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Martha J. Cutter

Editor, *MELUS*

All the lives I could live, all the people I will never know, never will be, they are everywhere. That is all that the world is.

—Aleksandar Hemon (2)

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet.

—Gloria Anzaldúa (103)

A recent article by Liesl Schillinger in the *New York Times* titled "Passport Lit: Words Without Borders" notes that in 2009 the finalists for the US's National Book Award in fiction include three authors not born in this country, two of whom currently live abroad: Irish author Colum McCann (who won the prize) was born in Dublin but now lives in New York; Marcel Theroux, a son of the American writer Paul Theroux, was born in Uganda and currently lives in London, yet deploys a distinctly American idiom; Daniyal Mueenuddin grew up in Pakistan and Wisconsin and currently lives in the southern Punjab but spends time in London. Schillinger contends that such nominations challenge criticism of American fiction made by, for example, Horace Engdahl, spokesman for the Swedish Academy (which awards the Nobel literature prize) as "too isolated, too insular" (WK 1). According to Schillinger, these selections demonstrate that the "American idea not only translates, it disregards national boundaries."

Schillinger views this as a recent development in American letters, yet if we look to ethnic and immigrant texts written since at least the early twentieth century (if not before), we see that the idea of a firm "national boundary" demarcating America often has been put into question and that US identity frequently has been viewed as multigeographical, transnational, and only artificially contained by the actual legal boundary of the US. Writers discussed in this issue of *MELUS*, in particular, are likely to undermine the idea that "US" literature exists (or can exist) apart from the

literatures of other countries, nations, and peoples; they are likely to see borders as permeable spaces where cultures come into contact in a creative process that leads to the continual modification of the meaning of America. These writers transgress the borders of “America,” but they also question the meaning of this term. As perhaps symbolized by Tino Villanueva’s vibrant watercolor, crayon, and pencil artwork “Flashpoints,” which graces this issue’s cover, the US may become a space where cultures converge, interact, deconstruct each other, and are remade in a productive fusion and fission, an almost chemical (but certainly visceral) transformation that leads to new forms of language, subjectivity, and nationhood.

Yet in the productive chaos of Villanueva’s “Flashpoints” a center—possibly a black hole—exists, holding still amid the swirling energy and galaxies that orbit it. We may read this as an emblem of something in the US that is stubbornly resistant to being remade, a sort of black (w)hole that translates all too well, sucking away the energy and power of other cultures in favor of a dark nothingness. The artists discussed in this issue, then, do not deny the US’s continued presence on the world stage as an engine of transnational dominance and power; nor do they overlook the painfulness of living on borders and in margins that, as Gloria Anzaldúa has famously phrased it, constitute “an open wound” where “the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (3). These essays explore the painful yet emplatonic elements of this “border culture,” but they also depict the ways that the idea of America as a coherent ideological and geographical space still holds force. Barriers of language, culture, and national belonging continue to exist, and not everyone is welcome, it seems, even in a renovated, dissolved conception of what Benedict Anderson calls the nation’s “imagined community” (34-35); those who are not (for example) able-bodied males may remain outside its contours. Moreover, in transgressing the borders of America, ethnic and immigrant writers may be remade in the image they seek to undermine, transformed into assimilated Americans. The writers discussed in this issue struggle to transgress the borders of America without themselves being taken over by the dominating ideology of the nation and its imagined community.

One way of resisting the ideology of America is to refuse the meaning of this term as a coherent marker of a geographical space. In “When the First World Becomes the Third: The Paradox of Collapsed Borders in Two Novels by Gabriela Alemán,” John D. Riofrio uses two novels by Ecuadorian writer Gabriela Alemán as a test case to push against more traditional conceptualizations of American and Latino/a literature. Favoring an “inter-Americanist” approach to American literature, Riofrio argues

that Alemán's novels *Body Time* (2003) and *Poso Wells* (2007) demonstrate the way in which the border can be both binary and multiple, both fixed and fluctuating. Alemán's novels frame questions of identity in binary terms with marked distinctions between the north and the south, yet these seemingly rigid distinctions are also shown to be unstable. Therefore, "Alemán's work offers the opportunity to analyze the aesthetic practice of a writer who refuses to precondition the idea of borders, tracing the idea of them through stories that do not track according to paradigms of first versus third world, Spanish versus English, or oppressor versus oppressed. Not only is the 'third' world unthinkable without the 'first'; often, it also is indistinguishable from it." To understand the *actual* US condition, Riofrio argues, "requires stepping away and considering its presence and image in far-flung places such as Ecuador and the forgotten community of Poso Wells."

Borders can be physical spaces, but they can also be symbolic ones, as Heather Alumbaugh notes in "Narrative Coyotes: Migration and Narrative Voice in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*." Thus what constitutes an "American" story needs to be conceptualized within a constant pattern of migration, placement, and displacement. Furthermore, storytellers can enable the dialogical quality of an "American" story by showing that it takes on meaning only in relationship to other stories, just as the US takes on meaning as a symbolic and actual space only in relationship to how its borders interact with the borders of other nations. As Alumbaugh establishes, for the central storyteller in *Caramelo* (2002), Lala, who struggles to tell her grandmother Soledad's story, narrative practices become crucial to the contestation of borders. Storytelling and migration—as border-crossing activities—are interlinked: "Because Lala's Mexican, Mexican American, and Chicano/a family members cross many geographical—and in the case of her grandmother, supernatural—boundaries, their stories of migration demand a narrative voice that likewise has the ability to transgress boundaries. Thus, like a coyote, Lala smuggles her grandmother's story and her own family history from the past to the present, from Mexico to the US, from the dead to the living, and from one person to another." Cisneros creates a migratory narrative voice that has the ability to redress the "tangled mess" (Cisneros 188) of the migrant's family history—the partial loss of identity, knowledge, and ethnic connection—that actual physical migration enacts. The story is thus re-placed within its proper context as part of American history, even as it crosses the geographical and spatial borders that America connotes.

Yet borders can also be closed spaces that trap and limit, dividing the

“inside” from the “outside”; borders can “define the places that are safe and unsafe . . . distinguish *us* from *them*” (Anzaldúa 25). In “Disabling La Frontera: Disability, Border Subjectivity, and Masculinity in ‘Big Jesse, Little Jesse’ by Oscar Casares,” an essay that unites border theory, race theory, and disability studies, Julie Avril Minich examines a short story from Oscar Casares’s collection *Brownsville* (2003) that concerns the connection between the geopolitical borders of the nation-state and emotional borders within families, particularly those regarding class and disability. As Minich notes, a century after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Américo Paredes described the 1848 re-drawing of the US-Mexico borderline as a violent dividing line; suddenly people were expected to consider their closest relatives and neighbors who lived across the Rio Grande as “foreigners in a foreign land” (15). Casares’s collection demonstrates how social conflicts produced by a political boundary still affect the most intimate of personal relationships. These issues coalesce around the portrayal of disability in “Big Jesse, Little Jesse,” a story that Minich asserts “uses disability to make visible a larger impulse of nation-building and border construction—a need to control and regulate participation in the body politic, acknowledgement of full citizenship, and membership in the category of ‘the people.’” In parallel processes, borders are drawn not only between nations, but also within them between those who inhabit (for example) a sphere of proper, able-bodied masculinity and those who do not. But the impulse is the same—defining who is and is not a proper citizen of the nation—and it is the opposite impulse of the narrative coyote who crosses and transgresses borders, or of the migratory citizen who recognizes the fluctuating quality of the border itself.

Oscar “Zeta” Acosta’s protagonist in *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) also transgresses borders between nations and in so doing indicates their unstable nature; yet, again there are limitations to these transgressions for those who are not able-bodied males. As Marci L. Carrasquillo points out in “Oscar ‘Zeta’ Acosta’s American Odyssey,” Acosta uses a truly “American” genre—the road narrative popularized by authors such as Jack Kerouac—to present an identity which is syncretic, transnational, and complex in its articulation of what it means to be American. Unlike Kerouac, Acosta’s protagonist resists the impulse to other those Mexican or Indian individuals he finds on the road in order to create his own American identity. According to Carrasquillo, Acosta’s protagonist Oscar also uses the foundational American myth of mobility to contest Chicanos’ ongoing containment and marginalization: “As Oscar becomes the cartographer of his past, retracing and remapping his youth, young adulthood, and recent history by careening and carousing through

the western half of the United States and through Juárez, he realizes that his 'single mistake has been to seek an identity with any one person or nation or with any part of history.'" Oscar's journey challenges nationalistic and essentialist notions of racial, ethnic, national, and religious identity. This challenge is, however, to some degree enabled by those who lack mobility—such as Chicana women. In Acosta's narrative these women are portrayed as passive and static, and women in general are the necessary precondition for Chicano men's assertion of physical, social, intellectual, and artistic mobility, as well as their independence and citizenship. Oscar vaunts his newfound political consciousness and his vocation as a writer, but does not consider that both are gained by gender and national mobility privilege. Transgressing borders between the "American" and the ethnic, it seems, can sometimes lead to other borders (such as those between the masculine and the feminine) becoming all the more firmly entrenched.

People coded as "ethnic" often are excluded routinely from the definition of "American" identity, so contravening the borders of America sometimes involves making a space for ethnic populations. White immigrants to the US may be given a slightly different choice: assimilate into the definition of "Americanness" or remain as other. Yet assimilation, as Jolie A. Sheffer points out in "Recollecting, Repeating, and Walking Through: Immigration, Trauma, and Space in Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*," often is accompanied by trauma and dislocation that goes unnoticed in the dominant rhetoric. Antin's autobiography *The Promised Land* (1912) documents an immigrant's longing to believe in America's promise but also the disintegration of that promise. As Sheffer argues, this work is a key text of America's ongoing belief in the mythology of the immigrant's painless adaptation; yet by paying attention to "the particular forms and expressions of trauma in Antin's story—and their relationship to the autobiography's obsession with spatial orientation—we not only acknowledge the losses inherent in immigration, but also expand our definition of trauma and reexamine commonly held notions of American identity." One way, then, in which the borders of America can be reconfigured is by invoking just what has been forgotten so that these borders can be formed and reformed. In a particularly keen analysis of the photographs in Antin's text, Sheffer reveals how these images expose the alienated social landscape of Boston, and by extension the US and America itself. The definition of the "American" is thus expanded to incorporate figurations of what has been overlooked in its national mythologizing of an imagined community.

However, some authors do not wish to become part of America proper, or even transgress its borders, but rather carve out a countercultural space

of racial pride and working-class consciousness. Yet even here we see that, as Schillinger optimistically puts it, “the American idea not only translates, it disregards national boundaries” (WK 1), or as a character in Michael Gold’s novel *Jews Without Money* (1930) laments more pessimistically, “It finally defeated him, this America” (191). In “Writing from the Margins of the Margins: Michael Gold’s *Jews Without Money* and Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*,” Catherine Rottenberg examines two novels by Gold and McKay—written only two years apart in 1928 and 1930—in terms of how they attempt to envision identities that can function as alternatives to dominant, white, middle-class American identity. In McKay’s novel Harlem becomes an anti-capitalist space of working-class community, racial beauty, and bodily pleasure; Harlem thus functions as oppositional to white American imperialism and exploitive capitalism, and even to the black bourgeois middle class. Gold’s *Lower East Side*, on the other hand, never functions in this way, in part because, Rottenberg argues, in the 1920s and 1930s many Jews were steadily trying to enter white society and the white American middle class. Rottenberg contends that Jews did not need to create an oppositional identity, because this “minority” group was already moving from margin to mainstream. Blackness, however, was increasingly mobilized as a positive racial identity in this time period to counter racist perceptions of African Americans. One effect of this was “the reinscription and reinforcement of the black-white divide, which, in turn, enabled Jews—who had been interpellated as off-white subjects—to jockey for position as normative, white Americans.” Thus *Jews Without Money* exemplifies how Americanness can infiltrate anyone and anything, while *Home to Harlem* mobilizes blackness to craft a space of racial pride that stands in opposition to the dominant concept of American identity.

Counternarratives that critique, but also renovate, the idea of America are a strong component of the two texts discussed by Kevin Piper in “The Making of an American: Counternarration in Louis Adamic’s *Laughing in the Jungle* and Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers*.” Piper argues that Adamic’s and Yezierska’s works mediate a perceived binary between ethnic identity and assimilation through counternarratives that incorporate ethnic culture into the idea of the American. More specifically, through transculturation of terms from the “past” ethnic world into the “new” world of the US and transgression of the typical demands of individualistic, assimilative American autobiographies, these authors destabilize imagined community, testifying to the fact that “immigrants bring more than simply cultural material, like a new language or religion, to the host country; often, as a result of this heritage, they import entirely new modes of imagining the national community—new ways of conceiving of the

relationship between the members of the country at large.” These novels are therefore acts of self-expression that incorporate the cultural contributions of specific ethnic groups within the larger picture of America.

This issue concludes with A. Robert Lee's fascinating interview of the talented poet and artist Tino Villanueva, whose dynamic artwork “Flashpoints,” I have argued, can be viewed as a visual emblem of the chaotic borderlessness of America and also a symbolization of how barriers of language and culture remain intact. As Lee points out in his introduction to the interview, Villanueva is shaped by a cross-cultural milieu and legacy (Spanish, English, Anglo, Chicano, and pan-Hispanic) and a wide range of poetic influences: English-language writers such as Dylan Thomas, T. S. Eliot, and the Beats, and the pan-Hispanic spectrum of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, Rubén Darío, José Martí, Federico García Lorca, and César Vallejo. It is therefore natural, as Lee comments, that Villanueva's poetry is written “colinguistically” and is “a poetry of landscapes lived in, and then inscribed in, the cadences of both English and Spanish.” Language itself becomes a space in which the borders of the American are challenged and undermined, as Villanueva says: “[W]e live in multicultural America, after all. And to live in the Southwest—and in other pockets of the country—is to live in *bilingualandia*. The only regret I harbor is not having become trilingual.” Writing what he characterizes as a “hybridized, interlingual, bisensitive, binary, *mestizo*, macaronic type of poems in which these two languages contain each other and carry the poems along” has sometimes meant that Villanueva has difficulty getting his bilingual volumes published, yet he holds out hope that major US publishers will eventually accept more works where English and Spanish are interwoven. Such works would be part of a renovated concept of American poetry that recognizes its past and present borderless quality as emblematic of the nation itself.

In his essay at the start of this issue, John Riofrio implies that we might be more willing, in the “flat” and borderless world of the new millennium, to argue that Ecuadorian novels such as *Body Time* (2003) and *Poso Wells* (2007) are “American” novels: “*This* is the theory of the fluidity of borders made concrete. That which defines and divides also unifies, simultaneously creating hybridizations that make stable categories, such as genre and national literatures, remarkably fluid and deliciously unpredictable.” However, for many of the writers discussed in this issue, this delicious unpredictability surrounding the borders of America has *always* been embedded in the concept of national and cultural identity. This is not to say that all literature can be called American, or that America is everyone and everything; nor is it to postulate that all authors do finally transgress

the borders of America. Yet it is to say that for the writers discussed here, the meaning of “America” has often been configured as plural, transnational, and fluid. Ethnic and immigrant authors have been on the forefront not only of recognizing this plurality, but also creating it in artworks that articulate the multiple meanings of the imagined new community we might finally and truly call “America.”

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