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## Introduction: The Transpacific as a Critical Space

In the early days of my research and writing that have led to the current book, whenever my American colleagues asked me what I meant by the “transpacific imagination,” I would use *Moby-Dick* as an example. I would tell them that Herman Melville was what Charles Olson called the “Pacific Man,” someone who has crossed the line of horizon; that the book, besides what generations of Melville scholars have made it out to be, is a profound meditation on the destiny of the Pacific in the context of U.S. imperial history; and that for me as a writer who has also gone across the Pacific, Melville’s book traces an imaginary line of flight from homogeneous visions, be they national, cultural, historical, or literary.<sup>1</sup>

Somewhere in the middle of my explanation, a question would pop up; my interlocutor would stop me by asking, “But isn’t *Moby-Dick* set in the Atlantic?” At first I was both annoyed and amused, but I soon realized that their not knowing the geographical setting for one of the most commonly read books in American literature classes was a symptom of something larger than personal gaps of knowledge (most of my colleagues are literary professionals). To be more specific, their confusion was a result of decades of canonical symbolist readings (from F. O. Matthiessen to Lawrence Thompson, Charles Feidelson, Jr., James L. Guetti, T. Walker Herbert, Jr., Bainard Cowan, and so on) of this American classic, readings that see the book as merely an allegory (for the battle between good and evil, democracy versus autocracy, capitalism versus communism, and so on) and shun the geopolitics lying at the heart of Melville’s concern.<sup>2</sup>

My own study of *Moby-Dick* follows an alternative, geopolitically conscious line of thinking that tries to unsettle symbol-minded readings of this and other canonical American literary texts. Starting with Charles Olson, scholars such as Stephen H. Sumida, William Spanos, John Carlos Rowe, Amy Kaplan, David Palumbo-Liu, and Rob Wilson have tried to situate American literature against the background of the United States as a Pacific empire.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, I use the phrase “transpacific imaginations” to refer to a host of literary and historical imaginations that have emerged under the tremendous geopolitical pressure of the Pacific encounters. My central concern is with the possibilities of literary representation and historical knowledge in the transpacific context. Through readings of an array of authors and texts that are usually not read together in any national literary history, I seek to uncover a critical terrain that Melville has called “the deadly space between.” It is both a contact zone between competing geopolitical ambitions and a gap between literature and history that is riddled with distortions, half-truths, longings, and affective burdens never fully resolved in the unevenly temporalized space of the transpacific.

### “The Deadly Space Between”

Melville took the “deadly” phrase from the Scottish poet Thomas Campbell’s “The Battle of the Baltic” (1809):

But the might of England flush’d  
To anticipate the scene;  
And her van the fleeter rush’d  
O’er the deadly space between.<sup>4</sup>

A popular English war song throughout the nineteenth century, Campbell’s ballad depicts a crucial battle between the English and the Danish fleets near Copenhagen in 1801; “the deadly space between” refers to the perilous strip of water in the Baltic that momentarily divides the enemies. As Melville was keenly aware, this phrase would be an equally apt description of another perilous body of water, namely, the Pacific, which bore witness to the deadliest battles in modern times in the same way the Baltic did to the wars of the old empires. In “Billy Budd,” Melville turns the phrase into a metaphor for the insurmountable distance between a normal human nature and a villain’s evil character. The

insurmountability lies, as Melville indicates, less in the actual length of the distance than in the deadly inadequacy of human language to measure the gap. For words to attempt to adequately address the “irritating juxtaposition” of the satanic Claggart and the Christ-like Billy Budd would be to force language to tread in treacherous, “deadly” waters, like the Pacific.<sup>5</sup>

Melville’s metaphorical use of Campbell’s phrase, charged with sedimentations of transatlantic imperial memory, has proven to be both an obstacle and inspiration for me as I enter the discursive terrain of the transpacific. Obstacle, because Melville’s metaphorism is an open invitation to the canonical symbolist elision of the transpacific in his work. Inspiration, because his resort to metaphorism exemplifies not only the deadliness of the geopolitical reality that constantly escapes the grasp of language, but also the slipperiness and ambiguity of the space between the two discursive modes in the subtitle of my book—history and literature. Exploring the fault lines of historical and literary imaginations across the Pacific, I want to show that the gap between the historical and the literary, between the documentary and the fictional, may be crossed over only at one’s own peril. Or, as Melville suggests, the crossing, if attempted at all, is best “by indirection” (324), a path paved with literary devices, inventions, or, simply, fictions. This is the path my book attempts to tread on, one that will lead to both historical fictions and literary truths of the transpacific imaginary.

I use “fiction” and “truth” in their plurals in order to suggest that I am dealing with different or differentiated histories here. I do not mean simply that each Pacific nation, culture, or island—the United States, China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Hawaii, Tahiti, and so on—has distinct memories of the past. What concerns me rather is the different ways of enunciating the past and projecting the future with respect to a distinct sense of historicity. As Robert Borolsky reminds us in his groundbreaking anthology of writings on the “pasts” of the Pacific, “Different people make sense of the past in different ways. To assert the past has a single, fixed, interpretation—that everyone concurs on through time—is to rob it of the one thing we can be certain about, the past’s contingent, negotiated, changing nature.”<sup>6</sup>

In other words, histories are different not simply because they have separate stories to tell, but because they have, to use Claude Lévi-Strauss’s term, different temporalities.<sup>7</sup> Temporality is a relation to time

that is by nature unevenly punctured, or, to use a tautology: temporalized. As the relation to time becomes increasingly homogenized in the age of globalization, the notion of historical difference has often been watered down to fact-finding through the lens of a common measure. But as Louis Althusser puts it in his famous attack on Hegelian historiography, it is impossible “to think the process of the different levels of the whole in the same historical time. Each of these different ‘levels’ does not have the same type of historical existence . . . Each of these peculiar histories is punctuated with peculiar rhythms and can only be known on condition that we have defined the concept of the specificity of its historical temporality and its punctuations.”<sup>8</sup>

The implications of the transpacific as “the deadly space between” are thus twofold: one pertains to the combat zone between History and histories, and the other the gap between history and literature. Obviously, the first use is historical or literal because it describes wars of discourses on the destiny of the Pacific; and the second use is literary or metaphorical because in this case the transpacific provides a backdrop for my contemplations on the epistemological battle between the documentary and the fictional. One may say, then, that this book on the transpacific as a deadly in-between contains a deadly gap in itself.

My answer to such a charge is also twofold. First, in the long history of the colonization of the Pacific, (this) space has always been conceived by the colonizers both literally and abstractly—literally as objects for territorial expansion and abstractly as typological fulfillment. As this book will show, such a double vision of the Pacific—one in which material possession and discursive abstraction reinforce each other—remains the central legacy of Pacific history/historiography. By looking at the transpacific as both a terrain of geopolitical struggle and an instance of epistemological battle, I mean to tackle that legacy head on and revision that double vision. Second, “counterpoetics,” the third term in my subtitle, carries on the critique of the violence of the imperial double vision. I use counterpoetics to describe a host of marginalized poetic/historiographical practices: antiquarianism, collection, local history, anecdotes, family genealogy, travel writing, graffiti, correspondence, fantasies, and hoaxes. As a counterpoint to imperial visions that always claim some version of historical teleology as their *raison d'être*, such poetics hovers between the literal and the metaphorical, the historical and the mimetic. And in contrast to the master narratives, these works of counterpoetics

turn away from any meta-discourse on the transpacific; they move instead toward the enactment of poetic imagination as a means to alter memory and invoke minority survival in the deadly space between competing national, imperial interests and between authoritative regimes of epistemology serving those interests. The conceptual gap between the transpacific as the geopolitical and the metaphorical may not, therefore, be bridged or abridged—a Melvillean curse/blessing. Instead, as I will propose in the conclusion to this book, the transpacific lesson is one of learning to live in or with the gap in the spirit of a hermeneutics of recognition and acknowledgment, called for in part by the works of counterpoetics.

### The Critical Space

In his monumental study of spatial production, Henri Lefebvre analyzes four kinds of social space: absolute, abstract, contradictory, and differential. Absolute space, according to Lefebvre, is made up of fragments of nature located at sites that are chosen for their intrinsic qualities but whose consecration stripped them of their natural characteristics and uniqueness.<sup>9</sup> Agropastoral in origin, such space corresponds to the precapitalist mode of production and is “hived” rather than conceived. It is a representational space rather than a representation of space; no sooner is it conceptualized than its significance wanes and vanishes and absolute space becomes abstract space (236). In its Euclidean geometric, optical, or phallic formant, abstract space is a product of violence of war and “serves those forces which make a *tabula rasa* of whatever stands in their way, of whatever threatens them—in short, of differences. These forces seem to grind down and crush everything before them, with space performing the function of a plane, a bulldozer or a tank” (285). Homogeneous as it seems, abstract space is filled with contradictions (quantity versus quality, production versus consumption, global versus fragmentary, exchange value versus use value, knowledge versus power, understanding versus violence, etc.) and is thus essentially a contradictory space (352–358). The components in this abstract/contradictory space are particularities that confront one another and clash with one another. “Out of their struggles, which imply and complicate class struggles as well as conflicts between peoples and nations, there emerge differences properly so called”; hence we find the fourth term, differential space (373).

As seen through Lefebvre's critical lens, the Pacific also needs to be understood in multilayered ways, simultaneously as an absolute, abstract, contradictory, and differential space. As I show in Part One, by following the spatial and discursive trajectories of three transpacific travelers, Mark Twain, Henry Adams, and Liang Qichao, the Pacific needs to be viewed from different shores. As Twain and Adams were well aware, the territorial expansion into the Pacific in the nineteenth century was not only an extension of America's Manifest Destiny but also a step in the historical progression of the world. As the Puritan typology would have it, the center of the world moves from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and now to the Pacific. But as Liang came to realize painfully, turn-of-the-century China's inability to compete with other nations in the Pacific signaled the bankruptcy of traditional Confucian historiography and the end of the eternally cyclical time spatialized in the boundlessness of the Middle Kingdom. The Pacific is the dead end of historical thinking for premodern China, whereas it is a new manifestation of providential design for the United States. Thus, the discourse of the Pacific Century, the notion of the Pacific as the new center of the world, ushering all nations into the last stage of Universal History, necessarily camouflages the fissures and wounds opened up by the clashes between these differentiated histories.

In *The Clash of Empires*, Lydia H. Liu reminds us that the battle of words and translations is central to the sovereign will that had driven the wars between empires. The title of Liu's book is meant to be a corrective to Samuel P. Huntington's theory of "clash of civilizations." "Civilizations don't clash," Liu states resolutely, "but empires do." In contrast to Huntington's interpretation of world conflicts as results of competitions among monolithic, homogeneous blocks of civilizations, Liu describes a world in which signs and meanings are in constant circulation, exchange, and reinvestment.<sup>10</sup> Sharing Liu's belief in the significance of word battles, I intend in this book to study the clash not of civilizations or of empires, but of discourses. To be specific, my interest lies in looking at the transpacific as a space in which the destiny of the Pacific is subject to competing interpretations made from different shores.

### Imagination; or, Its Transpacific Fallout

*Moby-Dick*; or, *The Whale*, which I treat extensively in Part Two, is a poetic enactment of the breakdown of a particular kind of transpacific

imagination as advocated by Emerson and other spokespersons for the nineteenth-century U.S. imperial vision. The correlation between Emersonian transcendentalism and U.S. imperial, capitalist expansion has been fruitfully explored by recent scholars.<sup>11</sup> My study, via Melville, is intended to look at the geo-specific manifestations of the imperial vision and the ultimate failure of such transpacific imagination.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge defines imagination as "a repetition in the infinite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."<sup>12</sup> In "Nature," Emerson turns Romanticist imagination into an engine of self-sublimation and individual autonomy: "Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."<sup>13</sup> The ideological consequence of such a transcendental eyeballing is the elision of space and people in nature. "Vast spaces of nature," Emerson writes in "Self-Reliance," "the Atlantic Ocean, the South Sea,—long intervals of time, years, centuries,—are of no account."<sup>14</sup> As Wilson points out, Emerson's sublime transcendence is achieved by mastering Atlantic and Pacific spaces and people into ciphers and turning history into a diary of national (and private) self-empowerment.<sup>15</sup>

It is against such a grain of imperial imagination that Melville, who famously refuses to see things as mere "ciphers," writes *Moby-Dick* as a transpacific book. Rather than imagination, the paradigm that Melville follows, I argue, is "collection" with its various manifestations in the fields of economy, literature, and history just at the time when the United States was emerging as a new Pacific empire. In economic terms, as I explain in Part Two, the collecting of natural resources in the Pacific, including whales, furs, bêche-de-mer, tortoiseshell, pearls, shark fins, spices, human heads, and human beings, served vital economic interests to the United States in the nineteenth century. But Melville is deeply interested in collecting also for its subversive, antiprogressive potentials. The ambivalence of collecting as primitive accumulation for capitalist production and as an antiquarian obsession thwarting production thus provides a backdrop for my engagement with Ahab, Ishmael, Queequeg, and finally, Melville himself, as collectors who hover in the abyss of conflicting economic interests. Ahab, for instance, instead of acting as a cool-headed industrial manager who steers the ship toward the pursuit

of commodities—ordinary whales—for their exchange values, becomes a monomaniac collector who is obsessed with a single collectible item—Moby Dick—for the sake of its nonexchangeable aura. His collector's appreciation for singularity thus leads him to change the course of the *Pequod* and eventually run it aground, ruining a transpacific pursuit of economic interests.

Collection as a subversive economic practice, one in which a collector arranges the collectibles into a magic circle and keeps them out of the system of exchangeability, finds literary and historiographical ramifications in a reader reading a text in an antihermeneutic manner, a writer assembling words as objects into a text as collection, and an antiquarianist historian living closely to his multitudinous details and rejecting luminous abstractions. In a society like the nineteenth-century United States, which prefers exchange, abstraction, and progress to use, singularity, and stasis, the sinking of a whaling ship by a whale, the pursuer by the pursued, becomes a powerful anticlimax in the drama the new Pacific empire has just begun to stage by mobilizing all the arsenals in its historical, economic, and literary imagination: the Pacific as the “final frontier” in *Universal History*, as the future of American economy, and as the setting for Western romance fiction with its predetermined narrative closure.

### Imagination; or, Its Counterpoetic Work

But the Pacific can be imagined very differently, and imagination itself may do different kinds of cultural work if mobilized outside of the Emersonian, Romanticist perimeter. When asked why the Pacific attracts him, James Clifford, a leading postmodern thinker, says, “For me the Pacific has a special clarity. In a strange way, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and such places are in a kind of time warp. Everyone knows the Pacific’s ‘out there’, ‘back then’,—never seen as modern. I actually think that is one of its great advantages, as it were, to think with. Once one takes it out of its past tense and places it in a contemporary context, it becomes possible to see its stories, its narratives, its history and historical change as only tenuously linked to linear modernist histories of progress and development. It becomes possible to see what I might call ap progressive narratives of modernity. It is both politically and empirically quite important to think about these types of narratives.”<sup>16</sup>

It is in the spirit of looking for such “ap progressive narratives” that I have set out, in Part Three, to explore imaginations that resist narrative closure and historical teleology as enunciated and projected in the transpacific space. In the case of Angel Island poetry (Chapter 9), the counterpoetics is manifested in *tibishi* (“poetry inscribed on the wall”) as a mode of inscription that sits uneasily with literary and historical authority. Written on the walls of the detaining station for Chinese immigrants, these poems delineate alternative modes of spatial and temporal practice whose subversive poetics would elude us if we treated them merely as a historical record of transpacific displacements of people. In my reading, these poems perform the cultural politics of protest literature associated with the simultaneously condemned and condoned form of urban graffiti. Also, as a Chinese genre of travel writing, these poems on the wall constitute an important outlet for the politically powerless to address historical issues when the conventional form of historical writing is strictly prohibited without authorization.

In the subsequent two chapters I continue to explore poetic resistance to imperial, national, and other forms of homogeneous narratives of the transpacific. As I argue in Chapter 10, if Angel Island represents modern America’s attempt to manage its racial frontier along the Pacific, the intervention of Japanese Americans during World War II may also be understood as a spatial practice of dissecting America’s transpacific routes through a racialized reterritorialization. In this regard, I see the poetry of Lawson Fusao Inada as an instance of countering the production of what Lefebvre would call abstract space by the imperial state power. Chapter 11 further complicates the traditional paradigm of conceiving the transpacific as an oppositional space of the East versus the West, Asia versus America. Addressing Japan’s occupation of Korea as a case of internal colonization within the East Asian region, Theresa Cha’s *Dictée* is concerned with poetry as a testimony, not document, of colonial history and violence.

In these works of counterpoetics, imagination departs from its Romanticist, transcendentalist origin and spreads new roots in “articulation” as a situated and contested social imaginary. In the idiosyncratically mongrel poetic language of Wilson, imagination becomes “an act of semi-joyous signifying that both props up (‘Structures’) and distorts (‘masks’) the materials of social reality, and works (through the production of some symbolic ‘excess’ to cover up the holes) to conceal and reveal (via

sublimation, displacement, and other defenses) those social traumas and antagonisms haunting its very creation.<sup>17</sup> Writing against colonial violence, historical traumas, and narrative closures as the centerpieces of transpacific history, the authors I study in Part Three have mobilized imagination, not as the faculty of a gifted individual, but as a collective imaginary that, as Arjun Appadurai has argued, both consolidates and threatens ideas of community, locality, ethnicity, and nationality.<sup>18</sup>

But these poetic subversions stand in a tantalizing relation to the case of hoax or forgery studied in the Conclusion. In the scandal of *Doubled Flowering*, English readers were tricked into believing that they were reading gripping accounts of the horror of the Hiroshima bombing by a dying survivor, Araki Yasusada, only to realize later that these poems and the poetic personae were fabricated by a white American poet who had been discontented with the recent flowering of ethnic, minority writings. This shadow-play of history, which feeds on the American legacy of guilt in the wake of the bombing, mocks our attempt to valorize those poetic subversions we have so much cherished. Thus, we are forced to look back again, over this unfathomable chasm filled with perilous water, to see if we still stand on treacherous and deadly ground. Rejecting the false dichotomy between the East and the West, between (their) history and (our) literature, as implied in the case of Yasusada, I propose a poetics of acknowledgment as a way to reimagine the transpacific. Only by means of acknowledgment rather than knowledge, through recognition of both the ontological status of the Other and the epistemological gaps in our knowledge, can we begin to approach the conditions of collective responsibility and planetary imagination.

## PART ONE

### History: And the Views from the Shores

The phrase “And the Views from the Shores” is meant to echo, with small variations, the title of a book by Stephen H. Sumida.<sup>1</sup> In his attempt to recover and re-envision a local and localized literary tradition, Sumida uses the title phrase, “And the View from the Shore,” as a dialectical rebuke to views of the Pacific islands typically from a departing cruise ship, in the midst of aloha music and hula dance. The plurals in my paraphrase, however, are meant to suggest that the transpacific space may be lived, conceptualized from multiple, contested points of origin. As Rob Wilson reminds us, “The Pacific remains a multiple region, to be sure, defying Western categorization or easy framing into any national trajectory.”<sup>2</sup> Or, as Arif Dirlik puts it, “There is no Pacific region that is an ‘objective’ given, but only a competing set of ideational constructs that project upon a certain location on the globe the imperatives of interest, power or vision of these historically produced relationships.”<sup>3</sup> In this part of my book, by following the transpacific trajectories of Mark Twain, Henry Adams, and Liang Qichao, I want to show how the emerging discourses of the Pacific have produced a transnational, transoceanic space that is unevenly temporalized.

Demonstrating the multiplicity of views from the shores or otherwise is not, however, my ultimate goal here. The transpacific space may indeed be experienced and represented in multilayered ways as Henri Lefebvre has suggested, but the transpacific multiplicity must be understood from a more critical, not merely descriptive, lens.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the real stress in my phrase, “And the views from the shores,” falls on the first, conjunctive word, “and.” Almost Poundian in its poetic, anti-epic effect,