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Transpacific American Studies and Global Indigeneity

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As University of Chicago historian Bruce Cumings wrote in 2009, "America has continuously shaped and been shaped by its Atlantic and Pacific dimensions, but the Atlantic influences remain dominant." Cumings attributed this dominance "to a longstanding mobilization of Atlanticist bias that overwhelms most of our institutions," and he cited in particular how Bernard Bailyn's "idea of Atlantic history … emerged in the postwar period as a way to characterize Britain's imperial Atlantic order."[1] More recently, this "Atlanticist bias" has morphed under the influence of transnationalism into the assertion of David Armitage, Bailyn's fellow Harvard historian, that "we are all Atlanticists now."[2] Such a transatlantic cartography has been reinforced since the early 1990s by Paul Gilroy's now ubiquitous "black Atlantic" paradigm, which involves a triangulation of Africa, America and Europe. As Steven G. Yao noted in 2011, the *Black Atlantic* influence "continues to afford Europe in particular a disproportionately prominent and centralized place in its efforts to map the terrain of global modernity."[3]

As Yao also observed, however, "it has been Asia, rather than Africa, which presents (or is perceived to present) the most serious threat to Western global expansion and hegemony, including most especially the dominant role of the United States within that order."[4] The key drivers for American studies over the course of the twentieth century emerged out of an implicit dialectic between the United States and the Soviet Union, from the time of Russia's socialist revolution in 1917, which greatly influenced

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[1] Bruce Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 475, 5.

[2] David Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History," in David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 11–27, 11.

[3] Steven G. Yao, "The Rising Tide of the Transpacific," *Literature Compass*, 8, 3 (2011), 130–41, 132.

[4] Ibid., 131.

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American communitarian writing during the Great Depression, through to the Cold War standoff that positioned American values of liberty and freedom against those authoritarian bureaucracies supposedly characteristic of the Soviet regime. But the key drivers for American studies in the twenty-first century are much more likely to derive from US engagement with China, which will be an especially formidable long-term antagonist to American interests since the new China is richer than the old Soviet Union and will be integrated into the world economy rather than alienated from it. Much of the turbulence in contemporary US politics, including the spread of a generalized xenophobia and the rise of Donald Trump, can be attributed to economic anxieties arising from the disruption of stable domestic employment patterns that are a direct consequence of the global mobility of capital and the outsourcing of labour. China will be a more immediate threat to the US economy because, rather than simply training its missiles on potential sites from afar, it will take advantage of the new conditions and possibilities of information technology to undermine established US prosperity from within. Since manufacturing in China and other parts of Asia is so much cheaper than in the United States, the challenge for all US politicians will be how to reposition their nation's complex system of economic capitalism and social cohesion in the light of these transnational pressures. Whereas the global hegemony of Ford in the automobile marketplace seventy years ago made the U S workforce secure and comparatively rich, the global hegemony of Apple in the iPhone market today has not.

There is nothing new about US involvement with the Pacific. Trade between China and the United States was initiated as early as 1784, and Honolulu became a centre for the whaling industry in the early nineteenth century.[5] Much of the contemporary US scholarship on the Pacific revolves around questions of immigration or imperialism, with more conventional accounts of Asian–American networks – usually centred on California or other parts of the West Coast – tending often to run alongside a negative critique of ways in which US imperial power has sought to subjugate Pacific communities.[6] John R. Eperjesi, for example, described the "American Pacific" as "a geographically specific form of American Orientalism," one in which an apparatus of romance was requisitioned to bolster the dissemination of US commercial interests.[7] Paul Lyons in *American*

[5] Kenneth J. Bertrand, "Geographical Exploration by the United States," in Herman R. Friis, ed., *The Pacific Basin: A History of Its Geographical Exploration* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1967), 256–91, 256, 262.

[6] See, for instance, Jayson Gonzales Sae-Saue, *Southwest Asia: The Transpacific Geographies of Chicana/o Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

[7] John R. Eperjesi, *The Imperialist Imaginary: Visions of Asia and the Pacific in American Culture* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2005), 14.

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Pacifism described Oceania as a "theoretical playground for investigations of U.S. sexuality, masculinity, race, nation, or ecological movements," while punning on "Pacifism" in the title of his book to suggest how the American appropriation of the Pacific effectively suppressed or pacified "Oceanian epistemologies," thereby turning the Pacific space into a site for "structured ignorances" and "imperialist nostalgia."[8] There is, of course, a solid rationale behind these claims of appropriation. When Mark Twain described Hawaii as a "half-way house on the Pacific highway," or when Charles Olson invoked Oceania as "part of our geography, another West, prefigured in the plains," both writers were seeking to annex the Pacific as an extension of US imperial space, just as Hawaii itself was annexed as a territory in 1898 and forcibly integrated into the United States after World War II.[9]

It is true that many American writers complicate this model of annexation, with Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick* (1851) quizzically representing the New Zealander Queequeg and the New Englander Ishmael as oddly twinned. But it is also true that jeremiad assumptions about the Pacific as no more than a location for the imposition of US power fail to acknowledge both the geographical and the epistemological variety of this vast and dense space. Eperjesi has aptly noted how the "discourse of imperialism" at the turn of the twentieth century, "like globalization discourse now, was an important locus for the creation of an economic imaginary that embraced fantasies of regional coherence," but the substantively different historical and geophysical characteristics of this Pacific region create a locale where Western notions of "orientalism" cannot so readily be applied.[10] Nicholas Thomas has cautioned that what works well for area studies in the Middle East may not so readily be transferable to the cosmopolitan communities of Pacific Islanders, whose mutual interactions across time effectively resist the stereotyped notion of Europeans and Americans simply imposing "a series of depredations" on Indigenous peoples.[11] Epeli Hau'ofa's 1993 conception of the Pacific as a "sea of islands," within which the blinkered Eurocentric version of the world as land occasionally interrupted by water finds itself inverted, evokes in every sense a more fluid environment, one responsive to questions of ecology, global sustainability and ways in which different parts of the planet are necessarily intermeshed.[12] Hester Blum, writing in a 2010

[8] Paul Lyons, *American Pacifism: Oceania in the U.S. Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 8–9, 10, 148.

[9] Ibid., 27, 31.

[10] John Eperjesi, "The American Asiatic Association and the Imperialist Imaginary of the American Pacific," *boundary 2*, 28, 1 (2001), 195–219, 219.

[11] Nicholas Thomas, *Islanders: The Pacific in the Age of Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 2.

[12] Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," in Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu and Epeli Hau'ofa, eds., *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands* (Suva: School of Social and Economic Development, The University of the South Pacific, 1993), 2–16.

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forum on "Oceanic Studies," emphasized the phenomenological significance of taking the sea itself as a "proprioceptive point of inquiry," rather than regarding it merely as a conduit for affairs of cultural exchange, and an emphasis on the Pacific, by far the biggest of the world's oceans and a space that covers more than 30 percent of the Earth's surface, helps to remind us that the planet itself is one-third land and two-thirds water, rather than the other way around.[13] While the transpacific turn in American studies has been activated in part because of pressure to take account of the newly burgeoning economies of China, India and other nations in the Asia-Pacific region, it has also been impelled by the rapid development of environmental criticism over the past twenty years. Widespread anxieties about global warming and the Anthropocene have required a planetary rather than national scope as their intellectual remit, along with an analytical framework capable of accommodating ways in which human traffic relates to its parallel nonhuman contexts.

One particular challenge for American studies in its engagement with the Pacific, then, is to acknowledge the reciprocal dynamics associated with this kind of theoretical process. In *Asia as Method*, Kuan-Hsing Chen observed how the United States after World War II had succeeded in colonizing Taiwanese hearts and minds to such an extent that "[b]eing anti-American" seemed "like opposing ourselves."[14] Similarly, the kind of critique that simply indicts US imperialism for its exploitation of environmental resources and Indigenous peoples implicitly attributes to the United States a unilateral, hegemonic status through whose compelling force any competing interests are simply annulled. In fact, as even an elementary inquiry into Pacific history will reveal, this oceanic space has been the site of many competing power plays over the past two hundred years, with British and German forces in particular heavily involved in this region. Melville's first novel *Typee* (1846) records engagements between the British and US navies in the Pacific theatre during the War of 1812, and Melville's narrative also addresses conflicts between these imperial rivals over the Sandwich Islands, as Hawaii was then called, in the early 1840s. For Melville, the Pacific thus becomes not an innocent or pastoral space but a transposed or mirrored version of the Atlantic, where the same kinds of visceral tensions are acted out on an alternative stage. Agency, in other words, is scrambled and displaced but never quite eviscerated. To read some studies of Indigenous tradition that romanticize their subject even in denying them independence, one would never think there

[13] Hester Blum, "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies," *PMLA*, 125, 3 (May 2010), 670–77, 670.
[14] Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 186.

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had been anything other than US imperial interests all across the South Pacific, although some of the best recent work does admittedly treat these Native Pacific communities not as autochthonous but as mobile constructions, an approach that has important ramifications for a reconsideration of how environmentalism might creatively intervene in, or intersect or coalesce with, globalization more generally.[15] It is important to recognize that all Indigenous communities are inherently hybrid phenomena, and that Australia, New Zealand and other parts of this region have long been involved in complicated crosscurrents and with a negotiation of cultural pressures from both local and distant sources. When he visited Fiji in 1891, Henry Adams described it as "a scrap of England dropped into space," an island populated by "the darker races" but ruled by a governor who entertained his Boston visitor with games of lawn tennis, and it was precisely such an incongruous sense of *métissage*, where geographical locales are caught between anomalous conditions, that attracted Adams's sustained attention. The United States has a long and complex history of involvement with Pacific space that cultural historians are only now, under the impetus of revised twenty-first-century geopolitics, beginning to unpack.

In *Reimagining the American Pacific*, Rob Wilson envisaged this other side of the world primarily in terms of what he called an "oppositional regionalism," where "a new, post-U.S. transnational sublime" could invoke alternative lines of planetary flight.[16] Half a generation later, however, the most pressing issue turns on the consequences of the Pacific becoming a central rather than an oppositional geospatial phenomenon. According to Adam Garfinkle, a former speechwriter for both of George W. Bush's Secretaries of State, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, the twenty-first century will mark the first time in four hundred years that the globe has had a "normative environment" that is "non-Western."[17] Just as there were many political realignments around the time of World War II, with Australia, for instance, turning for security to the United States after Britain had more or less abandoned its strategic interests in the Pacific, so there have been many strategic pirouettes to try to adjust to the altered conditions of the new century, with Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, for one, seeking to distance his country from

[15] See, for example, Chadwick Allen, *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); and Alice Te Punga Somerville, *Once Were Pacific: Māori Connections to Oceania* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

[16] Rob Wilson, *Reimaging the American Pacific: From* South Pacific *to Bamboo Ridge and Beyond* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 163, 219.

[17] Adam Garfinkle, "The Decade Ahead," in "The 9/11 Decade: How Everything Changed," US Studies Centre, University of Sydney, 7 June 2011.

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the United States by announcing in 2016 a new accord with a much nearer neighbour, China. Europe has long had an unrealistic sense of its own centrality to both the world's intellectual and its commercial economy, an illusion well described in *Provincializing Europe* by Dipesh Chakrabarty, who wrote of how historians "have long acknowledged that the so-called 'European age' in modern history began to yield place to other regional and global configurations toward the middle of the twentieth century," so that " European history is no longer seen as embodying anything like a 'universal human history.'"[18] The recent implosion of the European political project is likely to circumscribe the continent's influence still further, and while many commentators in Britain and elsewhere have fretted about the internal coherence or otherwise of the European Union, the larger question is how Europe in any of its social or political configurations might be able to forge a constructive relationship with the rest of a rapidly changing world. The Catholic founders of this European movement – Konrad Adenauer, Jean Monnet, Alcide de Gasperi and Robert Schumann – entertained the idea of a united Europe based on dignity of the human spirit and the pursuit of a collective common good, but such a vision would appear to be as unsustainable in the twenty-first century as the Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne, with which in truth it bears some kinship.[19] Catholic social teaching about subsidiarity and solidarity is all very well, but such doctrine consorts ill with an era in which the global mobility of capital threatens radically to undermine both the state-dominated structures of a "Fordist" economy and the comfortable standards of living to which Europeans, like North Americans, have grown perhaps too accustomed.[20] Just as the working-class white communities in North America feared that the emancipation of slaves after the US Civil War would threaten their own competitiveness in the labour market, so on a larger scale the opening up of global markets through digital technologies has rendered both European and American workers more vulnerable to systematic forms of economic displacement.

There are many possible outcomes of these political tensions, and any kind of academic work that indulges in prophecy risks falling flat on its face, overtaken by the unexpected march of events. What is clear, however, is that the United States remains nostalgic for its old Cold War certainties, with Barack Obama attempting in the second decade of the twenty-first century to harness

[18] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3.

[19] Petr Kratochvíl and Tomáš Doležal, *The European Union and the Catholic Church: Political Theology and European Integration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 4.

[20] On the "Fordist" economy see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 284.

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residual collective fantasies at the same time as negotiating different structural conditions, particularly those involving the rise of China.[21] As David Damrosch has observed, one characteristic of the American critical "standpoint" has been its "relative invisibility," its assumption that the position of the United States tends to become a default vantage point for the entire globe.[22] By introducing planetary, ecological and economic dimensions that do not necessarily conform to this synthetic model, and by confronting Westerners with a multiplicity of Asian languages that they have historically not been able so readily to assimilate, the transpacific turn in American studies opens up prospects for various forms of radical alterity through which the United States will be compelled to engage dialogically with the rest of the world. Both politically and academically, the United States has always preferred to engage with internationalization on its own terms, when it was in a position unilaterally to set the agenda, and one intriguing aspect of American studies in the twenty-first century is how this area-based subject will fare when the planetary domain does not acquiesce so readily in its familiar model of national exceptionalism and unipolar control.

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[21] On Obama's manipulation of "multiple and contradictory American fantasies" see Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 13–19, 209.

[22] David Damrosch, "How American Is World Literature?", *The Comparatist*, 33 (May 2009), 13.

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