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# Introduction: Transnational American Studies and Life Narratives

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ALFRED HORNING  
Editor in Chief

The transformation of conventional autobiography scholarship into the more inclusive concept of life writing was part of political and cultural changes in the 1980s. It was advanced by feminists not only as a response to the exclusive intentions of Reaganomics and an embracement of the emerging discourses of race, class, and gender but also as an extension of the enabling potential of narrating one's life for underrepresented and underprivileged groups seeking recognition in multiethnic societies. At the same time, this extension of an emancipatory genre for the expression of the self anticipated and advanced an internationalization of both authorship and scholarship. Exemplarily, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson defined the parameters of "life narrative" and its worldwide practice for the academic community and the general public in 2001.<sup>1</sup> The basic principles of this updated and all-inclusive genre, prefigured in Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*,<sup>2</sup> often also govern the practice of transnational American studies approaches, visible in many past issues and prominent in this one.

The fall issue opens with the contribution of the 2024 Shelley Fisher Fishkin prize awardee, Vinh Nguyen, who frames the excerpt from his monograph [Lived Refuge: Gratitude, Resentment, Resilience](#) (University of California Press, 2023) and states upfront: "As much as I've tried to, I could never separate my academic writing from what I'd lived, was living, and wanted to live." It is the perspective of his "experiences as a refugee of the Vietnam War" which literally underwrite his scholarly analyses.<sup>3</sup> The excerpt chosen for this issue is from the second chapter and deals with the feeling of resentment against the conditions of the American and Canadian host societies that follows the expression of gratitude for having received shelter. The miseries of flight from a war zone return in a different shape in an unaccommodating environment whose ideological attitude toward their former home country refugees do not necessarily share. The advent of the fifty-year anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War, which *JTAS* will commemorate with a special forum next year, also

figures in the *Reprise* section with [Karín Aguilar-San Juan](#)'s 2018 critical review and reassessment of Susan Sontag's 1968 "Trip to Hanoi: Notes from the Enemy Camp" that equally addresses Sontag's concrete experiences and their rendition in life narrative in the context of the political situation in both countries. The transposition of life narrative to the ideological discourses surrounding Indian cuisine in North America is the subject of Nilanjana Debnath in "[Illegal Tastes and Suspicious Aromas: Negotiating Migrant Selves Through Everyday Practices of Food](#)," which relates the in-between position of the migrant self and the accommodation of "foreign" food in the new world. The 2019 TV series *Undone* serves [Sony Coráñez Bolton](#) for an analysis of the schizophrenic and Deaf protagonist's life narrative in the US–Mexican borderlands and to "connect Latinx and Asian American migrant subjectivities across language, space, and time." Coráñez Bolton convincingly demonstrates how the disability narrative "enhances a comparative ethnic studies analysis" that also relates to the historical displacement of Indigenous peoples and the migrant experience of settler colonial repercussions.<sup>4</sup> The life narrative of the Icelandic Nobel Laureate Halldór Laxness informs [Jodie Childers](#)'s examination of the writer's relation to the United States. Laxness's previous welcome and acceptance within American culture and politics as a young man in California change in the course of the establishment of US military bases in Iceland, shortly after Iceland had gained its independence from Denmark. His opposition to this new form of colonization coupled with his flirtation with Communist ideas and visit to the Soviet Union are seen as causes for the negative reactions or lack of recognition after the receipt of the Nobel Prize in the US in 1955, an estrangement which was overcome on both sides in the final years of his life.

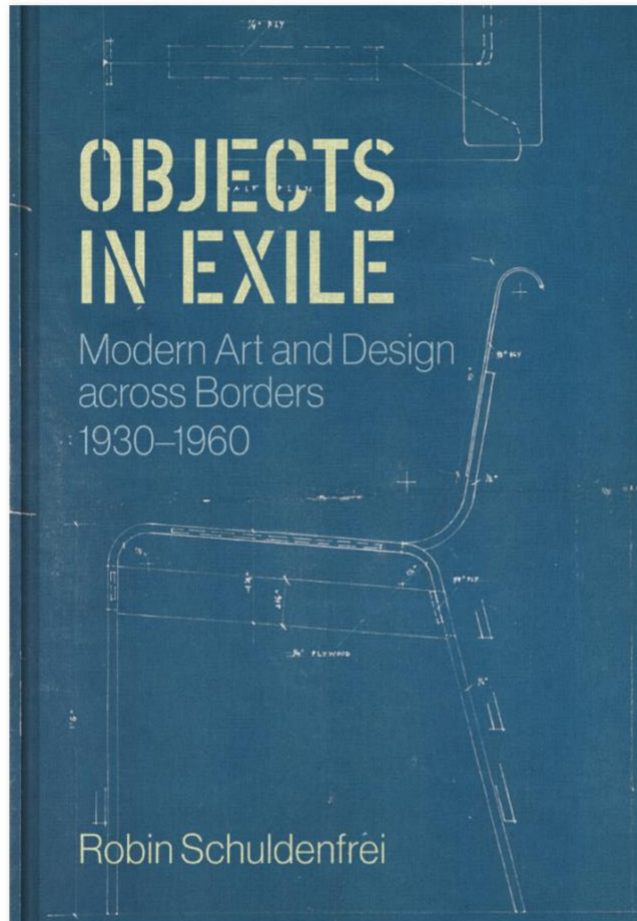
*Reprise* Editor Brian Russell Roberts titled his thematic cluster of four remarkable reprints "[On Dates, Calendars, and Time Lags in Transnationalist Thought](#)," examining tropes which also are essential features of life narratives. In his magisterial introduction he explores the parameters of dates and periodization based on different forms of time scales that range from [Sandra M. Gustafson](#)'s 2018 *PMLA* review of dates in the period of early American literature to the concrete date of Susan Sontag's visit in Hanoi, starting on May 3, 1968, taken up in Karín Aguilar-San Juan's review of the narrative of Sontag's experiences composed in June–July 1968 for publication in *Esquire* magazine. The political evaluation of the date of this visit and its relevance for the culmination of the anti-Vietnam movement in the US and Europe as well as a repeat visit in 1973 are used to explore past possibilities of antiwar activities for the present generation: "We need to facilitate an embodied and empathic meeting with the past that intentionally connects to the multi-dimensional experience of living in the present."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the reprint of Henry Francis Downing's 1914 [Voodoo](#) drama addresses the conflict between the retention of African spirituality and colonial Christian beliefs at a crucial point on the course of the cultural emancipation of African Americans. As such it also represents the life narrative of a group consciousness and an early expression of Pan-Africanness. An even wider time perspective is the subject of Stephen Edward Nash's reprinted chapter, "[Tree-Ring Dating](#)," from his monograph

on *Time, Trees, and Prehistory*. Early on, life narrative scholarship has linked the representation of human lives to ecological issues and the common environment of all organic life in the biosphere, an aspect of research prominent among life narrative colleagues working in South Asia and Asia.<sup>6</sup>

Life narratives also govern the three contributions of the *Forward* section. The life narratives of African and Arab immigrants to Israel underlie Oz Frankel's [Coca-Cola, Black Panthers, and Phantom Jets: Israel in the American Orbit, 1967–1973](#) (Stanford University Press, 2024). Frankel's excerpt tells the story of the underprivileged in hegemonic societies who affiliate with similarly discriminated ethnic groups in the United States and identify with African American culture.<sup>7</sup> The excerpt from Robin Schuldenfrei's [Objects in Exile: Modern Art and Design across Borders 1930–1960](#) (Princeton University Press, 2024) foregrounds the material subjects of modern art, which are, however, tied to the lives of mostly German artists in transit from the ideological and military battlefields to the receptive American host culture. While the art objects exhibited in American museums certainly speak for themselves, it is the presence and narratives of the exiled artists who contextualize and embody the "dislocated modernism." We also wish to highlight Ryan James Kernan's *New World Maker: Radical Poetics, Black Internationalism, and the Translations of Langston Hughes* (Northwestern University Press, 2022), in which the author traces the transnational dimensions of the poet's life on his trips to Havana, Moscow, Madrid, and Dakar to emphasize Langston Hughes's recognition as well as the importance of translations for the creation of a modern world literature. As the publisher's description reads:

In an ambitious reappraisal of Langston Hughes's work and legacy, Ryan James Kernan reads Hughes's political poetry in the context of his practice of translation to reveal an important meditation on diaspora. Drawing on heretofore unearthed archival evidence, Kernan shows how Hughes mined his engagements with the poetics of Louis Aragon, Nicolás Guillén, Regino Pedrosa, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Federico García Lorca, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, as well as translations of his own poetry, to fashion a radical poetics that engaged Black left internationalist concerns. ... Kernan reveals how the writer's identity and aesthetic were translated within these leftist geographies and metropolises, by others but also collaboratively. As Kernan argues, we cannot know Hughes without knowing him in translation. Through original research and close readings alert to the foreign prosody underlying Hughes's work, *New World Maker* recuperates his political writing, which had been widely maligned by Cold War detractors and adherents of New Criticism, and affirms his place as a progenitor of African diasporic literature and within the pantheon of US modernists. Demonstrating the integral part translation played in Hughes's creative process, this book challenges a number of common assumptions about this canonical thinker.

An essential examination of how emigration  
and resettlement defined modernism



“A thought-provoking read that sheds light on the hidden narratives of objects and their profound influence on our collective heritage.”

—*Metropolis*

“Refreshingly anti-parochial.... Impressively done.”

—Owen Hatherley, *Apollo: The International Art Magazine*



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At the recent American Studies Association convention in Baltimore, *JTAS* held a business meeting to discuss the new requirements and the current transnational political situation. We decided to field responses from our colleagues around the world on the result of the American election for a thematic cluster in the spring issue of 2025. Kevin Gaines and Jennifer Reimer will coordinate the contributions. For the conference itself, Brian Russell Roberts had organized a talkshop on “Publishing on Transnational Ground: Grounded Engagement and the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*” in which *JTAS* editors Kevin Gaines, Jennifer Reimer, Pia Wiegink, and I participated. In Brian’s role as cochair of the International Committee of the ASA, he also presided over the International Luncheon and the award ceremony for the Shelley Fisher Fishkin prize winner Vinh Nguyen. Brian will also use his function to solidify the relationship between the International Committee and *JTAS*.

The publication of each issue of *JTAS* is always a major concerted effort of many colleagues experienced in the publication business. We would like to thank all contributors to this issue for their impressive articles, book chapters, and reprint agreements. Special thanks go to all members of the editorial management, especially to the two comanaging editors, Sabine Kim and Vanessa Evans, and the rest of the editorial team of Şebnem Altunkaya, Holger Droessler, Mahshid Mayar, Ahngeli Shivam, Aiko Takeuchi-Demirci, and Mai Wang. All of them contribute to advance and continue the success story and life narrative of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography Now: An Updated Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2001 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., University of Minnesota Press, 2024).
- <sup>2</sup> Alfred Hornung, “Life Writing and Diversity: Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*,” in *Revisiting Walt Whitman: On the Occasion of his 200th Birthday*, ed. Winfried Herget (Peter Lang, 2019), 111–20.
- <sup>3</sup> Vinh Nguyen, “Preface,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 15, no. 2 (2024): 7. <https://doi.org/10.5070/T815264535>

- <sup>4</sup> Sony Coráñez Bolton, “How to Tame a Wild Eardrum,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 15, no. 2 (2024): 44. <https://doi.org/10.5070/T815255067>
- <sup>5</sup> Karín Aguilar-San Juan, “What Vietnam Did for Susan Sontag in 1968,” *The World History Bulletin* 34, nos. 1–2 (2018): 17, reprinted in *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 15, no. 2 (2024): 123–26. <https://doi.org/10.5070/T815264521>
- <sup>6</sup> See Nirmal Selvamony, “*tinai* as Tree: Revisiting Tree Worship in Tamil *tinai* Societies,” in *Ecology and Life Writing*, ed. Alfred Hornung and Zhao Baisheng (Winter Verlag, 2013), 215–40. Chinese translation: 生态学与生命写作 [Shengtaixue Yu Shengming Xiezuò], transl. Lin Jiang, China Social Sciences Press [中国社会科学出版社, Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe], 2016.
- <sup>7</sup> See Feridun Zaimoğlu’s interviews with discriminated German Turkish youth who identify with African Americans and Indigenous Native Americans: Feridun Zaimoğlu, *Kanak Sprak: 24 Mißtöne vom Rande der Gesellschaft* (Rotbuch Verlag, 1995); and Feridun Zaimoğlu, *Kanak Sprak: 24 Voices of the Misunderstood*, transl. Tom Cheesman (Autonome Media, 2004).

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