

Transnationalism and the Transformation of the “Other”: Response to the Presidential Address

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Shelley Fisher Fishkin impresses upon us just how profoundly the transnational turn has transformed American studies. Citing scores of examples from exciting recent scholarship, she highlights some of these transformations, most obviously, perhaps, in immigration and ethnic studies, but also in cold war studies, in comparative studies of race and racism, and in labor and religion studies, to mention a few.

Putting the transnational turn in the context of a genealogy of American studies, Fishkin notes that in the course of the last few decades a new generation of scholars brought to the fore subjects that were previously ignored or marginalized in academic inquiry—African Americans, women, and Latino/as and Asian Americans. These scholars challenged conventional wisdoms, opened up new areas of research, and in the process recentered and utterly transformed the discipline. Fishkin updates the question asked by previous ASA presidents—“What would the field look like if African Americans (or women, or . . .) were at the center?”—by asking: “What would the field look like if the transnational were at the center?”

Before addressing that question, it may be useful to pause for a moment to examine the links between past and current trends; for, the transnational did not drop from the sky or simply appear as part of the recent interest in “globalization.” Scholars of the transnational owe an enormous debt, both intellectual and institutional, to earlier projects. For example, diaspora has long been one of the key concepts of Afro-American and Africana studies. Chicano/a and Asian American studies encouraged us to enlarge our frame of reference from one focused on the Atlantic world to one that includes the West and the Pacific. The study of American empire underscored that geographic shift and, moreover, pushed us to problematize the role of nationalism in American history, culture, and politics. We have also learned from scholars in non-U.S. fields of study in history, anthropology, and literature, who in many ways are more advanced in their interrogation of nationalism than are Americanists.¹

The transnational turn in American studies builds directly on these innovations. We are, in Fishkin's words, now "less likely to focus on the United States as a static and stable territory and population whose most characteristic traits it was our job to divine, and more on the nation as a participant in a global flow of people, ideas, texts, and products." As Fishkin suggests, this involves not a rejection but, rather, a decentering of the nation-state. It is a profound shift, because the nation-state has been the standard unit of analysis in academic inquiry (and training) since the modern profession was established more than a hundred years ago.

The transnational turn, as Fishkin amply demonstrates, has opened up new questions and new problems for research. I am especially struck by her attention to matters that concern methodology and sources. She challenges us to reject our own nation-centric biases, asking us to reckon with sources in languages other than English, with archives located outside of the United States, and with scholarship published abroad by non-U.S. academics.

In this context, I would like to address another methodological issue. One of the most important (and refreshing) aspects of the transnational turn, in my view, is that it foregrounds human agency. At one level, that is because human movement and practices link—indeed, constitute—transnational spaces. At another level, a focus on the transnational, with its emphasis on multiple sites and exchange, can potentially transform the figure of the "other" from a representational construct to a social actor. This is not to deny the significance of work on the constitutive role of Orientalism in Western cultures. But insofar as much of this work remains focused on the metropole, and the "other" remains an object and not a subject, it reproduces, albeit unwittingly, the privileged position of the Western, liberal subject and occludes the role of non-Western people as historical subjects in their own right. Reorienting our own angle of vision to the transnational might, then, enable a shift from a methodology that emphasizes the production of hegemonic discourse to one that seeks to understand contact, translation, exchange, negotiation, conflict, and other dynamics that attend the constitution of social relationships across cultural and national borders.

To illustrate, let us take the problem of cultural representation at the world's fairs at the turn of the twentieth century, a well-trod subject in American studies. Scholars have established that these fairs offered visitors a "symbolic universe" and a "structure of legitimation" for processes of industrialization and empire. As Robert Rydell persuasively argued, the fairs provided an object lesson about progress, which was conceived as a "willed national activity to a determined, utopian goal." The utopian vision rested on a duality, which de-

fined and constituted civilization in juxtaposition to its "other." This was most clear at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which set a neo-classical "white city" against the midway, the fair's honky-tonk entertainment zone that combined evolution, ethnology, and popular amusements.²

I agree with the general analysis of world's fairs as visions of empire. But that vision becomes more complicated if we push on the question of Orientalism and ask not just how the "other" was depicted, but, what was the role of the "other"? Perhaps the fair was not a one-way white gaze. We might think about these exhibits instead as products of translation and negotiation—cultural, economic, and legal—that took place among a variety of social actors: exposition officials, the government, ethnic entrepreneurs, and migrant workers. Approached from this angle, such a project requires another level of empirical research and that we look at cultural representations at the fairs not in isolation, but as points in a larger and more dynamic circuit of cultural translation and knowledge production that was constituted by migrant artists, intellectuals, and businessmen.³ The question of agency thus moves to the forefront. The "other" is not a passive body appropriated by hegemonic discourse, but a social actor—one operating within constraints set by structures and relations of power, to be sure, but nonetheless a social actor in pursuit of his or her own agenda.

Indeed, there were literally hundreds of so-called exotics employed on the midway. Very few scholars have asked who these people were, but it is doubtful that they were actually "savages" who came straight from the jungle in Africa, Borneo, and the like. Rather, they were performers and entrepreneurs, who probably lived in port cities and other contact zones in the colonial world. Quite a few had experience performing at other international expositions; Sol Bloom contracted for the midway the entire Algerian village that he had seen at the Paris Exposition in 1889.⁴ In his massive chronicle of the World's Columbian, Henry Hugh Bancroft wrote admiringly of these "entrepreneurial exotics." He said, "Most of the Orientals employed on the plaisance took home with them a considerable sum of money; the Turks \$200 to \$300, the dancing girls at least \$500, and the donkey boys a larger amount."⁵

In the case of the Chinese village, we may add another level of migrant agency, for these productions were conceived, financed, and operated by local Chinese American entrepreneurs. It does seem to have made a difference that Chinese Americans sponsored the exhibit, not Euro-American show businessmen and ethnologists. Although the Chinese presence in the United States was marginal and controversial, the existence of an immigrant community meant that the Chinese village sponsors had access to capital, to the press, and

to co-ethnics who could provide support in any number of ways—as audience, as employees, or as a resource for the new migrants (the actors) that came to work at the fair.⁶

The three major investors of the Chinese village on the midway were Hong Sling (*Tang Xin*), a former labor contractor and railroad agent from Utah; Dr. Gee Wo Chan a practitioner of “Chinese medicines” who came to the United States in 1884, accompanying commissioners to the New Orleans world’s fair; and Wong Kee, a Clark Street “grocer,” reportedly the wealthiest Chinese in Chicago and treasurer of the Chinese Equal Rights League. The three men put up \$90,000 for the village (\$1.7 million in 2003 dollars). Wong Chin Foo (*Huang Qingfu*), the Chinese American civil rights advocate and journalist, praised Hong Sling and Dr. Chan in particular for their desire to assimilate. According to Wong, they acted like citizens by investing in real estate, by learning English, and by adopting the Western style of dress; and they professed the desire to become “bonafide citizens,” that is, naturalized citizens.⁷

For these assimilating subjects, the Chinese village project was full of ironies. The exhibit was organized in the absence of China’s official participation in the fair, because China had declined to participate in protest against the Chinese exclusion laws. More generally, in the early 1890s the Qing still resisted reform and engagement in international affairs. The Chinese Americans, however, understood that the fair was a global stage, on which modern and competitive nation-states were compared and contrasted. Wong Chin Foo praised Hong, Chan, and Wong as “courageous” men, who acted to represent China when China herself would not “come out like a man boldly, and face the music like other modern nations to maintain national honor.”⁸ It is a mark of the ambivalent position of the culture broker that these Americanizing subjects positioned themselves as proxies for China at the fair.

It was also ironic that these Chinese Americans, who supported China’s reform and modernization, emphasized ancient and traditional culture in the Chinese village. Clearly this was in line with the fair’s division of labor, which displayed modern manufactures and commerce in the official national pavilions and commercialized exoticism on the midway. The Chinese village was built in exaggerated faux Chinese architecture and included a theater, which presented Chinese operatic pieces; a model temple; displays of arts and crafts; a bazaar, which sold silks, porcelain, and curios; and a café, which offered both “fried chicken, ham sandwiches, etc.” and “shark’s fins, bird’s-nest soup, and similar delicacies.”⁹

The Chinese Village reflected the sponsors’ twin goals: to educate Americans about Chinese culture and to make money, which goals mirrored the

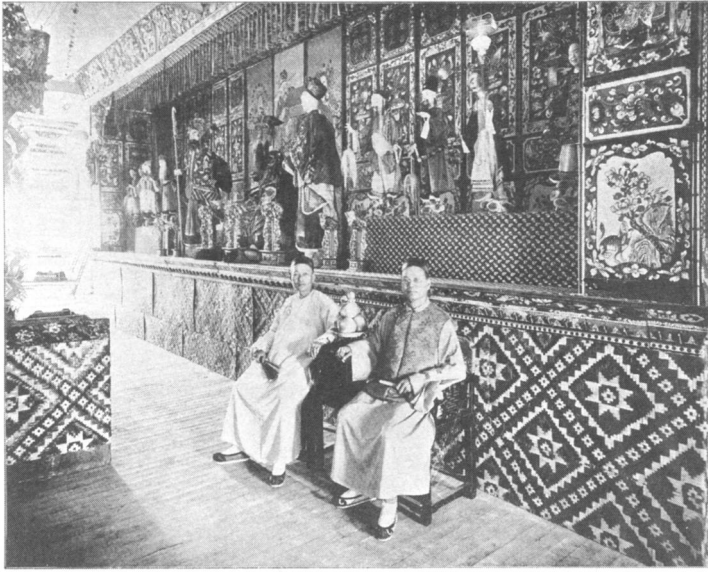


Figure 1. Hong Sling (left) and Dr. Gee Wo Chan, sponsors of the Chinese Village on the Midway at the World's Columbian Exposition, 1893. From *The Dream City: A Portfolio of Photographic Views of the World's Columbian Exposition* (St. Louis: N. D. Thompson, 1893).

larger didactic and commercial dimensions of the fair. The exhibit undoubtedly fulfilled the desire on the part of many fairgoers to consume an exoticized culture, but there were also some thoughtful responses. One visitor wrote, “One thing that is of great value to us, namely [the] pictures [of] scenes of China, showing her commercial and social life.” Another observed (although in a kind of backhanded style), “It was quite a relief to see the difference between the person and manners of the refined class of Chinese and the ‘coolies’ that infest our Western shores. These people were neat, intelligent, polite and agreeable.”¹⁰

The view I’ve presented here of the Chinese village and its sponsors suggests, then, that the world’s fair’s exhibits were not simply a hegemonic discourse but were produced and received through processes of cultural negotiation and translation. In addition, this view opens up another path of inquiry about the social location of the exhibit sponsors. In fact, I argue that the Chinese village was an early prototype for Chinese American efforts to develop urban Chinatowns as tourist destinations, a trend that began in San Francisco in the 1910s. This marketing of “Chinese culture” was one of a few spheres of commercial activity available to Chinese Americans during the exclusion era.

In this regard, we can consider the village's entrepreneurial sponsors in the context of an emerging Chinese American bourgeois class.

Hong Sling is an interesting case in point, because he was both an assimilated Chinese American *and* a transnational subject, a pairing that seems counterintuitive. In addition to mercantile and restaurant businesses in Chicago, Hong Sling invested in properties and businesses in Hong Kong, Panama, and Cuba. A cosmopolitan entrepreneur, Hong raised his family in the United States, sending his children to public school in Chicago and one son to Yale. And yet, despite his modern practices, Hong remained invested in and, to an extent, dependent upon a construction and presentation of himself as a traditional Chinese.¹¹

Hong Sling may exemplify the kind of historical figure that Shelley Fisher Fishkin describes: "figures who have been marginalized precisely because they crossed so many borders that they are hard to categorize." Yet, even as a transnational approach helps render someone like Hong visible, it may still be inadequate to explain his agency or his subjectivity as an "assimilated transnational." By pointing us to the problem of agency, the transnational approach might yet bring us back to older questions, such as immigrant incorporation and community formation, and enable us to revisit them with new insight and nuance. In this sense, the transnational is both more and less than the study of "global flows." While it may figure centrally in, say, studies of migration, ethnicity, and empire, it need not be at *the* center of American studies, where it runs the risk of overgeneralization or marginalizing other subjects. But it can still offer methodologies (e.g., a healthy suspicion of nationalism, attention to human agency) that might be productively put to use by us all.

Notes

1. Some of the most well-known work from non-U.S. studies include Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1992); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Eric Hobsbawm and Terrance Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
2. Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 2, 46.
3. I am grateful to Shuang Shen and Evelyn Chi'en for helping me think about this point.

4. Erik Larson, *Devil in the White City* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 133.
5. Bancroft, cited in Curtis M. Hinsley, "The World as Marketplace: Commodification of the Exotic at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 362–63.
6. Gertrude Scott, "Village Performance: Villages and the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, 1893" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1991), 118–19; "Chinese Actors Reach the City," *Chicago Tribune*, April 23, 1893, 2.
7. *The Chinese American* (Chicago), June 24, 1893, 3.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Official Catalogue of the Midway Plaisance* (Chicago: 1893), No. 35, "Chinese village, theater, joss house, bazaar, and café"; Rand McNally and Co., *A Week at the Fair* [1893], 232.
10. *Shepp's World's Fair Photographed* (Chicago: Globe Bible Co., 1893); "A Chinese Residence," *Views of the World's Columbian Exposition*, part 10 (Chicago: Laird and Lee, 1893) [unpaginated].
11. Testimony of Hong Sling, August 31, 1904, file 430 Hong Sling, 824332; memorandum, J.B. Brekke to District Director of Immigration, Chicago, August 27, 1924, file 2005/1638 Hong Sling; both in box 3, Chinese division case files, records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, RG 85, National Archives–Great Lakes Region (Chicago).