

Under the headline “White Elephants,” an article in the 28 May 1873 edition of the *New York Times* describes the criminal case of a George Francis Train, who had been brought to trial for “issuing obscene publications.” The anonymous author complains that the court has taken too long in determining the sanity of the defendant and that Train and his trial have become a significant burden on the judiciary system: “For months the Courts have been trying to get rid of this dreadful person, but in vain. . . . In the meantime he is in the public hands, a white elephant of prodigious expensiveness in judicial time, patience and dignity.” As is the case today, in nineteenth-century America the term *white elephant* was commonly used to describe a burdensome or useless possession. What is the origin of this curious expression? A popular anecdote purported to tell the real story behind the metaphor. The author of the *New York Times* piece opens with a detailed version of this story:

When a Siamese despot takes a grudge against one of his poorer subjects, and determines on his ruin, he does not cut off the delinquent’s head and confiscate his property. On the contrary, he makes him a present—he sends him the handsomest and healthiest white elephant he can find. The luckless recipient knows at once that his fate is sealed. He knows that the beast will eat him out of house and home without the possibility, on his part, of resistance. He cannot sell or give away the fatal gift, for no one would accept it, and the attempt to get rid of it even would be direct treason and sacrilege. He sits down with Oriental resignation to submit to the inevitable, and the white elephant devours his substance.¹

This story of the white elephant as a “fatal gift” was often cited in the nineteenth century as historical fact; indeed, its explanatory force is still invoked in contemporary discussions about what the phrase means.² Although, tellingly, there is no original source for this anecdote, it does not appear before the mid-1850s and the height of renewed British and U.S. trade interest with Siam, culminating in the 1855 Bowring Treaty between Siam and the United Kingdom and the 1856 Harris Treaty between Siam and the United States. Although Siam was not as economically valuable a trading partner as China or Japan, this treaty was important for the United States not only in terms of keeping up with the British Empire, but also because of the curious intercultural bond (one of simultaneous affinity and revulsion) that it fostered between Siam and America. In the series of travelogues written by Americans in the wake of the Harris Treaty, numerous passages refer to white elephants and the Siamese reverence for these animals. None of these texts, however, makes the explicit claim that white elephants were ever given as gifts. According to Thai historian Rita Ringis, the American conception of the white elephant as an onerous gift has no basis in Thai history: “[N]o Siamese monarch ever considered white elephants ‘burdensome’ nor gave them away, for according to ancient tradition, possession of one or many of these symbolized a king’s virtue or *barami*.”³ Instead of being a burden that would ruin its owner, a white elephant actually served the opposite function: it was considered a sign of virtue, a meritorious possession that lent authority and legitimacy to a monarch’s reign.⁴

As a paradoxical figure torn between its Eastern and Western definitions, the white elephant is a privileged sign for exploring the relationship between Siamese and American cultures. It is a sign for, among other things, discourses on white supremacy, economic risk and waste, diplomatic gift exchange, and the transnational foundation of both U.S. and Siamese national identity. In this essay, I trace the emergence of the white elephant as a figure for value in European and American travel writing. By the 1850s this animal’s association with wasteful expenditure had begun to surface even in prominent American literature, including Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851). I argue that the white whale operates in a manner that calls to mind the white elephant, and that this novel as a whole functions as an allegorical critique of precisely the oriental despotism decried as the corrupt source

of stagnant expenditure of which the white elephant serves as a prominent symbol. Finally, I examine the relationship between Siam and the United States in George Bacon's *Siam, the Land of the White Elephant, as It Was and Is* (1873), a text that subtly yet unmistakably aligns the white elephant with the figure of the Siamese twin, suggesting that despite their apparent differences, America and Siam might share a fundamental—and, for Bacon, repulsive—intimacy.

The animal referred to as a white elephant, or *chang pheuak* in Thai, had been known to European writers for centuries prior to the 1850s, yet it was only during that decade of renewed U.S. interest in economic relations with Siam that the story of the white elephant as an unwelcome gift gained cultural currency. This timing suggests that the origin of the story might be located in Western prejudices about gift exchange rather than in any historical Siamese cultural practice.⁵ Accordingly, I examine how “the logic of the gift,” to borrow Alan Schrift’s phrase, was introduced into U.S. discourse on white elephants in the mid-nineteenth century.⁶ I argue that the Siamese practice of diplomatic gift giving and the veneration of white elephants were identified as the primary points of difference between Siam and its Western partners. In texts by Americans in particular, this insistence on the gift and the white elephant as the central problems of Siamese society is frequently brought to the foreground, as these writers found themselves ambivalently attracted to this Southeast Asian country that reminded them uneasily of home: as the only nation in the region never to be colonized, despite being wedged between two major colonial powers (the British in Burma and French Indochina), Siam shared with America a history of anticolonial resistance. Accordingly, American writing on Siam fluctuates between passages praising the modern, American aspects of the country and passages that temper this praise with bitter criticisms of the stagnant and archaic aspects of Siamese life. This ambivalent desire for what Homi Bhabha describes as “*a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” produced a discourse about white elephants that attempts to establish them as a point of absolute difference between East and West.⁷ Building on earlier Western ideas about white elephants, this writing about Siam and Siamese diplomacy firmly established the idea of the white elephant as an unwanted gift in the literature and culture of the nineteenth-century United States.

“The So-Called ‘White’ Elephant”

What accounts for the paradoxical definition of the white elephant? How is it that one person’s trash can be another’s sacred treasure? One reason is that, from a Thai perspective, talking about white elephants is like talking about nothing at all. Although European and American writers have always mentioned white elephants in their texts about Siam and Southeast Asia, the Thai word for this creature—*chang pheuak*—suggests an “albino” or “strangely coloured” elephant (*chang*, in the Thai language) instead of a literally white animal. As a signifier that points to a real-world object, the phrase *white elephant* is misleading, the product of centuries of mistranslation and cultural misunderstanding. And yet this misunderstanding is no secret to Western writers, who often acknowledge that the term is a misnomer even as they maintain that these animals are fraudulent or deceptive because they fail to live up to their name. The seventeenth-century French emissary Simon de la Loubère, for example, wrote that the white elephants he saw in Siam were “not altogether White, but of a flesh colour” and that “the *Siameses* do call this colour *Peuak*.” In *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870), Anna Leonowens characterizes white elephants as “rarely true albinos—salmon or flesh-colour being the nearest approach to white.” And finally, American writer Frank Vincent, in his travelogue *The Land of the White Elephant* (1874), notes that the body of “the so-called ‘white’ elephant” has “the peculiar flesh-coloured appearance termed ‘white.’”⁸ All of these descriptions concede that the white elephant isn’t really white, yet all of them also appear in texts that view the white elephant with at least some degree of suspicion, casting doubt on the value of these supposedly sacred animals.

Vincent’s description is worth further consideration. In what way is the white elephant so-called? Which is to say, who calls it white? It is clearly not the Thai, who describe these animals as *pheuak*, instead of the Thai word for white, which, as Ringis notes, is “different entirely.”⁹ Vincent knows this, yet he chooses to ignore it, suggesting that the white elephant is so-called because it is a fraud. Of course, the only people who mistakenly call the elephant white are European and American writers themselves. These writers created and continued to use the term *white elephant*, while noting that the *chang pheuak* did not match this (imaginary) description, and then—partially as a result

of this noncorrespondence between word and thing—drew a series of conclusions about the supposedly deceitful, useless, and destructive character of these animals. There is an additional way, however, in which we can interpret Vincent's phrase. As we can see in the descriptions above, although the white elephant was not literally white, its color was, at least according to these writers, very much like the color of (so-called) white people. Vincent, for example, claims that the white elephant has no right to the label *white*, but then goes on to say that it has "the peculiar flesh-coloured appearance termed 'white.'" Although the flesh color of Caucasian people can be termed *white*, when this same color is observed in elephants it is suddenly "peculiar." This peculiarity about the white elephant, this uncanny vision of European and American whiteness embodied in the form of Asiatic alterity, is a recurrent theme in Western writing about Siam and white elephants, and it underpins both Melville's and Bacon's representations of these animals.

The nonwhiteness of the white elephant, however, is not the only point upon which it has been criticized in Western writing. The sense of fraudulence and deceit that the white elephant's peculiar flesh color evokes is exacerbated by numerous descriptions of Eastern monarchs wasting gold, silver, and other valuable resources on the maintenance of their *chang pheuak* and the kind of social and economic stagnation that such expenditure purportedly causes. Accordingly, the figure of the "oriental despot," who exercises absolute control over his subjects while indulging any whim he desires, is a common one in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European writing about Siam. Several sixteenth-century narratives that describe Siam and white elephants were included in Samuel Purchas's popular anthology of travel writing, *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas His Pilgrimes* (1625). Although these texts vary in their particulars, they all conclude that the king of Siam will go to any length to acquire a white elephant and that—once he succeeds—he will spend a lavish amount of wealth and resources on its upkeep.¹⁰ This representation of the white elephant as the locus of the despot's capricious desire to waste wealth is expanded on in seventeenth-century accounts of Siam, most notably those by the Dutch merchant Jeremias Van Vliet and La Loubère. Both Van Vliet and La Loubère suggest that the white elephant is a kind of medium that traps wealth and value, ensnaring not only the misguided king's

riches but also the souls of past kings or deities. Van Vliet, for example, claims that “[t]he Siamese pretend that besides royal dignity there is also something divine in these animals,”¹¹ while La Loubère reports that “a Soul of some Prince is always lodged in the body of a White Elephant.”¹² Taken on the whole, this body of writing, extending from the mid-sixteenth to the late seventeenth century, adumbrates an inchoate theory of waste that understands the white elephant as a product of despotism that “lodges” value—be it economic or spiritual—in its cumbersome and costly material body.

These sixteenth- and seventeenth-century descriptions of white elephants were well known to Enlightenment-era writers. About a century before Melville wrote *Moby-Dick*, Voltaire wrote that “all certain tyrants over souls wish for the men they teach is that they should have unsound minds.”¹³ Voltaire describes a despotic teacher who uses threats of physical violence, both in this life and the next, to persuade his student that there is—as Van Vliet puts it—“something divine” in a white elephant. Clearly, Voltaire explains, this belief could only be the result of tyrannical manipulation; he claims that even Don Quixote “had more excuse” for his unsound mind than the Siamese have for their faith that “the god Fo [Buddha] appeared to men in the shape of a white elephant.” “Don Quixote, smitten with the notion that he must combat giants, might have imagined that a giant must have a body as big as a windmill,” Voltaire continues, “but on what supposition can a sensible man persuade himself that . . . Sammonocodom [Siddhārtha Gautama] descended from heaven to . . . do all kind of hocus-pocus?”¹⁴ For Voltaire the exotic was more absurd than the Quixotic, since Miguel de Cervantes’s hero could at least make some connection between reality and fantasy, whereas the “white elephant” bore no relation to any clear religious principle. It is significant that Voltaire, while clearly drawing on earlier theories of the white elephant as waste, succeeds in transposing these theories from one discursive field (ethnography) to another (the critique of natural religion), thereby suggesting that the white elephant could be abstracted from historical circumstance and adapted into something like a general theory of wasted value.¹⁵ In other words, by the nineteenth century white elephants were no longer confined to Southeast Asia: as a potent metaphor for Eastern tyranny and stagnant value, the white elephant was free to wander from discourse to discourse and nation to nation.

The White Whale and the White Elephant

The extent to which this theory of wasted value was integrated into American discourse about Siam and Southeast Asia can be detected in antebellum writing concerning the role of the United States in the Pacific, perhaps most notably in Melville's *Moby-Dick*. At the beginning of the novel, after all, the nominal purpose of the *Pequod*'s voyage is to acquire commodities in the Pacific—in this case, oil from sperm whales—which can be sold in the “Nantucket market” Starbuck describes.¹⁶ The *Pequod*'s financiers, Peleg and Bildad, were—as Ishmael puts it—“bent on profitable cruises” that can be “counted down in dollars from the mint” (*MD*, 167).¹⁷ Captain Ahab, however, famously rejects the logic of Starbuck's Nantucket market, spurning the *Pequod*'s productive and profitable purpose in favor of his own monomaniacal quest to hunt and destroy Moby-Dick.¹⁸ Ahab thus views his desire to avenge himself through the white whale as being incompatible with antebellum America's mercantile capitalism, or a world run by “accountants [who] have computed their great counting-house the globe, by girdling it with guineas” (*MD*, 145). In *Moby-Dick*, the waters near Asia are the site where the theoretically limitless accumulation promised under capitalism is confronted with the possibility of waste, loss, and economic ruin. This vision of Asia as stagnant and archaic is by no means unique to Melville: both Hegel's *Philosophy of History* (1837) and Karl Marx's theories about the “Asiatic mode of production” make similar claims,¹⁹ and, as Malini Johar Schueller argues, “the construction of the Asian Orient as decrepit, old, and tied down by superstition and outdated belief systems” was in fact “the distinctive feature of Far Eastern Oriental discourse in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century.”²⁰ Melville incorporates this “distinctive feature” into his novel by aligning the white whale with the white elephant, and by representing Ahab not merely as a rogue captain but as a tyrannical and despotic king.²¹

Although Ahab does not reveal his plans to his crew until the *Pequod*'s journey is already underway, Ishmael makes it clear that Ahab's despotism was present from the beginning of the voyage. In “The Pipe,” for example, Ahab is described as “a Khan of the Plank,” a “king of the sea,” and a “great lord of the Leviathans” (*MD*, 113). A few chapters later, Ishmael tells us that the “only homage” Ahab “ever exacted, was implicit, instantaneous obedience,” and that the captain

possessed a “certain sultanism of his brain” that “became incarnate in an irresistible dictatorship” (*MD*, 129). Toward the end of the novel, however, as the crew of the *Pequod* anticipate their coming encounter with the white whale, having just been informed by the captain of the *Rachel* that Moby-Dick is only a day’s journey away, Ahab’s grip on the crew begins to tighten. “Like machines,” Ishmael reports, the crew “moved about the deck, ever conscious that the old man’s despot eye was on them” (*MD*, 473). Ahab’s gaze “fixedly gleamed down upon the constant midnight of the gloomy crew,” so that all of the sailors and officers—including the normally outspoken Stubb and Starbuck—are rendered mute and mutable to “Ahab’s purpose” (*MD*, 473).

Ahab’s antipathy toward a world “girdl[ed] with guineas” is strikingly similar to the Siamese king’s supposed disdain for the gold he would lavish on his white elephant. In a text published one year after *Moby-Dick*, Fred Arthur Neale laments that the white elephant he saw in Siam stood on a floor “wrought of pure chased gold, each interwoven seam being about half an inch wide, and about the thickness of a half sovereign!!!” While Neale goes on to complain that it made his “eyes . . . water to see such infamous waste,” we do not get the sense that Ahab would shed the same tears.²² Whether the world is girdled with guineas or sovereigns, Ahab—like the Siamese king—is willing to forgo using gold as money if it can be used instead as a means of fulfilling his desire. The gold doubloon that Ahab offers to the first crew member to spot Moby-Dick seems like an intervention into the money-eyed market, but this sojourn into the world of economic exchange is undone when Ahab pockets the coin himself, claiming that “[f]ate reserved the doubloon for [him]” (*MD*, 483). Like others aboard the *Pequod*, Ahab sees his own wishes reflected in the Ecuadorian coin, perceiving in the “round gold . . . the image of the rounder globe,” a maniacal world in which “all [is] Ahab” (*MD*, 385). If in the world of the Nantucket market “money’s to be the measurer,” then in the world Ahab sees reflected in the doubloon the only measures of value are the captain’s own whims and desires (*MD*, 145). By accepting Ahab’s offer of the doubloon, and scorning the ship’s original mission, the crew of the *Pequod* also leave the realm of economic reason (in which all are assured a share of the profits) and align their fortunes with Ahab’s own idiosyncratic and ultimately fatal worldview. Charles Lewis summarizes this tension between productive profit and destructive despotism as follows: “[T]he fetishized desire for both the doubloon *and* the

white whale . . . distracts the errant mercantilist ship from focusing on the real commodity production of whale oil (Starbuck's Nantucket market), hence its inability to realize economic wealth. Gold is, in this view, a sort of watery white elephant."²³ The doubloon and the white whale are conflated here as both objects of Ahab's desire and distractions that lead the crew away from their ability to "realize economic wealth." The strong connection between this kind of wasted wealth and the king of Siam's extravagant treatment of his chang pheuak come together in Lewis's reading, as he equates the mad captain's fetishized coin with the oriental despot's fetishized elephant.

When Ahab believes he is closing in on Moby-Dick, he reveals his secret crew of "yellow boys" (*MD*, 197), a gang of concealed oarsmen who are, Ishmael writes, "of that vivid, tiger-yellow complexion peculiar to some of the aboriginal natives of the Manillas" (*MD*, 195). Led by Fedallah, a "Parsee" who wears "a rumped Chinese jacket of black cotton" (*MD*, 194), Ahab's secret crew are wholly subservient to the great Lord of the Leviathan's every wish and command. Ishmael describes Ahab as "an independent lord," while Fedallah is "but his slave" (*MD*, 474), and the "yellow boys" are, as Ahab says, "not other men, but my arms and my legs" (*MD*, 503). Yunte Huang writes that "[u]nlike the regular crew on the *Pequod*, whose relation to Ahab is one of worker versus manager, subordinate versus superior in a capitalist enterprise, these five are virtually slaves owned by Ahab."²⁴ Huang suggests that Ahab's relationship to his secret crew needs to be conceived outside the terms of Western capitalism: indeed, Ahab only calls on his "yellow boys" when he wants to chase Moby-Dick, and he never uses them when the *Pequod* stops to hunt regular whales. Since Ahab reserves this crew exclusively for his pursuit of the white whale—that is to say, when he abandons the *Pequod*'s "profitable cruise"—it is perhaps unsurprising that they are described as the subjects of a despotic tyrant engaged in a fatal quest, spurred on by the mad captain's desire for vengeance.

For an antebellum audience familiar with the conventions and clichés of Western discourse about Asiatic society, an oriental despot would more likely be obsessed with a white elephant than with a white whale. Melville is well aware of this, and he repeatedly hints at a kind of affinity between Asian elephants and Pacific whales, mentioning elephants in no fewer than 14 of *Moby-Dick*'s 135 chapters, including an entire chapter—"The Tail"—devoted to exploring the simi-

larities between the two animals, and even going so far as to suggest that “had the great Sperm Whale been known to the young Orient World, he would have been deified by their child-magian thoughts” (*MD*, 311), implying that the religious appeal of elephants in Asian societies should naturally extend to include whales as well.²⁵ Melville foregrounds his familiarity with the received antebellum wisdom about white elephants by having Ishmael cite or allude to several well-known texts that discuss in some detail both oriental despotism and the role of chang pheuak in Siamese society. Ishmael’s self-conscious erudition is on display throughout *Moby-Dick*, and his allusions index not only Melville’s sources but also the texts that we as readers should keep in mind when considering the symbolic and historical implications of Melville’s novel. In both “Etymology” and “The Right Whale’s Head,” for example, Ishmael cites passages from *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, a text that contains—as I note above—numerous accounts of white elephants (*MD*, xli, 300). Ishmael’s references to John Harris’s *Navigantium atque Itinerantium Bibliotheca; or, A Compleat Collection of Voyages and Travels* (1705) are also significant here because Harris’s text contains an abridged version of La Loubère’s description of white elephants from *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam* (*MD*, xlv, 238, 241).²⁶ Finally, Ishmael’s citation of the claim by “Harto, the historian of Goa” that “at one hunting the King of Siam took 4,000 elephants” reveals not only Melville’s source (Thomas Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* [1672]) but also his ongoing concern with both Siamese monarchs and the “chance comparison” between whales and elephants (*MD*, 412, 338).²⁷

Of course, *Moby-Dick* is not a novel about just any whale, and the Siamese were not known for worshipping just any elephant. In “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Ishmael’s extended meditation on the significance of *Moby-Dick*’s “appall[ing]” whiteness, he contrasts the whale’s color with other “natural objects” in which “whiteness refiningly enhances beauty” (*MD*, 168). Ishmael claims that “various nations have in some way recognised a certain royal preeminence in this hue,” including the “barbaric, grand old kings of Pegu” who held “the title ‘Lord of the White Elephants’ above all their other magniloquent ascriptions of dominion” and “the modern kings of Siam” who place “the same snow-white quadruped in the royal standard” (*MD*, 168).²⁸ Although Ishmael wants to suggest here that the whiteness of the whale and the elephant are fundamentally different, as the novel

progresses, and as the *Pequod* sails closer to the shores of Siam, he seems to change his mind. In the chapter “The Grand Armada,” as the whaling vessel approaches the seas “southeastward from the territories of Birmah” it encounters an “immense caravan” of sperm whales (*MD*, 339, 342). Spotting this grand armada of whales, Ishmael wonders if the white whale might be among them, speculating “whether, in that congregated caravan, Moby-Dick might himself not temporarily be swimming, like the worshipped white-elephant in the coronation procession of the Siamese!” (*MD*, 342–43).²⁹ The white whale and the white elephant come together in this passage as the destructive power of Moby-Dick is paired with the threat of financial ruin. Although Ishmael anticipates that the *Pequod* will “witness the capture of not a few” of the mass of whales in the “Oriental seas,” the hunt does not go well (*MD*, 342). The number of whales in the water makes it difficult for the *Pequod*’s boats to single out individual targets, and many of the whales are simply wounded or escape. The vast wealth of the oceans near Asia promises splendid returns, yet it yields almost nothing the *Pequod* can use. The whales the *Pequod* encounters are like white elephants because their sheer number and value is so excessive that they actually become a burden for those who might want to possess and profit from them: for all the *Pequod*’s efforts, including both a lengthy hunt and being chased by Malaysian pirates, the hunt yields only one whale. Similarly, Moby-Dick is like a white elephant not simply because Ishmael makes a “chance comparison,” but because Ahab’s quest to destroy him leads to financial ruin for both the crew of the *Pequod* and its investors. Here the whiteness of the white elephant no longer seems to enhance beauty, but is instead likened to the terrifying and unfamiliar whiteness of the white whale, a figure inextricably linked in the novel to despotic desire and wasted wealth.

Moby-Dick encapsulates antebellum America’s received wisdom about Siamese white elephants and even suggests how stories about these animals were adapted into a figurative expression for costly, burdensome possessions. The novel presents the *Pequod*’s mission as an allegory for the quintessentially American notions of free enterprise and manifest destiny, yet it qualifies this allegory by presenting Ahab not as an advocate for democracy or progress but as a destructive Eastern tyrant. Despotism, in *Moby-Dick*, is democracy’s inalienable Siamese twin. And yet despite this focus on both Siamese elephants and Siamese despotism, at no point does the novel suggest that

white elephants—either literally or metaphorically—are “fatal gifts.” The same can be said of the texts by Van Vliet, La Loubère, Voltaire, and seemingly every other writer who addressed the topic prior to the mid-1850s. Thus, in order to understand the origins of the anecdote about the Siamese king and his ruined courtier—an anecdote repeated as historical fact in a surprising number of works—we must turn to texts written in the wake of the 1856 U.S. diplomatic mission to the court of King Mongkut.

“This Alarming Generosity”

Following the success of the 1855 Bowring Treaty, President Franklin Pierce ordered the U.S. consul to Japan, Townsend Harris, to travel to Bangkok and establish a new trade agreement. Although the resulting Harris Treaty was similar in spirit to the earlier Bowring agreement, Harris differed from his British counterpart and was “not favorably impressed with Siam.”³⁰ For Harris, King Mongkut was the very embodiment of the problem of Asian stagnation. His journal entry for 31 May 1856—the day he was supposed to leave Siam—records a series of delays and frustrations that represent the king as an obstacle to modern speed and efficiency. Harris goes to see him and is “kept waiting nearly two hours before [being] admitted.”³¹ His frustrations mount when he is finally admitted to Mongkut’s quarters, and they are ultimately recorded in an angry tirade against the king:

I was now delayed over an hour by the most frivolous and pedantic conversation I ever listened to, and satisfied me he was quite as weak-minded as pedantic. . . . It was now half-past twelve and I was most anxious to get away. But no—I must wait while he wrote a gossiping letter to Sir John Bowring At last, as there must be an end to all things, I got away a little past one o’clock.³²

In this passage the king of Siam seems like little more than a tiresome elderly relative, boring Harris half to death with unnecessary stories, gossip, and formalities. Behind this crude caricature, however, is the long-established idea that despotic rulers were the cause of social stagnation in Asian countries, and although the only thing stagnating here is Harris’s travel plans, his journal entry makes it clear that he views Mongkut as an impediment to progress and modernity, despite the king’s erudition and interest in the West.

The Siamese were equally confused by the U.S. system of government. The *Dynastic Chronicles* of Mongkut's reign, for example, describes Harris as a "royal envoy" and the rest of his party as a group of "American noblemen" who had been sent to Bangkok by "[t]he President, the sovereign of America."³³ It seems that Mongkut himself, however, largely understood the differences between the Siamese and American systems, although in his correspondence with Presidents Pierce and James Buchanan he would often ask questions in order to clarify his understanding of the role of the president. Among the issues he raised was that of giving and accepting royal gifts. In a letter to Buchanan that accompanied a series of gifts from the Siamese court, Mongkut explains that in Southeast Asia "when gifts are exchanged between heads of states, it is customary to address them to the ruler of the state for the time being." Such gifts should be "deemed . . . for his own use and enjoyment" and will "devolve on his heir or successor at his death." Despite the effectiveness of this gift-giving system in Siam, Mongkut writes that he has "gathered" that this tradition will be ineffective in his relations with U.S. presidents because "under a custom long established since the time of President George Washington the people of the United States of America hold a election [*sic*] at fixed intervals to choose their President and Chief Executive whom they put into office for a term of 4 years or 8 years." Mongkut describes this system as both "strange" and "highly commendable," and seems surprised that "such a custom remains in effective use to this day without throwing the whole of the United States into a turmoil of internal strife on every occasion of changing the head of state as usually happens in other countries."³⁴ In this letter, Mongkut doesn't seem to care whether his gifts are accepted by the president himself or by the state, but he definitely does want his gifts to be accepted by *someone* in the United States, since—in keeping with the tributary structure in place in Southeast Asia, in which weaker nations would offer tribute to their stronger neighbors—he believes such gifts will buy him some measure of protection.³⁵ Because of this, it was clear to the Americans that a gift from the king of Siam carried a burden of obligation. After Mongkut's letter to Buchanan, however, what became additionally clear was that in the eyes of the Siamese king such a backhanded gift would fall not only at the feet of the U.S. president, but at the feet of the American people as a whole. In the United States, it seemed, anybody could be given a white elephant, and this anxiety was exacer-

bated by Mongkut's next letter to Buchanan and by the gifts he proposed to send.

In a letter dated 14 February 1861, Mongkut wrote to Buchanan expressing his surprise that there were no elephants wandering freely on the American continent, despite his belief that "people [would] come by thousands" to see such an animal. "Having heard this," he writes,

it has occurred to us that, if on the continent of America there should be several pairs of young male and female elephants turned loose in forests where there was abundance of water and grass in any region under the sun's declination both North and South, called by the English the Torrid Zone—and all were forbidden to molest them, to attempt to raise them would be well, and if the climate there should prove favorable to the elephants, we are of opinion that after a while they will increase till there be large herds as there are here in the continent of Asia until the inhabitants of America will be able to catch them and tame and use them as beasts of burden making them of benefit to the country.

Mongkut goes on to express his wish to make a gift of several breeding pairs of elephants to America.³⁶ As is the case with the gifts he offered, Mongkut's letter would never arrive at its intended destination, since Abraham Lincoln had replaced Buchanan as president by the time the letter made it to Washington, D.C. Lincoln's reply, dated almost a year later on 3 February 1862, politely declines Mongkut's "tender of good offices in forwarding to this Government a stock from which a supply of elephants might be raised on our own soil," giving as an excuse the fact that America's "political jurisdiction . . . does not reach a latitude so low as to favor the multiplication of the elephant," but adding that the U.S. government "would not hesitate to avail itself of so generous an offer if the object were one which could be made practically useful in the present condition of the United States."³⁷ For Lincoln, then, the primary reason why America could not accept the king of Siam's gift was that these animals could not "be made practically useful" during the Civil War. They would be, in other words, figurative white elephants that would burden the United States with the cost and difficulty of their upkeep while serving no practical purpose. Although stories about oriental despots and their white elephants had long been known in America, this incident marked the first time that a

real elephant—in the form of a gift from the king of Siam—threatened to take on the pejorative figurative characteristics associated with white elephants.³⁸

In his 1873 travelogue, *Siam, the Land of the White Elephant, as It Was and Is*, Bacon recalls that Mongkut's proposed gift "provoked some amusement when the correspondence containing it was laid before Congress and published in the newspapers."³⁹ He goes on to summarize Mongkut's offer for his readers, freely speculating on the possible consequences had it been accepted:

[H]is majesty of Siam proposed to send to us not one, but many pairs of elephants, and those not stuffed, but dreadfully alive. Two motives seem to have prompted him to this alarming generosity. He had heard that elephants were "regarded as the most remarkable of the large quadrupeds," and were exhibited for a price to throngs of wondering spectators. So to multiply them that they might be seen for nothing, would be an act for which generations of unborn Americans might bless the name (if they could pronounce it) of Somdetch Phra Paramendr Maha Mongkut. The oppressive monopoly of the menageries would be broken down; and to "see the elephant" would no longer be a phrase available for the figurative uses to which it has long been applied. Had the good king been permitted to carry out his plan, wild beasts might have become a drug in the market, and showmen might have been driven in despair to Congress, before their time. . . . And whence could the supply so fitly come as from the land of the White Elephant, and from the king who had placed that serene quadruped upon his banner? (*LWE*, 114)

As this last sentence makes clear, Bacon wants to explicitly connect Mongkut's gift with the idea of the white elephant, referring to Siam here, and in his book's title, as "the land of the White Elephant" and suggesting that—because he created Siam's white elephant flag—Mongkut himself is a kind of source of white elephants. After all, the hypothetical elephants Bacon describes, albeit in a tongue-in-cheek manner, do become problematic, flooding the "wild beast" market, driving menageries out of business, and forcing on Congress more dishonest men than even they can handle. Moreover, Bacon's claim that Mongkut's "alarming generosity" is "dreadful" because it is "alive" is entirely consistent with the *New York Times* story describing the white elephant as a possession that will eat its recipient "out of house and

home.” In his important study *The Gift* (1990), Marcel Mauss writes that gifts are “[i]nvested with life.” For Mauss, this formulation suggests that life is a positive force that assures the proper circulation of wealth.⁴⁰ The gift in the *Times* story and Bacon’s text is also invested with life, but its life force is the very thing that ruins its recipient, “devour[ing] his substance” and assuring that, rather than being circulated or exchanged, wealth becomes stagnant as it is destroyed or wasted in maintaining the life of the white elephant. The white elephant, then, gives death to its recipient through the devastating power of its own life. It is a gift that keeps on living, destroying wealth and never returning to its proper place.

And yet, it is plain to see that the Siamese never ceased to view these animals as both practical and useful. In an 1863 letter to Prince Mahamala, Mongkut states his approval of the prince’s plan to hunt a recently spotted white elephant. To emphasize the importance of this hunt, Mongkut cautions Prince Mahamala against “be[ing] led into too much gaiety” while he is away, since “[i]t is far, far more beneficial to acquire white elephants for the State.”⁴¹ For Mongkut, the capture of a white elephant is financially worthwhile to the state insofar as it increases his own virtue as that state’s monarch. The pursuit of white elephants, then, is not the antiquated superstition that Bacon makes it out to be, but a savvy political strategy. In a different letter to Mahamala, Mongkut explains his motivations for seeking out a chang pheuak:

To try to find an elephant of such excellence in the forest, as you are now doing, is as difficult as to dive for fish in deep water. Glowing reports of elephants of good qualities often reach me, but as soon as I start the hunt for them, the animals seem to disappear. There has been one exception . . . [and] I admit that that success has spurred me on to further hopes. Whenever I hear of a new white elephant, I cannot help but organize a hunt for it. This, I think, is better than to remain inactive.⁴²

In admitting his own Ahab-like devotion toward hunting chang pheuak, Mongkut reveals a telling detail about his motivations. Against virtually every Western representation of the oriental tyrant’s despotic desire for white elephants (including Melville’s depiction of Ahab), Mongkut states that the pursuit of these animals, rather than causing social stagnation, is actually a way of resisting it. It is better to hunt white ele-

phants “than to remain inactive,” Mongkut claims, thereby proposing a radically different measure of value than the one held by Bangkok’s American visitors, who viewed the white elephant as a costly relic, and the king of Siam as a stagnating affront to the progress of America’s nascent international modernity.

“The Other Side of the Picture”

What did Americans see when they looked at the Land of the White Elephant? On the one hand, as I have noted, they saw a land of differences, characterized by oriental despotism, social stagnation, and the backward and wasteful worship of white elephants. Yet on the other hand, they could not help but see a reflection (however distorted) of themselves as well. Like the Americans, the Siamese had deftly resisted British colonial rule, and this seemed to produce a curious bond between the two nations. What America saw in Siam was a reflection of its own best and worst attributes: an uneasy double, or an uncanny Siamese twin.

When the U.S. embassy led by Harris arrived in Bangkok in 1856, they were already seeing double. Unlike any other nation the Americans had encountered, it seemed that Siam had two kings. As David Wyatt explains, when Mongkut became king in 1851, as a kind of political compromise his powerful brother Phra Pinklao was crowned as the “Second King” who would “reign jointly” with Mongkut.⁴³ It seems that for the Americans, however, all was not equal between either countries or kings, as the series of texts they left in the wake of the Harris Treaty almost universally praise the modern, progressive, and U.S. appeal of the Second King at the expense of the supposed archaic, Eastern despotism of Mongkut. Harris himself, whose scathing opinion of Mongkut I have already examined, seemed positively charmed by the Second King, with whom he had a personal audience the day before his frustrating visit with Mongkut. He reports that he was “most kindly received by the King,” who “speaks excellent English” and demonstrated his knowledge of America by instigating “a good deal of conversation about the United States [and] the Presidents.”⁴⁴ This glowing review of the Second King is matched by Leonowens, who claims that Siam “[n]ever had . . . a more popular prince,” and that Pinklao was nothing less than “the embodiment of the most hopeful qualities, moral and intellectual, of his nation,” especially when con-

trasted with the “jealous and tyrannical temper of Maha Mongkut.” Even Wyatt describes Pinklao as an “Americophile.”⁴⁵

This bifurcated vision of the Siamese monarchy, seeing in the First King foolishness and tyranny and in the Second King predominately Western qualities, is discussed at length by Bacon. He attempts to explain the monarchical system in Siam to his readers, writing that when he “was in the Land of the White Elephant, there was a kind of Siamese-twin arrangement in the kingdom” (*LWE*, 94). “It was hard to believe that I was in a remote and almost unknown corner of the old world, and not in the new,” Bacon writes of his audience with Pinklao, since “[t]he conversation was such as might take place between two gentlemen in a New York parlor” (*LWE*, 100). As an American gentleman, Pinklao shares Bacon’s American taste, showing off his copy of Webster’s dictionary and stating that he prefers it to its British counterparts: “I like it very much; I think it the best dictionary, better than any English” (*LWE*, 101). The Second King’s patriotic display continues, as he has his “band of Siamese musicians” play “Yankee Doodle” and “Hail Columbia” for Bacon’s benefit (*LWE*, 101–2). “[I]f I enjoyed it,” Bacon writes, “it was rather with a patriotic than with a musical enthusiasm,” adding that when the Siamese “played their own rude music” the results were “vastly better.” Nevertheless, he adds that “the imperfections of the band were of very small importance, compared with the good will which had prompted the king to make them learn the American national airs.” Because Pinklao has “words of intelligent and appreciative cheer for us” and has sedulously “observed the course of our history, the growth of our nation, [and] the principles of our government,” Bacon is willing to accept that the Second King’s reflection of American values may not be perfect (*LWE*, 102). In fact, for all the praise Bacon heaps on the Second King, he seems to understand that no matter how much Pinklao might act like an American gentleman, he will still always bear certain marks of unmistakable difference. After all, Bacon notes, “this gentlemanly and well-informed man was black” and, he is quick to add, “he wore no trousers” (*LWE*, 103). The king, then, is marked by racial and sartorial differences that make it impossible for Bacon to completely believe he could be a true American. His manner of dress, as Bacon presents it, offers an apt metaphor for what the American traveler perceives as the Second King’s Siamese American hybridity: “Half European, half

Oriental in his dress," he writes, "he had combined the two styles with more of good taste than one could have expected. It was characteristic of that transition from barbarism to civilization, upon which his kingdom is just entering" (*LWE*, 104). The Second King deftly balances East and West, presenting an ideal model for the rest of his people to follow out of "barbarism" and toward the kind of "civilization" that his deeply American tastes seem to necessitate. But no matter how closely the king approaches this American ideal, he can never reach it, as his title and appearance are incommensurate with Bacon's vision of the United States. What if, however, the king was even more American? What if he had an American name? Would this make him truly American, or would it be too close for comfort?

Among the gifts President Pierce sent to Siam were two portraits of George Washington, one for Mongkut and one for the Second King.⁴⁶ Although both monarchs gladly accepted these gifts, there was something of a catch, at least for Pinklao. There was already a "George Washington" in the Second King's family, as he had bestowed that name upon his son Prince Wichaichan.⁴⁷ Bacon is taken aback by this prince, describing him as a "tall, manly, handsome youth" who possesses "the physical endowments which should fit him for the dignity to which he was born," going on to tell his readers that this impressive young man also "has a kingly name—a more than kingly name," explaining that "the second king, seeking a significant name for his son, chose one which had been borne, not by an Asiatic, not by a European, but by the greatest of Americans" (*LWE*, 96–97). Does it not stand to reason, then, that this prince by virtue of his handsome appearance and American name, both of which Bacon views as distinguishing him from his Siamese peers, could represent for Bacon the transition from barbarism to American civilization that his father presaged but could never ultimately realize? Could Prince George Washington be truly American? Bacon admits that "it moved [him] with something more than merely patriotic pride to hear the name of Washington honored in the remotest corner of the old world," but the longer he dwells on General Washington's Siamese namesake, the more vociferously his "patriotic pride" works to establish the difference between the first U.S. president and his Siamese twin, between the United States and the old world of Asian despotism and stagnation. As Wichaichan takes Bacon "through a pleasant, shady court" that

leads to his father's house (*LWE*, 97), Bacon is shocked by a sudden "transformation" that comes over Prince George Washington:

I suddenly missed the young man from my side, and turned to look for him. What change had come over him! The man had been transformed into a reptile. The tall and graceful youth, princely in look and bearing, was down on all his marrow-bones, bending his head until it almost touched the pavement of the portico, and, crawling slowly toward the door, conducted me with reverent signs and whispers toward the king, his father, whom I saw coming to meet us.

This was the other side of the picture. And I draw out this incident in detail because it is characteristic of the strange conflict between the old barbarism and the new enlightenment which meets one at every turn, in the Land of the White Elephant. There are two tides—one is going out, the ebb-tide of ignorance, of darkness, of despotic power; and one is coming in—the flood-tide of knowledge and liberty and all Christian grace. And, as in the whirl of waters when two currents meet, one never knows which way his boat may head, so sometimes the drift of things is backward toward the Orient, and sometimes forward, westward, as the 'star of empire' moves. (*LWE*, 98)

In this passage, Prince George Washington, who initially strikes Bacon as perhaps being capable of moving fully "forward" and "westward" with the American "flood-tide" of "knowledge and liberty and Christian grace," reverts "backward toward the Orient." The "despotic power" of the Siamese monarch still holds sway over the young prince, which instantly distinguishes him from his American namesake and causes him to devolve into a "reptile." In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael comments that "Queequeg was George Washington cannibalistically developed" (*MD*, 44); for Bacon, Prince Wichaichan is Washington despotically developed—or, perhaps more accurately, despotically devolved. As much as the Second King and his son may seem like Americans on first glance, Bacon knows that this is merely an illusion, a false reflection of America's virtues in a people who are still struggling with the legacy of Eastern stagnation and oriental tyranny. The truth behind this illusion is, as he says, "the other side of the picture."

It is worth considering which "picture" Bacon is talking about. Could it be that he is referring to the very portrait of Washington that

Pierce had given to the Second King? The prototype, as it were, for the failed copy that Wichaichan turned out to be? During his conversation with Pinklao, Bacon finds himself distracted by the presence of the young prince, and other members of the Second King's family, who "lay prostrate with obsequious reverence on the floor" (*LWE*, 105). Noting this, Bacon writes, "I half expected to see the portrait of the real George Washington on the wall blush with shame and indignation as it looked down on the reptile attitude of his namesake" (*LWE*, 105). This portrait is a gift, and like all gifts it remembers where it came from, blushing in shame at the contrast between the American values represented by its subject and the Siamese values it "looked down on" on the floor. It is a gift from America, and it is a gift *of* America—a representation of a man who was, in Bacon's words, "the greatest of Americans." And yet when this present returns to the United States in the form of Siam's own George Washington, it comes with a burden: the legacy of despotism and stagnation that has been seemingly inextricable from this Southeast Asian nation. And by what name does Bacon refer to this country? In the passage cited above, and throughout his chapter on the Second King, it is not simply "Siam," but rather the "Land of the White Elephant." It is under the sign of the white elephant, then, that we should understand the bizarre exchange of the "real" Washington for a debased Siamese copy. The picture of Washington returns to America burdened with an unsettling Siamese twin, a devolved version of the great nation America imagines itself to be, and it is the legacy of the white elephant that has caused this grotesque transformation. This so-called Prince George Washington is, for Bacon, as much a perversion of the U.S. presidency as the so-called white elephant is an affront to American white supremacy. By initiating diplomatic and economic relations with Siam, and by giving Siam a present that is in fact a piece of itself, America risks being obliged to accept whatever counter-gift the Siamese might offer. For Bacon, this counter-gift distorts the original American gift beyond recognition and threatens to burden the United States with the cost of doing business with the supposedly stagnant and despotic land that has, for centuries, been brandished in Western writing as the Land of the White Elephant.

University of Western Ontario

Notes

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- 1 "White Elephants," *New York Times*, 28 May 1873.
- 2 See, for example, the 1989 second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for "white elephant," which reads: "a. A rare albino variety of elephant which is highly venerated in some Asian countries. b. *fig.* A burdensome or costly possession (from the story that the kings of Siam [now Thailand] were accustomed to make a present of one of these animals to courtiers who had rendered themselves obnoxious, in order to ruin the recipient by the cost of its maintenance). Also, an object, scheme, etc., considered to be without use or value."
- 3 Rita Ringis, *Elephants of Thailand in Myth, Art, and Reality* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 96.
- 4 Here is how one nineteenth-century writer, Ernest Young, explains the paradox of the white elephant: "To give a European a useless and troublesome present is known as giving him a 'white elephant,'" he writes, "but to give a Buddhist a present of a white elephant would be to give him possession of a creature which, kindly treated, would cause blessings and good fortune to fall in showers around him in this and all future existences" (*The Kingdom of the Yellow Robe* [1898; reprint, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982], 388).
- 5 The body of literature on the gift is extensive and cannot be adequately summarized here. For now, let us take Ralph Waldo Emerson's stance in his essay "Gifts" as representative: "It is not the office of a man to receive gifts. . . . We do not quite forgive a giver. . . . Some violence, I think, is done, some degradation borne, when I rejoice or grieve at a gift" (*Selected Writings* [New York: Random House, 1950], 26). The classic text in anthropological discussions of the gift remains Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: Norton, 1990). For a fascinating discussion of the intercultural origins of another kind of fatal gift—the "potlatch"—see Christopher Bracken, *The Potlatch Papers* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997).
- 6 See Alan D. Schrift, introduction to *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, ed. Schrift (New York: Routledge, 1997), 19.
- 7 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 122.
- 8 Simon de la Loubère, *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam* (1693; reprint, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), 98; Anna Leonowens, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870; reprint, New York: Tor, 1999), 138; Frank Vincent, *The Land of the White Elephant: Sights and Scenes in South-Eastern Asia* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1874), 160.
- 9 Ringis, *Elephants of Thailand*, 94.

- 10 Narratives by the following authors in Purchas all mention white elephants: Gasparo Balbi, Cesar Fedrici, Ralph Fitch, and Antonio Galvano. See volume 10 of *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas His Pilgrimes: Contayning a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and Others*, ed. Samuel Purchas, 20 vols. (1625; reprint, Glasgow, Scotland: James MacLehose and Sons, 1905). Other popular sixteenth-century texts that discuss Siam's white elephants at some length include Jan Huygen van Linschoten, *The Voyages of John Huygen van Linschoten to the East Indies* (1598; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, 1970); and Fernão Mendes Pinto, *The Travels of Mendes Pinto*, trans. Rebecca D. Katz (1614; reprint, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989).
- 11 Jeremias Van Vliet, "Description of the Kingdom of Siam," trans. L. F. van Ravenswaay, in *Van Vliet's Siam*, ed. Chris Baker et al. (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2005), 176.
- 12 La Loubère, *Kingdom of Siam*, 98.
- 13 Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. Peter Gay (New York: Basic Books, 1962), 254.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 253, 254, 253.
- 15 A useful point of comparison here is the history of the words *fetish* and *fetishism*. The idea of the fetish emerged from transcultural encounters between Portuguese and Dutch traders and the inhabitants of West Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. When Charles de Brosses coined the term *fetishism* in 1757, the fetish was thus abstracted into a general theory that could be applied to any number of different fields, including—most notably—Karl Marx's critique of capitalism and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. While there is no equivalent "white elephantism" as such, I would claim that our usage of the term *white elephant* to denote all manner of useless objects suggests that such an abstraction has indeed occurred. For a thorough history of the word *fetish*, see William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish II: The Origin of the Fetish," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 13 (spring 1987): 23–45.
- 16 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Tony Tanner (1851; reprint, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 145. Further references to *Moby-Dick* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *MD*.
- 17 Ishmael claims the name *Pequod* is derived from a "celebrated tribe of Massachusetts Indians" who are "now extinct" (*MD*, 61). This aligns the *Pequod*'s mission with the fate of Native Americans, who have been long associated in the American imaginary with gift giving, unequal exchanges, and an inevitable fatalism. For a reading of the significance of Native Americans and manifest destiny in *Moby-Dick*, see Wai Chee Dimock, *Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989).
- 18 For a reading of Ahab's opposition to the market and Melville's own relationship to the literary marketplace, see Michael T. Gilmore, *Ameri-*

- can Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), 113–31.
- 19 In *Capital*, Karl Marx addresses “the riddle of the unchangeability of Asiatic societies.” Despite “the constant dissolution and refounding of Asiatic states” and “their never-ceasing changes of dynasty,” Asian society was perceived by Marx, as it was by Hegel, as stagnant and unchanging (*Capital: Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes [New York: Penguin, 1990], 479). In the *Grundrisse* Marx writes about Asian society in which “oriental despotism and . . . propertylessness . . . [seem] legally to exist” because the despot appropriates all of the surplus labour in his society. “[S]urplus product,” Marx writes, “automatically belongs to this higher unity . . . and this surplus labour takes the form of tribute, etc., as well as of common labour for the exaltation of the unity, partly of the real despot, partly of the imagined clan-being, the god” (*Grundrisse: Foundation of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus [New York: Penguin, 1993], 473). This system of tribute and forced labor, which assures that all of a society’s surplus labor is appropriated by a single individual, prohibits the possibility of class conflict in those countries since the means of production never change hands (or only change hands from despot to despot).
- 20 Malini Johar Schueller, *U.S. Orientalisms: Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature, 1790–1890* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1998), 154.
- 21 Critical accounts of Ahab’s tyranny are numerous, although few critics have aligned the captain’s monomania with the Western stereotype of the Eastern despot. Lawrance Thompson (*Melville’s Quarrel with God* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952]) and Harold Bloom (introduction to *Ahab*, ed. Bloom [New York: Chelsea House, 1991], 1–5) argue that Ahab’s tyranny reflects Melville’s gnostic (or anti-Christian, as Thompson puts it) beliefs, while R. W. B. Lewis casts the captain as a warped variation of a prelapsarian Adamic hero (*The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1955]). Notable readings of Ahab’s tyranny from a literary rather than theological perspective include F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941); and Charles Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael* (San Francisco, Calif.: City Lights, 1947), both of which draw a comparison between Ahab and Shakespeare’s Lear. For a strong reading of Ahab’s tyranny over the narrative of *Moby-Dick* itself, see Russ Castronovo, *Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1995), 67–105.
- 22 Fred Arthur Neale, *Narrative of a Residence in Siam* (London: Office of the National Illustrated Library, 1852), 99–100.
- 23 Charles R. Lewis, *A Coincidence of Wants: The Novel and Neoclassical Economics* (New York: Garland, 2000), 101.

- 24 Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2008), 67–68. Although Huang’s text contains an excellent and recent analysis of *Moby-Dick* in a transpacific context, numerous critics have considered the transnational implications of Melville’s novel. See, for example, Dimock, *Empire for Liberty*; Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogies: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1983); Carolyn L. Karcher, *Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville’s America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1980); and, more recently, Donald E. Pease, “The Extraterritoriality of the Literature for Our Planet,” *ESQ* 50.1–3 (2004): 177–221. For an early—and somewhat eccentric—critical exploration of Melville and the Pacific, see Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*.
- 25 The most important critical antecedent for any discussion of elephants in *Moby-Dick* is Perry Miller’s *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1956). Miller contends that Melville may have drawn on Cornelius Mathews’s novel *Behemoth: A Legend of the Mound-Builders* (New York: J. and H. G. Langley, 1839), which tells the story of a group of prehistoric Americans who are terrorized by a gigantic mastodon, for at least some of his descriptions of *Moby-Dick*.
- 26 For a thorough account of Melville’s orientalism, see Dorothee Metlitsky Finkelstein, *Melville’s Orienda* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1961). The standard references for sources that Melville consulted are Mary K. Bercaw, *Melville’s Sources* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1987); and Merton M. Sealts, *Melville’s Reading* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1988). Both Bercaw and Sealts confirm that Melville was extraordinarily well read in early modern travel writing, and that he was familiar with Enlightenment thinkers such as Pierre Bayle, Thomas Browne, Georges Cuvier, and Voltaire.
- 27 According to Robin Robbins, the passage Browne and Melville cite from Garcia de Orta (“Horta”) is preceded in the original text by a discussion of white elephants. See Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, 2 vols., ed. Robin Robbins (1672; reprint, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), 2:1039.
- 28 Kathleen E. Kier suggests that this reference is “undoubtedly ironic” since “the city of Pegu by the nineteenth century [was] a prime example of a grand thing that had outlived its usefulness” (*A Melville Encyclopedia: The Novels*, 2 vols. [Troy, N.Y.: Whitston, 1990], 2:1098).
- 29 While I am obviously inclined to disagree with H. Bruce Franklin’s claim that “[t]his simile can hardly have great significance” because “we assume that the Siamese white elephant is of no great significance,” his text is notable as one of the only studies to address Melville’s Siamese imagery (*The Wake of the Gods: Melville’s Mythology* [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1963], 63–64).

- 30 Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds, Sukhon Polpatpicharn, and Beatrice Camp, *The Eagle and the Elephant: Thai-American Relations since 1833*, trans. Napa Bhongbhibhat (Bangkok: United Production, 1987), 41.
- 31 *The Complete Journal of Townsend Harris*, ed. Mario Emilio Cosenza (Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle, 1959), 159.
- 32 Harris, *Journal*, 161–62.
- 33 *The Dynastic Chronicles, Bangkok Era, The Fourth Reign*, 3 vols., trans. Chadin Flood and E. Thadeus Flood (Tokyo: Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies, 1965), 1:132.
- 34 Mongkut to James Buchanan, 14 February 1861, in *A King of Siam Speaks*, ed. Seni Pramroj and Kukrit Pramroj (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1987), 154–55.
- 35 For a comprehensive account of gift tributes in nineteenth-century Siam and Southeast Asia, see Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1994).
- 36 Mongkut to James Buchanan, 14 February 1861, in Bhongbhibhat et al., *The Eagle and the Elephant*, 224–25.
- 37 Abraham Lincoln to Mongkut, 3 February 1862, in Bhongbhibhat et al., *The Eagle and the Elephant*, 229.
- 38 This tendency is not limited to nineteenth-century authors. A recent example, which suggests that Mongkut's elephants and white elephants have been conflated in the American imagination, can be found on the back cover of Anita Hibler and William Strobbridge's *Elephants for Mr. Lincoln: American Civil War Diplomacy in Southeast Asia* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2006), which erroneously boasts that the book will tell the story of "the King of Siam's letter to President Lincoln offering white elephants to aid the Union (which didn't arrive until after the war had ended)."
- 39 George B. Bacon, *Siam, the Land of the White Elephant, as It Was and Is* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, 1873), 113. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *LWE*.
- 40 Mauss, *The Gift*, 13. Mauss explains the "life" of the gift through his discussion of the Maori term *hau*. He writes that "in Maori law, the legal tie, a tie occurring through things, is one between souls, because the thing itself possesses a soul, is of the soul. Hence it follows that to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself." Because things that are given retain the spirit (*hau*) of the person who gave them away, this spirit wants to return home to this original giver even though it will return in the form of a different object. Since it would be "dangerous and mortal" to retain something that is essentially a piece of another person's soul, this "chain of users" is caught up in a "general theory of obligation" that assures the constant circulation of wealth even though these "users" are not necessarily aware of their role in this "chain" (12).

- 41 Mongkut to Prince Mahamala, 1863, in *A King of Siam Speaks*, ed. Pramoj and Pramoj, 170.
- 42 Mongkut to Prince Mahamala, 1866, in *A King of Siam Speaks*, ed. Pramoj and Pramoj, 193.
- 43 David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1984), 182.
- 44 Harris, *Journal*, 158.
- 45 Leonowens, *English Governess*, 222; Wyatt, *Thailand*, 191.
- 46 Harris, *Journal*, 566–70.
- 47 Wyatt, *Thailand*, 191.