Cannibal Logic

an interview with ***Michael C. Vazquez*** *by* ***Carina del Valle Schorske***

Carina del Valle Schorske: For a magazine like *Transition*, which is very committed to moving and evolving, it feels especially important to make periodic pilgrimages back to the sacred sites of the past, so to speak. You are the custodian of some of those sites. During your tenure as Executive Editor from 1995 to 2006, you described *Transition* as a "general interest magazine about race."

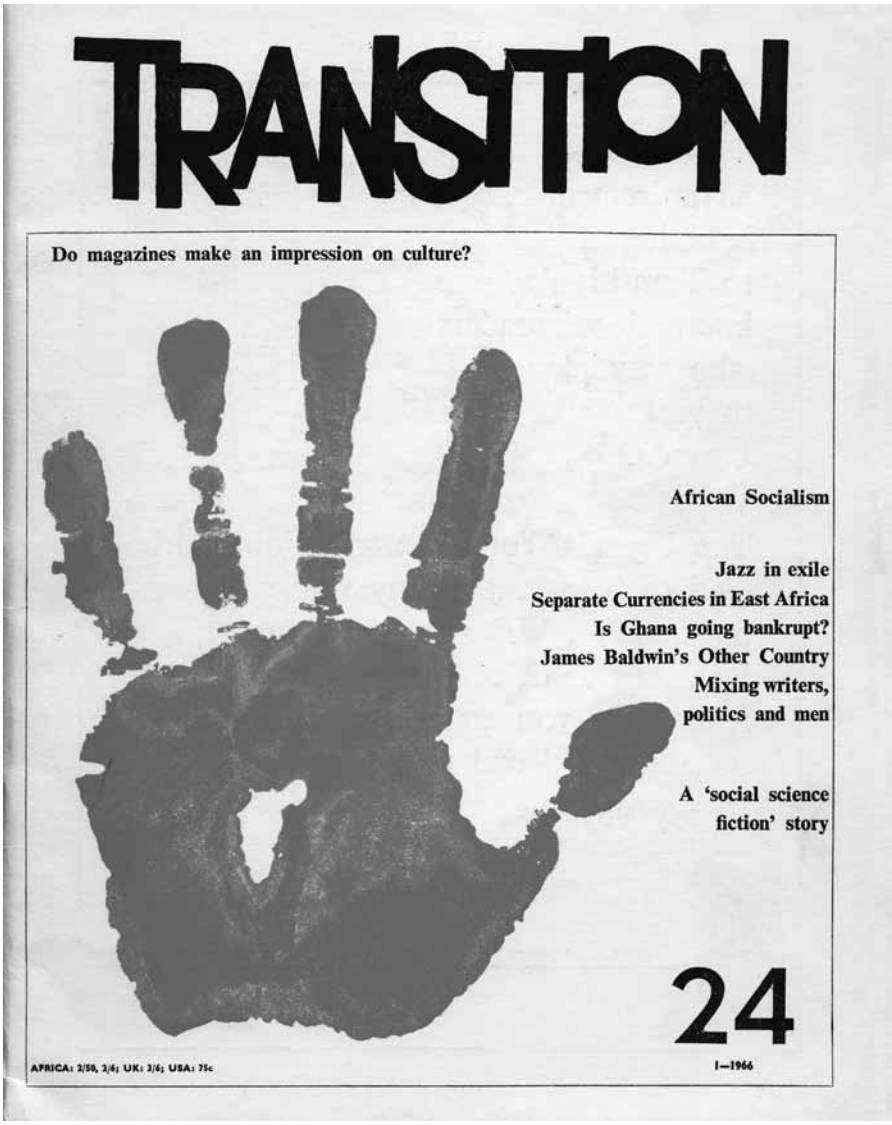
Michael Vazquez: Yes, we did.

del Valle Schorske: I'd be tempted to add, "from a Third World perspective."

Vazquez: [*Laughs.*] Well, maybe. I mean we were constantly trying to figure out how to describe what it was we were doing, which was itself not always clear. At one point a former intern showed a copy to one-point-five-eared boxer Evander Holyfield, who gave us a ringing endorsement: "I like it. There should be more magazines like this." Like what? It was hard to say. In promotional materials, we favored alliteration—"from Beijing to Boston to Bujumbura," and so on. But we liked the idea of "a general interest magazine about race," with its seemingly paradoxical air. The point was that we found race—or the house that race built, if you will—an endlessly fascinating prism through which to look at nearly everything. And we did not mean that reductively; we meant it expansively. That's in part why we tried not to say *identity*, which had reductive connotations, though of course we were a journal about identity. We were also *postcolonial*, and probably even *deconstructive*, but we tried not to use those words overmuch. That was also part of what "general interest" was meant to signal—if we had a choice between running a piece on black travel writing or running a piece *of* black travel writing, we would always go for the latter.

del Valle Schorske: Can I interrupt to ask who this "we" was?

Vazquez: Yes, yes. Of course it shifted over time, but in our fattest years there was Trevor Corson as managing editor—Trevor went on to write *The Zen of Fish* and *The Secret Life of Lobsters*. There was Richard "Spiff" Swartz, our house grammarian. And there was Kelefa Sanneh, now a



critic at the *New Yorker*, as deputy editor. K started out as an intern—we had a lot of interns—and there was a period where most them were recruited directly from the Harvard radio station's punk rock department. Oddly enough, you can read more about it in *Bidoun*, the Middle Eastern magazine I edit now—our special issue on the theme of NOISE included a conversation between me, Kelefa, and Jace Clayton (aka DJ/rupture), which is all about race and avant-garde music.

del Valle Schorske: I'm interested not just in the way you described what you did, but also in what you were doing—how you interpreted *Transition*'s mandate. Because it seems like it has changed over the years.

Vazquez: That's true. When I went back and read every issue of the African *Transition* in preparation for the last Anniversary Issue (No. 75/76), the differences between the magazine Rajat Neogy had founded in Kampala in 1961 and the magazine Wole Soyinka took over in 1973 seemed very profound. Especially in their horizons. Neogy's magazine, as befitted the work of a young Indian guy from Uganda, was about Africanness—a category that just might include someone like him. Soyinka's magazine, on the other hand, was about blackness—or at least, it was comfortably black.

When Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah revived *Transition* in 1991, it combined those two visions—it was, in effect, both African and black. [*Laughs.*] And then some! In the editorial in *Transition* 51, Soyinka—now chairman of the Editorial Board, and already the winner of the Nobel Prize for literature—staked a claim to the very heart of Europe. The *Transition* that Neogy had founded in Kampala, he said, was itself the revival of the 1920s and 1930s Parisian literary journal *transition*, which had published American expatriates like Hemingway and Stein and which famously serialized James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* long before it came out. But I don't know if we know whether Neogy had ever heard about the earlier magazine.

del Valle Schorske: One of your former interns, Dayo Olopade, takes this connection and runs with it right here in this issue.

Vazquez: I remember having those conversations with her. In any case, I certainly appreciated Soyinka's imaginative genealogy. And I guess it'd be fair to say that during my watch, we took a strong interest in India and Indian writers...

Sorry, that was a really long-winded way of saying, "Sure, if you like, 'from a Third World perspective.'"

del Valle Schorske: You don't have to accept the description.

Vazquez: But I do think that *Third World* is a very powerful phrase, with a mythic undercurrent. Like Middle Earth? Maybe. I've been thinking about Third Worldism a lot lately, while preparing for a talk I gave at the Serpentine Gallery in London about periodicals and the Cold War—part of the Bidoun Library project. The idea was to consider *Transition* not just in relation to the other magazines that were supported by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, but amid other publishing ventures produced in, and directed toward, the Third World—*Tricontinental*, the political journal produced in Havana, and *Lotus: Afro-Asian Writing*, the literary magazine based in Cairo, both dependent on Soviet subsidy. Both journals were in their heyday in the late 1960s; both managed to survive until 1989, when the money stopped trickling in from Moscow; whereas *Transition* went under in 1977.

del Valle Schorske: And was revived in the United States by Gates and Appiah just two years after those other journals collapsed.

Vazquez: Right.

del Valle Schorske: What's interesting about this hiatus is that it prevents *Transition* from aging—or maturing, depending on your perspective. When it

is too tired to go on, it takes a break, and when it revives, it's literally young again. In his contribution to this issue—his elegy for Rajat and Kampala—Paul Theroux really hammers home the point that they were all so young then, in the 1960s.

Vazquez: Right—I mean, Rajat is twenty-two when he founds *Transition*. Maybe twenty-nine when he's thrown in jail?

del Valle Schorske: How old were you when you started editing the magazine?

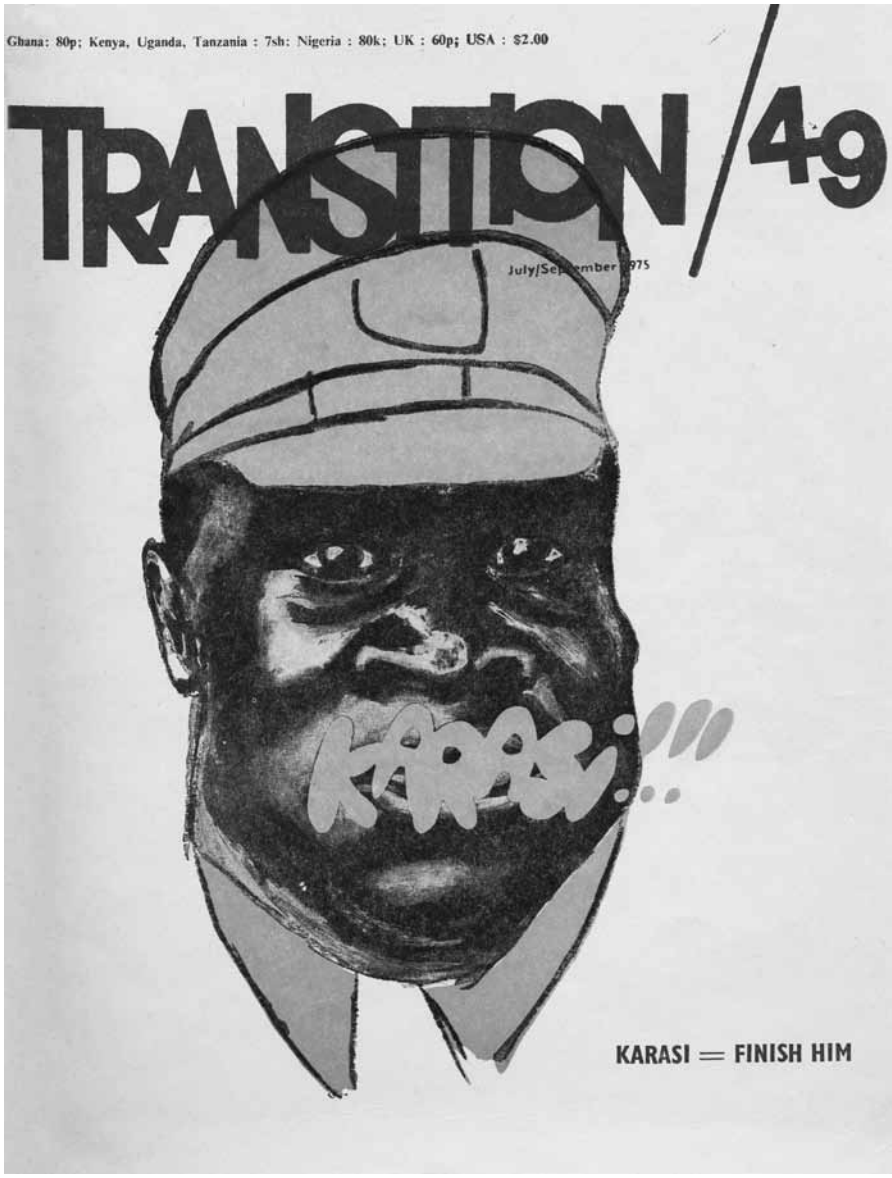
Vazquez: If I am doing the math correctly, twenty-four. [*Laughs.*]

del Valle Schorske: And Henry Finder, the first Executive Editor of the revived *Transition*?

Vazquez: Hard facts about Henry are elusive, but I am pretty sure he was in his mid-twenties when the idea of reviving *Transition* with him on point was conceived.

del Valle Schorske: It seems like this is a pattern in the history of the magazine. Why do you think youth has always been one of *Transition*'s strongest engines? This is not the case with all magazines—many flourish under more experienced, cynically wise or sophisticated editors… someone maybe like Bob Silvers. What about *Transition* makes it the right match for people who are essentially still pubescent?

Vazquez: [*Laughs.*] You have a very robust definition of puberty. And it's important to note that over the years the magazine has sported a generationally diverse roster of editors. But I know what you mean—there has always been something... youthful about *Transition*. I think there's always been something about its style, actually. It's hard to find the right word: Wry? Jaunty? Cheeky? Ridiculous? The sort of in-house deliberations that led to such titles as *Strom Quixote* or *I'm Ofay, You're Ofay* or *Dances with Wolofs* were guided by the equation, "Too stupid? Or *just stupid enough*." If you look at the covers of the magazine over the years, you'll see what I mean. There's a continuity of whimsy from the Tarzan comic book collage (No. 32), the splotched red imprint of Rajat's hand (No. 24, "Do magazines make an impression on culture?"), and the cartoon image of Idi Amin with the words "Finish him" stuffed into his mouth (No. 49) to such later text/image combos as "The Soweto Witch Project" (No. 81/82), "The Incredible, Edible Bug" (No. 86), or the buff black American GI and the little Vietnamese boy, both shirtless, drinking Coca-Colas (No. 70, "Black and Tan").



del Valle Schorske: Or the obscurely disturbing alien on the cover of Issue 63, "Race in Space."

Vazquez: My first issue!

del Valle Schorske: So that addresses the "pubescent" part. But I feel like there's something more fundamental about youthfulness and *Transition*—something related to the perhaps paradoxical project of a "general interest magazine about race." There may be a certain arrogant innocence required to embark on such a project.

Vazquez: Definitely a certain arrogance. [*Laughs*.] I think you're right, though—there have been moments when *Transition* is being steered by people who are looking to make their mark on or with or through the magazine itself—who identify with it, with all the flushed excitement of pucelage. I think Neogy set the tone for this; it was his baby, and he was hardly more than a babe himself.

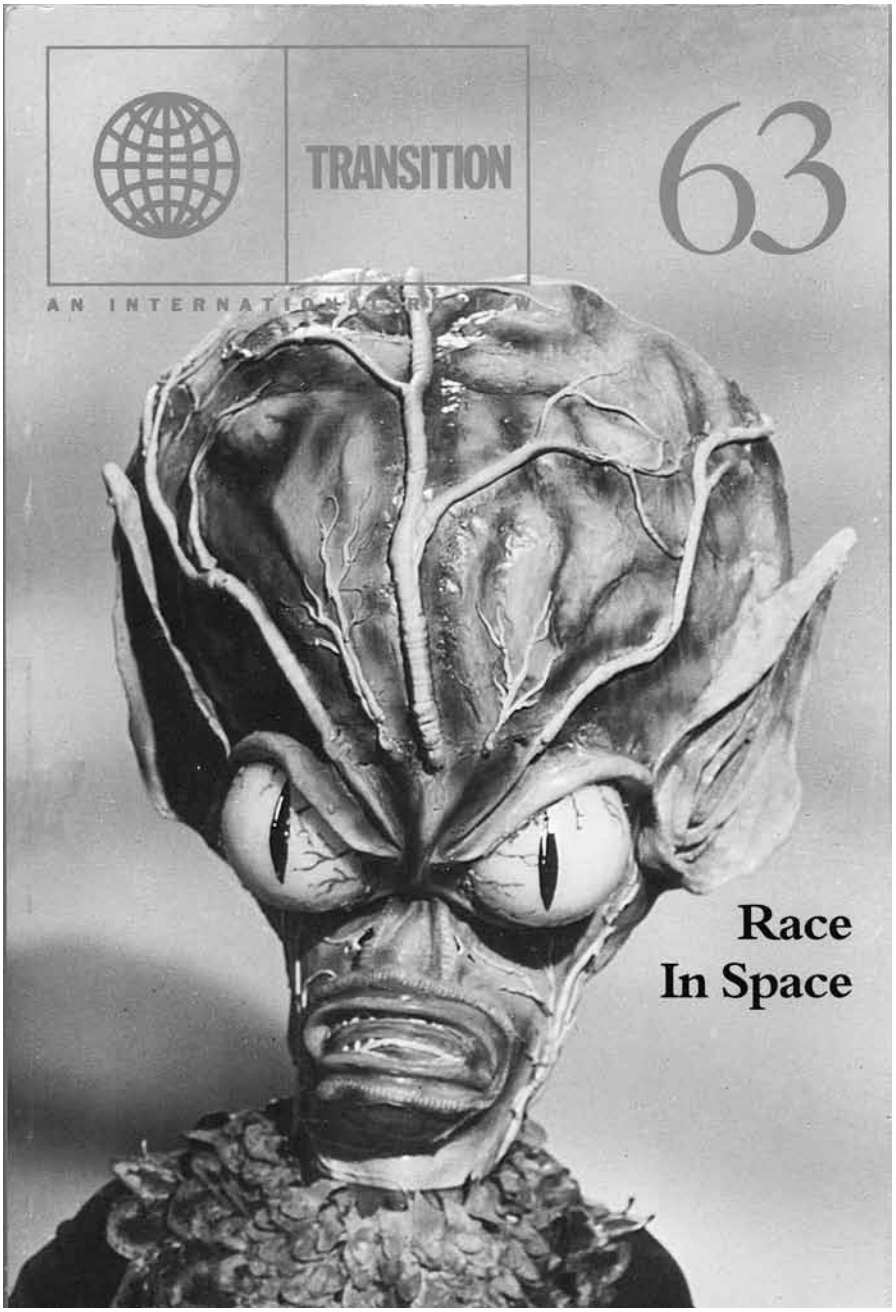
del Valle Schorske: Babies having babies.

Vazquez: Exactly. Have you read the "*Transition* Notebook" entry in Issue 3? It's Neogy, writing as "Sagittarius." It's a truly great, truly oblique manifesto, which ends with his famous declaration, "There will be no birth without miscegenation." His theme was Indianness, ostensibly, but his essay takes in an arranged marriage between Brahmin families in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam; then quotes extensively from the travel narrative of an Indian Catholic writer, returned home after six years in Europe, who observes with seeming dispassion the casual racism of Indian youths, who remind him of... British fascists. It then delves into a suite of extracts from lectures on Négritude delivered at Oxford by Leopold Sedar Senghor, the Senegalese poet who was also his nation's founding president. And also the honorary president of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, interestingly. Rajat, who really ought to have written for his own magazine more often, was arguing that the renaissance of Indianness would be achieved on the model of Négritude—which Senghor describes as an "anti-racial racialism" informed by "our continent's genius: *our need to love*." Senghor even says that the value of Négritude is to arouse "the energy slumbering within us" to "pour it into the main stream of cultural miscegenation." Awesomely, he then says "the biological process takes place spontaneously," which I think means *races will be races*, which means *they will have sex with each other.*

For Rajat, culture and democracy and diversity were sexual. We might say that there is a youthful tendency toward promiscuity that *Transition* fosters, or vice versa.

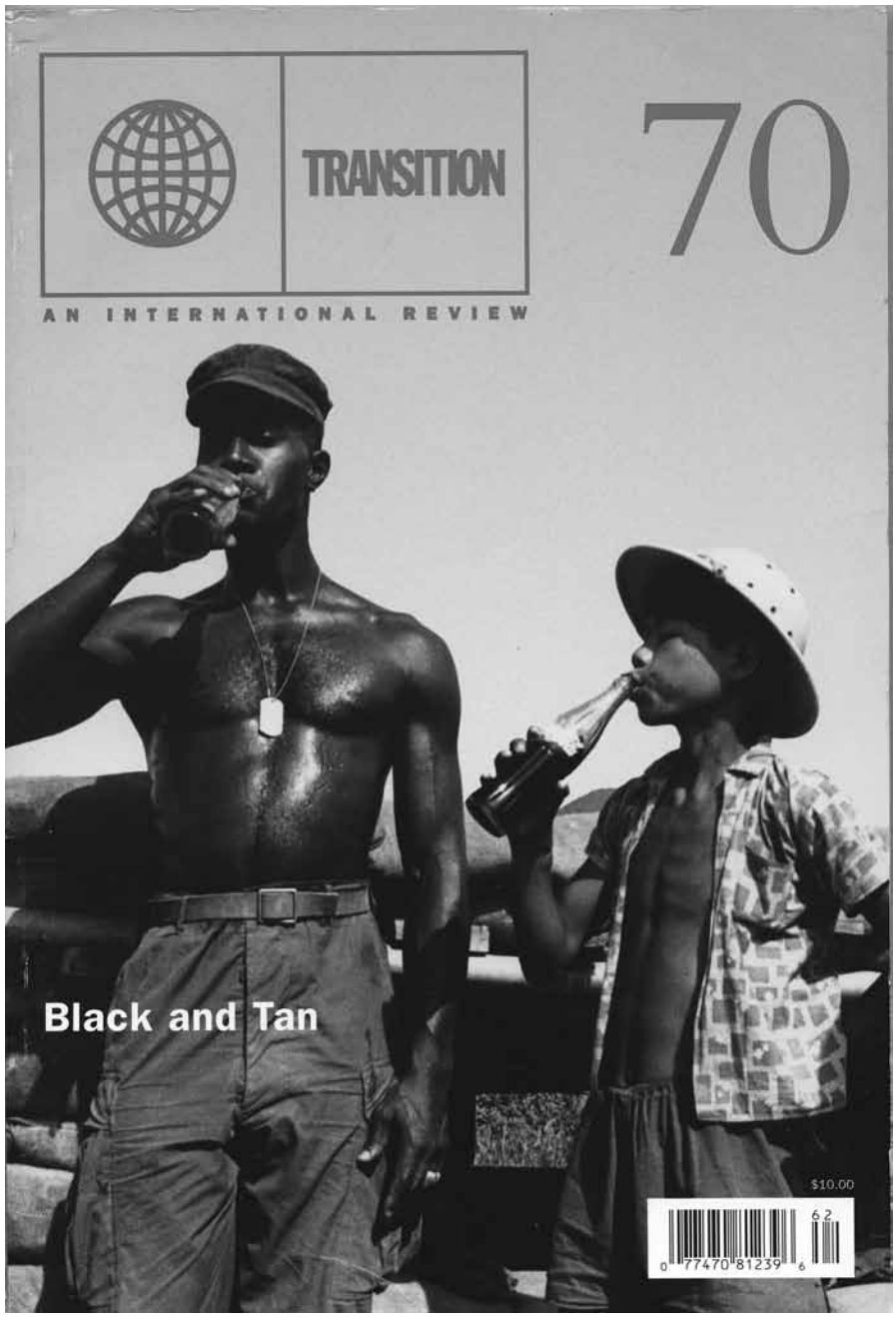
del Valle Schorske: This is a vision that often arises during violent periods; I am thinking of "The Cosmic Race," José Vasconcelos' ecstatic essay on racial mixing in the rough wake of the Mexican Revolution. But here Senghor proves that "*Universópolis*" is not the unique utopia of the New World.

Vazquez: Totally. In any case, what I love about this "Notebook" is that Rajat is also talking about making a magazine—about this magazine, heterodox in the extreme, founded by a Ugandan Asian who, rejecting various fixities and pieties, espouses the African *need to love*.



So maybe that answers the question, in a way? For Rajat, culture and democracy and diversity were sexual. We might say that there is a youthful tendency toward promiscuity that *Transition* fosters, or vice versa.

del Valle Schorske: I like that use of the word "fosters," which sets up a certain tension. Because the early magazine, despite its lightness of tone,



actually had a profoundly mature, even protective attitude toward its mission and its writers.

Vazquez: It's true. And not so many years later Neogy will have many of his youthful enthusiasms ground out of him by the not-uniquely-African *need to suppress dissent*. Throughout its various existences, *Transition* has

published plenty of sober, serious, occasionally boring, often thought-provoking, sometimes courageous writing.

del Valle Schorske: I wanted to ask you how you think about your time at *Transition*—or maybe just, what you think of as outstanding achievements.

Vazquez: God that's hard to say. I mean, there's the usual editorial pride or whatever at publishing a fledgling writer and seeing them, um, fly—so for example, Emily Raboteau's first published short story, in *Transition* 87, or ex-intern Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts's haunting essay "Lenox Terminal," from whence her book, *Harlem is Nowhere*, sprang. We published several ridiculously excellent short stories by the Southern African writer George Makana Clarke—perhaps not coincidentally, Gothic African tales of miscegenation—and brought him into the African literary circuit; one of those, "A is For Ancestors," nearly won the Caine Prize for African literature. I am beyond delighted to have published some of what I consider the greatest travel writing ever set to paper, the brilliantly irascible Kai Friese's "The Aryan Handshake" and "Marginalia," as well as his obituary for the creator of second-string superhero, The Phantom. I'd always admired the swervy, swashbuckling energy of Theroux's "Tarzan is an Expatriate" essay from the African *Transition*, and was thrilled to find a similar energy in Kai's work—and, a little later, in Binyavanga Wainaina's.

del Valle Schorske: I'd add the remarkable interview with the Brazillian pop star Caetano Veloso interview to that list.

Vazquez: "The Tropicalista Rebellion." Oh, for sure. That almost goes without saying—I can't believe our good fortune in landing that thing. Thanks to Chris Dunn for giving it to us. Caetano was so smart and funny and so incredibly unprepossessing—it was an exhilarating read. Certainly part of what I loved about it was the Brazilian modernist take on mixing—*cultural anthropophagy*, which is to say, cannibalism. So that the primal scene of modernity wasn't architectural or literary or musical but rather *the first missionary digested by an Indian* some centuries earlier. Instead of counterposing the modern and the primitive, it's the primitive *at its most stereotypical*—cannibalism—that marks the onset of modernity. It's a notion that's interesting to think about—and also really, deeply funny, if you can get past the, you know, cannibalism.

But that whole conversation was like that. Little smart things, like when he talks about loving the Rolling Stones and the Beatles.

del Valle Schorske: I can't resist quoting here, at length: "We didn't feel intellectually or artistically inferior or offended. I think that is the sentiment that made Joao Gilberto an artistic genius, and the same is true for Antonio

Carlos Jobim: they weren't humiliated, they were stimulated. We, too, were stimulated by all kinds of references… James Brown, The Beatles, Argentine tango… We were happy that all of these existed. We were alive and young, we wanted to do things—and we thought that Brazil should affirm itself in this way, that the Brazillian political system should be this way. I still think so today."

Vazquez: What's fascinating is that he has this attitude at the high point of Brazilian Popular Music, this movement that has put Brazil on the map. It's basically considered treasonous to support "Westernized" music. But Caetano counterposes this "defensive cultural nationalism" with aggression, so that his appreciation of the foreign is not a submission but an appropriation. Caetano observes that those British bands who he finds inspiring were themselves inspired by—or, by cannibal logic, swallowing, or even biting—black American music. So if there is something of the Stones or the Beatles in his music, it's not that he has been Westernized, it's that he has indigenized what was foreign—which was itself the product of various other indigenizations. Culture as The Great Chain of Swallowing. Naturally, there are casualties.

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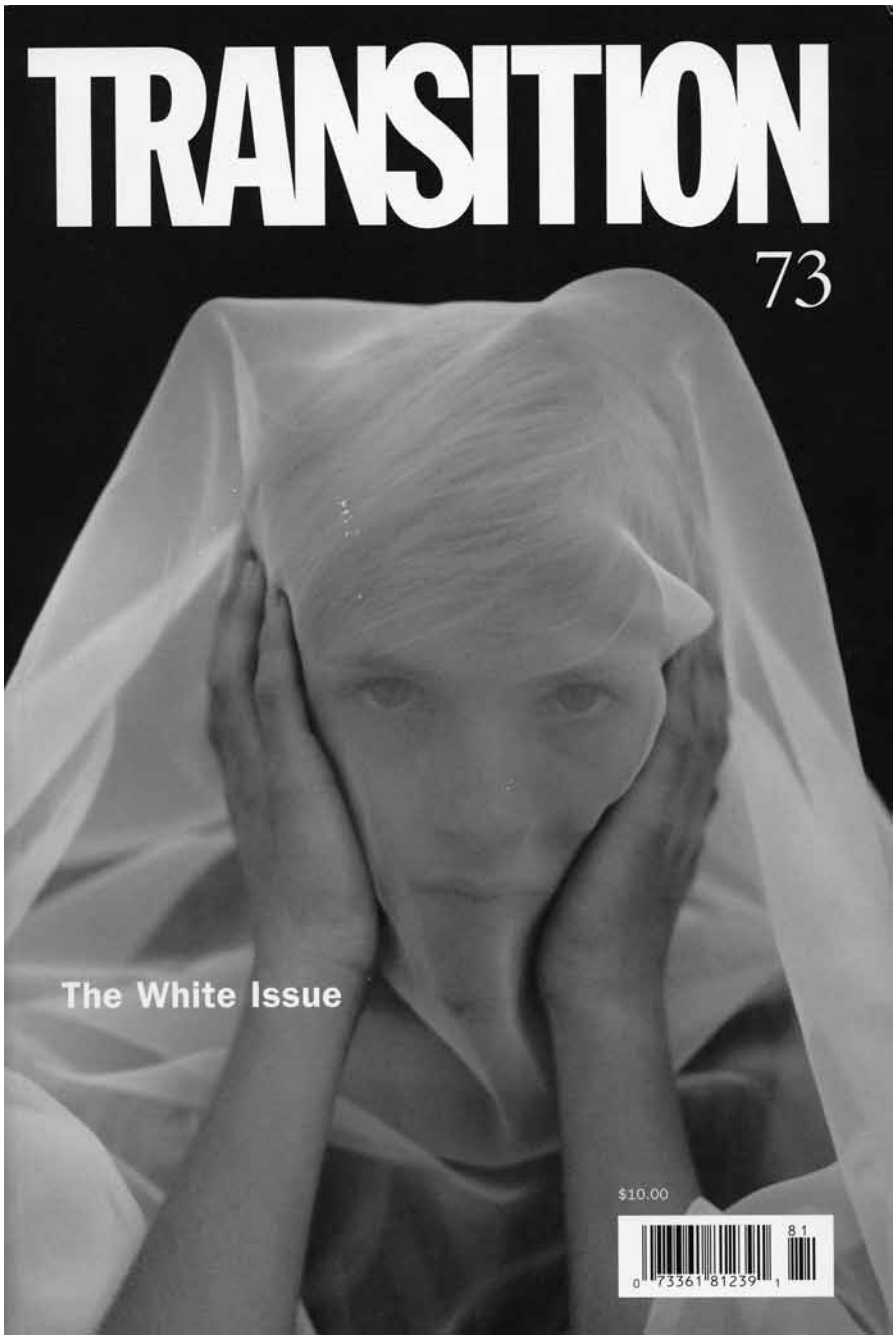
And then there is that breathtaking narration of the moment the Tropicalistas made their mark—one 1968 performance that is like the undigested lunch of a promiscuous yet highly discerning swallower, disgorged for maximum effect. It's the hugest music festival in Brazil, and here is long-haired Caetano wearing some kind of plastic sheet, and Gilberto Gil in Afrocentric dress, and Os Mutantes squalling away in the background, and a song based on graffiti from the revolt in Paris in May ("It's Forbidden to Forbid"), and a bald albino guy *not in the band* screaming like Yoko Ono alongside them. The crowd goes wild—and not in a good way. It's some kind of ritual exorcism, or the opposite. And it's as epic and unlikely a story as the idea that a world-class international magazine should have sprung forth from Kampala, Uganda, in 1961.

del Valle Schorske: I love the part where he talks about Carmen Miranda.

Vazquez: Yes. Or Carmen Miran-Dada, as he sings it, so casually you could easily miss the double meaning. Carmen Miranda, who was denounced for presenting a false, stereotypical idea of Brazil for American audiences—and for being vulgar, at that. For the Tropicalistas, Carmen Miranda was like the Campbell's soup can. A reviled object of consumerist



mass production. But Caetano chides Warhol for not going far enough. Warhol stops at the stage of alienation, neutrality, flatness. Whereas the key is to fall back in love, not ironically, even but not stupidly, either.

del Valle Schorske: In some ways Issue 73, *The White Issue*, was also about reconsidering reviled objects.

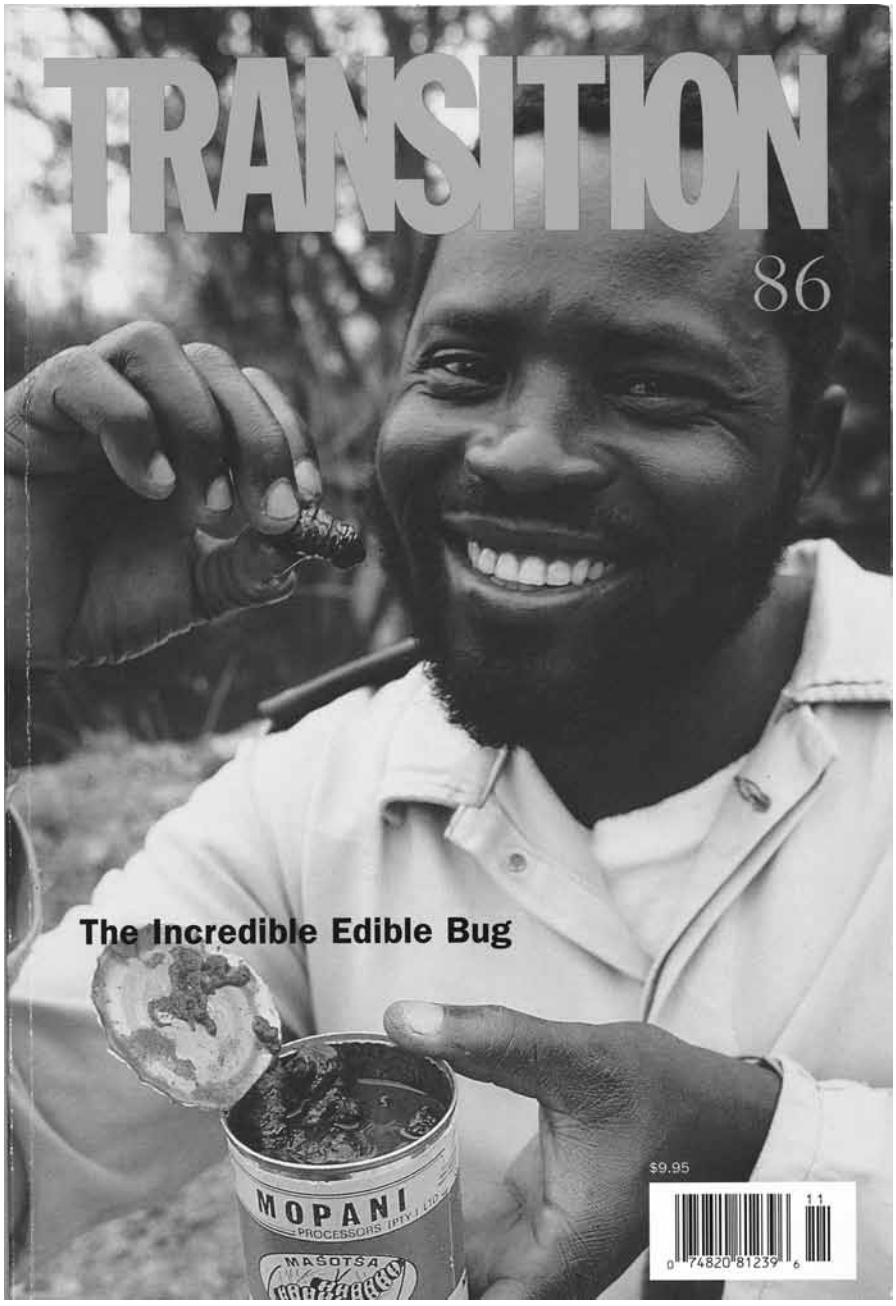
Vazquez: That was probably the most successful thing we ever did—a special issue on white people and whiteness, written by non-white people. It had a gorgeous cover—a Jock Sturges photo of a white girl behind a white veil, which we took totally out of context. The best or most exemplary pieces shared a basic structure—cultural icon *x* is racist... and I love him/her/it. For Jamaica Kincaid, *x* equaled Thomas Jefferson. For Ann du Cille, it was Shirley Temple. Hilton Als wrote one of the most compactly amazing things I have ever published anywhere, "The Overcoat," about William S. Burroughs as an elderly White Negro. And then there was Joe Wood's "The Yellow Negro," where *x* equaled... Japanese hip hop fans who wore black makeup, or logged extreme hours in tanning salons, the better to be—what, exactly? Joe wasn't sure. So he went to Tokyo, hoping to find out what it meant: whether, when a Japanese person "blacks up," he or she is trying to be black... or trying to be white. Complicating things further, some female fans seemed to be blacking up the better to hook up with African American GIs at clubs.

del Valle Schorske: What did he decide?

Vazquez: No spoilers! It's worth seeking out. The story behind that piece was instructive, too. In a way it made the argument for why something like *Transition* needed to exist. Joe had originally pitched the story to the *New York Times* Magazine, which liked it enough to send him and a photographer to Tokyo. But when he turned in his draft, they immediately told him they had a problem. They were a general interest magazine, after all—so where was the white point of view? Joe's correct response was that *his* was the white point of view. He wouldn't budge on that, so they killed the piece. So he offered it to *Harper's*, and they had a similar response. And so then he offered it to us, and we were like, *Duh*. I mean, we edited the crap out of it—I probably spent twenty hours on the phone with him, over two days, making the case for our edits line by line. It was excruciating at first, but eventually he started to trust me. By the end of the process we were friends. Collaborators.

del Valle Schorske: That's remarkable to hear, because it really does seem like no other magazine would publish that story, even today. The publishing world still remains extremely segregated. He could never publish a piece like that in a "black" magazine—what is he going to do, submit it to *Vibe*? And "mainstream" (read: white) magazines wouldn't touch it. I think it's really important that these "queer" stories—I use that word knowing that it's not quite right—don't get relegated to obscure academic journals, that they be told out loud in public.

Vazquez: As loud as possible. Which was still not super-loud, objectively speaking, but one does one's darndest.



del Valle Schorske: Before we close, I want to zoom out and ask a couple of big questions that have come out of our conversation. *Transition*'s philosophy of race has changed with its different editors, weaving in and out of focus. Perhaps it was easier to formulate such a philosophy in relation to particular political changes or world movements. I often wonder what transition the title of our magazine refers to, now. In Rajat Neogy's time it

was very clear. His magazine, despite its wide and wild forays, maintained a center of gravity because it was about the adventures and misadventures of decolonization. What do you think is our (mis)adventure?

Vazquez: Well, many of the revolts across the Arab world are literally happening in Africa! Whether the world tends to see them that way or not. But I'm not sure that any literary-cultural magazines are really riding the lightning these days. So much of the best thinking and writing and even image-making transpires online.

I do love the name, though. It's always apt. A lot of the little magazines from that era have names that indicate one or another phase of becoming: *Transition*, *Horizon*, *New World*. *Quest*. *Black Orpheus*, signaling the dawn.

del Valle Schorske: Nice. Actually one of our longest-standing contributors, Ali Mazrui, discusses the Arab Spring—or rather, the North African Spring—and what it means for the continent in this issue.

Whether we're in tune with the zeitgeist or not, I'd like you to project once more into the future. What pieces do you wish someone would write and publish in *Transition?*

Vazquez: [*Laughs.*] Well, you know, Rajat used to say that a well-edited magazine should be able to reproduce itself indefinitely, like sour milk. (At *Bidoun*, we say: like labneh.) So often, the new emerges from the leftovers.

That said, I'd love to see a special issue on China—something that delved deeply and narratively into the Chinese economic juggernaut in Africa today, but that also considered, say, what the Chinese experience in Africa has done to Chinese returnees, intellectuals, policy makers. There's much to be recovered about the role of Maoism in black nationalism and labor struggles and the like. Another big theme would be the role of Gulf Arab kingdoms in a new scramble for Africa—now involving very long-term leases on some of the most fertile lands. You might also do an issue on African printed matter—there's a show on black print culture right now at The New Museum in New York, and it might be interesting to look at that and then think laterally, back to Africa. Or the Caribbean, or wherever.

I also think what we were trying to do during my tenure, in promoting black travel writing, was very worthwhile. The last time I spoke to Joe Wood before he disappeared, we were talking about Langston Hughes' short travel book *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia*, which at that point had never been reprinted. I was saying how I wanted to publish it in *Transition*, but only with a companion piece—"A Negro Looks at Post-Soviet Central Asia." Langston's book was many things, among them a paean to Soviet-style industrialization, and it was published in 1934, before the purges. It begged for contextualization. I was like, "Who could do that?" And he was like, "Hello." We were going to try and find money to send him to Uzbekistan.

And then he went bird watching on Mount Ranier and disappeared. That was such a loss; I still miss that guy. Obviously the world is the worse for losing each of its sons and daughters, but *Transition*, and black letters, and New York publishing, among many others, are the worse for losing Joe. And Philippe—Philippe Wamba. Another friend and collaborator, graceful writer, thinker, editor. Race men, both of them. We buried too many people way too soon.

del Valle Schorske: Yes, those are huge losses, because they did not have successors. They were originals. Henry Louis Gates once said something very beautiful about Phillipe Wamba: "Philippe lived on no man's hyphen." Black travel writing is important in part because it reminds us that blackness is only invented in transit. The hyphen is blurred in the movement. I really think you've pinpointed a crucial genre here. In some ways *Transition* is just a magazine of black travel writing—or rather, a traveling magazine of black writing. As it's made its way from nation to nation, continent to continent, it has had its identity questioned at every turn. And there's power in that.