

Special Issue: *Transnational Inquiries: Representing Postcolonial Violence and Cultures of Struggle*

Introduction

Basuli Deb
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Pascale Perraudin
Saint Louis University

Annedith Schneider
Sabanci University

“A Legacy of Perception,” the cover image of our guest issues “Transnational Inquiries: Representing Postcolonial Violence and Cultures of Struggle,” is drawn from an exhibit by the collaborative artistic project Ro-Sa. Emblematic of imperial violence and its investments in the transatlantic slave trade, this image of lynching is closely associated with the forced transnational displacement of populations of color from Africa to the Americas. It is important to underline how transnational alliances sustained and perpetuated slave trade as various European countries played key roles in kidnapping Africans from their countries, selling them as slaves and eventually exerting colonial control over them. Our cover image, an iconic photograph now reconceptualized and transposed into a contemporary context, reactivates issues surrounding the violence of slavery. But it also departs from the specificity of the historic context as visual details are intentionally blurred, shifting the viewer’s attention to a broad set of interconnecting questions pertaining to transnational violence and its representations.

As the cover image incorporates both image and text, it privileges neither and instead encourages the viewer to read each in light of the other—much as we hope the contributions to this issue will encourage readers to think about how visual and textual representations raise common concerns, albeit in very different ways. While texts, whether literary or testimonial, may provide sustained narrative, images often have immediacy and urgency that texts are hard-pressed to match. What we appreciated about the cover image was the way it refuses the viewer any easy “understanding” of the violence it represents. As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, both textual and visual representations make claims on the reader or viewer, and both benefit from critical examination that sets them within a particular context in order to understand how each representation functions.

In the title of our guest issue, “transnational inquiries” signifies our attempt to cut across the epistemological and geopolitical boundaries of the nation-state to engage with the commonalities of the

postcolonial condition across the world while foregrounding the specificities of each context. Learning our lessons from a field that is invested in resisting the injustice of the arbitrary use of power, as editors we have especially been careful about issues of representation. However, keeping in mind the highly salient question regarding representation, *Who speaks for whom?*, we have been conscious about the inevitability of representational violence where literature, images, and critiques of such representations can only speak for others.¹ The word “postcolonial” in our subtitle needs special mention as we never forget the irony of the prefix “post” in a world etched by the escalating violence of ever more sophisticated warfare technology and the ever present legacies of colonialism which mark contemporary global structural inequalities. In our subtitle we have acknowledged the resilience of cultures and communities oppressed by such violence to underline that power does not go unquestioned and unresisted. We also recognize that speaking truth to power is the hallmark of postcolonial representation. Inseparable from a context of imperial expansion and control, transnational representations of violence are central to framing how disenfranchised peoples relate to social and political institutions. In an increasingly transnational world, as postcolonial violence circulates ever more rapidly, the potential for challenging such historical or geopolitical power relations proves critical.

This issue examines how the narratives of sub-national and supra-national communities contend with the violent narratives of the nation state—whether forced upon them by a colonial, post-colonial, or a neo-colonial state. The state has long held the monopoly on violence as a way to maintain and justify order, as well as values and ideologies supporting that order. Ideological and epistemological control has not only led to representational violence—insofar as the state determined who belonged and who did not, who got represented and who did not—but also to representational violence on the level of cultural epistemes. More often than not, people’s resistance to such state-imposed order has been met with silencing, counter-insurgency violence. However, as the articles gathered here expose, postcolonial representations of violence have the power to disrupt and displace statist repression. Our guest issue brings to light indigenous sub-cultures that clamor for self-determination as independent sub-nations in the face of the nation-state’s injustice against them. The potential of indigenous peoples worldwide to contest the category of the nation-state through transnational or Fourth World uprisings culminated in the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007. Articles in this issue also explore representations of past and present imperialisms. While past experiences continue to reverberate in the present, the current violent realities of American imperialism in the Middle East—despite international protocols to the contrary—focus our attention on empire formations and refugee populations in conflict zones. In this context the supra-national appears in our issue as we explore representations of violence that speak to international human rights discourses and engage with population displacement across national boundaries, as well as the global politics of terror and torture

in a post 9/11 world. Lastly, articles in this volume focus on emergent questions in postcolonial studies such as Turkey and Southeast Asia as important sites of analysis, the surfacing of the U.S. and the Middle East in the field, and the representation of indigenous resistance.

Claret Vargas focuses on a text by a contemporary Maya intellectual that intertwines the ethnocide of the indigenous populations in Guatemala, the 1981-82 massacres in the Kuchumatanes region, and sixteenth-century Maya accounts of the Spanish conquest. The essay shows how the text negotiates the transnational legal discourse of human rights. Vargas both questions the hegemonic premises of such discourse and explores the potential it holds for indigenous peoples to address the historically conditioned injustices of the modern nation-state and transnational structural inequalities.

Using an indigenous feminist approach, Raylene Ramsay's essay studies the representation of sexual violence against women in the indigenous literatures of the islands in the Pacific. The author resituates the trope of colonial violence on indigenous Pacific populations in light of gender violence within indigenous communities themselves. The essay examines how indigenous feminist literature challenges the traditional postcolonial paradigm of the oppressor and the oppressed.

Bunkong Tuon's article examines transnational movements of racialized populations as a result of violence, and the violent continuities that mark the lives of refugee and immigrant populations even after their relocation to other countries. Tuon focuses on women's voices in an intergenerational narrative of Vietnamese immigration to the United States in the context of the Vietnam War.

Esra Mirze Santesso's article complicates current premises of postcolonialism by bringing in the historical relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Europe through her reading of Turkish literature. Her essay problematizes postcolonial approaches to tradition and modernity by inquiring into the unstable boundaries between violence and culture.

Basuli Deb's essay draws on the post 9/11 War on Terror, particularly the U.S. invasion of Iraq, to inquire into the torture photographs of Abu Ghraib prisoners through a transnational feminist lens. The essay discusses images from Abu Ghraib and critiques the role of American women in imperial governance. It exposes the hierarchy of sexual power between American and Iraqi women that such governance is premised on. By examining representations of counter-terror torture, the author traces the continuities in the role of women in the torture of racialized Arab men and the public lynching of black men during the pre-civil rights era.

Finally, Basuli Deb's interview with anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod broadens the reach of literary postcolonial studies itself through intersections with other disciplinary fields. The interview starts with her encounters with postcolonial studies within U.S. academia and guides us through a transnational feminist inquiry into the Middle East. It embarks on a discussion of her later work, her

observations on Palestine, and her critique of transnational inquiry itself with regard to women of the Middle East.

Note

1. This issue has been famously raised in Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" See *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*.

Works Cited

Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, ed. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988. 271-313. Print.