

BROOKE L. BLOWER and MARK PHILIP BRADLEY, eds., *The Familiar Made Strange: American Icons and Artifacts after the Transnational Turn* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2015), 224 pp.

Over the past two decades the term, concept, and theoretical approach of transnationalism has been increasingly in vogue. "American studies has," as Rüdiger Kunow aptly phrases it, "been entranced by the trans."¹ At the same time, the transnational turn in American Studies and American History is in dire need of disentangling itself from an exceptionalist grasp without giving up its critical potential. Bryce Traister observes rather cynically that "transnationalist American Studies amounts to another version of the exceptionalist critical practice it would decry."² However, the *The Familiar Made Strange: American Icons and Artifacts after the Transnational Turn* heeds Winfried Fluck's call, who defines the transnational turn's goal as "the redefinition of the field of American studies as transnational, transatlantic, transpacific, hemispheric, or even global studies" and cautions Americanists not to run away "from the task and interpretive challenge for which it was created," namely "the analysis of the cultural sources of American power."³ To this end, the editors Brooke L. Blower and Mark Philip Bradley assembled a diverse set of essays on a variety of iconic cultural productions. The American icons discussed range from paintings, photographs, artifacts, documents, songs and speeches to books and films. According to Webster's dictionary definition, icons are "object[s] of uncritical veneration" and frequently emotional. This definition draws attention to the connection between icons and a culture of affect. In other words—and applied to a US-American context—icons condense, translate and emotionalize common beliefs or

¹ Rüdiger Kunow, "In Sickness and in Health: Transnationalism Reconsidered," *Virtually American? Denationalizing American Studies*, ed. Mita Banerjee (Heidelberg: Winter, 2009) 23–36; 23.

² Bryce Traister, "The Object of Study; Or, Are We Being Transnational Yet?" *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 2.1 (2010): n. pag., web, 8 Feb. 2017.

³ Winfried Fluck, "Inside and Outside: What Kind of Knowledge Do We Need? A Response to the Presidential Address," *American Quarterly* 59.1 (2007): 23–32; 23, 29–30.

represent aspects or virtues that are perceived as national American characteristics. They offer themselves for emotional appropriation and ideological identification by emphasizing consensus over conflict.⁴ Yet, what happens if the same icons are made subjects of "transnational methods, processes and contexts" (5) of investigation? Let me say as much at this point: Blower and Bradley rightfully call the result of their endeavor "surprising, unsettling, even subversive" (6).

In good neo-historicist fashion the editors introduce the subject and agenda of their volume with a paradigmatic example. They refuse to read Grant Wood's 1930 painting *American Gothic*, which has been described as "unmistakably, quintessentially American," (1) through an "exceptionalist lens" (5) and instead subject the painting to a thoroughly transnational examination. They argue that Wood, inspired by journeys across the Atlantic, domesticated European architectural elements and experimented with sexual identity and desires in this particular painting.

While the iconic status of *American Gothic* is hardly an issue to be debated, not all items studied in the collection of essays would immediately be added to a list of American icons by the mundane twenty-first century reader of this collection. The 1778 painting *Watson and the Shark* by John Singleton Copley is such an example. Yet Copley's painting became extremely popular through inexpensive reproductions in the nineteenth century and is fairly called "a landmark of early American cultural production" (9) by the essay's author Brian Delay. Copley's painting is conventionally read as an example of American determination in the context of the Revolution as it depicts young Brook Watson who loses his leg in a shark attack in Havana harbor. In his essay, Delay focuses on the transnational implications of Watson's probably illicit location in the Spanish-administered harbor. Thus, the painting testifies to "an economic practice that [...] was scarcely documented elsewhere" (18), but constituted the basis for exchange with the New World. A transnational rereading thus not only draws critical attention to a de-facto economic practice but also emphasizes the multinational nature of an engagement

⁴ See for example, Walter W. Hölbling, Susanne Rieser-Wohlfarter, and Klaus Rieser, eds., *US Icons and Iconicity* (Wien: LIT Verlag, 2006).

in the Americas, which again sheds light on the American experience.

An iconic work about Vietnam which has enjoyed remarkable popularity in the United States since its publication in 1955 is discussed by Frederik Logevall. Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* is indeed "a marvelous example of the transnational novel" (115). Multiple factors substantiate Logevall's assessment: an English author and an Indochina setting during the French colonial era peopled by characters of U.S. origin. Greene's novel engages in questions of "democracy" and "human motivation" (115), which—according to Logevall—became key issues in post-colonial Vietnam. In its intriguing historical prognosis of future developments in Vietnam Greene's fictional creation was indeed closer to reality than any news report at the time.

The next few contributions "focus on well-known icons such as Stephen Foster's song 'Oh! Susanna'" (5) and other items from the pop cultural realm, such as the photograph of a sailor kissing a woman on Times Square, or Josephine Baker's banana skirt. "Oh Susanna," a successful blackface minstrelsy song, was "persistently presented as both a prelude to the American Civil War and a domestic cultural codification of black inferiority" (30) according to Brian Rouleau, the essay's author. He traces the American song's proliferation across the U.S. border to show how the shared experience of displacement and the longing for a better future in times of economic transformation spoke to audiences around the world. Rouleau's essay proves especially valuable when he points to the limits of a transnationalist rereading of songs since an international adaptation "usually appears to reify some sense of national distinctiveness" (31-32).

Not surprisingly, the editors' own essays are excellent examples for the proposed exploration of national American icons in transnational contexts. Brooke L. Blower submits Alfred Eisenstaedt's much-reproduced V-J Day picture to a critical feminist and transnational analysis. Arguing that kisses like the one photographed were understood as rewards for soldiers after battle, Blower dismantles the myth of a consensual encounter. Rather, the scene is emblematic for cases of sexual assault committed by soldiers across the country, with Times Square functioning as an especially prominent, "sexually charged milieu" (87). The photo rectifies, Blower argues, the common World War II narrative in which "sexual

aggression has been extraterritorialized" (86) when, in fact, American women equally suffered "war's brutalities" (86).

In his essay on Josephine Baker's banana skirt Matthew Pratt Guterl works his way through the many readings of this African American icon to problematize the intersectionality of empire, race, and gender on both national and transnational levels. Guterl successfully contrasts the African American success story that rests on the exploitation of the black body by white spectators with the skirt "as a symbol of feminine success" and a "rejection of patriarchy in all forms" (64). In a critical transnational approach Guterl traces the route of the tropical banana fruit, plucked by the hands of "black and brown bodies" (67), and transported to the world's economic centers. He shows how both the banana and the black body are not only contextualized with commodities, but they become a commodity.

Both Mark Philip Bradley and Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof look at political icons. Hoffnung-Garskof examines the implications of the so-called Immigration Reform Act of 1965 by employing transnationalism as a method. He analyzes the "ten largest immigration flows into the United States in the period" to arrive at an "alternative, transnational framing of late-century immigration" (128). According to Hoffnung-Garskof, the Reform Act was not so much a watershed event, but immigration patterns can be explained much better by studying the engagement of the United States with the world in the Cold War-context of the early 1960s. In his excellent essay the author shares an entirely transnational reading and moves away from the original document just enough to highlight important connections, whereas Bradley in his essay on President Jimmy Carter's inaugural address seems to lose sight of the object under discussion from time to time. In his essay, Bradley connects individual testimonials of dissidents and victims of human rights abuse to the emergence of a human rights discourse in the United States which becomes evident in Jimmy Carter's inaugural address. From a wider transnational angle, however, it becomes clear that the United States were not pioneers of the global human rights discourse in the 1970s, and Carter's human rights concern was primarily focused on the world beyond American shores.

Among the "sources that did not seem so very important before" (5) but should indeed

be noted as American icons with transnational implications, the editors list Mary Lyon dolls, William Howard Taft sending underwear to Manila, as well as the 1962 comedy *That Touch of Mink* with Doris Day and Cary Grant. The rough, gnarly dolls that bore the name of the founder of Mount Holyoke College, Mary Lyon, were popular in the nineteenth century but fell into obscurity. The dolls at the time fit into a national narrative of “hardy white pioneers” (35), westward movement, and both physical and intellectual work that secured progress. In her essay, Mary A. Renda unfortunately misses the opportunity to reread the popular doll from a transnational angle. Instead she focuses on Mary Lyon herself, whom she considers a transnational intermediary working to align the United States intellectually with other Western cultures (37-38).

At the height of U.S. engagement with non-European nations, William Howard Taft sent drawers to Manila, where he was commissioned to reorganize local life as Philippine Governor-General. In his essay, Andrew J. Rotter argues that “imperial interactions” (49) are multi-sense experiences, which rely on “three critical sites of haptic contact” (51): land, air, and bodily contact. The latter was intricately connected to a fear of disease, which Taft meant to curtail by introducing “short and stout’ drawers” (57) that would serve as a barrier between his body and his surroundings, especially the people. The garments came from Europe through the U.S., were white, and “unavailable to Filipinos,” and also served as a way to “assert Western power” (58). Rotter’s essay is an excellent contribution to the collection as it not only successfully applies a transnational framework to the reading of an artifact but does so for a formative time in transnational American history.

Unusual for the genre of comedy, *That Touch of Mink* critically engages with the beginnings of neoliberal economic development in the 1960s. A jet-setting economist played by Cary Grant is brought down just enough in his superior demeanor by a working-class career woman played by Doris Day to take off his high hat in respect to underdeveloped countries. Nick Cullather points to the comedic and flirty way in which this is done: “How do you feel about the untapped resources of the underdeveloped nations?” asks Cary Grant, and Doris Day answers that “they ought to be tapped” (116). Nick Cullather’s essay stands

out for its transnational topic but not necessarily for a transnational rereading of the nationally and internationally very popular comedy.

“Icons are objects with power” (155), Daniel T. Rodgers writes in his conclusion to *The Familiar Made Strange*; and this particular power embedded in “icons of cultural nationalism” (162) almost precludes any attempt at a Brechtian estrangement. Yet, the authors of the essays in Blower and Bradley’s collection achieve just that. They successfully assess the transnational relevance of the cultural productions under scrutiny; the particular transnational approach does not aim to “reduce symbols [...] to mere inert matter” but achieves to disturb some of nationalism’s most “powerful symbolic conventions” (156). In sum, it is a stimulating, eye-opening experience to view familiar cultural productions from a transnational perspective; it is also one “of vital importance” (165).

Something that has seemingly become an old fashioned addendum in today’s digital publishing culture, deserves special mention: *The Familiar Made Strange* features an index from “abolitionists” to “zoot suits” which allows for an easy access to the diverse articles that span four centuries, several countries and all continents in their transnational approach: Argentina, Austria, Australia, Cuba, Chile, China, the Czech Republic, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, El Salvador, France, Germany, Great Britain, Guatemala, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Pakistan, Panama, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, South Africa, USSR/Russia, Vietnam, and the United States. While the spatial scope of the collection deserves praise, the collection’s greatest achievement lies in its exemplary transnational readings of American icons and artifacts. Yet, at this point a small grievance might also be voiced, namely that in light of the materiality of the examined icons and artifacts, it is surprising that the authors and editors did not more firmly ground their collection in the vibrant field of material culture and thing studies.

In conclusion, the collection is warmly recommended to both skeptics and avid practitioners of transnational American Studies who will inevitably catch themselves pondering which other American icons and artifacts might lend themselves for a rereading in a transnational framework.

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