

2009

## American Studies and the Transnational Ideal

John Patrick Leary  
*Wayne State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

---

### Recommended Citation

Leary, John Patrick (2009) "American Studies and the Transnational Ideal," *Criticism*: Vol. 51: Iss. 3, Article 8.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol51/iss3/8>

# AMERICAN STUDIES AND THE TRANSNATIONAL IDEAL

John Patrick Leary

---

*Hemispheric American Studies*  
edited by Caroline F. Levander  
and Robert S. Levine. New  
Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers  
University Press, 2008. Pp. 392,  
17 illustrations. \$27.75 paper.

*Translating Empire: José Martí,  
Migrant Latino Subjects, and  
American Modernities* by Laura  
Lomas. Durham, NC: Duke Uni-  
versity Press, 2008. Pp. 400,  
7 illustrations. \$89.95 cloth,  
\$24.95 paper.

*Waves of Decolonization:  
Discourses of Race and Hemispheric  
Citizenship in Cuba, Mexico, and  
the United States* by David  
Luis-Brown. Durham, NC: Duke  
University Press, 2008. Pp. 352.  
\$89.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

It is not surprising that the contemporary vogue for transnational and hemispheric American Studies in the last decade has coincided both with the militarization of national borders and a popular ideology of open frontiers for capital and ideas, if not for labor. The field of hemispheric studies reflects this functional dialectic. At its worst, the U.S.-based subfield recapitulates cosmopolitan ideals of Pan-American unity and cultural hybridization in an era of U.S.-dominated economic restructuring. At its best, however, the transnational optic can unsettle nationalist myths of cultural origins, progress, and development, and even point a way to alternative futures. As Susan Gilman has observed about “empire books”—the series of recent works on empire in U.S. culture—the posture of most works of transnational American Studies continues to be that of a revelation, of the unpaid debt of American culture to Latin American migrants, for example, or the latent hemispheric consciousness repressed by American exceptionalism, the battered but persistent antagonist of transnational Americanists. Nevertheless, many such authors recognize that there is nothing new, or even especially contemporary, about the “transnational,” nor is there anything intrinsically radical or even liberatory about it. It has gone by other names, like internationalism, comparative literature, Pan-Africanism, and

Pan-Americanism, and a hemispheric consciousness guided the Rough Riders up San Juan Hill in 1898 as surely as it took New Leftists to a later revolutionary Cuba. Therefore, writing about transnational or hemispheric American Studies is inevitably a historiographical enterprise, since in revising American cultural history in terms of the transnational one inevitably ends up writing a history of the transnational idea. American transnationalism is as old and persistent as the exceptional notion of American culture.

*Hemispheric American Studies*, a volume edited by Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine with an impressive roster of historians and literary scholars, pursues many of the expansive possibilities of the hemispheric frame while engaging some of its theoretical problems and its complex historiography. The book is an excellent contribution to the field of American Studies and the debates over its internationalization. The editors' introduction advances a dialectical approach to nationalism and the hemispheric frame that focuses, they write, on "the complex ruptures that remain within but nonetheless constitute the national frame, while at the same time moving beyond the national frame to consider regions, areas, and diasporan affiliations that exist apart from or in conflicted relationships to the nation" (2). This approach does not disavow nationalism in favor of

some ideal hemispherism, but emphasizes how these concepts and political postures are in fact mutually constituting. Matthew Guterl, Kirsten Silva Gruesz, and Jennifer Rae Greeson consider the hemispheric imaginaries of southern proslavery internationalists, Spanish magazine writers of early-twentieth-century New Orleans, and Reconstruction-era local-color writers, respectively.

Meanwhile, Ifeoma C. K. Nkwanko's essay, "The Promises and Perils of U.S. African American Hemispherism: Latin America in Martin Delany's *Blake* and Gayl Jones's *Mosquito*," engages the complex position of hemispherism in the case of a population that has historically been denied, and has fought hard to claim, the universality that nationality and nationalism can bring. Her essay on Delany's and Jones's novels

eschews the assumed oppositions between "real" (read national) African American literary studies and the "new" transnational approach, while illuminating the limits of hemispherist approaches modeled on now canonical concepts such as José Martí's "Our Euro-Indigenous America" (*nuestra mestiza América*). (189)

By putting pressure on the seeming novelty of transnationalism and on the cultural politics of

hemisphericism, this volume's essays combine both a careful historical approach with a critical skepticism that is refreshing and enlivening.

Where texts like *Hemispheric American Studies* seek to reframe U.S. cultural studies within a hemispheric history and historiography—and therefore dislodge the nation as a stable unit of analysis—Laura Lomas seeks to recover a practice of Latino anti-imperial critique that could inspire contemporary thinking. Lomas's book, *Translating Empire: José Martí, Migrant Latino Subjects, and American Modernities*, is an often provocative text that manages to pull off a difficult feat: saying something new about Martí, the canonical Cuban poet-statesman whose long exile in the United States produced the voluminous body of work Lomas considers. Martí's importance in Cuban literary and political history can hardly be overstated. Nearly every street corner in Havana features a bust of his austere mustachioed face, and his revolutionary legacy is as strongly treasured in Miami. His poetry, as well, helped define the *modernista* movement in Latin American verse. As a student in colonial Cuba, the "Apostle of Cuba," as he began to be called in the Cuban republic of the 1940s, was imprisoned and later exiled for his anti-imperial writings. After wearing out the welcomes of authoritarian governments from Venezuela to Mexico, Martí eventually settled in New York City,

supporting himself as a Spanish teacher, consul, and a journalist before beginning the long task of organizing the Cuban Revolutionary Party. He died in Cuba in 1895, after joining the anticolonial war that he had helped organize. Although her knowledge of Martí's political career is impressive, Lomas focuses primarily on Martí's work as a journalist, editor, and translator, both for Latin American newspapers and for Latino publications in the United States like *La América*, a New York review where some of his most famous essays, like "Brooklyn Bridge," first appeared. Following the work of scholars like Julio Ramos and Susana Rotker, who have brought theoretical techniques of deconstruction and postcolonial studies to Martí's poetry and journalism, Lomas claims Martí's writing on U.S. culture as a paradigmatic example of what she calls a "Latino prism": a liminal, oppositional gaze, not unlike W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of "second sight," that critically evaluates American modernity from within what Martí famously called "the monster's entrails." Lomas argues that Martí's Latino prism has been an unacknowledged, misunderstood, and still pertinent model for the best critical traditions of Latino Studies and, more broadly, the discipline of American Studies.

Lomas reads Martí's written work as translation, both in the literal sense—her readings of his

slyly dissenting translations of Emerson and Whitman are especially fascinating—and, more figuratively, as a critical mediator of the United States' self-representation as a nation of futurity and democracy to a Latin American and Latino migrant readership chafing under authoritarian rule and U.S. expansion. This trope of translation is an original way of understanding an aspect of Martí's work that has often confounded readers, editors, and critics, especially those mining his work for political support in the post-1959 Cuban political landscape. In his archive of newspaper articles, Martí often appeared to take contradictory positions, and critical evaluations of North American capitalism and politics sometimes seem at odds with apparent endorsements of U.S. democracy and modernity. Instead of subduing Martí and his work within the Manichaeic loyalties of the Cold War, as many have done, Lomas argues that we should consider his contradictory phrasings, his anxious self-concealment, and the capaciousness of his interests and positions not as "the single-handed creation of an individual author's genius, but the product of a struggle to formally convey a subaltern, postcolonial, and largely invisible condition," that of the Latino migrant (279). She finds a formal consistency in his critical approach to U.S. modernity. Martí's logorrhea, she argues, is an attempt to fill a silence

and renounce a North American misrecognition, and his exquisitely dense, erudite, barely controlled sentences—which Lomas, following the author himself, compares to the flitting dance of a butterfly or firefly—"disturb any pretense to the bourgeois individual's autonomy and universality" (105).

As Lomas notes, Martí's singular authority and postmortem approval have been claimed by a host of other political and intellectual partisans, and she is reflective about her own citation of Martí as the *apóstol* of a renewed American Studies. The entire Cuban political spectrum claims him as an inspiration, along with U.S. intelligence services (Radio Martí still beams U.S. propaganda to Communist Cuba) and many U.S.-based scholars of Latin American and American Studies. His most famous piece of writing, the essay "Our America," now routinely appears on (North) American literature syllabi as an example, perhaps, of a cosmopolitan, Pan-Americanist sensibility that Martí himself would likely have resisted. Lomas argues that, despite the large body of Latin Americanist scholarship on Martí's writing on the United States, he still "becomes more palatable, more easily appropriated, and more visible in the literary historical record in the United States when his seduction by and identification with a North American intellectual tradition constitutes the salient truth of his literary contribution."

Yet the major frustration of this book derives from Lomas's singular focus on a figure as revered and as prolific as this one. Throughout the text, her interest in uncovering the "metropolitan debt" in American cultural studies to Martí's ideas (and, by extension, Latino migrant thought in general) leads her to find consistently in Martí's work "anticipations" of later thinkers also based in the United States. We learn, for example, that Martí's notion of Latino modernity prefigures Du Bois's later concept of "double consciousness" (136). Although the cross-pollination of African American and Latino thought is an intriguing subject, doesn't this take the legend of Martí's creativity a bit too far? Later, Martí "anticipates the mainstream discussion of borders in American studies," and he can even be found "breaking a path for a postcolonial deconstructive and Marxist tradition . . . by depicting culture as a medium that encodes and shapes political relations" (161). Meanwhile, his critique of Whitman's national chauvinism "anticipates" recent scholarly reconsiderations of the great poet. It is unclear what the point of this line of argument is, other than to further lionize an author already practically encased in marble. Despite the presentist perspective that sometimes predominates, however, Lomas's rereading of Martí's work is an expert account of his political commitments and his formal innovations, and it

offers a compelling vision for the political vocation of Latino Studies and an anti-imperial American Studies.

Like Lomas, David Luis-Brown organizes his argument around a kind of intellectual practice, which he calls "hemispheric citizenship." In *Waves of Decolonization: Discourses of Race and Hemispheric Citizenship in Cuba, Mexico, and the United States*, he defines it this way: "Those who practice hemispheric citizenship work to turn critical perspectives on U.S. imperialism in Latin America to the political advantage of the oppressed in both regions" (19). The book's title, the author explains in the introduction, refers to a new, unorthodox chronology and geography of decolonization, a history more commonly located, he claims, in twentieth-century Asia and Africa (though Caribbeanists might disagree). Even as Luis-Brown places the revolutionary Americas in the time of decolonization, his book critiques the orderly temporality of empire and independence, one encapsulated by Martí in his famous observation in "Our América" (1946) that, in liberated Latin America, "the colony lives on in the republic." The political break with Spain, Martí wrote, meant little without a rupture with colonial thinking. Likewise, Luis-Brown's chronology of decolonization ranges widely to connect nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberation movements and theories,

successes and defeats, placing seemingly antagonistic discourses like primitivism, Mexican revolutionary nationalism, and Pan-Africanism in comparative perspective. *Waves of Decolonization* is ambitious in its attempt to reorder the cultural historiography of the independent Americas. "To posit waves of decolonization," Luis-Brown writes, "means to search for the mechanisms connecting histories separated by periodization, national specialization, ethnic or social identity, and language" (33). Its ambition often outstrips what its literary readings are able to prove, however.

Despite the introduction's focus on historiography, anticolonialism, and citizenship, Luis-Brown has not written an intellectual history of American liberation struggles, and ultimately he does not consider political practice as such, even as executed by intellectuals; his focus is more exclusively literary, or rather textual. It's really about theories rather than practices of hemispheric citizenship, although it's never entirely clear whether the author appreciates this distinction. A chapter on Mexican *indigenismo*, *afrocubanismo*, and the black cultural nationalism in the Harlem Renaissance is an excellent effort to recuperate primitivism by showing how such a cultural discourse helped define the anti-imperialist politics of the Mexican, Cuban, and American avant-gardes. Luis-Brown argues persuasively with

critics who have regarded primitivism as a romantic discourse of otherness that evacuates historical specificities and obfuscates racial strife under the sign of multiracial nationalism. Instead, he points out that primitivism "oscillated" between abstract stereotypes and more specific critique, between cultural nationalism and racial militancy. The great value of his notion of "waves" of decolonization is to point out that these fluid ideas *moved*, both in time and against concrete political realities and intellectual opponents. "While primitivism precluded some forms of radical critique," argues Luis-Brown, "it also made others possible, namely, the attempt to forge ties among divergent yet allegedly primitive non-white groups opposed to U.S. neocolonialism" (161). He also points out how these waves of anticolonial critique produced a literature *engagé* in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Elsewhere, however, Luis-Brown's tendency to confuse texts with movements muddles some of the book's promising arguments. A chapter on comparative readings of Du Bois and Martí begins by exploring the importance of 1898 as the "ethical imperative" of their work. (Du Bois, of course, published *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, five years after the event, whereas Martí died in 1895, after warning of the neocolonial intervention that finally came in 1898. Luis-Brown deals with the

incongruity by reading the event of the war as a “palimpsest” that accrues what has come before and after.) The chapter concludes (after a theoretical interlude with Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben) by comparing Martí, Du Bois, and Teresa Urrea, the Santa de Cabora, a late-nineteenth-century Mexican prophet, as authors of messianist narratives of anticolonial resistance. Reading Du Bois and Martí in this light raises questions of leadership and organization building—in other words, hemispheric political *practice*—that Luis-Brown rarely asks, even though they both held leadership roles in potent national (and even transnational) political organizations. Instead, we are left with unsatisfying abstractions like the following:

Martí’s revolutionary cross-class, cross-ethnic, and cross-national coalition building, Du Bois’s Pan-Africanist conferences, and Urrea’s collectively authored messianist texts push the boundaries of conventional intellectual activity, turning the intellectual into an activist who dreams of bringing together disparate peoples but who also works assiduously to turn that dream into reality. (146)

If the contemporary interest in hemispheric American Studies revives the patient old moles of

Pan-Americanism and socialist internationalism, it is reasonable to dig up another old term of Marxist critique. The young Marx and Engels attacked what they called “speculative idealism” in their acerbic 1845 work *The Holy Family*. They hurled this term of abuse at Hegelian philosophers who they said detached ideas and consciousness from their material and socially constituted human contexts. The concepts of transnational and hemispheric cultures and movements, despite their interpretive utility at unpacking and unsettling conventional nationalist histories, do so at the risk of substituting for nationalism an abstract, transnational “world spirit,” or what Lomas calls a “detached cosmopolitanism” (34), decipherable in texts and close readings. Lomas quotes the Brazilian Marxist Roberto Schwarz’s critique of his compatriot Silvio Santiago’s argument about the “Latinamericanization” of metropolitan culture. “It remains to be seen,” wrote Schwarz in “Brazilian Culture: Nationalism by Subtraction” (1992), “whether this conceptual break with the primacy of origins would enable us to balance our contemporary relations of actual subordination” (quoted on 71). Lomas is to be credited for at least raising—or rather resuscitating—this valuable question, even though she ultimately argues against Schwarz here. Schwarz’s stubborn materialism here reminds us, however, of the



liberatory possibility that the idea and ideal of the *nation* have carried for oppressed peoples in the hemisphere. Schwarz also asks us to remember the limits of what texts and intellectuals can do. Yet as each of these authors shows in her or his own way, literary transnationalism is in no small part a desire—for community, for peace, for origins and their absence, for an end to empire. Even as we unsettle the ossified national ontologies and border myths of the hemisphere, therefore, we should also remember that transnational communities in our divided Americas have always existed most potently in our aspirations and imaginations.

—Wayne State University