "the boundaries that distinguish Native nations as discrete polities. Through an analysis of Anishinaabe law and diplomacy, this article lays "the groundwork for recognizing the transnational flows of intellectual, cultural, economic, social, and political traditions between and across the boundaries of distinct yet often—though not always—allied and mutually amenable Native nations" (Bauerkemper and Stark).

Chadwick Allen, in his essay in that special forum, offers the alternative rubric for the term "trans-indigenous" to describe native networks and coalitions of global indigenous studies; the term is also deployed by Hsinya Huang in a book published in the UK two years after the special forum came out, entitled *Aspects of Transnational and Indigenous Cultures*, which she co-edited with Clara Shu-chun Chang (Allen, "A Transnational"; Huang and Chang). Like the work of the scholars noted above, Huang and Chang's book reframes both Indigenous Studies and Ethnic Studies as transnational at their core, exploring global vectors that transcend the borders of both Indian nations and nation states to generate new insights into place, mobility, identity, and community. It demonstrates that scholarship informed by comparative and multilingual approaches can enrich our understanding of the literary production of Indigenous people, as well as the representation of Indigenous people in popular culture. For example, in "Towards Trans-Pacific Ecopoetics: Three Indigenous Texts," Huang explores the "Indigenous Pacific" as a "large world in which the indigenous people intermingled along numerous, interconnecting routes, unhindered by the boundaries erected much later by imperial powers" (113). She examines it as a place where neighboring communities "exchanged ideas and products, often across vast oceanic distances" (113). Her comparison of *People of the Whale* by Chickasaw (and West Coast North American) writer Linda Hogan with *Whale Rider* by New Zealand/Aotearoa Māori writer Witi Ihimaera and *Eyes in the Sky* by Aboriginal Taiwan Tao writer Syaman Rapongan allows her to explore the Pacific "as a site of trans-indigenous solidarity in protecting oceanic environments" (114). Eschewing the trajectories of imperialism and colonialism, Hogan, Ihimaera, and Rapongan craft "mobile, flexible, and voyaging subjects" who are not "physically or culturally circumscribed by terrestrial boundaries," and for whom the Pacific is a site of "co-belonging and co-history across species boundaries and racial/ethnic and cultural borders" (115-16). In Huang's hands, the surprising resonances among the ocean-nurtured beings that emerge from these imaginative works come to inhabit a "planetary commons" united by the water that sustains both life and art.

Chadwick Allen's essay in the Special Forum in *JTAS* reminds us that long before the transnational became a common concept invoked in scholarship on history, literature, and the arts, "this kind of travel was already the old and ongoing story of incised rock and painted hides; of baskets, pottery and textiles; of fish hooks, canoes, and projectile points; of carvings, personal adornments, and sacred objects. . . . *Trans*-, yes, in the sense of *across*, *beyond* and *through*; but not limited to the national borders of contemporary (settler) nation states" (Allen, "A Transnational"). Or, as Huang and Chang remind us, "[n]eighboring communities have always exchanged ideas and products, often across vast ocean distances. Along these routes of interconnection was a large world in which indigenes mingled, unhindered by boundaries erected much later by imperial powers" (xvi). Allen explores this idea at greater length in his 2012

book *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies*.

Transnational approaches allow cultural products from far-flung places to be put in conversation with each other. For example, in her essay in Huang and Chang's collection, Tzu-I Chung discusses Walt Disney's *Pocahontas* alongside an enormously popular recent Chinese novel, *Wolf Totem*, by Jiang Rong, offering insights into the representation of Native Americans in both US and Chinese culture. Meanwhile, Erik Hieta compares the characterization of Indians and Sámi in an essay titled "'Awakening the Racial Spirit': Indians, Sámi, and the Politics of Ethnographic Representation, 1930s–1940" in *American Studies in Scandinavia* in 2019.

Other works melding Native American Studies and transnational American Studies during the last two decades include Shari Huhndorf's 2009 book *Mapping the Americas: The Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture*. Engaging such issues as labor and environmental exploitation, global imperialism, and the commodification of indigenous cultures, Huhndorf's book examines how Native cultures increasingly transcend national boundaries. Also interesting on this general topic are four other works: Robin Maria DeLugan's 2010 article in *American Ethnologist* titled "Indigeneity across Borders: Hemispheric Migrations and Cosmopolitan Encounter"; a special issue of *American Quarterly* edited by Paul Lai and Lindsey Claire Smith in 2010, titled "Alternative Contact: Indigeneity, Globalism, and American Studies"; Daniel Heath Justice's 2010 article on Cherokee Transnationalism in the *New Centennial Review*; and Jodi Byrd's article "American Indian Transnationalism" in the *Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature* edited by Yogita Goyal in 2017.

A truly intriguing example of melding Transnational American Studies with Native American Studies is Padraig Kirwan's essay "Recognition, Resilience & Relief: The Meaning of Gift," which appeared in a 2020 book edited by Kirwan and LeAnne Howe called *Famine Pots: The Choctaw Irish Gift Exchange 1847-Present* (and which won the American Studies Association's Shelley Fisher Fishkin Prize For International Scholarship in Transnational American Studies in 2021). The essay and the book tell of a sizeable sum of money the Choctaw collected and sent to the Irish in 1847, at the height of the potato famine and just sixteen years after the Choctaw began their march on the Trail of Tears. Kirwan brings together a broad range of historical sources to probe how the Choctaw Nation's stunningly generous gift to the poor of Ireland during the potato famine was more than a memorable expression of empathy: it involved recognition of how the Irish and the Choctaw had both been victimized in analogous ways by powerful nationalist governments ready to turn aside from their plights. Both an imperialist British government and an expansionist American one were ready to marginalize the Irish and the Choctaw, respectively, as "others" whose sufferings were the unintended consequences or collateral damage of an official policy that has been called a kind of benign imperialism. As he traces these two marginalized groups' longstanding awareness of each other and their appreciation of the ways in which their suffering had been ignored or rationalized by the misguided paternalism of central powers, Kirwan shows us the importance of the mutual recognition that the 1847 Choctaw gift embodied. The Irish in America were often viewed as victimizers of Native Americans despite the fact that the Irish themselves were often marginalized by some of the same forces that viewed Native Americans as irredeemably "other." While fully recognizing the fact that Irish and Irish American settlers were often deeply implicated in Indian removal in nineteenth-century America, Kirwan manages to unearth unexpected affinities and partnerships between the Irish and Indigenous involving moments of

reciprocity and recognition that were profoundly important to both groups—and that are often recalled by people in both nations.

The transnational turn in our field has brought not only conceptual complexity to the study of Native American and Indigenous cultures, but also advances in access to important Native American research materials. A symposium held in 2022 at the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies in Mainz, Germany, on "Indigenous Print cultures, Media, and Literatures," organized by Oliver Scheiding and Cristina Stanciu, brought Native scholars and others from around the world together to consider the current state of digitization of Indigenous periodicals and archives. The conference's findings were extended and amplified by a research group devoted to Transnational Periodical Cultures funded by the state of Rhineland-Palatinate in Germany, the German Research Foundation, and the Obama Institute, which investigated the possibilities of building a "Text Corpus of American Indian Newspapers and Magazines, 1890-1930," and by a research project on "Periodicals and Indigenous Modernity" funded by the German Research Foundation (Scheiding and Newton 111-32).

During the last decade, there have been a number of other stimulating volumes and essays exploring transnational dimensions of Native American literature and culture. These include the 2017 collection *The World, the Text and the Indian: Global Dimensions of Native American Literature*, edited by Scott Richard Lyons, which grew out of a 2013 symposium held at the University of Michigan on "Globalizing the Word: Transnationalism and the Making of Native American Literature" (1). The book includes examinations of such under-studied topics as Objibwe men who fought in Europe in World War I (Vizenor) and Native American literary criticism in a global context (Krupat). Global contexts also come into play in Robert Lee's article (in Huang and Chang's volume) about a Cherokee writer's encounter with Germany and Australia; a Choctaw writer's encounter with France, Germany, and Asia, and the encounter of a writer with Ponca/Osage roots with England.

Other works published in the last decade explore the challenges of Native and Indigenous "survivance" against a global backdrop of the myths and stereotypes that often go hand in hand with (and sometimes undergird) actual physical violence that threatens Native life (Bannerjee 13). These insidious "fairy-tale" versions of Indigeneity, as Mita Banerjee notes in her introduction to the edited collection *Comparative Indigenous Studies* (2016) may be found "in cultures as diverse as Germany, Russia, the US, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark and Suriname," often accompanying "the material violence of displacement, genocide, and environmental injustices" (11-12). The global performance and appropriation of Native American traditions has also gotten more attention in recent years. For example, Tara Browner explored American Indian-style pow-wow singing and dancing in Denmark in 2011, while Leopold Lippert examined "cross-racial performances of 'Indianness' on various Austrian stages" in 2018.

Scholars have also probed the roots of global fantasies about Native Americans in the last two decades. The global reach of a figure like Karl May, the best-selling German author of all time, whose novels introduced many of these myths around the world, often figures in these discussions, but other writers do as well. In his examination of portrayals of American Indians in Danish travel literature in the mid to late nineteenth century, for example, Jørn Brøndal looks at the ways in which writers including Hans Peter Christian Hansen, Vilhelm C. S. Topsøe, Robert Watt, and Henrik Cavling promoted the narrative of the "vanishing Indian" in Danish culture, tying "the Indians to a receding landscape of the past and—for the most part—to establish a

contradiction between Indians and white 'civilization'"—although they "sometimes attempted to create links between the Indians and Scandinavian settlers" (82). Meanwhile, a 2022 essay collection titled *Finnish Settler Colonialism in North America: Rethinking Finnish Experiences in Transnational Spaces*, edited by Rani-Henrik Andersson and Janne Lahti, examines Finland's complicity in the settler colonialism that led to the displacement and elimination of so many of North America's Indigenous peoples and their cultures. Janne Lahti's chapter, for example, "Gustaf Nordenskiöld and the Mesa Verde: Settler Colonial Disconnects and Finnish Colonial Legacies," examines Gustaf Nordenskiöld's decision in 1891 to excavate and pillage the ancestral Puebloan cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde and bring the artifacts he collected back to the Finnish National Museum. (A portion of these Indigenous ancestral remains and artifacts were returned to the US in 2019).

Whether focusing on the exchange of ideas, gifts, artifacts, and publications, or on how Indigenous peoples are impacted by the circulation of global capital, or on what Indigenous individuals see and how *they* are seen when they travel, transnational approaches turn out to have more to offer Native American Studies than many had expected.

* * *

A second area that concerned some colleagues in the early 2000s was the fear that transnational American Studies would only reify the nation rather than decenter it. However, that didn't happen. Instead, our mental maps have been reshaped dramatically over the last two decades. While the 1990s saw the rise of hemispheric approaches to our field, and while transatlantic approaches had been around for quite a while, during the last two decades, *transpacific, oceanic, archipelagic*, and *planetary* perspectives have come into their own, with each term having the potential to dramatically transform the ways in which we envision American Studies' place in the world. Yuan Shu has been instrumental in promoting transpacific and oceanic approaches to American Studies, while Brian Russell Roberts has championed archipelagic perspectives, and Alfred Hornung has advocated for a planetary understanding.

Yuan Shu is co-editor of *American Studies as Transnational Practice: Turning toward the Transpacific* (2015), as well as a 2019 collection *Oceanic Archives, Indigenous Epistemologies, and Transpacific American Studies.* These volumes suggest what focusing on the Asian Pacific and Pacific islands can teach us not only about neglected dimensions of American empire, but also about Indigenous epistemologies and non-western knowledge production (Shu, *Oceanic Archives* 2). Exploring how "the Far West of North America became the Far East of Northeast Asia" can fill in gaps left by US state-bound archives, which, for example, "did not include anything on the Chinese 'middle passage' across the Pacific or their treatment after their arrival in Hawai'i, North America, and Central and Latin America" (Shu, *Oceanic Archives* 2).The shift to a transpacific or oceanic frame of reference that Shu advocates also opens the door to topics like the one that Elizabeth DeLoughrey explores in "The Myth of Isolates: Ecosystem Ecologies in the Nuclear Pacific," in *Oceanic Archives.* DeLoughrey tracks "the origin of the science of ecosystem ecology to the nuclear tests conducted by the US military during the Cold War," noting that few scholars working in ecology today understand "the indebtedness of the Age of Ecology to the Atomic Age," and miss the ways in which "American environmentalism and militarism are paradoxically and mutually imbricated" (Shu, *Oceanic Archives* 6).

Oceanic perspectives are central to archipelagic American Studies, a concept for which Brian Russell Roberts has been a compelling advocate in the 2018 anthology he co-edited with Michelle

Ann Stephens, *Archipelagic American Studies*, and in his brilliant 2021 book *Borderwaters: Amid the Archipelagic States of America*. Roberts startles us with the insight that since the late twentieth century, the US has claimed more water space than land space, as well as more water space than any other country in the world. National mythologies of the United States as a continent give way to a different understanding of America's place in the world as what Roberts calls an archipelagic nation, a new geography that offers up fresh and thought-provoking insights into what we are as a nation. Eschewing continental exceptionalism, Roberts—and the contributors to the anthology he co-edited—focus on the US as a set of interconnected islands, archipelagoes, shorelines, continents, seas, and oceans and illuminate unexpected dimensions of our past, present, and future. In *Borderwaters,* Roberts notes that when we take into account the US's maritime claims, the US has borders "contiguous with some twenty-one countries," demonstrating why the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in 1983 called US an "ocean nation"—indeed, the largest oceanic nation in the world (2, 4-6). Roberts's inquiry into how archipelagos are grasped and understood shows a rather mind-boggling openness to considering "nonhuman subjectivities such as those exhibited by island-hopping birds, large monitor lizards swimming among islands, or the coral polyps that form the islets that constitute the archipelagic formation of an atoll" (16). Roberts's "postcontinental redescription of the United States" offers stimulating and provocative questions for American Studies scholars to ponder (16).

And while Yuan Shu and Brian Russell Roberts have urged us to attend to transpacific, oceanic, and archipelagic perspectives, Alfred Hornung has taken an even broader view, urging us to take a *planetary* perspective on our field of study in a 2011 essay entitled "Planetary Citizenship," and in a 2015 essay titled "ChinAmerica: Global Affairs and Planetary Consciousness" (which appeared in Shu's *American Studies as Transnational Practice*). Hornung notes that foregrounding issues such as ecology and the environment requires that we move beyond narrow national political and economic boundaries and adopt what he refers to as a "planetary consciousness," an idea that builds on the concept of "planetarity" limned by Gayatri Spivak. Hornung tracks how planetary perspectives shaped the life writing of individuals including Canadian scientist David Suzuki and former US president Barack Obama, two men who, in his view, "lived and practiced" a "planetary citizenship in their dedication to environmental causes and new global initiatives for the improvement of life on Earth" (Shu, *American Studies as Transnational Practice* 13).

Rather than reifying the nation state, as some critics of transnational American Studies had predicted, new spatial paradigms have emerged. In addition to transpacific, oceanic, archipelagic, and planetary perspectives on our field of study, scholars in the last two decades have continued to argue for the value of "hemispheric" and "interAmerican" frames (Levander and Levine; Raussert). All of these approaches have decentered the nation and given us entirely new mental maps.

* * *

Let's move now to the concern that encouraging American Studies scholars to move beyond English-only materials in our research would be problematic and more trouble than it was worth. Colleagues expressed to me informally their fear that this idea was out of step with students' growing resistance to learning foreign languages and would not yield much new knowledge that was particularly valuable. But those who expressed these views failed to recognize that there were scholars already conversant in languages other than English who had not previously used their language skills to explore topics

in American Studies because of the English-only traditions in the field. As the field of American Studies began to welcome research that drew on archives and knowledge bases in languages other than English, scholars who had previously published work in English that drew only on sources in English—like UCLA's King-kok Cheung—could now feel free to frame research topics that utilized their knowledge of other languages. Vast unexplored areas of inquiry have opened up as a result, moving the field in fruitful new directions.

Those who doubted the value of encouraging the use of foreign-language sources in American Studies also failed to realize that a move of this sort could attract a new crop of scholars who would find the field appealing precisely because of its openness to transnational research that moved beyond materials in English alone. Some, who already knew languages other than English, would develop fresh research topics that could be pursued only by scholars with their multilingual skills—particularly topics in which the subject of translation itself often plays a central role.

Others would learn new languages in order to gain access to archives crucial to their research. As we will see, the subfield of Cold War Studies is one area in American Studies that has been significantly deepened by four stellar younger scholars who have utilized their foreign-language skills during the last two decades to publish groundbreaking books and articles: Maria Bo, Chris Suh, Selina Lai-Henderson, and Brian K. Goodman.

King-kok Cheung, a senior Americanist in UCLA's department of English, had published a body of respected work on Asian American literature over the years that analyzes works written in English by US and Canadian writers of Asian descent (Cheung, *Articulate Silences*; Cheung, ed., *An Interethnic Companion*). But in 2019 she drew on her knowledge of Chinese, as well as English, to write a stimulating and original book—*Chinese American Literature without Borders*—that uses a bilingual and intercultural approach to both Chinese and Chinese American writers, showing just how much we can gain when we broaden our tools of analysis beyond English alone. "Moving across languages," she writes, can "open our eyes to alternative ways of seeing, being, and becoming" (15). While noting the marginalization of Asian American literature in both Chinese and US cultural conversations, Cheung demonstrates how the series of writers she discusses manage to "cross-pollinate two cultures," in the process "melding centers and margins" (5). Her critical strategy "spans languages and national cultures to illuminate the writers' hyphenated consciousness and bicultural aesthetics" (13). "By stretching across linguistic and cultural bounds," she writes, she seeks "to decenter the European American heritage and work toward a bilateral literary analysis" (2). At the same time, "[b]y collating Chinese and American gender norms and tuning in to bicultural aesthetics," Cheung tells us, she "traces how the writers tap their ancestral and adoptive cultures for artistic inspiration, all the time questioning the mores of both societies" (12). Cheung is currently taking her bicultural and bilingual investigations in yet another direction, in a book she is developing titled *Canto Aiiieeeee! Cantonese-American Reverberations in Literature, Theater, Martial Arts, and Popular Culture,* that she is co-editing with Belinda Kong, Selina Lai-Henderson, Bo Wah Leung, Sean Metzger, and myself. It will be the first major anthology to explore transnational Cantonese-American cultural circulations in the arts and the first to excavate their crucial importance to American Studies more broadly.

Cheung's approach of bringing multilingual transnational perspectives to bear on both Chinese and Chinese American writing is being extended by a new generation of scholars, including my Stanford colleague Maria Bo. Bo is one of four younger scholars who have recently

published fresh and important research on the Cold War informed by multilingual archives and perspectives. Bo is completing a book titled *Writing on Water: Tracing Equivocality in Sino-US Cold War Literary Translations.* It addresses the role literature and translation played in Cold War efforts to convince members of the Chinese diaspora to choose whether to side with the US-led Free World or with the Communist state of Mainland China. Bo studies "Asian and Asian American writers that were mobilized, knowingly or not, as 'Cold Warriors,' as they wrote between languages and translated texts across the Pacific" (Bo, *Writing on Water*). One case she examines is how Jade Snow Wong's 1950 Chinatown novel, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, was translated and sent abroad by the US State Department to Overseas Chinese everywhere as an example of the success of democracy, only for its narrative to run aground as the book's American concept of ethnicity failed to translate abroad (Bo, "Language Lessons") Another chapter analyzes Eileen Chang's translation of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* in 1953 "as part of a U.S. government-sponsored propaganda project" that aimed to integrate "American and Chinese notions of literary 'truth'" (Bo, "Freedom Overseas"). Bo's work on literary propaganda between the US and China helps us "re-imagine traditional boundaries of what counts as 'Asian American' cultural production" (Bo, *Writing on Water*). Focusing on translation—as Bo writes, "what problems it causes, what unplanned effects it has, and how it reveals the stories we tell ourselves as we attempt to connect with each other"—allows us to read ethnic American literature in new ways while revealing historical threads of transnationality that have always existed in literary production (Bo, *Writing on Water*). Bo's research on diasporic Asian literature draws on her language training in Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, and French, as well as a grounding in translation theory.

Translation figures in subtle ways in the research that resulted in Chris Suh's 2025 article in *Diplomatic History*, "Diasporic Politics in the Age of Decolonization: Korean Independence and the US Military Occupation of Korea, 1945–1948." Suh's bilingual skills allow him to mine both the Korean and English-language stories in a newspaper published in the US, as well as English and Korean primary and secondary sources in both countries. Articles that appeared in English during the early Cold War in *Korean Independence* (*Tongnip*), a bilingual newspaper based in Los Angeles, turned out not to be just translations of those that ran in Korean in that newspaper (as had long been assumed): they were completely different stories. Analyzing the Korean-language stories in that paper (along with other archival materials) allows Suh to challenge the dominant interpretations of the origins of the Cold War in Korea and responses to the US military's occupation of the country. The article examines how progressive and Marxist Korean Americans made sense of the changing US policy in Korea from 1945 to 1948, when the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) governed the southern half of the peninsula. It argues that, until the summer of 1947, editors of and contributors to *Korean Independence* supported US policy because they believed the United States would work with the non-communist left in Korea toward reunification and would oppose anti-communist Korean politicians who sought to establish a separate government in South Korea. Suh's examination of the archives of the US Army Military Government in Korea, as well as the US State Department, shows that the diasporic Koreans who edited and wrote for the paper understood the United States' policy correctly. Although the prevailing understanding of the early Cold War in Korea assumed the opposite, Suh's archival research shows that during these years the USAMGIK had a difficult relationship with the rightists in Korea, including Syngman Rhee, who

campaigned to create a separate, anti-communist South Korea (and who would become the first president of the country in 1948). The article concludes by showing how the separate government in South Korea emerged only after the United States changed its policy toward Korea in 1947, when the escalating tensions of the Cold War prompted the United States to adopt a more aggressive posture toward the Soviet Union.

Suh had earlier utilized his language skills to probe the complexities of the early Cold War challenges faced by the USAMGIK in a prize-winning 2014 paper about responses to the first Korean-American novel *The Grass Roof* (1931), and its author, Younghill Kang, in 1946 (Suh, "East Goes West"). As Kun Jong Lee has noted, Younghill Kang's *The Grass Roof* was not translated into Korean until 1977, and did not attract the attention of literary scholars based in Korea until the 1990s (K. Lee 276). But despite being a book that only a relatively small number of Koreans could even read in the 1930s, Koreans in Korea applauded the novel out of gratitude that it "had drawn the attention of Anglophone readers to Korea's colonial situation," and out of a sense of national pride sparked by "the accolades it got in the American press"—despite recognizing "flaws they saw in its depiction of their country" (Suh, "East Goes West"). In 1946, the USAMGIK liked the book so much that they brought Kang, now an American, back to Korea to run their public information office and ordered many copies of the novel, flagging it as recommended reading to any GI who wanted to learn about Korea. But, as Suh notes, the same military officials who brought Kang back to Korea "became furious when Kang, after returning to the United States a year and a half later," published an essay

> in which he argued that the country recently 'liberated' by the United States was now filled with corruption, hunger, poverty, and political chaos. The US Military Government, Kang explained, had the "agency" to "correct the evils of the provisional regime" yet it refused do anything. (Suh, "East Goes West")

Suh observes that most of the Koreans who had taken issue with aspects of Kang's portrayal of Korea in *The Grass Roof* now celebrated his depiction of the country under American rule.

Suh's bilingual skills allowed him to come up with similarly fresh and unexpected interpretations of the roots of US policy toward Korea in the decades leading up to the Cold War in his 2023 book *The Allure of Empire: American Encounters with Asians in the Age of Transpacific Expansion and Exclusion*. Suh demonstrates that American imperialism in Asia and the persecution of Asian Americans in the American West turn out to be connected in ways that previous scholars largely ignored. A tremendous number of useful Japanese primary materials that have never been translated into English have been translated into Korean, allowing Suh to effectively put into conversation English, Korean, and Japanese sources that he uncovered in archives in Seoul, San Francisco, Washington, DC, New York, New Haven, Boston, and Atlanta. The result is a groundbreaking book that interweaves previously separated stories of immigration policy, military conquest, social science studies, and global ideologies of racial hierarchies to present a new history of the imperial Pacific from the Russo-Japanese war (1904-5) through the 1940s.

A third young scholar in Transnational American Studies who is using her ability to access materials in two languages to make a distinctive contribution to Cold War Studies is Selina Lai-Henderson. Her prize-winning 2023 essay "'You Are No Darker than I Am': *The Souls of Black Folk* in Maoist China" (winner of the Modern Language Association's 1921 Prize in American Literature) and her 2020 article "Color Around the Globe:

Langston Hughes and Black Internationalism in China" both draw on her research in English- and Chinese-language archives. These bilingual materials enable Lai-Henderson to present rare insights into Hughes's engagement with Chinese leftist writers in China during this era and unpack the ways in which Hughes, the first African American intellectual to visit China, transformed the public image of African Americans in the Chinese cultural imagination. Lai-Henderson points to the inspiration that Hughes's visit had for both the Chinese intellectuals whom he met in China and African American civil rights leaders back home. It would help enable his contemporaries on both sides of the Pacific to envision the possibilities of an Afro-Asian alliance during the Mao and Civil Rights eras in the 1960s and 70s. Lai-Henderson's original discussion deepens our understanding of Hughes's efforts to frame a concept of black internationalism. As she notes, "[a]t a time when the Soviet Union held center stage in communist revolutionary thought, Hughes's Chinese encounters challenged the assumption in American and African American communities" that China was, for the most part, "largely irrelevant in the discourse of proletarianism" (Lai-Henderson, "Color" 107). Although he was in China only relatively briefly, his trip remained important to him as he "repeatedly included China in the complex web of global liberation in his writing," drawing connections that linked the United States, Africa, China, and the Soviet Union in his exploration of "alternative democratic spaces that allow for mobility and continuity in how African Americans define their positions in the world" (Lai-Henderson, "Color" 107). A previously unpublished poem titled "China" that Hughes wrote in 1963 (which Lai-Henderson unearthed and published in the *Yale Review* in 2024) further suggests Hughes's admiration of China's role in global struggles against oppression during the Cold War, a time when Hughes's relationship with the US government was fraught. Her current work focuses the transnational travels of both Hughes and W. E. B. Du Bois in China, and on China's impact on these two canonical American writers. (She has contributed to other areas than Cold War Studies as well. Her earlier 2015 landmark volume, *Mark Twain in China*, made invaluable contributions to Mark Twain studies and translation studies and raised intriguing questions about ideas of race and nation in transnational global contexts.)

But what about students who do not start out with training in multiple languages? What about the fear that greater emphasis on foreign languages and translation will deter students from embarking on research in transnational American Studies? Although some students may be deterred, others will embrace the challenge, as Brian Goodman did. As an undergraduate at Stanford, Goodman was intrigued when he learned, while poking around in the Allen Ginsberg papers in Stanford's Special Collections, that the poet had travelled to Prague in 1965, and was crowned as "*Kraj Majales*," or "King of May," by Czech students. He decided to write a senior essay about the episode, and got an undergraduate research grant from Stanford to go to the Czech Republic to interview some of the participants in those events who were still around. In the process of doing that, he decided he really needed to learn Czech, and he did. It turned out that his investigation of Ginsberg's trip was only the tip of the iceberg. His 2023 book, *The Nonconformists: American and Czech Writers Across the Iron Curtain*, documents the many surprising and important connections between US and Czech literary culture during the Cold War—connections that had a major impact on both art and politics on both sides of the Atlantic. He discusses not only friendships forged by American writers Ginsberg, Philip Roth, and John Updike with Czech nonconformists including Vaclav Havel, Josef Škvorecký, Ivan Klima, and Milan Kundera, but also the history of the Czech fascination with American cultural trends

from the Beats to Dixieland jazz, rock and roll, and the works of authors like Langston Hughes and Ernest Hemingway—even when that fascination came with major risks. The story the book tells about the transnational circulation of literature that transformed Kafka's Prague into "a global capital of dissent" demonstrates (as Jonah Raskin puts it) "that the Iron Curtain wasn't as formidable and as impenetrable a force as it once seemed to capitalists and communists, peaceniks and warmongers, and those who advocated for the use of nuclear weapons and those who wanted to ban them" (Raskin). Goodman, "a versatile literary historian of the Cold War," as Raskin writes, and "an advocate for cultural cross fertilization and building bridges not walls," demonstrates that there was more cultural traffic back and forth between the East and the West than most of us suspected. The result is a productive intervention into our understanding of the Cold War (Raskin).

I don't want to suggest that all students will find multilingual approaches to American Studies appealing—just as I don't want to suggest that every scholar in our field must work on transnational topics. But I do want to highlight some of the rich, unexplored territory that awaits us when we and our students move beyond an English-only vision of our field.

* * *

Finally, let me address the complaint that paying attention to the voices of scholars from outside the US would be boring—that there wasn't that much that Americanists in the US could learn from them. Here I'll draw on my own experiences for evidence as to how unfounded that concern actually was. In addition to invigorating and enlivening the annual American Studies Association convention with their presence, students and colleagues from around the world have transformed my personal agenda as a scholar in unexpected and fascinating ways. Over the last two decades I've embarked on several research ventures in transnational American Studies that involved intense collaboration and consultation with scholars from around the world—projects which I would not have even conceived of had I not recognized how much I had to learn from them. The experience has been *anything* but dull.

The first was the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* (I have served on its editorial board since co-founding it in 2009). Sponsored by the Obama Institute and Stanford's American Studies Program, and hosted on the University of California's e-scholarship platform, the journal's editors include scholars based in Canada, China, Germany, Japan, Turkey, and the US (*JTAS*). It has published work by scholars based in Argentina, Australia, Austria, Canada, China, Cuba, Denmark, France, Germany, Guam, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Korea, Lebanon, Macao, Malasia, Morocco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Romania, Russia, Sāmoa, American Samoa, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, Tunisia, Turkey, the UK, and the US (Fishkin, "Envisioning"). The journal has included Special Forums on topics including "Archipelagoes/Oceans/American Visuality"; "Teaching and Theorizing Transnational American Studies Around the Globe"; "Global Huck: Mapping the Cultural Work of Translations of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*"; "Transnational Black Politics and Resistance"; "Overseas Empire and Transnational American Studies"; "Charting Transnational Native American Studies"; "Sweden and America"; "La Floride française: Florida, France, and the Francophone World"; and "The Molecular Intimacies of Empire," to name just a few. The most recent issue of *JTAS* contains a special section on "Reflections on the US 2024 Elections in a Global Context," which features contributions from scholars based in Belgium, China, Denmark, France, Hungary, India, Italy, Poland, and the US (Gaines and Reimer 5-107). Being exposed to the work of

scholars from around the globe has been anything but boring—and the editorial discussions with wonderful colleagues have been a true joy. *JTAS* has also been an important training ground for graduate students: during their time in graduate school, Chris Suh was *JTAS*'s managing editor, Brian Goodman was its Special Forums editor, and Selina Lai-Henderson was an associate managing editor. All three are now emerging leaders in a field that barely existed when they entered college.

What I learned from co-editing the "Global Huck" special forum in the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* prompted me to make transnational perspectives central to my own most recent book, published in 2025 in Yale University Press' "Black Lives" biography series: *Jim: The Life and Afterlives of Huckleberry Finn's Comrade*. The book includes a long chapter that deals with more than a dozen of the sixty-seven languages into which Twain's novel has been translated. It was a pleasure to interact with scholars I'd met and worked with who have studied translations of the book into Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish, and also to read research in English by scholars I didn't know personally who'd written on versions in Czech, Danish, Norwegian, Slovenian, and Swedish (Fishkin, *Jim* 276-310). I was also happy to be able to include in my long chapter on Black actors who have portrayed Jim in film versions of the novel discussions of two Soviet and two German films; colleagues and former students with greater knowledge of Russia and Germany than I had were happy to answer questions that came up in my research (Fishkin, *Jim* 216-27; 268-75).

The second major collaborative venture in transnational American Studies on which I have embarked was the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford, a massive enterprise that began in 2011 and ended in 2021 that aimed to recover the history of the Chinese who built the first transcontinental railroad across the US—the source of the funds that built my university. I don't think I would have even conceived of the project—which I co-founded and co-directed with my colleague Gordon H. Chang—If experience had not taught me what a pleasure it was to collaborate with colleagues around the world. Over 150 scholars in history, literature, anthropology, archaeology, and other fields from Canada, China, Taiwan, and the US worked together to produce books and articles in Chinese and English, oral histories, digital visualizations, and traveling historical and photographic exhibits that illuminated this neglected chapter of the past. There were things we never could have learned without the involvement of scholars from all over the world. A colleague at a French-speaking university in Canada, for example, found the only eye-witness account of the 1867 strike by the Chinese workers, the largest workplace strike yet in America at the time, in a memoir in French by Simone de Beauvoir's uncle (Robinson 221-23). Colleagues in China were able to contribute invaluable insights into how the workers paid for their passage, how they sent the bones of deceased workers back to China, what their state of education and literacy was, etc. (Guoxiong; Ding; Jin). It was a tremendous pleasure to visit some of the sending villages with colleagues in China and to have them accompany us to sites in the Sierras that the Chinese built. The fruits of our research appear in the volume I co-edited with Gordon H. Chang, *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental*, and in the broad range of materials listed and linked on the project's website—including books in Chinese and English, a special issue of a journal, over fifty oral histories, web-exclusive publications, digital visualizations, a teaching guide, etc. (*Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University*). I find the worry that it would be boring to talk with colleagues from around the world simply dumbfounding—and absurd.

* * *

The transnational turn in American Studies did not marginalize Native American studies. It did not reify the nation in new ways. The field's increased openness to scholarship in languages other than English turned out to be a boon rather than a burden, and interactions in person, in print, and online with scholars from around the globe turned out to be anything but a bore. The transnational turn may still be a teenager in the grand scheme of things—but it is a teenager with a promising future.

Today, however, that future is threatened by political developments in the US that have left scholars (as well as many others) reeling. The current administration has waged war on the ideals on which the nation was founded and on efforts over the centuries that followed to form a "more perfect union." The idea of equality has been assailed. Voting rights, civil rights—even democracy itself—have been devalued and undermined. The values of diversity, equity and inclusion have been demonized, along with expertise itself. History is under siege. Universities are under attack. Important research projects have been defunded and decimated. Presenters from right-wing media now occupy major cabinet positions. Museums are being forced to toe a narrow ideological line. The rule of law can no longer be assumed. Facts themselves are cast as the enemy. International exchanges are being curtailed or cut. Scholars who mention "race" or "gender" in their Fulbright applications find their promised grants cancelled. International students are being deported. Federal troops line the streets of peaceful major American cities. American citizens are increasingly deprived of rights for which hundreds of thousands fought and died over two and a half centuries. The world in which the scholarship described and celebrated in this essay was produced is no longer the world in which we live. What are we to do?

This summer, while staggering under the grief, shock, and disappointment of watching our fragile American experiment in democracy endure the steady onslaught of an elected leader who emulates the dictators and autocrats he admires, I attended a Critical Island Studies Symposium at National Taiwan Normal University in Taipei. I began to wonder: might our sanity as scholars of American Studies be saved by our embracing an archipelagic vision of what we do?

What if, instead of getting depressed by the thought that we now live in or study a United States that has betrayed us and the ideals on which it was founded, we envisioned ourselves as inhabiting an archipelago of border-crossing seekers of knowledge? Doesn't that also describe where we live? What if we and the individual scholars with whom we interact and correspond all over the world were each tiny islands in this imagined archipelago, along with the institutes and departments and universities that house us, the journals we edit, the conferences we attend? What if we envisioned ourselves as part of a vast and expansive constellation of islands of inquiry where inhabitants were linked by the conviction that history, facts, and truth matter? What if each of us were part of an archipelago of shared respect, of curiosity, and diversity—an imagined community that stretches from one end of the globe to the other? An archipelago of islands that may be *in* various nation states, but are not *of* them? An archipelago that fiercely asserts its independence even when that independence is threatened and challenged by those who fear it or misunderstand it or don't believe it has a right to exist?

I have studied the US with passion and devotion for my entire professional life. I now know that what I had imagined it to be all those years is not a given—that some of the qualities that made it vibrant and fascinating also contained the seeds of the forces now tearing it apart. It is more imperative now than ever that we keep producing

scholarship that raises more questions than it answers; that we keep teaching classes that open students' minds; that we keep asking hard questions and seeking complex answers; that we keep the light burning in the darkness. If we can take solace in the archipelago of islands that retain a devotion to facts, to truth, to knowledge, to diversity, equality, inclusion, democracy, and the rule of law, we may be able to weather this tsunami of bigotry, ignorance, ambition, and sheer malevolence that threatens all that we hold dear. All we can do is try.

## A Note on the Text

I presented an earlier, shorter version of this essay as a keynote talk at "Transnational American Studies Revisited," the 56th Annual Comparative Literature Symposium held at Texas Tech University, April 12-14, 2024, organized by Yuan Shu.

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# Migrating Possibilities

## Jonathan Escoffery's "In Flux" and "Independent Living"



**ABSTRACT:** The first- and second-generation immigrant characters in Jonathan Escoffery's short story collection *If I Survive You* (2022) struggle to belong as they navigate racism, a precarious existence in a foreign country, and familial conflicts. Both the precarity characteristic of the migrant condition and the histories of colonialism, with its enduring legacy in shaping contemporary migration flows from the so-termed Global South to the North, come to be highlighted by Escoffery through these works of short fiction. The eight stories, though they may be read as parts of a whole, are nonetheless separate, self-contained literary works. It is through his characters and their trajectories that Escoffery critiques institutionalized racism and the facile promises that the term "American dream" embodies. In this article two short stories from *If I Survive You*, "In Flux" and "Independent Living," are analyzed with a view to opening up a larger academic discussion on how writers such as Escoffery, reflecting deterritorialization through the form of the short story and the English language, may be seen as opening up the borders of what may be referred to as American literary fiction. The article also explores how the character/narrator Trelawny may be seen as an attempt at autofiction by the author, whose life has followed a similar trajectory, and how that becomes an important aesthetic choice for Escoffery's politics of literary representation of the transnational Jamaican-American community.

**Keywords:** American short story, migrant fiction, mobility studies, transnational fiction, globalization studies, postcolonial criticism, Anglophone short fiction

*If I Survive You* (2022), by American writer Jonathan Escoffery, is a collection of interlinked narratives of short fiction in which the principal characters in each of the eight stories belong to one immigrant family from Jamaica. The parents, Topper and Sanya, migrated to Miami in 1979 following violence back home in Kingston. The violence in Kingston and the factors leading to their migration are later revealed to be a direct result of interventionist policies of the US in Jamaica. Their younger son Trelawny, who was born in the United States, is the narrator in some of these stories and the focalized perspective in others. As an acclaimed American writer who has been awarded both the 2020 Plimpton Prize for Fiction and the 2020 ASME Award for Fiction for his literary contributions, Escoffery seems firmly planted within the genre of American literary fiction. And yet, as I will show later, the two short stories that this article focuses on, "In Flux" and "Independent Living," represent a kind of narrative that experiments with the notion of American literary fiction even as these stories become contemporary examples of it.

The most prominent question that this experimentation raises has also been taken up by Wai Chee Dimock in her essay "Deep Time: American Literature and World History," which asks, "[w]hat does it mean to refer to a body of writing as American?" (755). In highlighting the problematic assumptions underlying "American literature" and the ways the authors associated with the discipline are read and written about, the essay attempts to destabilize the Eurocentric and Global North-oriented understanding of how academic disciplines in general, and the category termed "American Literature" in particular, are pedagogically understood and defined. Writers such as Escoffery, reflecting deterritorialization through form, content, and language, may thus also be seen as opening up the borders and challenging the contours of what may be referred to as American literary fiction. Moreover, this article also aims to investigate the ways in which the very form of the American short story lends itself to a fragmented self-expression characteristic of contemporary Anglophone migrant literature.

In *If I Survive You*, Escoffery presents a nuanced, kaleidoscopic vision of migration in the US context. The author, much like his protagonist and principal narrator Trelawny, was born to Jamaican parents who migrated to the US and set up base in Miami, where the author also grew up. Consequently, the character/narrator Trelawny may be seen as an attempt at autofiction by the author, whose life has followed a similar trajectory.[1] Autofiction, as this paper will suggest, is an important lens with which to view Escoffery's politics of literary representation of the transnational Jamaican-American community. Sonia Weiner notes that in the past few years, "migrant writers seem to be less concerned with what makes them American, ethnic American, or hyphenated American, and more with the possibilities their complex identities offer personally, culturally and ideologically" (6). This article thus argues that Trelawny becomes a literary means by which Escoffery raises larger questions about identity, structural racism, and literary representation, experiments with what "American literature" is and can be, and examines his own personal experiences of being a Jamaican American.

As the analysis of the two works will show, the American short story as a form, in and of itself, becomes a means of literary engagement appropriated by Escoffery towards a particular aesthetic representation of the migrant figure in the Global North. As Martin Scofield writes regarding contemporary experiments with the form, "[t]he short story is perhaps the exemplary form for the perception of crisis, crux, turning point; and as such it has proved ideal for recording decisive moments, intimately private but often with broad social resonances, in the swift development of the psyche of post-independence America" (238). The two stories chosen for

analysis from Escoffery's critically well-received and bestselling short fiction collection provide comprehensive insight into the writer's aesthetic representation of the contemporary migrant condition, particularly in the American context. It is in Escoffery's "excess of roots" that one may encounter "new visions of American selfhood" inscribed (Weiner 6-7).

The political heft of Escoffery's experimentation with autofiction in the American short story form lies in the connections he draws between histories of imperialism and contemporary migratory flows from the Global South to the North. Through his short narratives, Escoffery places the history of violence in Jamaica within a larger context of US interventionist foreign policies. As Gilbert H. Muller has written, the "immigrant tide in American fiction" in the post-World War II period "is global, flowing across diasporas, borders, and postcolonial terrains" (1). Through his fiction Escoffery presents an example of the transnational character that American fiction in the contemporary era embodies. More than personalized narratives of immigration from the Caribbean to the United States, Escoffery provides a literary response to a narrativization of these migrations in the popular imagination and an attempt at unearthing complexities shaped by the history of colonization and slavery often overlooked in accounts of the same. This "refraction of reality" (Carpio 72) that Escoffery's fiction offers, as this article highlights, investigates the ways in which the rhetoric of the nation state continues to endure in a globalized world marked by cross-border movements.

The article is divided into three sections. The first section will take up a close textual analysis of the first story in Escoffery's collection, titled "In Flux," with a view to situate how the author employs autofiction as a mode of political critique of the narrativization of the American nation state, showcasing the story's inherent transnational character. The second section will explore in a similar manner Escoffery's story "Independent Living," wherein the author both highlights and problematizes the complex trajectories of migration that are inextricably linked to America's past and present as an imperial force. The third section of the article will address how Escoffery's experiments with the short story form and autofiction as a mode of literary composition are important aesthetic tools for his politics of representing the migrant condition in the American context.

## Mobilizing Mobility

"In Flux" is the first story in *If I Survive You*. Though each of the stories in this collection is a self-contained literary work and can be read separately, "In Flux" sets the tone for Escoffery's project in general and the collection in particular. The story takes the reader through Trelawny's formative years as he navigates institutionalized racism in the United States. This includes experiences at his junior high and high schools in Miami, along with those at his university in the Midwest. As much as the narrative focuses on Trelawny's personal journey to adulthood, it also becomes a commentary on how the question of "where are you from?" is laced with a complexity that makes it unfair for those whom it comes to be asked of, specifically in the context of citizens of color in powerful Global North countries such as the US.

Certain narrative points in the story that shape Trelawny's view of the place he occupies in the world have been inspired by Escoffery's own life. Karen Ferreira-Meyers writes that in autofiction, the writer, "through his/her writing style, transforms an instance of personal reality into a public literary work" (40). She also goes on to explain how, in the Anglophone context, autofiction is conceived of as "a 'modus' of writing," as opposed to a genre, which is how Francophone literary criticism approaches it (Ferreira-Meyers

40-41). This autofictive modus of writing presents, in Ferreira-Meyers's words, a "literary puzzle" to its readers as it "vacillates between biographical fact and outright fiction" (42). This section of the article attempts to show how Escoffery's refraction of his reality in the form of Trelawny represents a particular mode of autofictive writing that is integral to the author's decolonial poetics. Escoffery chooses to fictionalize the events of his own life in order to draw out a larger trajectory of migrant histories in the context of the United States. This, as this article will highlight through a close textual analysis of "In Flux," is the author's attempt to make American literary fiction more nuanced and representative. The autofictive mode of writing allows Escoffery to highlight the inherently transnational character of both the nation state, as well as the characters who occupy the urban landscapes of the United States.

The narrative voice in "In Flux" directly addresses Trelawny as "you" yet makes the reader aware that it is the inner voice of Escoffery's narrator-protagonist himself and not an external character or a third-person narrator. The addressed "you" of the story is Trelawny, and everything he comes to experience, from boyhood to adolescence and adulthood, is articulated through his perspective and inner voice. This second-person narrative voice presents the story to the reader, narrating the experiences that shape Trelawny's coming-of-age. It also, more importantly, acts as an interpreter who shares how these external events translated into the growth of Trelawny's self-consciousness as a non-white citizen of the US.[2] This voice switches to the first person in "Independent Living" when an adult Trelawny becomes the narrator.

For Escoffery, showing Trelawny's coming-of-age in "In Flux" through a narrative structure that highlights the protagonist/narrator's inner world thus becomes a way of highlighting the crisis of identity formation for a second-generation immigrant of color in the US. The choice of a second-person narratorial voice lends an intimate tone to the narrative. One may read the narrative voice as that of an older Trelawny bearing witness to his own coming-of-age. In addition to this, one may also infer that the inner voice addressing him as "you" is in effect the author articulating the struggles of his younger literary persona. The opening line of the story sets the stage for the short narrative and also the collection as a whole: "It begins with What are you? hollered from the perimeter of your front yard when you're nine–younger, probably" ("In Flux" 3). The question that is asked, that of what he is, echoes throughout Trelawny's adolescence and adulthood. The narrative voice, addressing Trelawny, notes, "[y]ou're a rather pale shade of brown, if skin color has anything to do with race. Your parents share your hue" (10). When he does ask about his ethnic makeup, the narrative voice explains the mother's response to his question in the following words: "[y]our mother tells you that you are made up of all sorts of things. She lists countries," and "[m]ost of the countries she lists are European, and though she's sure to add Africa as though it were a country or an afterthought, she never mentions race" (9). This creolized texture of Trelawny's ancestral past negates the possibility of his affiliation to a homogenous identity.

This lack of an easily accessible identity that the story opens with is shown to be complicated by Trelawny's African-Caribbean roots, because of which his skin color makes his geographical and cultural associations ambiguous and not readily available. When he asks his mother point blank, "'[a]re we Black?'" then "[a]gitation grips her" (9). She again begins listing the ethnic backgrounds of past generations, hesitantly making a reference to a possible Arab heritage, yet never speaks confidently about an African ancestral lineage. Only when Trelawny goes to his older brother Delano, the only other person who can understand the "entrenchment in this liminal

space" (14), is he told that for America and its white Anglo Saxon populace, Trelawny, and by extension his family, is unquestionably Black, but that is not the case back in the Islands. The narrator explains, "[t]he Jamaicans, some of whom are in your classes, look nothing like your family," which makes "[y]ou wonder if there are two Jamaicas" (14). It is through Trelawny that Escoffery presents the complexities of migration and colonial histories that have shaped the twentieth- and twenty-first-century transnational American urban landscapes.

Through Trelawny's experience at school, both inside the educational institutions where he learns, as well as at their peripheries where he is socialized, Escoffery paints a nuanced portrait of American life through an immigrant of color's eyes. Muller notes of the African-Caribbean diaspora that it was "[f]ormed concurrently by English colonial models and African traditions," and that "West Indian voyagers to the North American mainland enter a new world where their efforts at self definition require the incorporation of yet another metahistory within their consciousness" (143). Escoffery writes his protagonist's experience of the ways the "metahistory" of America comes to be inscribed at his school in the eighties, where "in class, you pledge to one and one flag only, the Stars and the Stripes" (4). At his school, the "[*g*]*reatest country on earth* is the morning anthem" (4). The greatness of America, as a young Trelawny notes, is drilled in "day in, day out" at the school, like a mantra, wherein "the implication that all other nations, though other nations are seldom mentioned in school, are inferior" (4). When in history class students are taught about America's founding and the slave trade, "[a]n air of shared discomfort infiltrates the classroom" (8). While confronting America's past of the slave trade becomes an uncomfortable experience for the mixed classroom, teachers practicing racial discrimination is shown to be a norm. The narrator, in mentioning that a teacher had asked Trelawny to resubmit an assignment as it didn't sound like he had done it, tells him, "[y]ou might talk and dress Black, but you still write White and there's a discrepancy to account for" (21). His response to the teacher is resubmitting the assignment on Newton, which now says, "[t]hat was one scientific nigga, my nigga" (21). This assignment is dutifully graded and returned with "an emphatic checkmark and a D minus," but without any further questioning (21). In an interview, Escoffery has noted that this incident was inspired by his own life (Gross). Escoffery's narrative, which moves in a linear fashion through Trelawny's coming of age in the diverse space of Miami, is also a tale about the structuring of American society.

Escoffery, through Trelawny's search for belonging in the US, highlights how his otherness was not only owing to his second-generation immigrant identity. This search was also a result of the difficulty in ascribing to himself a fixed, stable cultural and racial nomenclature that would make it easier to be categorized as either one or "the other." This comes to be showcased particularly in the ways in which his narrator-protagonist is initially unable to find friends or a social group with whom he shares a similar heritage at school. While he points to the complex nuances of a Jamaican American heritage, Escoffery also draws attention to how the racial other within the landscapes of the Global North is made to define their ethnic makeup in order to be legible through an already available vocabulary of social affiliation. Trelawny, who was born in the US and has "got the paperwork to prove it" (5), is made to confront this lack of clarity throughout his childhood. Relocated to a new school after the destruction wreaked by Hurricane Andrew on the most vulnerable members of the population, Trelawny must once again find his place among groups divided on the basis of common cultural and linguistic backgrounds. He feels a "double exclusion" (15) which makes him wish he were invisible. "If no one can see you, no one

can realize tú no entiendes, that you don't quite fit" (12). Through his infusion of Spanish, as well as the patois that Trelawny's parents speak to him in, Escoffery uses language in the stories in his collection to showcase the transnational character of the US that his immigrant characters experience. In an interview, Escoffery spoke about his own experience growing up in Miami. He said, "[t]here wasn't necessarily this rush to assimilate into an idea of mainstream America. It felt more like you had to maintain your family culture, and the more successfully you do, the more you tend to be rewarded by your own family and your own community" (Elliott). Through his protagonist, who is a refraction of Escoffery himself, the author also points to how a history of colonialism and present-day neo-imperialist rhetoric have paved the way for an exclusionist society where survival depends on an affiliation to clearly defined racial identities, even though the truth is often more complicated than a one-word response to "where are you from?"

Not only does Trelawny's inability to fit in with the Dominican diaspora, the Puerto Rican crowd, the African American one, or even the Jamaican group at school posit a challenge to his being able to answer questions of "what" he is, but it also opens up a literary space to question whether the act of identifying and the quest for cultural belonging for a non-white American citizen are both flawed given that they rely on the assumption of available one-word answers in a world shaped by histories of the slave trade across continents. Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, a Ugandan writer residing in the UK, was interviewed about her works exploring the Ugandan diaspora in the UK and shared that she categorizes them as "expat experiences" instead of immigrant ones as the latter term plays into the West/others binary (Underwood). When nomenclature itself is conditioned by a hierarchy that privileges the white Anglo Saxon subject position, any attempt at categorization on the basis of race is an exercise in maintaining the status quo. This, then, opens up a space to cast light on the ways in which the discourse around what vocabulary is used to differentiate a cosmopolitan subject from an immigrant alien can be said to replay the West/others binary that globalization upholds in the neoliberal world order.

With Escoffery's narrator, who was born in the US, the search for a racial marker of identity and the way in which his Caribbean heritage is made the subject of scrutiny both become aesthetic tools employed by the author to two specific ends. The first is to map the ways in which certain parts of the American urban landscape, such as Miami, are marked by diversity yet prone to ghettoization, which is a direct consequence of national policies that cause certain members of the population to lead a precarious existence. This is the case even if their migration to the United States is a result, as in Trelawny's parents Topper and Sanya's case, of the host country's interventionist foreign policies.[3] The second aesthetic strategy is to trace the less metropolitan parts of the United States, which remain untouched by an awareness of the problematic assumptions that underlie the population's understanding of race and colonial history. This becomes evident when, during the course of the narrative, Trelawny moves to the Midwest for university, where no one assumes his comparatively lighter skin makes him "Puerto Rican or Dominican. Here you are simply, unquestionably Black" (25). All ambiguity is gone in a predominantly white geographical setting that is far less diverse than Miami.

At the formal events he attends at the university in the Midwest, he is "surprised that the only Black people present are there to serve" (32). Here he is not faced with a plethora of groups asserting their racial and cultural heritage and shaming Trelawny for not fitting in, but instead encounters privileged classmates, many with hyphenated identities, asserting their whiteness. This assertion stems from their need to highlight

their Americanness over readily available racial features, a need to be treated "'how White people treat White people'" (27). At one point in the story, Trelawny's Chinese American friend Caitlyn declares that she feels "too privileged not to be White" (27). In another instance, Trelawny meets a group of his fellow students at a party, standing in a circle reassuring each other that they are white (28). This group includes a woman from Mexico, who declares that her "family's bloodline goes directly back to Spain," an Argentinian student who wants it known that she is "more similar to Europeans than to South Americans," and a third character who complains that because her "mother is Jewish" she is treated like she is not white (28). This scene ends with the three women declaring, in unison, "[w]e're White" (29). Trelawny thus undertakes a DNA test to trace his roots scientifically and empirically, even though he notes at one point in the narrative, "[r]ace, you know, is a social construct" (45). But then, on receiving the results, the narrator, which in effect is Trelawny addressing himself, states, "[y]ou, Negro, are mostly European" (45). Trelawny's need to have an acceptable answer for what he is reflects a need for self-definition, which constantly eludes him throughout the narrative, even when he visits Jamaica, where he realizes that "everything is relative," on a research project (35).

Escoffery's fiction can thus be seen as an attempt at self-assertion, or, in Weiner's words, an attempt to "discursively create the self" (7). However, as the next two sections will elaborate further, Escoffery's carefully crafted literary self is one that contains multitudes. Through Trelawny's individual experiences, Escoffery opens up a larger discourse on identity crises of non-white US citizens and the social ramifications of the same. His narrative and protagonist both work to undo the national myths that the idea of America as a nation thrives upon. In her 2004 Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, Shelley Fisher Fishkin made an observation regarding how the celebrated American author Mark Twain's anti-Imperialist writings were relegated to the periphery of his works in order to preserve an acceptable version of the writer in the national popular memory.[4] Had that not been the case, Fishkin reasons, then it would not have been false to assert that "criticizing your country when you know it to be wrong is as American as Mark Twain" (19). Migrant or immigrant fiction in the context of contemporary American literature is a genre that, through its embodiment of a transnationalism that is aware of the histories of colonization and contemporary neo-imperial policies, may thus be seen as truly representative. Herein, as Yogita Goyal points out, "[a]t its best," a transnational approach may be a way to "offer an analysis of past and present imperialisms" (9). It is through a discursive self-reflection that Escoffery produces a literary text that challenges meta-narrativization at the individual level of the immigrant US political subject, at the formal level through his literary experimentation with autofiction and the short story, as well as at the national level, by throwing a light on the contradictions in the very foundations of the narrative of the American nation state as "the land of the free."

## A Literary Homecoming

The other story by Escoffery that this article examines is titled "Independent Living," which, like "In Flux," found publication in a literary journal before *If I Survive You* came out as a collection in 2022. "Independent Living" is the sixth story in the collection, which has a total of eight short narratives. While "In Flux" is the story that opens the collection and sets the stage for the narratives that come later, there is no linear progression to the stories as such. In fact, Escoffery's chosen genre of interlinked short stories that can still be read independently of one another offers a potent form through which the author

highlights the fractured self of the non-white immigrant subject in the US. There is never a resolution to the narrator-protagonist's search for an easily recognized and recognizable selfhood. Trelawny's trajectory, as mapped out in the collection, rather showcases the fact that there are a plethora of narratives of immigration and oppression that may never find neat articulation. In other words, Trelawny's coming-of-age as a second-generation immigrant of color struggling to survive in late-stage capitalist America is told through a genre that reflects this struggle through its fractured storytelling.

"Independent Living" follows Trelawny's life after he finishes his degree at the university. The reader becomes acquainted with a graduate Trelawny, who finds himself unhoused.[5] The other stories in the collection, as well as "Independent Living," touch upon the circumstances that led to Escoffery's narrator-protagonist living out of his car. These include his mother deciding to move back to Jamaica, leaving the United States, resulting in Trelawny's choices after graduation being asking either his father or his brother if he can move in with them. Trelawny then briefly attempts living with his father, who stays in the US and is separated from his mother, but it does not turn out well for either of them. He notes that he "didn't last three weeks at his house before the beef got too thick to choke down" (137) and ended up living out of his car using the utilities at fast food restaurants.

As "Independent Living" opens, Trelawny is working as a staff member at a "federally subsidized senior housing scheme" (134). The inhabitants at this senior housing complex mostly comprise refugees, as well as asylum seekers. His job at the subsidized elderly living complex, called Silver Towers, is to cull out details about the lives of residents that may be helpful for his senior colleagues in the administration in making decisions regarding increments in rent or making the inhabitants leave in case they are found not to be complying with the complex's terms and conditions. The opening line of the narrative shows Trelawny explaining to the reader that his job is to "hunt elderly people" (133). This he does by ensuring that they are not obfuscating their sources of income, which may make them ineligible for the low rent. One of the other factors that he must check up on is whether these residents, in the absence of family members, are able to prolong living independently without any hired help, which, given their precarious economic situations, they will not be able to sustainably afford. A tenant by the name of Carlos Rodriguez is his next target as he suspects the resident has a day job working at Walgreens, the proof of which he is tasked with acquiring.

In short, Trelawny is promised a promotion if he can help to make the enterprise more profitable for the Silver Towers administration, which translates to higher rents for these vulnerable senior citizens of color. He clears up misconceptions one might incur as to how subsidized housing functions. He notes how people "erroneously figure it's in our interest to charge the elderly as little rent as possible" (135) while the truth is that the threefold mission of Silver Towers is to "increase the property's value, maintain high occupancy, and keep rents climbing" (135). The irony of the situation is aptly presented to the reader that in order to be able to afford his own place of residence, Trelawny needs to hold his job and get a promotion interrogating vulnerable senior citizens out of their already precarious living situations. As the story moves forward, Escoffery paints a grim picture of life in the United States, for both the young immigrant members of the workforce as well as the ageing refugee population barely managing a life of dignity in an oppressive system where the odds are forever stacked against them.

With an adult Trelawny as the narrative's focus, he himself becomes the primary storyteller

addressing the reader directly. Unlike "In Flux," in which the narrative voice addresses Trelawny as "you," here he takes the reins as the first-person narrator, addressing the reader and directly becoming the voice sharing his myriad experiences. While the narrative voice in "In Flux" guides the reader through the inner landscape of Trelawny as a child, addressing him as "you" and delineating his experiences, in "Independent Living" it is Trelawny himself who takes over as the storyteller and interpreter. As Weiner notes regarding migrant writers, one of the common linguistic features of their works is the "creation of narrators who double as storytellers, drawing attention to the very art of storytelling as they struggle with responsibilities, limitations and ethics that storytelling entails" (31). The agency bestowed upon a mature Trelawny as narrator in this story is perhaps given to make the readers, who become the addressed "you," complicit as silent beneficiaries of a capitalist society that is adept at maintaining the status quo, particularly at the cost of its most vulnerable members, and to draw attention to their own culpability in making this predatory system thrive. Escoffery's narrator/protagonist does in fact at times turn to the reader directly to ask what they would have done were they in his position.

While discussing the diverse makeup of Silver Towers, Trelawny apprises his reader of the circumstances under which his parents migrated. He explains that his parents migrated not seeking economic advancement, but as a means to flee the American government-funded violence in "Jamaica throughout the 1970s as part of its war on socialism" (136). Thus Trelawny, a second-generation unhoused immigrant in Miami, states that it "might be hyperbole to say" that he identifies with the tenants at Silver Towers, "most of whom are asylum seekers and refugees," but he can "empathize well enough" (136). In "In Flux," and more prominently in "Independent Living," Escoffery explicates Trelawny's family history of migrating to the United States. Trelawny's experience as a second-generation immigrant was shaped by the choices his parents were forced to make when they left their homes in Jamaica for the United States.

However, as the reader is subsequently also apprised, years later, in the present time, Trelawny's mother has left the US for Jamaica to experience, in his words, "the privilege of relative racelessness" (137). The narrator/protagonist notes, "[i]n 2009, Kingston's murder rate reached the highest ever on record, and my mom returned there so she could finally feel safe" (137). The liminal space that the category of "home" occupies for the migrant of color in the US is highlighted by Escoffery throughout his stories. "Home" is a signifier caught in a constant negotiation between referring to the one that the migrants in Escoffery's literary universe tenuously occupy in the US and simultaneously always to the one that is carefully curated and retained as the signified in the collective imagination. Trelawny also makes an attempt to distinguish his predicament from that of his parents as immigrants based on his own experience with this constant negotiation. He states that in their case, as opposed to his, and as opposed to that of those exiled in the US, such as the Silver Towers residents, his parents "have a homeland to which they can return" (136). However, even this statement is proven to be a facile proposition since his mother returns to the US not long after her move back to Kingston proves to be unsuccessful.

The author, through Trelawny, thus presents a nuanced view of immigration in the American context, complicating the categories of forced and voluntary migration from the regions riddled with conflict in the so-termed Global South by highlighting the historical, colonial nexus and present interventionist, neo-imperial policies that have shaped contemporary transnational movement flows to the Global North. Escoffery

also highlights how this violence, which led to large-scale displacement, as well as death and destruction, has not been made a part of the public/popular national memory. As Trelawny puts it, "when I say Jamaica to non-Jamaicans, no one thinks of CIA operatives, or puppet prime ministers, or historical continuity" (136). Instead, Escoffery, through his narrator/protagonist, describes how "they break into free association, as if they'd been tossed into a rap cypher: *Bob Marley, irie, ganja, poor people, Sandals, 'ey mon!*" (136). Escoffery's short fiction draws attention to and critiques how the Jamaican American migrant, and by extension the non-white US citizen, has become a citational presence, reflecting cultural stereotypes ideologically embedded in a popular culture that has hitherto been made a tool for invisibilization of colonial legacies that have shaped the current political and economic instabilities in erstwhile colonies.

Escoffery's overall project is to highlight the invisibilization and false narrativization of America's inherent transnational character owing to its past and present as an imperial force. Trelawny, in another portion of the story, also dons the role of ethnographer as he notes the diverse, multicultural and multilingual "mix of racial ambiguity" (153) that characterizes the young workforce at the eating establishments along the beach. Here, he finds "impossibly beautiful" hostesses "displaying phenotypes that, according to American media outlets, should not co-exist" (153). Escoffery's short story becomes a means of narrativizing Miami and its inhabitants through a native informant, that is, his narrator/protagonist. In "In Flux," Trelawny is a child who constantly is made to confront his otherness through unanswered questions and experiences of exclusion. In "Independent Living," Trelawny can now aptly perceive the varied lives shaped by histories of migration resulting in a reality that is not containable in easy-to-consume categories promoted by the American media.

What Trelawny means by the "phenotypes" that are not highlighted by the American media is explained in detail in what can be described as a montage of the many shapes and forms of multiracial existence that make up the young population of Miami. As he walks past these establishments, he is greeted with "[b]ronze and brass-colored flesh" that "make[s] aqua eyes glow like jewels in their faces" along with "blonde coils" that "spiral out above plush brown lips" (153). Trelawny further makes a mention of how "American men," qualifying this category by adding, "Southerners and Midwesterners," are the ones who "stop to ask where these young women are from," often drunkenly asking them "what" they are (154), echoing the question asked of him in "In Flux." Bringing the focus back to his own mixed heritage, he states that his own loneliness makes him play into the fetishes of those American tourists "who think every light brown thing in Miami is exotic" (154). Here, in a reversal of the narratorial voice in "In Flux" addressing and advising Trelawny on how to navigate these situations growing up, he takes the baton and tells the reader, "[a]nything they ask, just nod along; be the surface onto which they can project their colonial desires" (154). Escoffery simultaneously investigates racist and cultural stereotypes while showcasing the inexplicably diverse urban milieu of Miami.

What Escoffery achieves therefore is an interrogation of both the narrative of empire in the Anglo-American context, as well as any homogenization of the histories of migration in a postcolonial, globalized world in the neoliberal world order. Weiner states that the texts of migrant writers "speak in multiple voices, encompassing within them multiple subject positions and revealing suppressed histories and stories" (27). The many subject positions Escoffery encompasses within his short narratives I analyze here consistently challenge any homogenization of migrant narratives emanating from similar geographical locations in the postcolonial Global

South. Walking on Washington Avenue, Trelawny notes that the horde of shoppers "provides an even more diverse backdrop of languages" (163) than he witnessed in Silver Towers. Escoffery's text itself becomes a montage of different ethnicities mingling, where "French and Arabic and Japanese join Spanish and the myriad variations of English spoken in the crowd" (163). As Weiner writes, the "migrant perspective is apparent in the translingual, transnational and multi-perspectival dimension of their novels" (13). Language, thus, is an important tool through which Escoffery also destabilizes the centrality of English in the American context.

Escoffery's use of language and his poetics of representation become evident through an interesting character: Trelawny's boss, who is called El Jefe, a Spanish term translating literally to "the chief" or "the boss." El Jefe, in what may come across as a parody of the assimilationist narrative arc, purposefully makes a show of not knowing how to speak English properly. Trelawny, whom his boss asks to teach him English in exchange for help with his Spanish, notes that he has stopped helping him with the language because he believes that El Jefe "goes out of his way to exaggerate his English deficiency to appear foreign, or local, depending how you look at it" (140). Escoffery points out, through his narrator-protagonist's assertion, that to appear foreign was a requisite in order to be seen as local to Miami's urban landscape. In fact, for Trelawny to excel at his new job, he must learn Spanish in order to communicate with the residents at Silver Towers.

Thus, in this story Escoffery also plays with the tropes of the assimilationist narrative by highlighting the diverse ethnic makeup of Miami wherein to fit in means one needs to appear "foreign." The many languages that populate the text also showcase Escoffery's exposition of the urban Miami milieu, which becomes an important aesthetic venture. Helle Egendal notes that "multilingualism is a key autofictional strategy in transcultural autobiographical literature" (141). This strategy, as this textual analysis of "Independent Living" attempts to showcase, is therefore a means through which Escoffery problematizes populist and xenophobic rhetoric surrounding migration by bringing to the fore the inherent transcultural and transnational character of America.

Throughout the short fiction narrative, Trelawny's inability to have a firm grasp over Spanish is shown to be an anomaly, more so than El Jefe's affected bad English. Egendal's concept of "multilingual autofiction" describes the role that "language plays in enabling these literary works to question social norms and power relations" (156). Egendal also notes that such writing "enables authors to showcase and mobilize their multilingual capacity and to address political discourses on migration, transculturality, and racism" (145). Escoffery gestures to the many languages Trelawny encounters on a casual evening stroll and also makes ample use of Spanish words and phrases thrown into the text for good measure. The author thus makes his text a multilingual, transcultural artefact, employing language as an aesthetic tool to destabilize essentialist notions of the cultural and linguistic makeup of a diverse American urban landscape such as that of Miami.

## Mirroring Truths

The final section of the article will analyze two other characters from each of these two stories in order to examine how Escoffery's characterization and appropriation of the short story form work to further his decolonial project of diversifying American literary fiction. The first is Justin from "In Flux." He is a theatre major who is a writer himself and encounters Trelawny during his university days. When we meet Justin in the text, Trelawny is taken by how similar he looks

to him in terms of appearance, going so far as to call him his mirror image. Trelawny's constant curiosity regarding Justin, whom he describes as a "very light-brown young man" ("In Flux" 39), is mistaken by the latter for flirtation. However, when it becomes clear to Justin that all of Trelawny's feigned interest in his writing and in his person was a ruse to uncover his racial makeup, Justin is rightfully taken aback.

At their second meeting, Trelawny asks him about his "background," to which Justin answers by asking if he means "educationally?" (41). Trelawny replies with, "I mean where are your parents from?," to which Justin responds by pointing out the oddness of the question and then saying, "[t]hey're from here. As were their parents before them" (41). This exchange continues until Justin asks Trelawny if he has a fetish. In effect, Justin, who is figuratively and literarily Escoffery's protagonist's mirror image, comes to be asked by Trelawny the dreaded question that has plagued Trelawny himself throughout his young adulthood: that of what he is. Moreover, Trelawny's fear of a lack of an acceptable answer for what he is makes him put Justin in the same uncomfortable position that he himself has hitherto occupied. Thus he becomes both the victim and the perpetrator of racial bias through his constant struggle for social as well as self-acceptance.

Much like the liminal space that Escoffery's protagonist, as well as Justin, are seen as occupying racially in "In Flux," in "Independent Living" it is El Jefe who proves to be the mirror image for both the author and his narrator. With his Cuban and African heritage, El Jefe is similarly shown to be mistaken for a member of the Dominican diaspora although he actively asserts his Cuban roots every chance he gets. He insists on his Cuban heritage even though he's admitted, Trelawny tells us, "that his almond skin, his too-round nose, and his tight curls are viewed among many of his brethren with distrust and contempt" ("Independent Living" 140), almost mirroring a young Trelawny's inability to fit in and ascribe to himself a stable, homogeneous identity in "In Flux." Here, El Jefe tells Trelawny about this discrimination: "[t]hey act like Africa doesn't pump through Cuba's veins" (141). Discussing the works of Jamaica Kincaid, Muller highlights how "the large-scale arrival of non-Europeans" in the US after World War II helped foster a postcoloniality which allowed "an interrogation of the Anglo-American narrative of empire" (159). It is this interrogation of the narrative of empire that Escoffery's mirror images within both these texts embody and also help uncover for the reader of his short fiction. Herein, Escoffery employs the form of the short story to reflect the fragmented self that itself may never be geographically traced, yet becomes a member of a new class of dispossessed individuals working within oppressive structures of power.

It is not the coherent, cohesive and linearly progressive form of the novel that enables such a politics and poetics of representation for Escoffery, but the short story, which finds publication across literary platforms apart from the traditional book publishing circuit. In an NPR interview about his collection of interlinked short fiction, Escoffery opened up about why *If I Survive You* does not fulfil the characteristics of an assimilationist narrative with an ending that would make his protagonist Trelawny turn out to be a successful writer if he in fact had been based on the author's own life. The writer responds that "I was writing about my fears. I left Miami in 2011, and I never moved back. And I was thinking about what it might have been like had I actually moved back to Miami" (Gross). The mode of multilingual autofictional writing, then, becomes a way for Escoffery to refuse to play into composing stories that in any way, shape, or form can be characterized as "redemptive narratives of global trade, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism" (Gikandi 28). No story within the collection is exclusively meant to be a chapter of a

larger whole. Each is a self-contained work that opens up more questions than it answers, and that never presents one homogenous assimilationist narrative of migration, of displacement. Rather, as this analysis of the stories and the characters who occupy Escoffery's literary universe has shown, his collection of short fiction entails multiple narratives of migration and exile. These short narratives are replete with characters mirroring one another and the author, yet each has their own separate trajectory of transnational heritage. What brings them together is a shared history of colonization and imperial domination.

This article has discussed how Escoffery traces histories of migration that continue to be determined by American and Western European hegemony on the global stage. The author achieves this through both the genre of interlinked short fiction, as well as telling his narrator-protagonist's coming-of-age story, which in itself becomes a mirror for contemporary American society. For Escoffery, the mode of autofiction writing allows for a mapping of the complex trajectories of migration in the American context through his literary persona, Trelawny. What Escoffery thus achieves through these short narratives that make up *If I Survive You* is a playing out of "what if" scenarios that fictionalizing his own life allows him to do. He does so in an attempt to lay bare the intricacies of oppression and suppression of colonial histories in the making of the national myths of America as a signifier of a land where migrant dreams can come true, thus making his stories truly American in the way that both Fishkin and Dimock have envisioned.

## Notes

1. The term "'autofiction'" has been credited to Serge Doubrovsky and has been used by French scholars since it came into being in 1977. It is a relatively new theoretical construct in the Anglophone literary context, particularly for transcultural writing.

2. I have opted to use lower-case *w* when mentioning white as a racial identity and upper-case *B* when mentioning Black. For a discussion on why this has become common practice, see Laws. When directly quoting from the stories, I have retained the author's use of upper case for white.

3. Scholars such as Edmonds have examined how "the roots of Jamaica's current crime epidemic" have deeper connections "to the CIA, the Cold War, and the efforts to marginalise the 1970s democratic socialist government of Michael Manley and his People's National Party" (54). This nexus of American Imperialism, which has been responsible for violence in Jamaica following its Independence, particularly in the 1970s, and the subsequent migration of those affected to the United States, is constantly alluded to and highlighted by Escoffery, and forms an integral part of his politics and poetics.

4. Fishkin mentions Jim Zwick's *Mark Twain's Weapons of Satire* (1992) as an exposition of Twain's anti-Imperial writings, in which readers get "to confront in one place Twain's uncensored condemnation of the lies the government told about the Philippine-American war" ("The Transnational Turn in American Studies" 19).

5. I have used the term "unhoused" instead of "homeless" because the former points to the failure of the government in providing affordable homes for its citizens. For a nuanced engagement with this terminology, see Abrams.

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# ON A PERPETUAL STATE OF BECOMING:

## Transnationality and Precarity against the American Dream in Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*



**ABSTRACT:** This paper reads Ethiopian-American writer Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007) to consider how the liminal experience of national identity that is often thematized in transnational literature pertains not only to the intersections of race and gender, but also to class conditions. The novel's protagonist, Sepha, struggles to reconcile idealistic notions of America with the harsh realities of working-class life in a low-income DC neighborhood. To Sepha, citizenship figures not as the stable destination the American dream professes to offer, but rather as a marginal state of isolation and uncertainty. For decades, linear notions of immigration as assimilation have been subject to critique and re-framing. In addition, recent developments in the labor market under late-stage capitalism have generated working-class narratives that are fragmented by the forces of precarity. Mengestu's novel addresses, through Sepha, an intersection between an ephemeral transnational identity and a precarious working-class position, subverting the narrative chronology of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century migrant novels. By contrast with these, transnational and precarious narratives defer such stable endpoints to remain in transition. The result, this paper argues, is the aesthetic expression of a perpetual state of becoming, the prevalence of which ought to be further considered within the field of American studies.

**Keywords:** transnational literature, working class, transnationality and class, precarity, intersectionality, liminality

Dinaw Mengestu's debut novel *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007) introduces Sepha Stephanos, an Ethiopian immigrant who runs a struggling grocery store in Washington, DC. As part of an unspoken routine, his two longtime friends, Joseph and Kenneth, have made a habit of stopping by the shop on Tuesdays. One afternoon, as the three sit by a small fold-up table in the back of the shop, Joseph jokingly asks: "How is America today, Stephanos?" (Mengestu 6). It soon becomes clear that the question is a standard part of their weekly meetups, and that the answer varies according to the profits made on the day on which it is asked. Most of the time, Sepha finds himself disillusioned by the grocery store's slow economic decline. On the rare days it earns him a slim margin, however, his faith is restored in the simple mantra that "America is beautiful after all" (5). As Sepha's unsteady confidence in the US suggests, he is always navigating liminal spaces, both between the unstable positioning of his working-class and immigrant status, as well as between his Ethiopian and American identities.[1] The fluid motion of these navigations, in which Sepha grasps for things that remain out of his reach, is arguably characteristic of transnational literature. As the present paper understands this genre, it can be defined less by its depiction of finite journeys, and more by its awareness of the many overlaps that stratify and coexist within a matrix of the migrant's experience. That notwithstanding, Sepha's frangible sense of belonging can also be attributed to a crumbling belief in the possibility of social mobility that is often metaphorized through the concept of the American dream. Challenged for centuries as a romanticized ideal in stories of America, from Friedrick Douglass' *Narrative* (first published in 1845), to Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861), the dream of reaching some "final destination" in a composite of social attachment and economic security now faces the new pressures of "precarity." As Guy Standing defines this concept, it refers to the many personal liabilities and risks that workers are forced to accept in the flexible labor market of late-stage capitalism (Standing, *Precariat Charter* 21). Indeed, one could then argue that a state of insecurity is making its imprint on transnational literature, not only in its narrativization of cross-border migrations, but also in its representation of the material conditions that frame these journeys.

Published only two years after Shelley Fisher Fishkin's addressal of "the transnational turn" in American Studies, Mengestu's novel constructs an interesting thematic connection between matters of national belonging and class position. As Pieter Vermeulen writes of *Beautiful Things*, "Mengestu's novel cuts across the conventions of the literary migrant novel; it shows how different forms of restlessness and mobility fail to map onto each other, and how the friction between these movements generates a tractless affect that cannot be slotted as readily recognized emotional experience" (284). This argument connects to Vermeulen's broader claim that works of contemporary migrant fiction mediate the "market logic" of neoliberalism. In the case of *Beautiful Things*, he suggests that the novel ostensibly promises an emotionally moving tale of migration, but that its resistance to resolution undercuts our ability to consume it as such (278). Instead, readers are asked to stay with Sepha in the midst of a challenging life situation, without reaping the quick satisfaction of a happy ending. In the same vein, this paper argues that overlapping portrayals of precarity and transnationality are key to the novel's proposed break with tradition. In particular, the liminal space these concepts generate can be seen as a disruption of the narrative chronology we might associate with some late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century narratives of immigration. Where the latter imply a linear journey toward a "final" American identity, transnational and precarious stories typically defer stable

endpoints to remain ever in transition. As I stress further below, the tendency to remain in flux instead of attaining the American dream has long been explored through the migrant novel, and it remains a highly topical theme in transnational literature. But in my view, the negative role a precarious class position can play in this destabilization could be further explored in scholarly readings. As Nicholas Van Hear points out, "the form of migration and its outcomes are shaped by the resources—economic or network-based—that would-be migrants can muster" (101). In this, he importantly reminds us that material conditions impact, and often circumscribe in detrimental ways, how a transnational story might unfold.

As for *Beautiful Things*, the novel can be read as refuting the possibility of a stable identity positioning on the liminal fringes of society because Sepha's journey never truly ends. One could certainly object that the flexible expression of identity that emerges in this trajectory is not an inherently negative one as it reflects the general plasticity of modern society. In my view, one's class position can nevertheless be seen as rendering such a perpetual state of becoming more destructive than productive. In this, I refer to the risks of limited agency, social isolation, and fiscal insecurity that accompany precarity. In any case, the field of American Studies ought to consider the aesthetic expression of perpetual states of becoming and ask what these mean for the future of the discipline. Here I point to the way in which these everlasting journeys dislodge the markers of nationality and identity from which the limits of the field have been historically drawn. As such, I align myself with Fishkin's ambition for American Studies to persevere as "a place where borders both within and outside the nation are interrogated and studied, rather than reified and reinforced" (20). But I am also asking that we remain attentive to the transnational subject within this radical boundary dissolution, especially as such subjects' location within the hierarchy of class can impact their ability to positively partake in its free flow.

## Whose American Dream? Mythmaking, the Migrant Novel, and the Legacy of the Bildungsruman in Transnational Literature

The origins of the American dream as an idiomatic phrase are contested, but Scott Sandage points to an early outline in James Truslow Adams's *The Epic of America* (1931), which describes the "dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are" (404).[2] As such, the dream is a surprisingly young concept, but its ideological bearings arguably trace even further back to the country's seventeenth-century colonization. Likewise, critiques of the dream as an illusion have long been formulated, for instance through Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853), whose titular character is driven into paralyzing apathy by the repetitive and meaningless work he executes in a Wall Street office. Other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers, such as Frederick Douglass and Charles Alexander Eastman/Ohiyesa, have also drawn attention to the inescapable fact that the dream is only attainable to a privileged few, as well as its intrinsic bond to racial constructions of whiteness and hegemonic masculinity.

Despite its deceptive nature, the dream's lasting influence on American culture has, in turn, been widely recognized in scholarship since the mid twentieth century. For instance, Jennifer L. Hochschild noted in 1995 that "those who do not fit the model disappear from the collective self-portrait. Thus the irony is doubled: not only has the ideal of universal participation been denied to most Americans, but also the very fact of its denial has itself been denied in our national self-image" (39-40). Hochschild importantly

underlines that there is a difference between referencing the American dream as a proxy for an underlying ideology and referencing it as a practical phenomenon. For while the former has proven surprisingly durable throughout the centuries, its execution in real life is unfeasible against the tangents of class, race, and gender that are still used to control and suppress its contenders. Therefore, I here apply an understanding of the American dream as a cultural myth which, despite its many contradictions, persists, and has shaped and imprinted narratives of migration.

In this interpretation, the dream's imaginative power has made an imprint on the narratives of America, particularly in its execution through the subject of the "self-made man." Indeed, aspirations of a linear trajectory of success have played a role in several notable nineteenth- and early twentieth-century narratives of immigration. Works like Drude Krog Jansson's *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter* (1887), Abraham Cahan's *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896), and Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912) see characters who face much resistance as they enter American society, but nevertheless strive to forge fully formed identities by means of upward social mobility. Other examples remain in conversation with the American dream, but see it derail from its linear path into an impasse. Of note here would be Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1905), which follows a Lithuanian family into the darkest corners of the Chicago meat-packing industry. Furthermore, scholars have also problematized the narrativization of America as a "new world" at the grasp of actors who are, as Adams put it, "innately capable" of forging their future. For instance, Mishuana Goeman duly argues that these ideas have been used in art to create and sustain a "settler aesthetics" (16). I am not suggesting that the early migrant novel, or the academic scholarship dedicated to its interpretation, should be accused of naively idealizing the American dream. The reason I bring up the literary examples of Jansson, Cahan, and Antin is rather that these works assemble themselves on the "autobiographical" adumbrations of the Bildungsroman, and therein represent a complex, but nevertheless linear, narrative structure that we rarely see in contemporary works such as *Beautiful Things*.[3]

Literary scholars John Frow, Melissa Hardie, and Vanessa Smith capture the elemental form of the Bildungsroman in the following way: "a young man from the provinces seeks his fortune in the city, and undergoes a process of education in the ways of the world such that he eventually becomes reconciled with it" (Frow, Hardie, and Smith 1905). In its most conservative interpretation, Jagdish Gupta elaborates, the genre thus "emphasizes the idea of masculine maturation propelled by a chronological progress for a higher stage" (366). But as these scholars further note, the Bildungsroman has since developed beyond this simple "template," as the placeholder for each intersection they mention (e.g., the gender of the protagonist, their origin and destination, not to mention what "the process of education" they undergo entails) can be reimagined endlessly. Here one should note the subgenre of the "ethnic Bildungsroman," which has, since the mid twentieth century, decentered the aforementioned theme of "masculine maturation," with its consideration of ethnicity, race, and individual aspirations. That notwithstanding, the scope of this paper prevents me from addressing the many figurations Bildung has taken on over the decades, and as such, my argument refers only to the linear story of "becoming" that has girded its tradition. There is strong evidence to suggest that the Bildung's recognizable narrative structure, which has in turn served as a metaphorical proxy for the myth of the American dream, has borne a lasting influence on the migrant novel. As the points above show, however, the bond between motif and genre has never been an uncomplicated one.

As a contemporary example of the migrant novel, *Beautiful Things* considers how the American dream can erode and fray without fully disappearing from view. Throughout the story, its lasting image as an unattainable but alluring fantasy looms over the ambitions of the characters. While Sepha's belief in the dream is waning at best, his uncle, Berhane, maintains a more naïve optimism:

> He used to have the grandest ambitions for me when I first arrived from Ethiopia. "Just wait and see," he would tell me in that soft-spoken, eloquent voice of his. "You will be an engineer or a doctor. I only wish your father could have lived to see it." Tears would well up in his eyes sometimes as he spoke about the future, which he believed could only be filled with better and beautiful things. (Mengestu 41)

When tears well up in Berhane's eyes at the prospect of his nephew becoming an engineer or a doctor, he describes the American dream in its most idealized form, despite the hardships both he and Sepha have faced since coming to the US. Berhane's character comes to represent the lasting belief in social mobility I associated above with some examples of the earlier migrant novel. Resonant here is the fabula diagram developed over forty years ago by William Q. Boelhower in is his attempt to define the genre. As part of Boelhower's model, subjects move through three central stages in their venture between the homeland and their new destination: expectation, contact, and resolution. Importantly, Boelhower associates the final narrative stage of resolution with the process of assimilation (5). Recent scholarship explores this idea further. For instance, in her reading of Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation* (2010), Brygida Gasztold argues that the novel remains in conversation with earlier "assimilative immigrant narratives," among them Antin's *The Promised Land* (80). Writing on migrant fiction after 9/11, Katie Daily-Bruckner sees recent additions to the genre that critique and resist a renewed pressure to align with a narrative of American nationalism (261). With this, we are reminded of the fact that Boelhower's model, despite figuring as an ideal type, reads as far too simple from a present perspective, particularly in its lacking an account of the ways in which the migrant novel can subvert such narrative stages. Notably, it places heavy emphasis on the concept of assimilation as a means to *resolve* liminal positions, suggesting in turn that the migrant subject can or wants to shed their former identity/identities, which is most certainly not always the case. And yet, the model mirrors Berhane's assimilationist (but well meaning) ambition for his nephew to *become* an American.

Sepha understands the unattainability of this dream and yet struggles to discard it entirely. The assimilationist logic that undergirds it is, of course, a deeply problematic one with a long history of violence. But as Mengestu's novel is sensitive to the many intersections of the transnational migrant experience, it is nevertheless unafraid in its consideration of assimilation's allure of social cohesion. Although Sepha feels ambivalent toward American society and his place within it, part of him also yearns for a sense of belonging. This desire is especially reflected in his interest in literature as a means to escape, but also to re-frame, his precarious existence. In a particularly salient passage, Sepha reflects: "I had tried to recast myself into the type of man who dined casually on porcelain plates and chatted easily about Emerson and Tocqueville while sitting on a plush leather couch in a grand house" (Mengestu 80). Ultimately, Sepha feels that this "recast" fails, and feels foolish for ever having had confidence in it. In my view, we can nevertheless read these reflections as a recognition of the appeal traditional migration narratives carry, although a more complex reality ultimately calls for a more nuanced reframing.

This reframing is largely achieved by Sepha's ongoing conversation with the myth of the American dream, the linear chronology of which he replaces with a perpetual state of becoming. The space of his low-income neighborhood, Logan Circle, remains key in the representation of this ephemeral experience:

> Here in Logan Circle, though, I didn't have to be anything greater than what I already was. I was poor, black, and wore the anonymity that came with that as a shield against all of the early ambitions of the immigrant, which had long since abandoned me, assuming they had ever really been mine to begin with. As it was, I did not come to America to find a better life. I came here running and screaming with the ghosts of an old one firmly attached to my back. My goal since then has always been a simple one: to persist unnoticed through the days, to do no more harm. (41)

The story Sepha tells of his own identity starkly contrasts with the fixed roles Berhane ascribes to the concept of American success. Instead, Sepha's narrative recognizes the postulations put down by his class and race alike. Although he mentions "the early ambitions of the immigrant," he also makes it clear that he has never felt a sense of ownership over the naïve optimism the phrase implies. Where Berhane wants nothing but the best for his nephew, Sepha imagines a life for himself that is marked by the strict absence of ambition altogether. Instead, his wish to "persist unnoticed through the days" mirrors the liminal position he is confined to. Like a ghost or a specter, Sepha wants to be weightless and invisible, the verb "persist" underlining his passive endurance of the outside forces that impact his daily life.

One might think that Sepha would find a sense of belonging with his two longtime friends, Kenneth and Joseph. Instead, these characters have invested in other narratives of immigration that are not necessarily liminal. Unlike Sepha and Joseph, Kenneth *has* achieved the American dream in the strictest sense and now works as an engineer. Still, Sepha seemingly feels that Kenneth is enacting a shallow role through his reproduction of typical Americanisms. Partial to idioms about working hard, Sepha dryly notes that "he's come to believe that American men are so successful because they say the same thing over and over again" (2). Joseph is a waiter at "an expensive downtown restaurant," and his life appears more similar to Sepha's (5). Although he is originally from Congo, one of his recurring jokes is based on the obfuscation of his country of origin. As Sepha puts it, "There was hardly a single thing in Joseph's life, though, that hadn't become a metaphor for Africa" (100). From this, it appears that Joseph aligns his sense of self more closely with the African diaspora, which, despite being culturally complex and disjointed, lends him a more stable sense of self. Of the three friends, Sepha thus stands out with the distinctly liminal telling of his story, underlining his status as a highly individualized, but also alienated, transnational subject.

Overall, Sepha's story illustrates how the migrant novel has evolved into new, complex, and pluralized expressions that are not as so easily conceivable as a linear Bildungsroman, nor as a celebration of the American dream. This brings us back to the notion of transnational literature and calls for some further clarifications of the concept itself. Not only does increasing globalization complicate questions of national identity, but technological developments have also made it easier to maintain familial and social connections across geographical borders. It is against these developments, Paul Jay argues, that we need this kind of literature:

> transnational literature is a particular type of literature, emergent at an identifiable historical moment and dealing,

> collectively, with a set of issues and themes associated with decolonization, globalization, postmodernity, and technology. Put another way, transnational literature is about the variety of forms of transnational experience produced by the convergence of these forces. (51)

Although Jay notes that what constitutes transnational literature is notoriously difficult to pin down, he suggests a tentative definition in literature that represents forms of "transnational experience." Crucial to this representation seems to be a *dynamic* understanding of migration as an ongoing process (as opposed to one with a finite conclusion). Here, I also reiterate another crucial critique of the early immigration literature, which heavily emphasized whiteness. As Spickard, Beltrán, and Hooton note, the classic celebrations of the migrant formulated by historic writers such as Wittke and Crèvecoeur, were, despite their potency, unequivocally dedicated to newcomers from Northwestern Europe (5). In reality, racially diverse migrants have entered the US long before the contemporary age, something that is further complicated by the American history of slavery. Transnational literature has long decentered monolithic and white-centered conceptions of the migrant, instead distinguishing itself as keenly attentive to both race and racial prejudice. Where the American dream might have offered a final destination in some earlier stories of immigration, as illustrated in Berhane's fantasies above, transnational literature thus brings to light a much more complicated reality.

## Precarity and Class Position in Transnational Literature

Much as the concept of transnational literature reminds us that contemporary stories of immigration hold much more than a set journey from start to finish, so has the academic discourse on class been positively diversified in recent decades. Moving away from traditional labor history, which, in the American context, has been known for favoring white, male, industrial workers, Lizabeth Cohen noted already in the mid 1990s a turn in modern working-class studies not only toward smaller grass-roots actors but also to the intersectional relationship between class, race, and gender (Cohen). This shift relates to the point I touch on above, namely that class significantly intersects with figurations of transnational experience. Race has already been recognized as an overt theme in notable works of transnational fiction such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016). This is also true for Mengestu's *Beautiful Things*, which Bénédicte Ledent aptly reads as an exploration of "the difficulty for an individual African migrant in America to adopt a ready-to-wear diasporic identity or to feel a sense of natural allegiance to the African American cause" (110). While it is absolutely true that discourses of race and racial identity comprise a crucial aspect of many transnational stories, I nevertheless reiterate that class should also be approached as a foundational structure that postulates the limitations and possibilities available to the transnational subject. Although a higher class position cannot fully protect individuals from prejudice, material resources can certainly serve as a buffer to the structural constraints race and gender put forth and typically open up doors to otherwise unattainable social spaces. This type of freedom is associated with cosmopolitanism, a philosophy that presupposes the existence of human interconnectedness across nation states. As Peng Cheah notes, the concept of cosmopolitanism has been criticized on these very grounds, as it glosses over obvious social and economic inequalities brought on by global capitalism (Cheah). Resoundingly, a lower-class position will quickly confine transnational subjects, who are already vulnerable, to the fringes of society, denying

them the benefits that a "free flow" between states and identities can bring.

Indeed, a contemporary working-class position is typically far from cosmopolitan. Guy Standing has written extensively on the rise of temporary forms of labor in the wake of the 1980s' neoliberal surge, and how this has impacted class-structures and identities. From this, he suggests the emergence of a new class category which he has named the "precariat":

> One defining characteristic of the precariat is distinctive relations of production: so-called "flexible" labor contracts; temporary jobs; labor as casuals, part timers, or intermittently for labor brokers or employment agencies. But conditions of unstable labor are part of the definition, not the full picture. More crucially, those in the precariat have no secure occupational identity; no occupational narrative they can give to their lives. (Standing, "Precariat" 10)

As Standing explains the precariat, this new class category is not only shaped by the financial pressures of uncertainty, but also by the loss of identity occurring as a direct consequence. He notes how, in the past, long-term positions on the factory floor ensured not only financial stability for workers, but also a foundation of collective experience from which they could relate to one another. With this, Standing does not claim that workers under the Fordist model of production did not face oppression, but that it nevertheless afforded a valuable sense of stability. As he suggests, short-term contracts for employers like Amazon or Uber puts strain on workers to secure their next paycheck, and by extension, erode the social bonds that have previously united the working class. Precarity can thus be understood as a contemporary working-class experience marked by insecurity—of livelihood, community, and self.

As I see it, Mengestu's *Beautiful Things* is a literary work aptly aware not only of this particular type of insecurity, but also of the ways in which precarity interlaces with the transnational experience to render a more destructive state of perpetual becoming for vulnerable migrant subjects. Sepha is clearly transnational, but defining him as a precariat worker in Standing's sense of the term is more complicated. Since he runs his own business, he is technically part of the entrepreneurial middle class. Ironically, though, Sepha's store is key to our impression of his life as precarious. Since it is always teetering on the edge of foreclosure, it forces him to live day to day. As a consequence, Sepha endures a prolonged state of insecurity that makes it difficult for him to formulate what Standing above calls an "occupational narrative" ( "Precariat" 10). The "story" of his failing business is a messy one, full of rifts between dream and dissolution:

> I spent two thousand dollars of borrowed money on it with the idea that perhaps my store could become a deli, and in becoming a deli, a restaurant, and in becoming a restaurant, a place that I could sit back and look proudly upon. I place the chairs right in front of the empty deli counter. I sit with my back against the glass. It's May 2. Since January, I've had exactly three deli orders (turkey, no mayo, wheat bread; turkey, mustard, wheat bread; turkey, just one slice), not a single one after lunchtime. Despite my recent efforts, there is nothing special to my store. It's narrow, shabby, and brightly lit, with a ceiling of fluorescent bulbs that hum for over an hour every morning after being turned on. I sell twenty-five-cent bags of potato chips, two-liter bottles of Pepsi, boxes of macaroni and cheese, diapers, soap, detergent, condensed milk in narrow aisles haphazardly arranged. (3)

For a moment, Sepha imagines a steadfast trajectory to his business, developing from a deli to a successful restaurant. When he envisions something to "sit back and look proudly upon," he arguably also sees a version of himself with a more permanent sense of identity. He also sits himself by the abandoned Deli counter, physically going through the motions of this dream. But as he remembers the meager number of deli orders he has received, three in total, his mind shifts back to reality. Because "there is nothing special" about Sepha's store, it fails to offer him a satisfying narrative about his life. Instead, its crooked shelves and "haphazard" arrangement embody the messier reality he has come to accept. When Sepha lists the ordinary grocery items he sells—bottles of Pepsi and condensed milk—he inadvertently underlines a sense of mundanity or insignificance that comes into stark contrast with his previous aspirations. The store thus emerges as a physical manifestation of the transnational experience under precarity—it is a messy, ill-defined, and disconcerting space. In other words, Sepha's business is also representative of his liminal identity: on the one hand, it makes him an entrepreneur, which has often been seen as epitomizing the American dream, but on the other, it places him within the precarious working class.

## Liminality and the Perpetual State of Becoming

I have already applied the word "liminal" as an adjective in this paper, but the concept of liminality calls for some further clarification. That is, the perpetual state of becoming that defines Sepha's circumstances represents a form of unresolved narrative positioning that remains constantly in a conceptual borderland. As I mention above, this opaque state could certainly be read positively for transnational characters who merge different cultural experiences into a new, constantly developing whole. But for others, like Mengestu's Sepha, the liminal transnational experience is more conflicted. Part of that conflict seems to arise from class position, as stark economic divisions limit his ability to live out the idealized narrative of the American dream. Unable to either return home or succeed as a self-made man in the US, Sepha is left to navigate the fringes of an uncertain everyday. As such, the concept of liminality offers a key term for us to approach the complicated relationship between the transnational and precarious working-class experience. Theater scholars Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen and Joshua Edelman define liminality as "a transitory and precarious phase between stable states, which is marked off by conceptual, spatial and/or temporal barriers, within which individuals, groups and/or objects are set apart from society and/or the everyday" (1). Immediately interesting is Skjoldager-Nielsen and Edelman's description of the liminal position as one of *isolation*. When subjects or groups move "between stable states," they also feel themselves to be set apart from society at large. I would argue that class position is key to the valor of this dislodged experience, as it can color it either as a cosmopolitan form of freedom or as an experience of marginalized alienation. Furthermore, where Skjoldager-Nielsen and Edelman define liminality as a finite process, transnational literature arguably experiments with forms of liminality that are not temporary, but rather persist as constant states in and of themselves. Arguably, the transnational subject cannot arrive at a stable state because its very nature is one of suspension.

Part of Sepha's ambivalence also relates to the fact that he has recently befriended his neighbor Judith, a white ex-professor of American political history whose arrival in the neighborhood is inextricable from the gentrification it is currently undergoing. In Judith lies the promise of a form of social belonging and mobility Sepha has

previously felt impossible. Their first meeting becomes emblematic of this idealized vision:

> Judith was sitting on the bottom steps of the house on an early fall afternoon with a little girl leaning back in between her legs when I came out of my house. I was dressed for a wedding, and as I turned to lock the door behind me, I heard her say, "What a beautiful garment." Her use of the word "garment" struck me most—it was polite, almost formal, as if the word had been inserted into her sentence at the last possible moment out of an instinctive sense of cultural diplomacy. I was dressed entirely in white. I had on white pants, with a white shirt that had a crucifix embroidered down the middle, over which I wore a finely woven shroud of white cotton. It was an outfit that meant nothing here, stripped as it was of all context. (18)

Sepha and Judith's first meeting sees him don traditional clothes from Ethiopia. He has previously felt anxious about the outfit, which, "stripped as it was of all context," makes him vulnerable to the judgmental gaze of passersby. On the contrary, Judith grasps not only the significance of Sepha's clothing, but uses it as a means to spark up a conversation. Although Sepha notices a slight awkwardness to Judith's "cultural diplomacy," it also makes him feel seen in a way he is not accustomed to. For readers, the scene, remaining true to the novel's liminal position as a whole, allows us to read its context from more than one perspective. At its core, Sepha and Judith's initial meeting represents an ideal encounter across cultures, marked by mutual respect and a desire to understand. On another level, Sepha's traditional clothing, all-white and outfitted with a "crucifix," makes him appear almost non-human or saint-like. This leaves us to question whether his appeal to Judith lies in his personal attributes, or whether it is his cultural "exotism" that draws her toward him.

This uncomfortable ambivalence continues throughout Sepha and Judith's relationship, which teeters on the edge of, but never grows into, a fully-fledged romance. Their unresolved relationship thus speaks to the perpetual state of becoming that I argue is central to the novel. More broadly, transnational literature often uses romantic relationships to explore liminal and dislodged positions across boundaries, a prominent example of which would be Adichie's *Americanah*. In the novel, as Jennifer Leetsch argues, there is a clear "correlation between love and spatial practices," as the Nigerian-American protagonist, Ifemelu, navigates a sense of identity through her American lovers, where a nostalgic longing for the stable state of home is closely connected to her first love, Obinze (Leetsch 5). Although the story grants the possibility of the two reconnecting, Obinze and the ideas connected to his personhood remain out of Ifemelu's reach for most of the plotline, leaving her to grapple with the uprootedness of her present life. Similarly, *Beautiful Things* sees Sepha's relationship to Judith as emblematic of the liminal space he cannot transition out of. Part of Sepha wants the relationship to develop, a desire that seems fortified by the profound connection he makes to Naomi, Judith's young daughter—an intelligent and charismatic girl whose father is implied to be a person of color. His interactions are, however, stunted by his chronic passivity and feelings of inadequacy. The closest the two get is described by Sepha as "a gentle press, or an extended graze of lips, full of a sudden, almost crushing tenderness" (59). Although promising, this exchange never develops further, and Sepha accepts it as a moment that simply passes.

Of course, the stunted nature of the romantic relationship is not just a product of Sepha's transnational status, but also traces back to his class position. Realizing that he cannot live up to Judith's expectations, Sepha painfully crafts a

fictional image of Naomi's father to contend with his own precarious reality:

> The picture was complete now. I could see him, Judith's former husband and Naomi's semiabsent father. I imagined a tall, sandy-skinned man with oval wire-rim glasses and smart, well-tailored suits like the ones my father used to wear. Someone who spoke with a crisp accent, whom women described as being gorgeous. I imagined academic conferences, family vacations on windswept beaches, and late-night dinner parties. A confident and assured voice that knew how to order wines, talk to sales-clerks, and command the attention of a room. Someone I knew I could never stand against. (135-36)

Succinctly, the ex-husband Sepha makes up for Judith mirrors the person he might have seen himself become under the guise of the American dream. Attractive and well educated, this fantasy figure appears somehow reminiscent of Sepha's own father. In Sepha's mind, Judith's ex-husband possesses many markers of high socioeconomic class—he knows wine and books and treats his family to extravagant trips. The real Sepha cannot compete with this cartoonish upper-class figure. Although we never become privy to Judith's inner feelings about Sepha, she does seem to abandon the romanticized notion of him that she may have had at the outset of their relationship. Noticing the growing strain between them, Sepha reflects on how "I wanted to take it back and start all over again, just as we had that evening in my apartment, but I knew that we had run out of roles to play" (137). Indeed, Judith's relationship to Sepha ultimately reads as more explorative than committed. She invites him over for dinner, lets him watch Naomi, and frequents his store with a sense of belonging. For a time, the three appear almost like a family. But the practical realities of committing to someone like Sepha—their differences in class, finances, and sense of national belonging—ultimately becomes unrealistic. The end result is a relationship that is as precarious as Sepha's life outside it.

Toward the end of the novel, a local man disillusioned with the gentrification of Logan Circle tries to burn down Judith's house and she decides to move away. This choice she makes also demonstrates the contrasting mobility levels of Sepha and Judith as characters: "'I still owe you a dinner,' she said. 'Maybe once I settle into a temporary place, you can come over and join Naomi and me.' That we haven't spoken or seen each other since then is no surprise. It was enough to pretend, for just that afternoon, that our lives might intersect again" (228). Where Sepha is precariously stuck in the "in-between" in his state of becoming, Judith reads as a person who freely and willingly remains in motion. In the end, Sepha's life is tethered to Logan Circle, which, for Judith, only seems to have represented one of many temporary places. Although these two characters have bonded over a mutual desire to belong, or perhaps even to be, something permanent, they have very different options once the spell of this promise has been broken. In this sense, the arsenous neighbor represents a negative mirroring of Sepha's own circumstances, the many frustrations from which are manifested in a violent act of eradication.

## The Isolated Denizen: Collective and Personal Relationships

Sepha's position in the liminal space of wavering national identity and precarious class position makes it difficult for him to form lasting social bonds, both on the collective and personal planes. Returning to Standing's work, he notes how a large portion of the precariat is made up of migrant workers who face overlapping forms of marginalization: "Migrants are the light infantry of global capitalism. Vast numbers vie with

each other for jobs. Most have put up with short-term contracts, with low wages and few benefits. The process is systemic, not accidental. The world is becoming full of denizens" (*Precariat* 113). Standing argues that migrant workers, pushed into the insecure circumstances we have come to associate with the precariat at large, also tend to become "denizens": a category of reduced citizenship historically reserved for non-native peoples. Denizens are forced to take on the least lucrative jobs (even if they are over-qualified), and to boot have to compete fiercely among their peers to get them. Besides the economic dimension of denizenship, Standing underlines the social discrimination that accompanies it. Migrant workers are frequently portrayed as outcasts who promote non-Western values and threaten the status quo (*Precariat* 114). The result, he argues, is not only material disadvantages, but also an isolating narrative that alienates them from participating as equal parts of the mainstream culture.

Throughout the novel, Sepha's denizen status keeps him from experiencing a sense of solidaric belonging with other Black Americans. This issue is particularly prominent in his ambiguous feelings about the ongoing gentrification of his neighborhood. Attending a meeting in a church basement on the issue, Sepha becomes a spectator as opposed to an active participant:

> When the speeches came back to the neighborhood, the people's anger was barely disguised. I don't know who used the word "they" first. . . . Once the word entered the meeting, it seemed to trail onto the end of nearly every sentence. I don't know who they think they are. What are they doing here anyway. They have their own neighborhoods and now they want ours too. It's bad enough that they have all the jobs and schools. I was convinced that if given enough space and time, a conclusion would have been drawn that held "them" responsible not only for the evictions in the neighborhood, but for every slight and injury each person in that room had suffered, from the children who never made it past junior high to the unpaid heating bill waiting in a dresser drawer. (199-200)

On this section of the book, Ledent notes how Ms. Davis, the leader of the meeting and a prominent figure in the community, "encourages the neighborhood . . . to adopt an us/them rhetoric with which Sepha finds it difficult to feel comfortable" (114). From his liminal position, Sepha observes this schism on a meta level. On the one hand, his relativized stance allows him to discern the emotional pain that lies hidden beneath the increasingly heated discussion. He understands that his neighbors are not just angry about rising rents caused by recent gentrification, but more deeply about the many disappointments structural oppression inflicts onto personal life. The coupling of "children who never made it past junior high" with unpaid heating bills in the same sentence implies a dual grief: both over futures deferred and presents continually circumscribed by precarity. On the other hand, Sepha fails to pierce through the membrane of alienation that separates these stories from his own, although there are overlaps. Indeed, he carries his own traumas from the Ethiopian war and certainly has his share of heating bills stuffed away. But despite this, Sepha is unable to claim a sense of ownership over the discussion.

In the end, Logan Circle seems to be one of the few stable fixtures of Sepha's liminal existence. In an interesting paradox, Mengestu imagines this neighborhood less as a permanent space, and more as a signifier of continual instability, which only highlights the persistence of Sepha's liminal existence even further. This impression holds true even when he has lost everything—his store has been foreclosed, Judith has left, and his neighborhood is fast becoming

unrecognizable due to gentrification. Sepha's final words seem indeed to embrace a life in continual flux, the fluidity of which is emblematized in the space of Logan Circle:

> We try to do the best we can. There are moments like this, however, when we are neither coming nor going, and all we have to do is sit and look back on the life we have made. Right now, I'm convinced that my store looks more perfect than ever before. I can see it exactly as I have always wanted to see it. Through the canopy of trees that line the walkway cutting through the middle of the circle is a store, one that is neither broken nor perfect, one that, regardless of everything, I'm happy to claim as entirely my own. (228)

Nicole Cesare has already made a compelling connection between the representation of spaces as concrete embodiments of Sepha's inner life in *Beautiful Things*. On Sepha's remark regarding his store as "more perfect than ever before," despite his lease being foreclosed, Cesare writes that the "ambiguity of the ending places the reader in the position of either filling in the narrative and constructing an alternate conclusion to Sepha's story or accepting the uncertainty of his final position" (133). This paper leans toward the latter option of this interpretation, as Sepha's soliloquy can be read as a literal acceptance of "the liminal space" his life unfolds within. Where Sepha once felt his store looked shabby, he now embraces that it is "neither broken nor perfect." In this claim, he can also be said to do away with the ideal of the American dream, which has long postulated over his life an ideal of perfection against which he has felt insufficient. When he claims the store as "entirely my own," this might have less to do with his legal ownership of the shop itself, and more to do with a final acceptance of "the life we have made." Of course, even this acceptance does not represent a stable state, for although Sepha finally claims a sense of belonging to Logan Circle, he knows that the space will continue to change. And even though his final lines signal a newfound sense of agency, readers are left to grapple with the many uncomfortable and unresolved tensions that remain. Sepha might have embraced his status as a transnational subject, but as a member of the precariat, the material bearings of his future are left in shambles.

## Conclusion

Mengestu's *Beautiful Things* highlights the impact of a precarious working-class position on transnational experience, highlighting the importance of intersectional and, particularly, class-inclusive approaches to this kind of literature. As I have stressed throughout this paper, the emphasis on fluidity that transnational literature brings to conceptions of migration remains key to our understanding of the innate complexity this process holds. But the issue of class position remains ever-present in framing the potentialities and risks that accompany the migrant's journey. As such, the contribution this paper makes to the existing scholarship is in underlining how the overlaps between transnationality and precarity in Mengestu's novel speak to a broader "revision" of linear narratives—and not only those that find their home within the migrant novel genre. Sepha's perpetual state of becoming remains unresolved and calls on us to question not only the meaning of national belonging or class, but also the somewhat rigid limitations postulated by the notion of "American literature" itself. The primus motor of this dynamism is arguably not a distinct "Americanness" in Mengestu's novel, but rather lies in its investigation of the many crevices surrounding this singular node—among them those of the Ethiopian, diasporic, and working-class subject. Emerging are the outlines of a particular aesthetics in which liminal spaces force us to

suspend, revise, and re-think old lines of thought—especially pertaining to the reductive idealization of cross-border migration. This point returns us to the words of Fishkin's address, which helpfully reminds us that "[t]he United States is and has always been a transnational crossroads of cultures" (44). Indeed, it might be the case that transnational literature outfits American Studies with a new way to probe these crossroads—be they the ones long established or those that are now emerging.

## Notes

1. This paper applies liminality as a theoretical concept, the definition of which is further elaborated on page 10.

2. See Sandage 261-62.

3. To this, one should note that the migrant novel does not always adapt to the form of Bildung, and that there exist other variations of this genre. In the context of American literature, however, I would argue that the motifs of the Bildungsroman remain in close affiliation to the migrant novel, although, as Jo Collins argues, the genre often deconstructs and reimagines the anatomy of traditional Bildung (Collins).

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# FILIPINO DREAMING:

## The Powers of Death and the Limits of Diagnostic Narratives



**ABSTRACT:** This article provides a transnational perspective on the Filipino American novel *Leche* (2011) and its depiction of both *tsismis* ("gossip") and the fatal Filipino medical phenomenon *bangungot* ("nightmare"). I pay particular attention to the unpredictability of bangungot—its ability to paralyze and kill during sleep without warning—which is precisely why it becomes an object of speculation and gossip. Through *Leche*, I examine how bangungot kills, but also how it lives on through tsismis, and how tsismis provides not a medical diagnosis, but an unofficial and insurgent narrative through which to understand bangungot, and queer Filipino fantasies and desires, differently. By going against postmodernist and poststructuralist discourses on narrative, I highlight how bangungot's haunting quality and refusal to be medically diagnoseable disrupt Western diagnostic traditions, which are novelistic. My use of tsismis also highlights subaltern forms of documentation that run counter to imperial narratives of development, enlightenment, and modernity. Throughout the article, I incorporate personal narrative, speculations, alternative sources, and fantasies to challenge imperial notions of theorizing and knowledge-making. Bangungot quietly and violently kills, but it also continues to live on, not in scientific certainty or in the developmental depths of the novel, but in the fleeting and evasive speculations, experiences, and fantasies of Filipinos.

**Keywords:** diagnostic narrative, death, gossip, imperialism, transnationalism, queer fantasy

**Prologue**

My departure from and return to the Philippines was framed by a fatal Filipino medical phenomenon called *bangungot*. Bangungot (Tagalog) loosely translates to "nightmare," a mere bad dream, but in the Filipino context, it can leave its prey (often young, healthy men) dead, unable to break away from the terrifying dream. A week before my family moved to the United States in 2004, our morning was disrupted when one of the neighbors (who was also a distant relative) came running and screaming, looking for my mother because her thirty-nine-year-old son, Juvenal "Bentot" de la Peña, would not wake up. My mother was a midwife and the only medical professional in the neighborhood. Composed as she always was, my mother comforted the neighbor, grabbed her medical bag, and rushed to their house. Curious, I promptly followed. I was behind my mother when she entered the room and felt Bentot for a pulse before telling our neighbor that her son had most likely been dead for hours. Amidst the grieving was the immediate chatter about what could have happened. One of the family's maids speculated that Bentot had been drinking heavily days before he died. Another said that he had been consuming dishes made with animal organs—Filipino stewed dishes like *dinuguan* and *paklay*, made with pig intestines, kidneys, hearts, livers, stomachs, and ox tripe—insinuating that it may have been the unhealthy diet that did it. But everyone, including me, understood that he had died of a bad dream: bangungot. Almost eighteen years later, I returned to my hometown in the Philippines for the first time. On the first night, over drinks, grilled meats, and karaoke, friends and relatives filled me in on the town gossip, or *tsismis*: neighborhood feuds, who had died since I left, who had gotten pregnant out of wedlock, who else had left town to work abroad, etc. But the main story that night was about another neighbor, Kyle Glen Verador, who, at thirty-two, died in his sleep just days before I arrived. Kyle and I were not friends as boys (I was a few years older), but the name rang a bell because his father, Epoy Verador, had worked for my parents, and I remembered being very fond of him. The rumor was that, because of the recently concluded town fiesta, Kyle had been drinking and eating heavily days before he died. My Aunt Perla, a nurse at the town hospital, said she *overheard* that when Kyle's body reached the hospital, he vomited barely chewed pieces of *humba* (braised pork belly) before the doctor could officially call his death. Bangungot, I thought then, had once again, in a very particular way, marked my movement back to that town and my relation to its people. For me, bangungot—and the tsismis (gossip/speculation) that conveys it—is not only a paralytic and deadly nightmare, but also a coordinate to my past, to memories both tragic and pleasurable.

In both deadly instances, tsismis acted as the narrative mode that articulated bangungot's workings and elusive manifestations. That is, the unpredictability of bangungot—its ability to paralyze and kill during sleep without warning—is precisely why it becomes an object of speculation. Through R. Zamora Linmark's 2011 novel *Leche*, and its depictions of the deadly nightmare, this article examines not only how bangungot kills, but also how it *lives on* through tsismis, and how tsismis provides not a medical diagnosis, but an unofficial and insurgent narrative through which to understand bangungot, and Filipino desires, differently.[1] This article also provides a transnational perspective on both the Filipino American novel and the bangungot phenomenon by placing them away from postmodernist and poststructuralist discourses on narrative (that is, as deeply American/Eurocentric philosophical traditions) and instead within the context of the Philippine-American imperial relation.[2] In the section "Bangungot, Tsismis, and Diagnosis," I examine how bangungot's haunting quality and refusal to be medically diagnoseable disrupt Western diagnostic traditions, which, as

Joel Fineman has argued, are novelistic. I also highlight the ways that tsismis, as a subaltern form of documentation, runs counter to the ideological function of imperial narratives of development, enlightenment, and modernity. My formulation of bangungot and tsismis intervenes in what Rita Charon calls "narrative medicine" because of the ways they not only describe the limits of, but also exceed, imperial logics of both "narrative" and "medicine." Paying attention to *Leche*'s narrative style and focus on the Philippine-American imperial relation, my section titled "The Queer Filipino Colonial Condition" highlights, through bangungot, queer forms of sense- and meaning-making that also reveal the erotics and fantasies of the US empire. I describe how Filipino narratives and traditions are not erased by, or simply assimilated into, US imperialism; instead, they reveal how Western forms such as the novel fail to contain or explain bangungot's evasive power. By centering queer fantasies, I also describe bangungot's and tsismis's abilities to generate more stories and meanings, way beyond the world of the novel. In my section titled "The Powers of Bangungot as Mess," I highlight *Leche*'s depiction of bangungot as "*kalat*" ("mess" as both displacement and disorganization), which articulates, I argue, not only Filipino nightmares, but also Filipino styles of survival, creativity, and pleasure. Kalat also describes tsismis's viral and parasitic tendencies, which displace, disorganize, and fabricate stories. Bangungot and tsismis thus *mess up* the narrative medicalization of life and death and draw us to their excesses, out of which we may conjure new ways of living together amidst crises. Additionally, I incorporate personal anecdotes throughout this article, including the stories that bookend it, about my own encounters with bangungot to underscore how and why bangungot continues to haunt *me* and many other Filipino men at home and throughout the diaspora, and to examine the different ways that we might rethink such haunting—that is, beyond mere discourses of morality and medicine. My incorporation of personal narrative, speculations, alternative sources, and even fantasies throughout this article also challenges imperial notions of theorizing and knowledge-making, which often hierarchize bodies of knowledge and reconcile the individual with the demands of social conformity, as in the ideological function of the nineteenth-century bildungsroman, or novel of formation.[3] Following Lisa Lowe, I understand the novel form as a "developmental narrative . . . designed to justify the histories of colonialism, neocolonialism, and forced labor and to erase the dislocations and hybridities that are the resulting conditions of those histories" (58). "Development," which, as Philippine historian Reynaldo Ileto has noted, extends eighteenth-century European ideas of "Progress—the belief that the growth of knowledge, capabilities, and material production makes human existence better," is also deeply implicated in power relationships within Filipino society and reproduced as a "universal 'given'" in "any text emanating from the [Philippine] national government and its technocrats" (Ileto 98). And because Filipinos from a young age "learn about themselves, their society, history, and culture through books, the mass media, and the classroom," which are steeped "in ideas of development, emergence, linear time, scientific reason, humane pragmatism, governmental ordering, and nation building," it becomes all the more crucial to find alternatives, particularly those, like bangungot, that thrive in the dark recesses of consciousness and political life, that evade, resist, and exceed such logics (Ileto 98). Bangungot quietly and violently kills, but it also continues to *live on*, not in scientific certainty or in the developmental depths of the novel, but in the fleeting and evasive speculations/tsismis, experiences, and fantasies of Filipinos.

**Bangungot, Tsismis, and Diagnosis**

In *Leche*, the incorporation of bangungot into its plot is afflicted with chaos, contradictions, speculations, and (sexual) fantasies. The sequel to Linmark's highly praised debut novel, *Rolling the R's* (1995), which was set in Honolulu, *Leche* follows the return of protagonist Vince de Los Reyes to the Philippines over a decade after he and his family have immigrated to the United States. The trip is part of his prize for winning first runner-up of "Mr. Pogi [Mr. Handsome]," a Filipino-style male beauty pageant he joins in Hawaii (Linmark 242). Upon arrival, and throughout his stay in Manila, Vince navigates not only the city's heat, stench, and chaos, but also the melancholy of immigrant return. As with many postcolonial narratives of return, he questions his sense of identity and place in the Philippines—he still identifies as a Filipino, yet he does not quite feel like a Filipino. Throughout his time in Manila, Vince encounters various eccentric characters including President Corazon Aquino's actress daughter, Kris Aquino, known as the "Massacre Queen of Philippine Cinema," and Dante, Vince's married cab driver, towards whom he develops a deep crush. Not unlike *Rolling the R's*, which was known for its obsession with popular culture and playfulness with form, *Leche* manages to be "at once formally inventive and compulsively readable" (Boggs). Woven into its primary plot are postcard correspondence between Vince and his family and friends in Hawaii, dream sequences, sarcastic lists of "Tourist Tips," and entries from "*Decolonization for Beginners: A Filipino Glossary*," which acts in the novel as a translator of sorts for foreign visitors. One of the glossary entries provides bangungot's etymology: "bangungut, *noun*. A contraction of *bangun* (to rise) and *ungul* (to moan). See also *batibat*, *hupa*, *Sudden Unexpected Death Syndrome*."[4] The novel also indulges in extended retellings of Vince's youth both in the Philippines and in Hawaii. In one such instance, Vince recalls his first encounter with bangungot after reading about it in "Bonifacio Dumpit's essay 'The Contagion of Folk Beliefs: Bangungut and Racial Profiling in Hawaii's Plantation Camps'" in an "Ethnic Literature in Hawaii" course (Linmark 28). Vince's narrative of return, as well as the novel's initial portrayal of bangungot, thus unfolds not through the neat regulation of plot, character development, or resolution, but through the chaos and contradictions of both Manila and the novel's narrative structure.

As *Leche* notes, bangungot comes from *bangun* (to rise) and *ungul* (to moan), and is known colloquially as that performative moment, popularized in Filipino TV and films, when a person struggles and moans during sleep to break away from a bad dream. Bangungot's English equivalent is "nightmare," a mere bad dream, but the bangungot that *Leche* refers to here is a specifically Filipino one. It leaves its young and healthy prey (like Bentot de la Peña and Kyle Verador) dead—unable to break away from the bad dream.[5] And, "to Filipinos raised on Catholicism and folk superstition," what makes bangungot even more terrifying

> is that the victim returns momentarily to the world of the living, only to witness, in his limbo state, the final scene of his life—moaning and kicking helplessly. He wants to get up, but he can't. He opens his mouth to scream but he can't. Because sitting on his face, which is how survivors of the nightmare described their near-death experiences, is the bangungut, shoving his fat cigar down the victim's throat, determined to drag his young and healthy prey to the underworld. (Linmark 18-19)

As the passage points out, in its nightmare form, bangungot is also paralytic. As if in a straitjacket, the helpless victim tries to struggle away from the bad dream, yet is completely unable to move or speak. While my focus is on bangungot as a

deadly phenomenon, it is worth noting that not all bangungots are deadly. One might suffer the paralytic and nightmarish symptoms of bangungot (as I have in the past) but still wake up to tell the story. Some Filipino researchers have noted that bangungot can refer to chronic sleep paralysis—a non-deadly combination of nightmare and immobility during sleep—which is common among young Filipinos/as in high school and college (Alegre et al.).[6] I focus on the paralytic and deadly characteristics of bangungot here precisely because they force us to find other ways of telling stories—that is, in situations where one is unable to speak and tell the story because *one is dead*.

One such way of telling stories of the dead is through speculation, or tsismis. Because death through bangungot happens quickly during sleep, without prior indication, its enigmatic quality is precisely why it becomes a prime subject of speculation. *Leche* reminds us of the workings of tsismis. While in line at the Honolulu airport for his trip back to the Philippines, Vince overhears a "group of [Filipina] women gossiping about him literally behind his back" (Linmark 9). As he points out, this is "not uncommon. Filipinos talking loudly behind your back is their indirect way of showing you that you are important enough to kill time with. If they don't do it behind your back, they'll do it beside you or in your face. And if you're not within sight or hearing distance because you're in Serengeti National Park, or glacier-sighting in Patagonia, they'll make certain their words reach you" (9). What this passage performs about tsismis is its attention-seeking quality, exemplified by its need to exaggerate—and, I should add, misrepresent and manipulate—to be heard. While tsismis is nevertheless propelled by some fact or actual event, it prioritizes recognition rather than truth. Having caught Vince's attention, the women are encouraged to amplify the tsismis even more:

> "He is here, Mare."
>
> "Who, Mare?"
>
> "The 'Let America be America Again' guy, Mare."
>
> "Ay, really? Where?"
>
> The woman stretches her pursed lips to Vince.
>
> "He looks so much better live than on my Sony Trinitron," her friend says, eyeing Vince up and down through her rhinestone-studded glasses.
>
> "And so much more gwapo [handsome] than that Negro who won."
>
> "He's a gay, you know, Mare," she whispers loud enough for the natives on Easter Island to hear. (9-10)

But instead of being offended, Vince is tickled by the conversation and makes all efforts to hear every word. He is especially delighted to hear one of the women cuss out the airline supervisor with "Leche" for charging her an extra fee for her overweight luggage. Leche means "'Milk' in Spanish," but for Filipinos, its one variation is equivalent to "Shit!" (11). Vince has not heard that word in so long, and it "conjures up childhood memories of melodrama movies, when deceived lovers, during a confrontation scene, threw it in the face of their cheating partners before walking away, as if to tell them no one could ever break their heart again" (11). Not only does *Leche* (the novel) articulate and perform tsismis—its hyperbolic, seductive, and manipulative tendencies that at once catch Vince's attention and make him complicit—but it also describes how tsismis, like bangungot, serves as Vince's coordinate to the past. Here, I am especially interested in tsismis's parasitic nature—its aggressive, authoritative, manipulative, and appropriative tendencies—as a counter-narrative logic for thinking about bangungot differently, in how it describes the deadly bangungot phenomenon

as a *mirror* rather than a developmental narrative's *other*.

Lisa Lowe has argued that tsismis, although "unofficial," does not "[occupy] a terrain that is separate or discreet from official narratives; rather, gossip is peculiarly parasitic, pillaging from the official, imitating without discrimination, exaggerating, relaying" (113). Discussing the Filipino-American novel *Dogeaters* as it relates to the narrative and national formation of the Asian American citizen-subject, Lowe points out that the novel's use of gossip acts "as an antifiguration of narrative" that "[interrupts] the traditional forms for narrating the development of the individual subject and its reconciliation to the national social order." That is, gossip, as a "destructuring device," challenges "concepts of identity and identification within a universalized narrative of development" (100-101) and, as such, "disorganizes official history" (114). By "official history," Lowe is referring to colonial narratives of development, including the novel and historical narratives that "[legitimate] particular forms and subjects of history and [subjugate] and [erase] others" (98). For Lowe, gossip's disorganizing tendencies describe both the workings and the limits of developmental narratives, particularly as the method through which national identities are constructed. Following Reynaldo Ileto, Lowe also places tsismis within the longer colonial history of the Philippines under Spain, pointing out that "nineteenth-century discourses of modernization privileged a small elite and subjugated the knowledges of 'others'" (115). Here, Lowe notes that tsismis, as an unofficial narrative mode, must be understood as counter-knowledge or "counterhistory," emerging alongside "the popular and regional activities of bandits" that provide "an account of mobile, dispersed insurgency and of the official modes of regulation erected to police and suppress those insurgencies" (115). Following Lowe's (and Ileto's) call for more expressions of insurgent knowledge production, I use tsismis to articulate the ways that bangungot conveys not only its relation to, but the limits of, the developmental logics of Western diagnostic narrative.

In my use of "diagnostic narrative," I follow Joel Fineman's formulation of "diagnosis" as "one that starts from some zero-degree of vulnerable healthiness, that then builds up to a series of significant symptoms, to a predictable dramatic climax at a moment of required 'crisis' . . . after which the disease completes its predetermined and internally directed course, when the patient either dies or returns to health" (65-66). Here, Fineman highlights the fundamentally novelistic quality of medical diagnosis, which is the movement from infection to crisis to healing or death: beginning, middle, and end. In the diagnostic process, that movement is then propelled by anecdotes:

> the anecdote is the literary form that uniquely *lets history happen* by virtue of the way it introduces an opening into the teleological, and therefore timeless, narration of beginning, middle, and end. The anecdote produces the effect of the real, the occurrence of contingency, by establishing an event within and without the framing context of historical successivity. (Fineman 72)[7]

Fineman is skeptical of the New Historicist approach that relies too much on the anecdote, confined as they are within the given developmental narrative, in *getting at* the historical/novelistic/medical "truth." What is unique about bangungot is that it happens suddenly, without prior indication, and so it is unavailable to a diagnostic method that requires beginning, middle, and end. In bangungot, death is the beginning, middle, and end. Death is the only truth, everything else is speculation. Tsismis, on the other hand, unlike the New Historicist anecdote, does not project itself as "real," nor does it require a standard narrative form, for it can feed

off anything. As such, tsismis provides us a different mode of (medical) articulation that does not rely on or expect a universal etiology.

Bangungot's and tsismis's defiance to being confined within diagnostic narratives also has to do with a particular Western obsession with health, with the preservation of life and the alleviation of pain caused by disease. In her discussion of the fascination with pathology and disease during the Victorian period, and how such fascination reflected the novelistic pursuits of the time, Erika Wright notes that illness or the sick body—that which threatens health—provides the condition for a developmental narrative: "For the doctor, illness is a problem *to solve*; it must be diagnosed, treated and cured. For the patient, illness is an obstacle *to overcome* or perhaps a punishment for sin" (5). Illness creates narrative energies that propel one to act, "to take notice of our bodies and behaviors, to experience compassion, to purge, to repent," while anticipating a particular end, a return to health (5). As such, health provides a narrative point of both departure and return; it plunges the reader into an interpretive exercise of "crisis and recovery," "conflict and resolution, mysteries and solutions, a beginning that moves (but not too quickly) toward an end"—qualities that draw us to the novel (6). As Rita Charon has also pointed out about the relation between health and narrative drama, "health improvements decrease all the societal events that would have followed from ill-health—hospitalizations, days lost from work, wages lost for sick days, inability to fulfill familial roles, and the like" ("Novelization" 43). Although it occurs locally—that is, it mostly only directly affects the individual body—ill health creates a condition of chaos that has implications for the sick body's larger environment, the very condition necessary for creating conflict and making the story move. Bangungot fails to fit within these parameters precisely because, although it may be propelled by ill health, it is not driven by "a sense of an ending," to borrow from Julian Barnes, either in the form of death or a return to health, for death in this case has already happened and health as such is now an impossibility. Here I situate my formulation of bangungot and tsismis within literary discourses in the Medical Humanities to argue for an expansion of what Charon calls "narrative medicine," which Charon describes as a "narrative competence" that utilizes "methods such as close reading of literature and reflective writing" ("Narrative Medicine" 1897). "[P]roposed as a model for humane and effective medical practice," Charon argues for "bridging the [narrative] divides that separate physicians from patients, themselves, colleagues, and society" to "[offer] fresh opportunities for respectful, empathic, and nourishing medical care" ("Narrative Medicine" 1897). But as Shreya Srivastava has pointed out, "narrative medicine" in its current formulation is limited to medical pedagogies "created by artists and writers from the West . . . rooted in Western ideology" (Srivastava). This article echoes Srivastava's call to "diversify narrative medicine" and "expand the tools used in narrative practices to include oral and participatory forms of expression" (Srivastava). However, my formulation of bangungot and tsismis as alternatives and disruptions to diagnostic narratives also accounts for the fundamentally colonial and hierarchical logics of Western (narrative) medicine. Beyond simply diversifying the institutional tools, we must also find narrative tools and logics that exceed the parameters of the (medical) institution.

## The Queer Filipino Colonial Condition

Without the obsession with health—that is, for a narrative structure that requires the disciplinary tactics of (medical) development and aspires to a particular (healthy/happy) ending—bangungot and tsismis allow for queer logics of sense- and meaning-making. I use the term "queer" in this article to refer to Vince's identity as "bakla," the

Filipino equivalent for "gay" and "queer." But I also follow Martin Manalansan's formulation of "queer" as "mess," which "[focuses] on the recognition and centering of underrecognized practices, stances, and situations that deviate from, resist, or run counter to the workings of [colonial and neoliberalist] normality" (97), to which I shall return later. In *Leche*, bangungot, and not the developmental plot of the novel, is that which creates a narrative "sense" for Vince's return to, and queer awakening in, the Philippines. After reading about bangungot in his "Ethnic Literature in Hawaii" course (Linmark 16), Vince is transported back to his childhood in San Vicente, "a small provincial town four hours north of Manila by car, [where] he read about the bangungut from the Tagalog komiks [his grandfather] Don Alfonso bought him" (18). Before moving to Hawaii, Vince remembers how his grandfather used to pick him up at school and take him to the "magazine stand right across the plaza," where his grandfather would pick up "*Life* and *Time*" magazines and "Tagalog komiks [comic books]" for Vince (18). Vince admired and inherited this literary interest from his grandfather. However, while Vince learned the habit of, or developed a love for, reading through his grandfather, it is not exactly the "enlightening" and "realist" qualities of reading—that is, reading as the formative process of rationalizing the progressive unfolding of information and events to *get at* the "truth"—that becomes immediately meaningful to him; instead, it is reading about the disruptive, violent, fantastical, and even erotic tendencies of bangungot that comforts him and transports him back to a pleasurable past. Vince's favorite comic series, "Stories of the Unexpected," depicts "stories about bangungut, which disguised itself as a nomad by day, wandering around Metropolitan Manila for potential victims, then transformed into a cigar-puffing hairy beast that terrorized them in their sleep" (Linmark 19). In one issue, bangungot's new victim is "Mr. Smith, an American businessman who ran an illegal logging business on the island of Leyte, where much of the virgin forest had been destroyed" (19). Bangungot often preys on "crooks and greedy men" (20). Apart from being a womanizer, Vince adds that Mr. Smith "bore a striking resemblance to his grandfather, who was also very debonair" (20). Mr. Smith is Vince's first crush. Vince's "hot lips were all over the pages" of the magazine (20). At night, "Vince went to bed thinking about him, kissing him goodnight, telling him 'Sweet dreams, Mr. Smith,' 'I love you, Mr. Smith,' 'Do you love me too?'" (20). Vince even goes so far as to imagine being married to the American; they would hold hands "as they walked along the promenade of Manila Bay, chitchatting about full moons, wedding bells and the houses, love-nest resorts, and nurseries he would build for them and their babies" (20). By likening Vince's grandfather to Mr. Smith, *Leche* warns us about the seductive charms of male (literary) figures who are meant to be bearers of wisdom (the grandfather) and economic development (the American businessman). That is, bangungot complicates Vince's attachments to these men by *not* treating them as liberatory, moral, or modern figures. While folklores and superstitions often offer moralistic narratives of "good and bad," exemplified by bangungot's victims being "crooks and greedy men," Vince's relationship with bangungot is instead one of desire, pleasure, and sexual awakening.[8] Not only does bangungot articulate Vince's attraction to men through the stories in the komiks, but it also indexes the messy entanglements of his (sexual) desires with the developmental fantasies of the US empire.

The obsession with Mr. Smith haunts Vince in his sleep, which, I argue, highlights the connections and discontinuities between his diasporic location and colonial fantasies. In one of Vince's nightmares, "Mr. Smith knelt down to kiss Vince . . . [and] As he rolled his tongue inside Vince's mouth . . . a python slithered from Mr. Smith's mouth and down into his throat" (21). Trying to

get away from the bangungot, Vince is "moaning, kicking, and gasping" (21). Had he not been heard and woken up, "the bangungut would have sucked out Vince's last breath, smelling of Mr. Smith's kisses" (21). Here, bangungot articulates not only Vince's desires, but also the violence of those desires. That bangungot acts for Vince as a reference to both pleasure and pain underscores the workings of the queer Filipino colonial condition. Mr. Smith stands in for the American empire, whose logic of occupation in the Philippines was one of violence and benevolence, discipline and desire. As Nerissa Balce has noted about the "erotics of the American empire," "the relationship of U.S. imperial culture with the play of eroticism, racism, desire, and fantasy . . . constructed the figure of the Filipina savage" (94). Balce points to the ways that Filipino desire has to be understood within the context of American imperial knowledge production, which includes, beyond traditional archival sites like libraries or museums, "a fantasy of knowledge . . . collected and united in the service of the state and empire" (94). In other words, the desire for the American heteronormative ideal—what Karen Tongson has called "whiteness and promises," "an American suburban fantasy of the good life, with a good wife"—(e.g., Vince's sexual and marital desire for Mr. Smith) works alongside the construction of the Filipino as the savage and undesirable other (Tongson 14). Vince's fantasies as a child, along with his sexual awakening, are entangled with American imperial fantasies of occupation and expansion. That someone like Mr. Smith, a corrupt and greedy American, becomes the subject of the (sexual) desires and fantasies of Filipinos like Vince is symptomatic of the "inferiorising discourses" of the US empire, which promotes "narratives of civilization and progress" and "continue[s] to live on in ubiquitous notions of 'development' . . . after World War II" (Bulloch 230). *Leche*'s use of bangungot thus reveals not only Vince's, but also imperial fantasies. Bangungot acts as a colonial conduit of violence that relates Filipino fantasies and desires to the erotics of the US empire. But *Leche* refuses to reproduce such "inferiorising discourse" by revealing, through bangungot, the inherently deceptive and violent nature of that fantasy. Furthermore, *Leche*'s focus on imperial fantasy is not a reminder of the colonial subject as an "other"; that is, it is not about a certain *lack*. Instead, *Leche* reminds us how queer Filipino identity in fact exceeds the contours of the "civilized" and "developed" imperial subject.

In a diagnostic narrative, bangungot is understood as that which is antithetical to, or a violation of, life and health, a "happy ending." In the imperial fantasy, bangungot is that which reflects the nightmarish violence of empire. But here, I also want to offer a formulation of bangungot that teaches us life-making logics of fantasy, desire, and pleasure beyond the disciplinary, normalizing, and accumulative tactics of empire. One such way is by centering queer pleasure within the economy of imperial desire. Just a few months after Kyle Verador's death, I travelled back to the Philippines in the summer of 2023 to look at archives and find out more about bangungot. During my research, I was struck to find that most of the articles available about bangungot were from 2002. But I also had a creeping suspicion as to why. In the early morning of Good Friday, March 29, 2002, Rico Yan—a very well-admired twenty-seven-year-old actor and heartthrob known for his romantic roles in Filipino films and "teleseryes" (telenovelas)—was found dead while on a Holy Week vacation in Puerto Princesa, Palawan. I was fourteen at the time, and, having been a fan of celebrity talk shows, I remember vividly the rumors that circulated about his death, which included drug overdose and even suicide. But as one of the newspapers I found put it the following Easter Sunday, it was bangungot that killed Yan: "'Bangungot' Kills Rico Yan; Claudine Still in Shock" (Lo). As a result, many of the archival accounts on bangungot—medical and

entertainment gossip alike—were responses to Yan's death. According to the same article, Yan's family immediately made the autopsy result public to dispel the rumors, stating that he "was found to have died of cardiac arrest resulting from hemorrhagic pancreatitis (commonly known as *bangungot*). The doctor said that Rico ate so much seafood during the party [the night before], downed with [alcoholic] drinks" (Lo). While Yan's autopsy seems consistent with bangungot's general characteristics, other doctors remain skeptical. One medical article has linked bangungot to Brugada syndrome, "a genetic disorder that can cause a dangerous irregular heartbeat" ("Brugada Syndrome"). Brugada is better known as SUNDS (sudden unexplained nocturnal death syndrome), and is also known to be genetic. Linking bangungot to Brugada is quite significant, according to the article, because it clashes with popular perceptions that bangungot is about bad diet, heavy drinking, or high carbohydrate and sodium intake. It also disputes the suggestion that it is a pancreatic failure, since pancreatic failures do not generally kill overnight and are known to be fatal mostly to men and women over 40 (Gaw et al.). Despite these findings, many Filipino doctors remain skeptical about the link between Brugada and bangungot. Some doctors have admitted to being on the verge of giving up research precisely because of bangungot's elusiveness and inherent contradictions (Gaw et al.). It is worth noting here how bangungot is used as a diagnostic term in both newspapers and medical articles, as though it is synonymous with pancreatitis. This is precisely why, in the Filipino context, diagnostic methods must account for, or think alongside, folklores, superstitions, religious mysticisms,[9] and, I would argue, gossip. But of more interest to me here is that what medical researchers find to be an epistemological impasse is in fact an enormous site of inquiry if one thinks beyond the borders of Western developmental traditions—that is, for instance, if one leans into "queer fantasy," which, as Karen Tongson has pointed out, is "forged just as much from the facts of our shared intelligence, which are far from being untrue even if they aren't always grounded in what is verifiable fact" (81).

What struck me most about rediscovering Rico Yan's death was how Yan, like Mr. Smith for Vince, served as a coordinate to *my own* queer sexual awakening. Growing up as a closeted gay boy in the Philippines during a time when hetero-nationalist Filipino films and "teleseryes" were our main source of media entertainment, young matinee idols like Yan were the (hidden) objects of my queer fantasy. Yan's on- and off-screen romantic relationship with Claudine Barretto, for example—which in the mid '90s was the envy of all Filipino celebrity love teams—allowed me (and many other Filipino queers, I'm sure) to imagine a way into the seductions of heteronormativity, which I knew was not available to me. That Easter Sunday of 2002, while watching TV with my family, I learned of Yan's death when the breaking news disrupted regular TV programming. No one acted hysterical, but I remember everyone in the room almost audibly gasping—and for a moment I recklessly and shamelessly allowed myself to show sadness and even shed tears, my fear of being *outed* be damned. That moment of death allowed me to openly grieve and express my feelings for Yan in a way that I could never have done when he was alive. In that instance, death became a good distraction, a moment of exception in which to be dramatic, sentimental, and soft. It became a fleeting opening through which my queer fantasy could realize and express itself. But bangungot is not just a distraction for queerness, either. There is something queer about bangungot because, like queerness, it poses a threat to heteronormativity and socially constructed notions of propriety; it serves as a consequence, a "mystical retribution," for defying normative social and health practices (Tan 38). And, for that same reason, because of its

inherent insurgency, recklessness, and sense of chaos, bangungot also not only abstracts or hides, or merely distracts from, but *fuels* other forms of queerness. It fueled the gay fantasies of this Filipino boy to see beyond the heteronormative horizon. In this way, bangungot, as both bearer and reproducer of queerness, *messes up* the developmental and assimilationist cycles of imperial norms.

**The Powers of Bangungot as Mess**

In *Leche*, the theme of "messing up" also describes how the novel uses anecdotes not to propel the plot forward so much as to serve as reference points to further anecdotes and speculations—way beyond the novel's diegesis. This highlights, I argue, Filipino styles of survival, creativity, and pleasure that are meaningful in themselves and not only insofar as they drive a grand narrative. In the chapter "Fuseli Revisited" (a nod to the eighteenth-century Swiss painter Henry Fuseli known for "The Nightmare"), Vince's housemaid in Manila, Burrnadette, wakes him up after suspecting that he was suffering from a nightmare. Burrnadette then tells Vince that her brother died from bangungot and explains the myth about how it kills:

> You see, where I come from, we believe that when we're sleeping, our soul leaves our bodies. It travels, you know—the soul. It goes on a journey. And like many journeys, it runs into problems. The soul gets lost or gets tricked by spirits. When that happens, that's when the bangungut appears and drags us to hell. . . . Like purgatory, surr. Except it's here, surr. On earth . . . the soul, surr, it just ends up wandering. Like it's homeless. But that's part of being Filipino, surr. We're here, we're there, we're everywhere. Scattered like the stars. That's us, surr. Kalat kalat, even in our sleep. (314)

Burrnadette points out not only the superstitious and religious narrative sources of bangungot, but also the Filipino condition of displacement. In response, Vince thinks about how indeed "Filipinos are wanderers, peregrinators, seafarers, scattering themselves across the world" (314). Filipinos fled "Malaysia toward the islands of a thousand volcanoes before it was christened by the Spaniards as 'Islands of St. Lazarus' . . . Seafarers then, overseas contract workers now, nothing much has changed" (315). Both Burrnadette and Vince note how bangungot's story of displacement goes beyond colonial narratives of not only medical diagnosis, but also Christian enlightenment. Here, the purgatory that bangungot portrays is not so much a holding place for lost souls—which must be purified before they are allowed to move on—as a space in which lives thrive in all their messy forms. During the nightmare, Burrnadette describes the soul as "kalat" (*verb*, "to displace"), referring to how the soul wanders outside the body during the nightmare, but "kalat" (*adjective*) also means "mess," the disorganization that displacement creates. Kalat, in both senses of the word, can then serve as another conduit through which to think about how both bangungot and tsismis operate together. On the one hand, kalat describes how the nightmare separates the soul from the body, thereby disorganizing the Christian body-and-soul unity. As such, bangungot draws our attention away from notions of spiritual divinity/sublimity and into the body itself and its affective relationships with other bodies. On the other hand, kalat also describes how tsismis not only creates mess through disruption and disorganization, but, as an appropriative and parasitic narrative mode, also disseminates information like a virus. Bangungot and tsismis, as active forms of subaltern disorganization and displacement, thus defy normative notions of health, which, not unlike Christian ideas of divine unity, propel the narrative from pathology to cure/salvation. Highlighting the active and reactive

tendencies of "mess" in queer immigrant lives, Martin Manalansan has asserted that "'queering' and 'messing up' are activities and actions as much as 'queer' and 'mess' can be about states/status, positions, identities, and orientations" (97). They "focus on the recognition and centering of underrecognized practices, stances, and situations that deviate from, resist, or run counter to the workings of normality" (97). Kalat disorganizes not merely for the sake of disorganization, but to create more stories and meanings, especially in inhospitable places.

In *Leche*, the author and protagonist act as orchestrators of mess, and not authoritative orchestrators of truth. Instead of creating characters that develop, Linmark uses doubling as a form of both breaking and bonding (what I refer to elsewhere as "non-coherence"),[10] and to revive (the stories of) those who have been erased by bangungot but continue to reverberate in the lives of the living. Here, I think of "doubling" in line with queer mess and messing up, insisting on a logic of non-coherence, rather than assimilation and integration. The word "leche" itself holds multiple meanings. As I mentioned above, it means both "milk" and "shit." But in the novel it is also the name of a popular gay sex club in Manila—the inside of which is likened by Linmark, quite (disturbingly) beautifully, to Dante's nightmarish nine circles of Hell—because one of its colloquial meanings, particularly among gay Filipino men, is "cum." Another object of doubling that Linmark is fond of is the names of minor characters. One of them is Bino Boca, a "controversial filmmaker" known for his "sociopolitical flicks. . . . Before he ventured into filmmaking, he was directing plays for the Philippine Unconventional Theater Association (PUTA)" (210). Given what we know about Boca in the novel, it is safe to suggest that he is a character after the real-life renowned queer Filipino filmmaker Lino Brocka. But the name revision is not a simple misspelling. "Bino Boca" (or "binubuka") means "to open," often referring to something sexual or reproductive in nature, like a flower or a vagina. The acronym "PUTA," as in Spanish, also means "whore" in Tagalog, but it is more often used as an equivalent to the curse word, "fuck!" Here, doubling acts as a form of breaking that does not reduce the meaning of the words but multiplies it, placing it in different cultural and historical contexts. As I have discussed in more detail in another article, punning is a national pastime for Filipinos; to pun is to make and have fun together. Punning, especially among queer Filipinos, is a decolonial act of contesting linguistic boundaries, as well as creating alternative forms of community (Siglos 4).[11] But what interests me more about Boca here is how he leads us to an actor in his films who has just died of bangungot. In the novel, Vince and his fellow gay friend Edgar argue about whether to see a Boca film or not, with Vince pointing out that he is "just not in the mood to sit through a two-hour porno passing off as sociopolitical flick" (210). Edgar counters by admitting that he only wants to watch the film because he has the "hots for the hustler" (211).

> "Too late. The hustler is already dead," Vince said, of the Amerasian and then-rising movie star.
>
> "How you know?" Edgar asked. "Jing told me. She read it in Kislap. He died in his sleep last week."
>
> "Bangungut?" Edgar asked. "Supposedly," Vince said. (211)

Though the "hustler" is not named in the novel, the two are most likely referring to the Filipino American actor Miguel Rodriguez, who in real life was discovered by and appeared in the many films of (the non-fictional filmmaker) Lino Brocka. Rodriguez died in his sleep on February 14, 1997, at the age of 34. The cause, according to the *Filipino Reporter* article "Mystery Shrouds Death of Actor Miguel Rodriguez," was said to have been a "collapsed pancreas" or

"bangungot." However, as with many bangungot deaths, particularly those of celebrities like my childhood crush Rico Yan, tsismis immediately emerges as bangungot's double—that which often betrays it but also necessitates its condition of possibility. Implied by the article's title, Rodriguez's diagnosis of pancreatitis was not enough to prevent speculation about possible suicide or drug use. The same article points out "that Rodriguez was last seen drinking, the night before his death," a mode of excess, like overeating and over-partying, that is too often used as the main subject of speculation when it comes to "making sense" of the deadly nightmare.

In the spirit of (extradiegetic) speculation, beyond such deadly cautionary tales implicit in these gossip newspapers, I want to offer another way of understanding Filipino excess as instead constituting *moments of splendor*. Developmental narratives—and by extension imperial narratives of progress, modernity, and enlightenment—are often moralistic, particularly in reference to queer, racialized, sexualized, and deviant bodies and identities, and focus on lives that have lessons to teach, have serious political implications, or overtly resist. But what do we make of stories about (reckless and messy) lives lived for the sake of living? In all those stories of death I discussed above—those about Bentot de la Peña, Kyle Verador, Rico Yan, and Miguel Rodriguez—the presumed (moral) faults of excessive drinking, eating, and partying, not to mention the alleged drug use and suicide, which are forms of excess in themselves, have overdetermined their life stories. And gossip has been very much complicit in reproducing that—not least in the ways that gossip tabloids capitalized on these deaths. But gossip, or tsismis, in the way that I have formulated it throughout this article, also provides the means through which to speculate about these lives *otherwise*. The lives of these men (Bentot, Kyle, Rico, and Miguel), I argue, are moments of splendor because they were lives lived for the thrill of living, reckless lives that, although they have ceased to exist, and thus ceased their life-productivity, have continued to live on in non-productive yet moving and memorable ways in the stories told about them, not least in the ways they each affected *me* then and now. Throughout this article, I have tried to reconfigure their life stories not as lessons on how not to be reckless, but on how recklessness is part of being. By "moments of splendor," I do not mean to romanticize any form of excess or recklessness, since, as Sarita See has argued, recklessness is also a mode of capitalist accumulation and speculation, that is, "as a form—*the* form—of gambling with debt" (121). Instead, I place recklessness and moments of splendor in conversation with Subaltern and Marxist-Feminist Studies scholars who think about the survival and reproduction of life that is deemed disposable within the logic of global capitalism (See 121). In particular, I situate "splendor" alongside what Neferti Tadiar calls "remaindered life," which understands the

> global present . . . as the aftermath and perdurance of decolonization, those processes and practices of quotidian as well as formal, organized social struggles among the colonized to live nevertheless and otherwise—beyond the constricted fates that Western European-American colonialism's transfiguration into a dominant global mode of life continues to impose. (ix)[12]

"Remaindered life" thinks about the human as the life-form of value—about how, under global capitalism, the human becomes valuable, then waste, and then valuable again *as waste*, a process out of which, Tadiar argues, remaindered lives can be traced. In such an economy, human life is seen as a means for more value creation and, as such, is disposable. However, something else becomes *excess* in such a relation of value and waste: "splendor." According to Tadiar, "splendor" is "one fleeting glimpse of remaindered life . . . the unexpected gratuitous

abundance . . . that might unfold in the everyday arts of survival" (274-75). Splendors are "also lifetimes of expenditure, times of waste, but unredeemed, not simply placed to more productive ends—times of waste that are also times of recreation, openings, cheap thrills, and boundless relation" (275). Here, I situate bangungot and tsismis, and the moments of splendor they engender, precisely within these spaces of "re-creation, openings, cheap thrills, and boundless relation" in which they thrive most. These deaths are not necessarily splendid in themselves, but they become splendid insofar as they provide the necessary means for endless narrative speculation. They create mess where righteousness, order, discipline, control, and productivity are the names of the global capitalist and imperialist game.

## Epilogue

The thing that has haunted me throughout the research and writing of this article, the thing that I have been uncomfortable to mention up to now, is the fact that *I am* bangungot's perfect prey. I am a Filipino male in his mid thirties, and, having worked as a chef in Las Vegas throughout my twenties, I am no stranger to stress and excess of various kinds. Ever since my first close witness encounter with it through our neighbor Bentot, bangungot has continued to haunt me long after I left the Philippines for America—like an old memory of home only without the feeling of longing—as I am sure it haunts, for one reason or another, many other Filipino men of a certain age in the Philippines and its diaspora. When I left cooking to pursue graduate studies almost a decade ago now, I was overweight (another form of excess) and felt especially anxious about bangungot—even though weight is not an exclusive indicator of victimhood and none of the men I mentioned above would have been considered "overweight." It was also around this time when I started following the queer Filipino YouTube vlogger Lloyd Cafe Cadena, known particularly for his eccentric personality. Cadena had over five million subscribers when his death was announced on September 4, 2020. He suffered from a heart attack *in his sleep* while confined in the hospital for being positive for COVID-19 (Newcomb). Although none of the reports about Cadena's death mentioned it, bangungot was the first thing that came to mind when I heard the news. And, perhaps due to a concern about my own weight, I also immediately associated it with Cadena's being overweight. That scared me enough to keep up with my yearly blood checks and hire a personal trainer to get into better shape.

I tell Cadena's story not as a cautionary tale, for that would be antithetical to the goal of this article, but as yet another coordinate to my own anxieties about excess and being haunted by bangungot. But more importantly, Cadena's life, although cut short, and his YouTube contents perform precisely the excessive moments of splendor I discuss above. In the video "MGA GANAP SA JEEPNEY (LAPTRIP to Bes!) | LC Learns #110," which currently has eleven million views, he and his group of queer friends create a skit that highlights "proper" etiquette when riding in a jeepney—a cheap and eccentric Filipino mode of transportation, and a remnant of the US military presence in the Philippines. This is part of an informative series—hence, "LC [Lloyd Cadena] Learns"—on the "*ganap* [goings on]" in a typical Filipino communal space, but with a queer and comedic twist. In the opening, Cadena explains the structure of the video in his signature flamboyant and excessive (loud and fast) speech. He then sets up each scene before the video cuts to the reenactment, which is also flamboyantly performed by Cadena and his friends. On the surface, the video immediately captivates in the style of Filipino queer comedy with which Cadena's viewers, including me, are very familiar: loud, quick, self-deprecating, crass, morbid, physical (sometimes violent), overtly

mocking, and unapologetically sexual. In a scene that warns about how some people cannot help feeling horny in a jeepney, an actor rubs himself next to a woman who feels extremely uncomfortable: "*Hoy manong, ano po ba ginagawa niyo?*" ("Excuse me, sir, what are you doing?") she calls him out; "*Oy, makati lang, ano ba?*" ("I'm just itchy, what's your problem?") he retorts; "*Kanina pa kita nakikitang nagjajakol diyan ah!*" ("I also saw you rubbing your dick there, don't deny it!") another woman in the jeepney interjects (Cadena). The jeepney can be a communal place of laughter, gossip, and entertainment. As *Leche* points out, it is a place where "several conversations are exploding all at once. A talk-stew of morning news peppered with tsismis, theories, and queries" (Linmark 353). But here, Cadena also plays out its dirtier side. Aside from occasional perverts, the video also points out how riders are squeezed like sardines inside the unairconditioned jeepney (there is no regulation on the number of riders the jeepney can accommodate; the more, the better for profit), how riders sometimes get robbed, how loud and inconsiderate riders can be, and how lovers take their quarrel in a jeepney and treat it like a soap opera set. The video performs a characteristically Filipino comedic style that operates through excess, that is, in excess of polite society: sexual harassment, morbidity, violence, etc., which is that "Third-World" moment of *making fun* and *creating pleasure* out of a completely dire situation. Characteristic of *splendor*, the Filipino comedic style is "excessive" because it faces head-on the desperate conditions in the Global South created by global capitalism, yet also exceeds them by making fun and creating pleasure *anyway.* Like bangungot and tsismis, it does not provide pure pleasure (whatever that is), but pleasure amidst direness and crisis—which is pleasure, nevertheless.

Lastly, I tell the story about my fear of bangungot in this section to describe the ways that the writing of this article has transformed my relationship with that fear. I learned that my fear of bangungot is also tied to a fear of diverging from particular kinds of (hetero)normative and imperial development, whether in the ways we tell stories about ourselves and others, or in the value we put in our (biopoliticized) lives and ways of living. This article's transnational turn in taking the US-based Filipino American novel and interpreting it through forms emerging from the tight corners of everyday Filipino life (and death) contests not only the borders of the nation-state, but also the epistemological logics that reproduce them. Throughout this article, I revisit the events of the lives of those who have died of bangungot not to diagnose them or explain what exactly might have killed them, but instead to explore, through fantasies and tsismis, the different afterlives and modes of pleasure they have generated for the living, including Vince and me. Bangungot lives on in tsismis, I argue, because together they have the potential to transform our fear of death into alternative ways of living and living on within power structures that are often hostile to those caught up in them. Through queer mess and recklessness, we move away from the (narrative) medicalization of life and turn death from nightmare and tragedy to moments of splendor and times of impasse that are also times of shift, revision, and refashioning.

## Notes

1. I borrow the terms "unofficial" and "insurgent" in relation to tsismis from Lowe's *Immigrant Acts*, which I will discuss further later. Throughout this article, I use "gossip," "speculation," and "tsismis" interchangeably. But I must note that I use "gossip" not in the tradition of British bourgeoise life (as described, for example, in the novels of Jane Austen and George Eliot) but, following subaltern studies scholars like Lowe and Rafael, who view gossip as anti-colonial resistance.

2. After almost four hundred years under Spain, the Philippines became the first (and only) formal US colony in Asia in 1898 under the Treaty of Paris. The United States granted the Philippines its independence in 1946, but it would remain a US neocolony (that is, economically and geopolitically dependent) for far longer—arguably to this day. See Rafael, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino American History* (2000); Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines* (2005); and McCoy, *Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of Surveillance State* (2009) for more on Philippine history and the Philippine-American neo/colonial relation.

3. See the Introduction of *A History of the Bildungsroman*, edited by Graham.

4. *Leche* uses the spelling "bangungut" while all my other sources use "bangungot." I will use "bangungot" throughout this article except when citing the novel directly.

5. However, the English word "nightmare" is not unrelated to bangungot either. Bangungot's Ilokano (regional) version "batibat" is said to be about a supernatural creature, in the form of a large old woman or man, who sits on the male victim's chest, suffocating him to death. Like batibat, the Western nightmare figure (from "night" and "mare") is a female horse-like creature that sits heavily on the male victim's chest during sleep.

6. I want to acknowledge and thank a group of Communication students from the University of the Philippines, Cebu, who wrote their senior thesis on *Urom*, a Cebuano (regional) variant of bangungot, as a non-deadly but paralytic nightmare phenomenon among displaced college students. Alfaro, Gonzalez, and Composo, who wrote "Urom: A Phenomenological Study of Sleep Paralysis Experiences among University of the Philippines, Cebu Student Dormitory Residents," asked me to serve as their dissertation defense panelist after hearing about my lecture on bangungot at the Ateneo de Manila University. I learned a great deal from their work, especially from how they reinforce and rethink the role of displacement and storytelling in "making sense" of urom/bangungot.

7. While, as Fineman points out, the New Historicist approach sees the anecdote as having "the effect of the real," which authenticates the narrative, my use of personal anecdotes throughout this article is not a claim for authenticity, but merely highlights further speculations and fantasies.

8. For more on the relationship, and conflict, between Filipino indigenous beliefs and Western Judeo-Christian morality, see chapter 3 (on "mystical retribution") of Tan's book *Revisiting Usog, Pasma, Kulam*.

9. This is Tan's main argument in his book *Revisiting Usog, Pasma, Kulam*—though he does not talk about gossip.

10. See Siglos, "Walang Arte: Gina Apostol's *Insurrecto* and Filipino Non-coherence."

11. See also See, *Decolonized Eye: Filipino American Art and Performance* and Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* for more on Filipino punning.

12. I also borrow the term "splendor" from chapter 11 of Tadiar's book *Remaindered Life*.

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Other-Than-Human Movement
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# OTHER-THAN-HUMAN MOVEMENT ACROSS BORDERS IN LORNA DEE CERVANTES'S POETRY



**ABSTRACT:** This article focuses on the work of American poet Lorna Dee Cervantes (1954- ), who is concerned with Chicana and Native American experiences in her poetry and is a transnationally oriented poet who is interested in "the treatment of borders and border zones in all of their various forms," an aspect that Paul Jay names as important for transnational literature (*Transnational* 94). In her first collection, *Emplumada* (1981), Cervantes writes frequently about crossing borders, a notion that is evident in frequent references to the movement of other-than-human beings and elements that cross or delineate borders. Her most recent collection, *Sueño* (2013), is thematically broader but similarly evokes the other-than-human. Metaphors related to other-than-human beings, movement, and border crossing can be connected to posthumanism in ways similar to those Thomas Nail employs when he argues that borders are in motion. I examine the experiences of crossing and living on various kinds of borders as they are evident in *Emplumada* and *Sueño*, and suggest that Cervantes's other-than-human animals display an expanded vision for transnational situations where movement is freer and more choices are available than for the poems' humans.

**Keywords:** transnational literature, borderlands, other-than-humans, nonhumans, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Chicana poetry

Lorna Dee Cervantes defines herself in an essay as follows: "I am a Chicana poet, I'm an indigenous American, I'm a California native from Santa Barbara, from the Chumash nation, and the Californios" ("Lorna Dee Cervantes"), and these multiple starting points are visible in her poems. As a writer who is concerned with "border zones in all of their various forms," which Paul Jay describes as a feature of transnational literature (*Transnational* 94), Cervantes considers how transnational literature can play itself out on American soil. Her work can be said to explore how "transnational forces . . . interact within the borders of a nation" and how "identities and cultural practices within nations are always forming and reforming across the differences we associate with race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and nation" (Jay, *Transnational* 10). Her poems comment on living in multifaceted, intersecting situations. This is particularly evident in the ways in which Cervantes explores crossing borders through metaphors and images that relate to the movement of other-than-human beings and elements. Already the title of Cervantes's first poetry collection, *Emplumada*, published in 1981, evokes a duality where the human and the other-than-human meet: "emplumada" refers both to the flourish of a pen and to something that is feathered, as the preface of the book explains (Cervantes, *Emplumada*). The pen, in other words, is in motion, which in the pen's case would be instigated by a human, but simultaneously something other-than-human is involved.

When Shelley Fisher Fishkin called for a transnational turn in American Studies in 2004, she mentioned that this should mean "increasingly interrogat[ing] the 'naturalness' of some of the borders, boundaries, and binaries that we may not have questioned very much in the past, and . . . prob[ing] the way in which they may have been contingent and constructed" (22). Transnational concerns have long been relevant for the US-Mexican border as it has been viewed "dialogically, in terms of multifaceted migrations across borders," as José David Saldívar wrote in 1997 when he examined cultural products that engage with the border (1). Historically, the US-Mexican borderlands have been a site of "contradictory divisions and unities" where transnationalism affects people's lives (R. Saldívar 27). This can mean adopting what Ramón Saldívar calls, in a discussion of Américo Paredes's work, "the transnational imaginary," which crosses national borders in defining identity (59). A similar view of the border is relevant to Cervantes's work. With that in mind, I discuss how the other-than-human moves in *Emplumada* and in Cervantes's most recent collection, *Sueño* (2013), and what its movement means for thinking about transnational narratives. In these collections, humans are often described as being restricted by their positions, which are defined across a variety of factors, such as gender, class and ethnicity. These factors are contrasted by the focus on other-than-human beings and elements, which present a world where borders are on the one hand revealed to be moving, and on the other hand there is space for choosing between movement and immobility or even remaining indecisive. I argue that other-than-human elements and beings reflect different approaches and tensions associated with borders and offer an expanded vision of an agency that is freer than that which the humans living in the borderlands can imagine in these poems. In Cervantes's work, these considerations are also linked to her well-known feminist focus.

A focus on the other-than-human can broaden the transnational field of inquiry, which has often taken the human as its focus, not least because the root of the concept *transnational* is the human concept of the nation state, giving it the potential to reckon with a vaster network of agencies beyond the human (see Jay, *Transnational* 10).[1] Already in 2008, Ursula K. Heise suggested that "environmental literature and ecocriticism need to engage more fully with the

insights of recent theories of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism," but in this inquiry the focus is mostly on environmental problems (387). The use of other-than-human elements to broaden and contrast understandings of transnational situations has received less attention. One exception is Thomas Nail, who writes that the contemporary world is "increasingly defined by patterns of motion that precede and exceed human agency" (183). Nail forms a theory of kinopolitics, with reference to Deleuze and Guattari's theory of assemblage (184-88), and argues "that borders are in constant motion" (194). He thus discusses the role of other-than-human agency and movement in shaping borders, which I take as a starting point for reading Cervantes's work. For Nail, the notion of assemblage "offers us a truly posthuman theory of collective agency," which runs counter to the common idea that other-than-human beings have no free agency (187). The other-than-human should here be understood as a wide category. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann define the "nonhuman" as "not only sentient animals or other biological organisms, but also impersonal agents" including phenomena such as electricity (3-4). In Cervantes's work, the other-than-human includes not only animals and plants, but also other elements such as the freeway, which appears in some poems.

Considering how the other-than-human moves and how this movement relates to borders also offers a counternarrative to the many negative contexts in which other-than-human beings are often evoked in public discussions of borders, as when forced migrants are likened to animals in racist and dehumanizing ways (Khazaal 9-10). Atsuko Matsuoka and John Sorenson likewise discuss how comparing migrants to animals or discussing them in terms of "being treated like animals" emphasizes the othering of migrants (116). In Cervantes's poems, instead of being presented as others, other-than-human beings and elements have their own agency as a part of a larger system of agencies (Nail 187), which also provides further nuance to the poems' narratives on borders. Nail's argument about borders does not pertain to literature specifically, since it is instead presented as a more general contribution to posthumanist theory, but I propose that it can be applied to Cervantes's poetry.

Cervantes is invested in examining border crossing and living in a border culture on many levels, not merely through human experiencers, whose experience of the borderlands is often determined by multiple factors, including different cultures and aspects such as gender or the barrio as an environment (see Seator 23). As a Chicanx poet, Cervantes is concerned with borders, not least because Chicanx people can be described in terms of "mestizaje, . . . hybridization and crossbreeding on a cultural level" (Pérez-Torres 8). Her work can be read, as Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson notes, in the context of "an expanding frame of reference for Chicana poetry, which includes: African American feminism, an urban Chicana consciousness which relates to a Pan-American indigenous one, as well as a global sense of struggle against multiple and overlapping oppressions" (136). As Raúl Homero Villa writes, Cervantes is often simultaneously critical of how Chicanx people have been wronged and of how Chicanas in particular have been wronged within the male-focused Chicano movement (206). Rodriguez y Gibson notes that Cervantes's topics and sources of intertextuality are globally inclined because she includes elements "from traditional Chicana tropes of Mexica imagery to Hispanophone modernist poetry, to Celtic folklore" (138) and engages with "Greek, Celtic, and Chumash myths, as well as American, Latin American, and European literary figures" (137). Cervantes's work has also been read in the context of bilingualism, as Nerys Williams (185) does in pointing out that Cervantes, who grew up in San José, CA, was not raised to speak Spanish, which is reflected in the way she uses Spanish words as kinds of interruptions, creating "a

disjunctive and warring texture in the poem" (193). Sheila Marie Contreras goes as far as to suggest that *Emplumada* "is self-consciously about language, about claiming it, crafting it, and yet remaining alienated from it" (145).

However, expanding beyond human experience, *Emplumada* is riddled with the presence of the other-than-human, such as crows, seagulls, and mockingbirds. The later work *Sueño* is a large poetry collection and thematically more multifaceted as such, but it also comments on Chicanx[2] issues, immigration, and other-than-human movement and agency, along with other themes such as love. I am not suggesting that birds, snakes, trees, and other other-than-human beings and elements in Cervantes's poems have the same meaning throughout, but rather that reading Cervantes's poetry with a focus on the movement and agency of other-than-human beings and elements presents expanded visions for life in the borderlands. Nail's idea of how borders are in motion and how they "circulate movement" as part of a larger system helps us see human and other-than-human agencies on a continuum (194). In Cervantes's *Emplumada* and *Sueño*, the physical borderlands between Mexico and the United States are contrasted with less tangible borders such as those within multicultural cities, where the barrio is separated from the rest of the city by the freeway, as well as enforced gender distinctions between men and women, class distinctions, ethnic divisions, or situations where, for example, immigrants are seen as others. These situations restrict humans while other-than-human beings and elements are shown as being free of such limitations. Thus, in making this argument, I first consider Cervantes's position as a Chicana writer and her resistance to patriarchal systems. Next, I elaborate on the theoretical background for understanding the movement of the border through the other-than-human, connecting it to the transnational, after which I move on to an analysis of specific poems.

## The Borderlands as an Intersection

To shed light on what kinds of approaches to the transnational are visible in Cervantes's poems from a human perspective, next I consider the context of her writing further. This will provide some background to help us understand how Cervantes contrasts human experiences with other-than-human beings and elements to nuance the experiences of borders and transnational situations her poems present. For Cervantes, a Chicana feminist writer with a transnational orientation, an obvious frame of reference is Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of "the borderlands," discussed in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldúa writes that "[a] borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition" (3). The people who live on the border are considered "transgressors, aliens" by "those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites" (Anzaldúa 3-4). As Allison E. Fagan notes, Anzaldúa's concept of the borderlands is often used to mean any situation that is broadly concerned with the intersections of different cultures (5). Anzaldúa's work on the notion of the borderlands also has a prominent role in Fishkin's argument on the transnational turn in American studies (17-18). The notion of the borderlands, as a marker of "rupture," is also central to "Chicana cultural discourse," more so than the older Chicano movement's notion of "homeland" (Pérez-Torres 34-35).

Both *Emplumada* and *Sueño* are concerned with how the categories of ethnicity and gender are shaped by intersecting cultures in the borderlands, which, as I will show below, is connected to other-than-human movement. *Emplumada* has been described as "a fundamental text in Chicana/Latino studies" (González 164). Many poems detail the life of a speaker who appears to live in a Chicanx neighborhood in a US city and additionally seems to have Native American

origins like Cervantes herself, which, as a multiethnic situation, offers possibilities for exploring how borders and intersections of cultures can affect an individual's life and construction of identity. Transnational situations and their effects on identity have been addressed in research on Chicanx literature previously, for example by Juan Velasco, who, in an article on Chicano writer Francisco Jiménez's autobiographical works, discusses how people whose lives are shaped by the US-Mexico border are simultaneously "beyond borders" and "situated within different lines of oppression—mainly class and racial formation" (219). In this situation, there is space in Jiménez's work for "individual self-empowerment and communal agency" (219). In Cervantes's work more specifically, the transnational has been discussed in previous research with a focus on issues such as space (Ambroży) and global aspects (Rodriguez y Gibson). Cervantes's work also addresses the effect of racial formation and class on agency and empowerment and adds the role of gender. As a feminist writer of indigenous and Chicana origin, she considers both local identities and more global, transnational concerns.

Rodriguez y Gibson affirms Cervantes as a feminist, transnationally oriented author who is fundamentally concerned with resistance to oppression within patriarchal and colonial systems, as well as with how the struggles of indigenous people are globally linked to each other (136-37). Cervantes is critical of, for example, the limiting gender roles that Chicano culture assigns to men and women, the kinds of assumptions that, for example, Sonia Saldívar-Hull has commented on in her discussion of Chicana feminism (9-11). Chicano culture has a history of chauvinism and relegating women to subordinate status, but while Chicanas felt the need to fight for feminist causes, they also faced discrimination or ignorance of their concerns among white feminists, a situation that vexed many Chicana writers in the 1970s (Sánchez 4-5). Marta Ester Sánchez verifies that grappling with these forms of exclusion is common for Chicana poets, and describes their work "as a poetry of conflict and struggle" with regard to "issues of ethnicity and gender" (6). In her discussion of Cervantes's poetry, Paulina Ambroży adds to the considerations of Anzaldúa's borderlands the broader notion of space "as a site of cultural interactions and identity formation" (129-30). Ambroży postulates that Cervantes uses metaphors connected to space to portray situations where the poems' selves can thrive in all their multiplicity, experiencing not only "separation, longing, alienation, displacement, and dispossession," but also "the possibility of contact and interaction" (132). In Cervantes's poetry, this multiplicity is seen in other-than-human beings and elements, for whom borders are more malleable than they are for humans, for whom transnational situations are often complicated by intersecting factors such as gender and ethnicity. Before analyzing the poems in more detail, elaborating on the theoretical starting points of borders that move through other-than-human movement and their connection to the transnational is in order.

## The Divisive Moving Border

Fagan has argued that the Mexican-American border invites a "desire and inability to fix [it] in place" (4). There is a certain willingness to stabilize the border through the use of metaphors when stability is not achievable through geography (4), not least because the border moves, for example, with the movement of the river. This idea of the movement of the border aligns with Nail's perspective, in which, contrary to the common anthropocentric notion that "animals, plants and minerals," unlike humans, have no agency, "political borders . . . are in motion and circulation" through other-than-human movement (187-88). Nail writes that "animals, insects, water, weather, wind, dirt, trash and rivers are

constantly crossing the border, circulating back again, often transforming the border each time" (197). From this perspective, the border "circulate[s]" movement instead of halting it (194). Thus, while from a human perspective the border might seem fixed, a focus on the other-than-human can reveal it to be in movement. The idea that borders are in motion is also in alignment with the "transnational perspective," where, according to Jay, "borders are understood as historically and existentially porous" (*Transnational* 10). For Nail, "[h]umans and nonhuman beings are two dimensions or regions of the same systems of collective interactional agency or patterns of motion" (183), so that other-than-human and human agencies are not separate and human agency is also not automatically primary. Animals can move freely across borders and shape them, which is evident not just regarding physical borders, but also in a metaphorical sense in imaginary borders between cultures, as we see in *Emplumada* and *Sueño*, for example in the movement of birds, which I discuss below. Birds are often presented as freer to operate in a transnational situation than humans, who may be restricted by their positions as people living in particular places and cultures.

The transnational perspective in which borders are porous, it appears, has something in common with material ecocriticism, which considers the agency of other-than-human beings, and in which "material phenomena" are understood to form "a vast network of agencies," which then form stories (Iovino and Oppermann 1). Iovino and Oppermann hold that "the borders between meaning and matter are constitutionally porous" (4), much like borders in the transnational perspective. Nail's work is, as he notes, a participant in discussions of "the entangled continuity of human and nonhuman agencies" (184), so the larger framework of new materialism is relevant for considering the movement of other-than-human beings and elements across borders. Fagan rightly points out that an interest in "the mobility and metaphors of the border" is not meant to erase the lived reality of those situations where the border is fixed and authority wielded over it (6). In my reading of Cervantes's work, the idea that border crossing is connected to metaphors of the movement of other-than-human beings and elements is not meant to obliterate or downplay this reality either. Instead, for Cervantes, the idea that the border is not fixed appears to be a projected wish or an ideal to strive for, as is evident when she writes in "Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, an Intelligent, Well-Read Person Could Believe in the War Between Races" that "In my land there are no distinctions," while she affirms, later in the same poem, that distinctions very much exist in reality (*Emplumada* 35, 37). In the world of humans, the distinctions are all too evident, but looking toward the other-than-human offers a vision beyond the human view.

Both *Emplumada* and *Sueño* comment on the notion of the borderlands as a site that is divided by "an unnatural boundary" (Anzaldúa 3), which is reflected in relations between people. In *Emplumada*, "Poem for the Young White Man" spells out the different positions of white and Chicanx people. Cervantes maps her own position, where she is, in Sánchez's words, torn between "desiring a peaceful harmonious world and . . . recognizing a violent polarized world" (86). Cervantes uses the word "land" to describe her own position:

> Every day I am deluged with reminders
> that this is not
> my land
> and this is my land. (*Emplumada* 36-37)

The speaker is divided between feeling that she is where she belongs and feeling that she is viewed as foreign, or as someone who does not belong. The notion of "land" is an important one in Chicanx culture in general, as seen in the notion of the mythical homeland Aztlán,[3]

discussed, for example, by Anzaldúa (1-2, 4) and Monika Kaup (363). Pérez-Torres reads the land in Cervantes's poem as a divided Aztlán, "a region between violence and peace, a site of tension and dispossession" (87). In the poem, "Aztlán ceases to be the reclaimed territory of a homeland" and instead signifies the tensions evident on that land (Pérez-Torres 87). Saldívar-Hull notes that for Anzaldúa, "the patriarchal nation-state Aztlán" is "transformed by a mestiza feminist sensibility" (64-65). As I have noted, a feminist perspective is visible in Cervantes's poetry too. The importance of the notion of land is detailed already in the first stanza, which refers to "a slight / rutting in the fertile fields" (*Emplumada* 35). This then serves to remind the speaker that many "past battles" have been fought on her land, even though she does not wish to consider the "distinctions" there (35). Villa points out that coding the land with references to femininity can even be connected to nationalist discourse (209), but Cervantes's use of femininity in this context is more complex. The reference to fertility serves to remind readers of battles that are internal to the Chicanx movement. The land, it seems, has inscribed in itself these differences, and the "slight / rutting" can be read as movement across the (re)productive land, possibly originating from an unidentified other-than-human source that moves. For the speaker, this movement reads as a negative aspect because it reminds her "of past battles" (*Emplumada* 35), while her wish is that there should be no boundaries. However, the notion of fertility leaves open the possibility that something new might be born on the land on which the border is drawn.

In *Sueño*, many poems explicitly comment on immigration and the situation on the US border in more forceful ways than in *Emplumada*, which focuses more on defining the individual's place in a transnational situation. For example, the poem "Night Travelers" comments on immigration and violence that immigrants experience from border officials, ultimately affirming that "This is my country, a country between us, a hard / wired pride in history" (*Sueño* 12). "Night Travelers" presents, again, the notion of the homeland that is contested by the majority culture, which polices the borderlands through wires and views those who cross borders as others. The poem's images are jarring and violent, as when "black fascism rides" (*Sueño* 12). "Night Travelers" also recalls Anzaldúa's discussion of migration on the US-Mexico border in her essay "The Homeland, Aztlán / El otro México," which she ends with a snippet of a poem:

> This is her home
> this thin edge of
> barbwire. (Anzaldúa 13)

For both Cervantes and Anzaldúa, the borderlands that has been divided by white Americans is home. In *Sueño*, Cervantes reflects further on the notion of the land in poems such as "A Chicano Poem," where she takes a direct, accusatory stand against violence and injustice done to Chicanx people by white Americans, who have appropriated their land and cultural customs or tried to erase them. The poem also has a feminist orientation through references to grandmothers and goddesses. It culminates in a declaration on how Chicanx people are nevertheless still here "[a]nd speaking" (*Sueño* 93).

In *Sueño*, open grounds like fields appear, as in *Emplumada*, as places where something divisive is happening. In the second poem of the collection, "The End of the World As We Know It," the end is inscribed in other-than-human beings and elements which are conceived as particularly small, or which easily pass by unnoticed. The poem suggests that the end of the world

> happens on the dot of an "I", in each
> patter of a millipede's feet, in every beat
> of a hummingbird's heart. I see the field
> frozen to steel, feel the frost split

> the single blade, favor the awakening
> of a fern frond, feel for the hungry tongue
> awaiting the forever ripening. (*Sueño* 4)

The field freezes and the frost moves to split a leaf and "a fern frond." Small other-than-human beings, like a millipede and a hummingbird, move and are affected by the environment or the world that is ending. Thus the poem also draws attention to violence against these small creatures, which are affected by the end of the world, which will presumably be brought on by human action, although the poem does not comment on who is responsible. This poem does not explicitly mention borders or migration, but there is a focus on divisions, as "the frost split[s] / the single blade" (4) and the fern leaf is by nature divided into segments (called pinnae). These divisions might initially appear to end the movement as the end is near and "the field / [is] frozen to steel" (4). The field is a space in which bordering can happen. We might thus presume that the poem reflects the fixedness of borders. Nevertheless, the movement toward divisions is active, as "the frost split[s] / the single blade" and "awakening" and "awaiting" take place. The other-than-human is capable of very subtle movement, and arguably the poem's title points precisely to this: the world may end "as we know it," but the movement of the other-than-human points to survival.

A reading that connects the divisions presented in "The End of the World As We Know It" to borders is reinforced when we read it against other poems in *Sueño*, for example "Blind Desert Snakes,"[4] which, too, refers to ice, a field, and movement of the other-than-human, which moves where immigrants travel:

> Across the immigrant road, wisps of ice
> knot and unknot sinews of light and water,
> water the parched mouths crave. The
> [voiceless
> snakes of a voiceless race wage across the
> [desert
> landscapes. An empty field waits for the
> [wake. (*Sueño* 13)

The injustices experienced on the border that the immigrants cross are registered in the other-than-human elements, which knot, wage, and wait, moving or sometimes halting the movement. The internal rhyming and the way the words like "wage," "wake," and "race" sound as read against each other emphasize the affective effect of the poem. In "The End of the World" and "Blind Desert Snakes," both movement and divisions are registered in spatial elements, as in the "empty field [which] waits for the wake," a statement that can be taken to indicate that movement can take place even across a seemingly fixed border (or "the immigrant road"). The spatial element of the field thus registers not only the affects experienced in the borderlands, but also the subtle possibilities of movement that exist even when humans might police the border heavily, which is indicated in "Blind Desert Snakes." In a review, Candice Amich reads the "blind desert snakes" as immigrants who have died while attempting to cross the border. The snakes might, however, also be conceived of as literal snakes, which register the "voiceless" affect experienced on the border, moving but, in their blindness, unable to see the full extent of their movement.

Other-than-human elements that can be connected to the border in *Emplumada* and *Sueño* also include the freeway, which is associated with other-than-human beings like worms. In an early poem in *Emplumada*, the speaker lives "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway" in a Mexican barrio in San José, CA (*Emplumada* 11). Villa discusses how the city of San José grew rapidly and became segregated in the mid twentieth century (204-5). He comments on the poem "Freeway 280," which he says shows "the freeway's disruptive effects upon the central San José barrio it dissects" (215), while also detailing how older

women in the community are able to live with its effects by tending to the land (219-20), an image that Villa notes is one "of adaptation and survival in the present" rather than a glorification of the past (223). "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway," for its part, tells the story of the speaker's family, focusing on female figures like her mother and grandmother while criticizing men who have mistreated women (*Emplumada* 11-12). The poem describes the freeway as a "blind worm" that "wrap[s] the valley up / from Los Altos to Sal Si Puedes" (*Emplumada* 11). For Villa, the "blind worm" condenses social inequalities and "[t]he history of Anglo-American land appropriations" into one image that contrasts the white Los Altos with the Chicanx Sal Si Puedes (227). The poem thus focuses on two divisions: that between white people and Chicanx people and that between Chicanx men and women, or their "intracultural gender conflict" (Villa 226). The inanimate freeway is, through its association with the animate worms, something other-than-human that has enough agency to control and delimit the valley, but it is also simultaneously blind and presumably unable to see or to acknowledge the effects of controlling the border. This is contrasted with the speaker of the poem, who "watched it from [her] porch" (*Emplumada* 11). As in "Blind Desert Snakes," blindness is a quality that can be taken to refer to limited agency and an inability to see the effects of borders clearly. References to snakes, along with those to birds, which I discuss below, also have a connection to Aztec and Mesoamerican mythology, which is proliferated by serpents, eagles, and other birds (see e.g., Anzaldúa 5, 27; Taylor).

The freeway also appears in *Sueño*, when a voice speaks up in "Burial":

> Under the open freeway
> lanes, a voice in the rush of rush, a bare
> [tunnel
> asking the question: *What is buried here?*
> [*Who thrusts*
> *out among the living chalk?* Who answers an
> [unasked
> question: *All of America is an Indian burial*
> [*mound.*
> *Anew.* (*Sueño* 47)

In this poem Cervantes adds to her "commitment to justice by denouncing political violence . . . and genocide—particularly that of her Chumash ancestors, whose bones are still entombed in the adobe walls of the Santa Barbara Mission," as Sonia V. González writes about Cervantes's earlier book *Drive: The First Quartet* (2006) (164). Here a voice asks the "unasked / question." The inanimate space offers an echoing ground for the questions or possibly hosts something or someone that has agency to register the burials of Native Americans, remembering the injustices fought on its soil. This makes sense especially because it aligns with other poems in which inanimate elements have an active role. The freeway arguably functions as a metaphorical liminal space that registers not only movement, but also memory.

**Indecisive and Free Birds**

As I mentioned, other-than-human elements frequently appear alongside other-than-human beings, and a particularly prominent role is given to birds. In *Emplumada*, birds appear in many poems, as in "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway," where seagulls "walk in flocks, / cautious across lawns: splayed toes, / indecisive beaks" and mockingbirds sing constantly: "Grandma says they are singing for their nesting wives. / 'They don't leave their families / borrachando,'" which refers to being on a drinking binge (*Emplumada* 11-12). The birds share a consistency and an uncontroversial commitment to their families and flocks, experiences that are not easily available to the grandmother, who is revealed later in the poem to have been a victim

of domestic violence. The agency of the birds, who are committed yet indecisive and cautious, seems distant, too, to the poem's speaker, whose life is limited by the freeway, which is presented like a border that is difficult to cross. It can only be observed from a distance: "I watched it from my porch / unwinding" (11). The indecisive birds are able to fly, even if they choose not to, and thus they appear to be freer to choose and to move than the humans in the poem. Lynette Seator writes that Cervantes's poems about birds are "poems of place-centeredness," meaning that staying in the place where your identity was formed is important, instead of a simple focus on "flight and freeing," which is what one might expect of bird imagery (23).

I propose, however, that birds, along with other flying beings, can mark the fluidity of border experiences in Cervantes's work. Their ability to move freely is often acknowledged, but at the same time, they are often consistent in their ways, as in "Integrity": "Yours / is the integrity of birds flocking" (*Sueño* 55). "Integrity," which is primarily a poem addressed to a loved one, presents images of both movement and stability, as in the comment on birds. The implication here, similarly to "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway," seems to be that staying in place and moving, or even remaining indecisive, are possible options in a transnational situation. For the human speakers of the poems, this situation is again more a projected wish than an existing reality because their situation is restricted by human-constructed borders. As Taylor notes, in Western literary traditions, flying birds usually connect the human soul to its spiritual roots, but in the novels of Chicano writer Rudolfo A. Anaya that Taylor discusses, flying takes on more complicated meanings when it is circled through Western and Chicanx cultures, and it "mediates between the landscape, an idea of self, the story, and reader-listener" (131-32). Cervantes's birds are an integral part of the landscape and something against which speakers of poems can project their own feelings. Nevertheless, the birds have their own agencies through which they can transcend limitations that exist for humans. In *Sueño*, a poem called "Movement" contrasts flying with the limitations set by the surrounding world. Cervantes writes that "There was always someone trying / to stop us" and acknowledges "the crass class lines we / dared not cross" (43), contrasting these limitations with flying: "Colored butterflies, pin-struck and perishing, we flexed / our wings and, winging it, we fled" (43). Like the pinned down butterflies, the speaker and her peers feel restricted or nailed down, but they are allowed freedom in flight. Perhaps this requires becoming, in some way, an other-than-human animal with wings, because from the human perspective described by Cervantes, borders are not as easily crossed.

In the poem "Caribou Girl" from *Emplumada*, borders between humans and other-than-human beings are similarly blurred. Dressed in the feathers of a blue jay, but ultimately unable to fly or to walk on water as the poem indicates (*Emplumada* 23), the Caribou Girl figures as someone who exists between two worlds, one where she might be able to fly and one where she cannot. In Ojibwe stories, the caribou are able to walk on water (see MacDonald), but in the poem, Caribou Girl merely attempts but fails. The poem features crows as mythical animals who can speak and send the titular caribou girl poems (*Emplumada* 21). Later in the poem, Caribou Girl gets her own chance to speak and to "*dream four great hawks and a speckled bird*" and "*Quetzalcoátl, Ometeótl, the Great Manitou*" (*Emplumada* 22, italics in the original). The reference here is to god figures like the feathered serpent Quetzalcoátl that could give her strength and lift her up from a mundane existence, "*to birds*" (22). Quetzalcoátl is a founding god who guides the Aztecs on the migration to a new home (Taylor 134). Manitou, on the other hand, is the omnipresent life force among the Native American Algonquian groups, and is present in

animals and plants, for example. The poem thus weaves together references from multiple traditions, highlighting the intersections of these in the borderlands.

Caribou Girl also calls on

> . . . the serenity
> of a mockingbird, the justice
> of a crow, blue jay's strength
> (*Emplumada* 22, italics in the original)

Strength, serenity, and justice are qualities that Caribou Girl appears not to have on her own. She looks to other-than-human life, to birds and to transformative figures and life forces, who do have the power to cross between various worlds. The mythical god figures and omnipresent life forces are the visions that would allow for Caribou Girl's transformation "*from a mere / cat girl*" to something else (*Emplumada* 22). Again, humans are presented as restricted in their abilities to cross borders in transnational situations. Flying in poems like "Caribou Girl," "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway," and "Movement" can be viewed as an activity that allows access to something beyond the everyday world. Other-than-human flying beings transcend the limitations that exist for humans.

In *Emplumada*, a poem called "Visions of Mexico While at a Writing Symposium in Port Townsend, Washington" comments on living in the borderlands in two sections, one of which is set in Mexico and the other in the state of Washington. This is an oft-studied poem, and fuller readings of it are offered by Sánchez, Ambroży, and Contreras. Ambroży writes that the two places represent Cervantes's "intermediary and destabilized position between the cultures and languages of Mexico and the US" (135), and Sánchez's (96-97) and Contreras's (147-51) overall readings start from a similar premise. I do not disagree with these readings, but propose instead that shifting the emphasis to the other-than-human can change some of the nuances and result in new figurations. In the Mexico section, the speaker observes migrating birds, which, in Sánchez's view, are "always in transit between one home and another," like Chicanx people (96). People observe the birds from a distance:

> We work
> and watch seabirds elbow their wings
> in migratory ways, those mispronouncing
> [gulls
> coming south
> to refuge or gameland. (*Emplumada* 45)

Ambroży takes this part of the poem to be saying that the speaker "allies herself with those critical of the migrant 'tourist birds' which come to her land" (136), and Sánchez's reading is similar (101). Contreras's reading is closest to my own as she emphasizes that the poem is titled "Visions of Mexico," so that the "homeland" is observed from a distance and the poem's speaker feels a sense of difference with regard to it (147-48). If we focus on the language and the sea birds, one possible interpretation is that those who live in transnational situations and between cultures, like the poem's speaker, are associated with the "mispronouncing gulls," as Contreras also argues (149). The birds move between situations, taking "refuge" in Mexico to feel at home, but nevertheless come to be seen as partly different due to a lack of full command of the language or familiarity with the way of life, which the speaker also admits to in the poem. This reading is supported by the next stanza, which reveals the speaker's partial lack of command of the language, which Ambroży also briefly acknowledges (136). "I don't want to pretend I know more / and can speak all the names. I can't," writes Cervantes (45), commenting on the complex position occupied by someone in a liminal position between cultures (see Williams 194). On a wider level, as Anzaldúa writes, people who live in the US-Mexican borderlands have

often been punished for speaking Spanish in English-dominant schools, and Chicano Spanish has been viewed as "deficient" by Latinx people (54-55; see also Contreras 137). These facts mean that language is a complex issue for Chicanx people, and Anzaldúa reminds her readers that they speak not one but several different languages (55-56).

Many previous readings have discussed the relations between Washington and Mexico in the poem in ways that associate negative qualities with these places (see Ambroży 135-36; Seator 31; Sánchez 96-97, Contreras 150-51). In a reading that focuses on the other-than-human, it can be noted that the many negative images offered in "Visions" culminate in birds who have agency to cross borders and to ignore limitations which exist for humans. In the Washington section, the birds talk back to the speaker and openly mock Mexico:

> I don't belong this far north.
> The uncomfortable birds gawk at me.
> They hem and haw from their borders in
> [the sky.
> I heard them say: México is a stumbling
> [comedy. (*Emplumada* 46)

The speaker of the Washington section resists the clichéd narrative that the birds offer, eventually proclaiming that

> there are songs in my head I could sing you
> songs that could drone away
> all the Mariachi bands you thought you
> [ever heard
> . . .
> but for that I need words
> simple black nymphs between white
> [sheets of paper (*Emplumada* 47)

The birds in this poem can cross borders freely and are able to talk back, although the message they deliver is one that does not sit right with the speaker, as they speak in the voice of the white culture that ridicules Mexico. In any case, they have an agency of their own, one that is separate from the poem's speaker and is apparently greater than hers, because she has songs in her head but affirms that she lacks words.

One possible reading is that the "uncomfortable birds" who have their own words occupy a negatively charged cosmopolitan position. Jay associates cosmopolitanism with transnationalism, noting that "cosmopolitanism embraces worldliness and a sense of global belonging" (*Transnational* 16). He adds that the term has often been viewed critically and "associated with empire, colonialism, and the negative effects of economic globalization" (*Transnational* 17). The speaker's own position between cultures is complicated and she is not fully able to assimilate into either the north or the south, while the birds slip comfortably into the "sense of global belonging" (*Transnational* 16). As "mispronouncing gulls," they ignore limitations such as not being able to fully speak the language (*Emplumada* 45), and they are free to move and speak regardless of this. Cervantes's collection also features another poem, "From Where We Sit: Corpus Christi," in which seabirds are associated with a negative attitude as tourists feed them and "We who have learned the language / . . . / understand what they really say" (*Emplumada* 33). Birds, it seems, are not simply metaphorical devices for the poem's speaker's feelings, but they have their own voices.

In "Visions," the birds' vision is contrasted with the speaker's eventual affirmation, at the end of the poem, that in Washington she can find the words to counteract this vision (see Contreras 150):

> I come north
> to gather my feathers
> for quills (*Emplumada* 47)

In other words, Cervantes focuses on what Jay views as central to the transnational study of literature: it is imperative that "cultural production is analyzed within a context that assumes its connection to economic flows, material conditions, and inequities related to class relations" (*Global Matters* 72). Cervantes's poetry is cognizant of these conditions, and the other-than-human presences offer a vision where these conditions can be reckoned with. As Contreras writes, "[t]he tensions that reside in Cervantes' work are neither solved nor resolved" (151). Nevertheless, the final statement indicates that the human speaker intends to find a position where she comes closer to birds (by "gather[ing her] feathers / for quills") without, however, becoming a fully cosmopolitan bird who has relinquished all cultural particularities and her own position between cultures for global belonging.

In Cervantes's poems, birds are often depicted as having an authoritative position, an agency and a voice of their own, although the position that they occupy varies. In yet another poem in *Emplumada*, entitled "This Morning," we find "a hundred robins / . . . / telling it their way," "throwing their heads / behind them," and the speaker notes that "They had the ultimate authority / to do things" (*Emplumada* 51). Birds assume a wider perspective than humans: "It was as if they were laughing, as if / the whole soaking world was something to laugh" (51). This larger perspective is something that the speaker merely desires and dreams about as she says later in "This Morning": "I dream all I could ever be" (51). Birds, again, have more freedom than the human who looks at the birds "through the greased window," which evidently limits her perspective and confines her to dreaming of what is not available to her (51). A further instance of a situation where birds are freer than humans to assume a wider perspective can be found in the title poem "Emplumada," where the speaker observes "two hummingbirds," noting that "These are warriors / distancing themselves from history" (66). In *Sueño*, for its part, wild horses are the ones that traverse between past, present and future, as well as between the borders of species, as is implied in a dream narrated in the poem "Honoring Past, Present, Future" (26). Cervantes's other-than-human animals can not only mock or laugh, but also distance themselves from history, unlike humans, who do not have the privilege to distance or to remove themselves from limitations, for example ones related to class, ethnicity, or gender. In "Emplumada," also "the leaves of snapdragons [which] withered / taking their shrill-colored mouths with them" (*Emplumada* 66) can be interpreted as having a similarly freer position. The plants "were still, so quiet" (66). They have stability and a way out, which the speaker is left observing. For other-than-humans, borders are clearly more porous than for humans, and a variety of options are available.

As the final poem of Cervantes's first collection, "Emplumada" in a sense completes the considerations that begin in the first poem, "Uncle's First Rabbit," which describes a world where domestic violence is perpetuated across generations and the uncle that the poem describes is unable to avoid it, despite his willingness to take the train and leave (*Emplumada* 3). In "Uncle's First Rabbit," pine trees "shadow the bleak hills / to his home" (4), arguably remaining steady, which is contrasted with the turmoil experienced by the man and his family. Seator writes of *Emplumada* that the speaker's life in the barrio is described as something that must be accepted as it is, with a focus on understanding "social context" (24). This life involves violence, and it is particularly difficult for a Chicana, as discussed by Seator (35), who identifies inequal power structures between men and women as one of the entire collection's focuses (27). The pine trees, as other-than-human elements, represent a more stable situation. In *Sueño*, a poem called "Radiation" presents a similar sentiment: "The tree holds, ever after" (54). Other-than-human

elements and beings are given a freer agency across borders and limitations set by intersecting factors, through which they are able to remain steady, distanced from history, or to leave, as seen on the final lines of "Emplumada": "They [the hummingbirds] find peace / . . . / and are gone" (*Emplumada* 66).

In the contemporary world, Cervantes's images of other-than-human movement in the borderlands are more relevant than ever for considering how borders are "contingent and constructed" in transnational situations (Fishkin 22). For Cervantes, a focus on the other-than-human sometimes allows for imagining a greater sense of authority than human individuals, who are restricted by factors such as ethnicity, gender, or command of a particular language, are permitted in these poems. Other-than-human elements, beings, and spaces serve various functions. Some, such as the land and fields, along with animals like snakes, are marked by division, but borders are in any case shaped on and through them, and their movement reflects the porousness of borders. Some other-than-human beings serve to mark stability and constancy. Birds variously have the "ultimate authority / to do things" (*Emplumada* 51), a freedom to speak their truth, to speak up or to remain indecisive, or to assume a wider, cosmopolitan and more negatively critical perspective. Nevertheless, as "Visions of Mexico" implies, living in the borderlands is sometimes arguably better than becoming fully cosmopolitan. Birds and bird-like mythological creatures are also used to refer to liminality between the ordinary world and something beyond it. In *Emplumada* and *Sueño*, other-than-human beings and elements have agency and the ability to affect their experience in ways that are not always easily available to humans who live in transnational situations. Ultimately, the freedom to choose between moving, remaining steady, or being indecisive, along with speaking one's truth, as some of Cervantes's birds do, are the qualities that best point to an expanded vision for living in the borderlands.

## Notes

1. Given the focus on a vaster network of agencies than the human, I use the term *other-than-human* rather than the more common *nonhuman* to avoid creating an oppositional hierarchy (see e.g., Chao 182, in Price & Chao).

2. I use *Chicanx* as a general term when it is not necessary to differentiate between genders, but quotations from others may also include the terms Chicana or Chicano. Cervantes herself has used the term "Chicanao poet" ("Lorna Dee Cervantes").

3. Aztlán refers to the "mythical homeland of the preconquest Aztecs located in what we now know as the U.S. Southwest," which is often referred to in Chicano discourse (Saldívar-Hull 64).

4. Western blind snakes are a species of nonvenomous snakes that are common in the US Southwest and Northern Mexico.

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