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Transitions and Dislocations,  
Curated Cultural Works Issue,  
Curated by Paul Allatson.



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INTRODUCTION

## Curated Issue: Cultural Works—Transitions and Dislocations, Introduction

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### Abstract

Introduction to the curated issue of *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*,  
Cultural Works—Transitions and Dislocations.

### Keywords

**transitions, dislocations, Mabel Lee, translation, Gao Xingjian, Nobel Prize for  
Literature, Ian Campbell, James Worner, Susana Chávez-Silverman, Gerardo Papalia,  
Régis Debray, digisphere**

Silvia Spitta's magisterial study, *Misplaced Objects: Migrating Collections and Recollections in Europe and the Americas*, is driven by 'the paradoxically simple thesis that when things move, things change' (2009: 4). Extending from Foucault's idea, expounded in *The Order of Things* (1973), that objects form the table on which a culture's epistemology is ordered, Spitta's critical attention is drawn to the epistemological trouble inaugurated by migrating objects as they signify anew in displacement. As Spitta glosses her argument, 'Every new cultural configuration and therefore every subject position depends upon transcultural processes: the uprooting of objects, the loss of place and memory that such uprooting entails, the reconfiguration of objects in foreign spaces, and the concomitant reorganization of the epistemological table of the receptor culture under the impact of those objects' (2009: 21). For Spitta, moreover, these new subject positions and reconfigured material objects, whether 'human,' human-made, or found in and produced by the so-called natural realm, merit close attention because they signify and embody the multidirectional transculturalizations set in motion by European and American encounters since the late fifteenth century.

Taking a cue from Spitta's claim 'that when things move, things change,' this curated issue of *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* extends out from those European-American encounters to conjoin works by four writers—the Australian trilingual poet Ian Campbell; Australian fiction writer James Wornor; the US Latinx code-switching writer of chronicles, Susana Chávez-Silverman; and the Chinese-born, Paris resident Gao Xingjian, the 2000 Nobel Laureate for Literature—and a renowned translator, Mabel Lee, in this case of poems by Gao Xingjian. Their works—short stories, chronicles, poems, or their translations—invite readerly attention precisely because in these texts, things *and* people *and* the languages they use are in motion, and therefore reconfiguring once familiar literary tables. In short, the contributors to this issue of *PORTAL* are responsible for texts that revel in transcultural forces of dislocation and reconfiguration. Or, to paraphrase Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, these writers are presenting to us their literary and translational aspirations for transcultural connection and exploring how those aspirations are animated in and by 'friction,' that is, 'the grip of worldly encounter' (2005: 1).

Renowned for his work as a novelist, playwright, literary critic and translator, the Chinese émigré Gao Xingjian is also an accomplished poet. This curated issue of *PORTAL* includes translations from the Chinese, by Mabel Lee, of poems from Xingjian's 2012 collection, *Wandering Spirit and Metaphysical Thoughts* (2012: 89–97). The poems were drafted in 2004 (and later worked upon or polished) following a particularly challenging time for Gao Xingjian in the wake of the cardiac arrest he suffered in 2002 while his opera, *Snow in August*, was being rehearsed before its premiere at the National Opera House in Taipei, Taiwan. After undergoing surgery in France in February and March 2003, Gao Xingjian was directing rehearsals for a new play, *Le Quêteur de la Mort* at Théâtre du Gymnase, in Marseille, France, when he collapsed and was again hospitalized. The poems translated here by Mabel Lee fittingly meditate on the fragility of life and mortality while exemplifying the spiritual nomadism that is a hallmark of Gao Xingjian's writing; they are the first nine poems from *Wandering Spirit and Metaphysical Thoughts*.

The curated issue continues with two offerings from the trilingual Australian poet, Ian Campbell, who often writes back translations of poetry from one language to another in the three languages he works with: Indonesian, English and Spanish. The first poem, 'Charlie Chaplin di Ngemplang, 1927,' first appeared in 2012 in the literary pages of the Jakarta mass media daily *Kompas*. Its humorous focus is on a series of imagined events that befell the

famous film star and director Charlie Chaplin on his visit to the Dutch colonial-era hill station of Ngamplang in West Java in 1927. In fact, the well-travelled Chaplin visited the Dutch East Indies on three occasions between 1927 and 1932, the exact era in which he was also being confronted by the introduction of sound films, a technology he was reluctant to embrace.<sup>1</sup> An English-language back translation is also included here. The second offering from Campbell comprises three versions of a poem about the Valle de Elqui (Elqui Valley) in northern Chile: a poem he first wrote in Spanish, then in English, and finally in Indonesian ('Lembah Elqui'), the latter also first published in 2012 in *Kompas*. The suite of three poems thus exemplifies what Campbell calls trilingual poetics, namely what does a 'concept'/poem idea look like if done in the three languages with which he works. This approach to linguistic dislocation and reconfiguration mirrors the three-pronged title 'Selatan–Sur–South' that he adopted for a trilingual set of poems published in *PORTAL* (vol. 5, no. 1) in 2008. In each version now the key literary reference is to Gabriela Mistral (1889–1957), Nobel Prize Laureate for Literature (1945), whose burial place lies in Monte Grande in the Valle de Elqui of the poems' title. Both 'Charlie Chaplin di Ngamplang, 1927' and 'Lembah Elqui' were included in Campbell's poetry and prose collection *Tak ada Peringatan* from 2013.

Susana Chávez-Silverman is a Califas-born U.S. Latinx writer who has published two collections of crónicas or chronicles to date: *Killer Crónicas: Bilingual Memories/Memorias Bilingües* (2004) and *Scenes from la Cuenca de Los Angeles y otros Natural Disasters* (2010). She is currently working on a new collection, *Our Ubuntu, Montenegro: del Balboa Café al Apartheid and Back*, which adds Afrikaans expressions to her linguistic repertoire of code-switching between English and Spanish. However, the two chronicles included in this issue, 'Casi Víspera / Colibrí Resucitado Crónica' and 'Black Holes—Deshielo Crónica,' are not from that work in progress. Rather, both texts emerged from a year of personal and professional dislocation and distress as creative proof that the writing urge could somehow find productive outlets despite those challenges, outlets capable of transporting readers, to quote from 'Black Holes,' 'a un lugar (o muchos) *mu*y otro, completely unexpected.'

Code-switching between Spanish and English also peppers the short story 'Parallel Lines' by Australian writer James Worner, which charts the translational journey—physically and metaphorically—of a Chilean Australian about to fly back to Chile and reveal a new self to her mother. And the Chilean connections that appear across this special issue continue with the story's references to Marta Brunet, Isabel Allende and María Luisa Bombal (alongside the Mexicans Laura Esquivel and Carmen Boullosa). 'Parallel Lines' is from a collection of stories in progress entitled *The Shapes of Us*. As Worner describes it: 'The story looks at lives, like lines, that do not meet but which travel in proximity, simultaneously attracted and repelled.' Or as the narrator asks tellingly at one point: 'When is the moment when one thing can be said to have turned into another?' The same question applies to all the contributions to this special curated issue of *PORTAL*.

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Sitting outside the remit of the curated cultural works in this issue of *PORTAL* is the speculation by Gerardo Papalia, 'Trump: Just a Berlusconi,' which appears as a New Perspective Report. The piece provides a timely comment on the social media tactics deployed by President Trump that evoke the mass-mediated aesthetic regimen favoured by

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<sup>1</sup> On a side note, there is remarkable home film footage by Chaplin of his visit to Java and Bali in 1932: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjHdPwAzgE8>.

former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Papalia, however, does not regard Trump as a simple clone of Berlusconi. Rather both leaders exemplify how power operates in the digital epoch—which Papalia calls the ‘digisphere’—that has evolved out of the entertainment- and celebrity-driven ‘videosphere’ identified in 1993 by French philosopher Régis Debray, in his prescient study *L’État séducteur. Les révolutions médiologiques du pouvoir* [The Seductive State: The Mediological Revolutions of Power]. For Papalia the ‘digisphere’ functions temporally ‘as a period of increasingly fast circulation of imagery in all its forms, across multiple digital devices. In a manner akin to electronic commerce, the greater the speed of circulation, the faster the accumulation of social and political currency.’ In this epoch, Papalia reasons, the success of Trump and before him of Berlusconi demonstrate that we, ‘the vast audience (now no longer a public), has long ceased to reflect or to think, preferring surrender to the eye glazing procession of visual stimuli. It matters little whether Trump, Berlusconi or their epigones win, for the digital media that supports them has already taken over our thoughts, our emotions and ultimately our lives.’ And this victory over reason means that all participants in the vast digitized and social-mediatised audience ‘have [ourselves] become clones of these politicians we are so driven to decry.’ We are all, it seems, responsible digitally for Trump and his ascent to extraordinary political, and always already celebritized, power.

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