

# American Studies in Review

## Transpacific Interpretations

---

Hsu, Hsuan L. *Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 257 pp.

Huang, Yunte. *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008. 187 pp.

Wu, Cynthia. *Chang and Eng Reconnected: The Original Siamese Twins in American Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012. 203 pp.

Reviewed by Ross Bullen

**Abstract:** In this review, I look at recent texts by Yunte Huang, Hsuan Hsu, and Cynthia Wu on the transpacific literature and culture of the United States, noting how each of their books make significant and original contributions to this emerging critical field. All three books draw on transpacific methodologies (among other discourses) to generate fascinating new readings of well-known US literary and cultural texts, including—in all three critical studies—Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. Although each of these books embraces its own method and scope, reading all three together provides a compelling snapshot of the development of transpacific American studies over the past half-decade, and suggests some of the new areas in which these methodologies are making critical headway.

**Keywords:** Yunte Huang, Hsuan Hsu, Cynthia Wu, transpacific criticism, Asian American studies, cultural geography, disability studies, Herman Melville

**Résumé :** Dans le présent article, j’évalue des textes récents de Yunte Huang, Hsuan Hsu et Cynthia Wu sur la littérature transpacifique et la

culture des États-Unis, en indiquant de quelle façon chacun de ces livres apporte une contribution importante et originale à ce domaine de la critique émergente. Les trois livres s'appuient sur des méthodologies transpacifiques (parmi d'autres discours) pour produire de nouvelles lectures fascinantes de textes américains littéraires et culturels bien connus, notamment – dans les trois études critiques – *Moby-Dick* d'Herman Melville. Bien que chacun de ces livres adopte sa propre méthode et une portée personnelle, la lecture des trois ensemble offre un instantané convaincant du développement des études américaines transpacifiques depuis les cinq dernières années, et suggère de nouveaux domaines où ces méthodologies réalisent des progrès importants.

**Mots clés :** Yunte Huang, Hsuan Hsu, Cynthia Wu, critique transpacifique, géographie culturelle, études asiatiques américaines, études de la condition des personnes handicapées, Herman Melville

In the introduction to his 2008 study *Transpacific Imaginations*, Yunte Huang relates an anecdote that speaks to the critical blind spots that necessitated his own intervention in the field of transpacific American literary criticism. "In the early days of my research and writing that have led to the current book," Huang writes, "whenever my American colleagues asked me what I meant by the 'transpacific imagination,' I would use *Moby-Dick* as an example" (1). Huang goes on to list some of the most significant connections between Herman Melville's novel and the Pacific that he would share with his colleagues, before, he claims, he would inevitably be interrupted by someone who was convinced that *Moby-Dick* is set in the Atlantic Ocean. Huang was "annoyed and amused" by this response, but he astutely describes the source of this massive geographical confusion as the "result of decades of canonical symbolist readings" of *Moby-Dick* that have tended to "shun the geopolitics lying at the heart of Melville's concern" (1). Despite decades of critical writing on *Moby-Dick*, the novel's Pacific setting had largely remained a forgotten detail, passed over in favour of formalist readings that often treated *Moby-Dick* as an apolitical and abstract allegory. Of course, as anyone who has read much Melville criticism from the past twenty years surely knows, this critical tendency had been largely reversed by the time of Huang's writing. Texts by authors who either anticipated or participated in the much-discussed "transnational turn" in American literary studies—such as Wai Chee Dimock's *Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism* (1991), Geoffrey Sanborn's *The Sign of the Cannibal: Melville and the Making of a*

*Postcolonial Reader* (1998), or Samuel Otter's *Melville's Anatomies* (1999)—had done much to re-situate Melville so that questions of race, nation, and empire sat at the very core of his literary project. Despite this, as Huang's anecdote suggests, the illegibility of the Pacific has endured for many readers and critics. One of Huang's goals in *Transpacific Imaginations* is to redeploy Melville's phrase "the deadly space between" (from *Billy Budd*) as a metaphor for the "critical terrain" of transpacific literary studies. The "deadly space between," Huang writes, "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" (2). As *Transpacific Imaginations* proves, such spaces are extraordinarily conducive to innovative literary analysis.

Huang's impressive reevaluation of *Moby-Dick* in a Pacific context, which I will address below, does much to demonstrate the critical and creative potential of transpacific literary criticism. This potential is realized in two other recent texts that draw on transpacific methodologies (among other discourses) to generate fascinating new readings of well-known US literary and cultural texts: Hsuan Hsu's *Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2010) and Cynthia Wu's *Chang and Eng Reconnected: The Original Siamese Twins in American Culture* (2012). Intriguingly, both Hsu and Wu also write about *Moby-Dick*, providing a common thread through all three texts. Although each of these studies embraces its own method and scope, reading all three together provides a compelling snapshot of the development of transpacific American studies over the past half-decade and suggests some of the new areas in which these methodologies are making critical headway. In this review, I look at Huang's, Hsu's, and Wu's investigations into the transpacific literature and culture of the United States, noting how each study makes significant and original contributions to this emerging critical field.

One of the most impressive aspects of Huang's *Transpacific Imaginations* is the sheer variety and scope of texts he manages to analyze in a relatively short book. Mark Twain, Henry Adams, Liang Qichao, Herman Melville, the Angel Island poets, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha are each addressed in Huang's 160 pages. Such impressive breadth is signalled by Huang's capacious subtitle: "History, Literature, Counterpoetics." This last term, along with the

“deadly space between,” acts as a kind of guiding metaphor for this work. “Counterpoetics,” Huang writes, “describe[s] a host of marginalized poetic/historiographical practices” that serve as “a counterpoint to imperial visions that always claim some version of historical teleology as their *raison d’être*” (4). Discursive practices like antiquarianism, graffiti, collection, travel writing, anecdotes, and so forth are anti-teleological, Huang argues, because they refuse to make any grand claims about the unified meaning of “the Pacific,” existing instead in the “deadly space between” a universal conception of History and the multiple histories that constitute the material reality of transpacific spaces. Counterpoetics, then, is the literature of a transpacific contact zone, a kind of literary practice that emerges from a space of radically uneven power relations and, as a result, is not subject to the kind of hegemonic power structures associated with “national” literatures and universalist accounts of History. The works Huang examines—when read as critical counterpoetics—reveal the Pacific as a space not of tranquillity (as its name suggests) but rather of constant upheaval, transformation, transportation, and translation.

*Transpacific Imaginations* is divided into three parts, each of which roughly corresponds to one of the three concepts named in the book’s subtitle. Part one examines transpacific history by looking at three late-nineteenth century writers’ thoughts on the meaning of the Pacific. While Mark Twain’s Hawaiian letters reflect his early enthusiasm for US imperialism in the Pacific (a view he would abandon after the Philippine-American War), and Henry Adams’ letters from Japan and the South Seas convey a sense of cultural superiority that in fact belies his own historiographical theories, perhaps the most interesting figure Huang looks at here is Liang Qichao, a Chinese historian who travelled to Hawaii and North America around the turn of the century. As Huang explains, Liang’s traditional antiquarian historiography was thrown into question with the emergence of China on the “world stage.” While the Pacific functioned as a field for US imperialist actions and fantasies, for the Chinese literati, the emergence of the US as a major power in the Pacific signalled a major geopolitical realignment wherein “China” functioned as one nation among many others, instead of as an “ethnocentric synonym” for the world itself (43). Liang’s *Xin shixue* (New Historiography) emerged from this contested transpacific space, establishing a new historical discourse that accounted for both Confucian antiquarianism and the kind of

US “Rimspeak” articulated by politicians like Theodore Roosevelt. In this chapter, Huang “delineate[s] the fault lines in Liang’s transpacific imagination” which, when read alongside his earlier analyses of Twain and Adams, demonstrates the semantic and conceptual instability of the Pacific in both US imperialist and Chinese historiographical rhetoric (49). In this first section of *Transpacific Imaginations*, history itself emerges as the “deadly space between” America and Asia.

The second part of *Transpacific Imaginations* finds us in familiar critical waters. Huang devotes five short chapters to his analysis of *Moby-Dick*, which stands in for the broader topic of “Literature” promised in his book’s subtitle. Huang’s interpretations feel anything but limited, though: Melville’s text engenders an impressive variety of transpacific narratives in his study. It is the theme of “collection” that unites these disparate readings. Queequeg, Ishmael, the “Consumptive Usher,” and even Melville himself emerge as collectors in Huang’s analysis, where “collector” is understood in a Benjaminian sense as one who “takes objects out of the societal system of circulation and thereby prevent[s], as long as objects remain within their collection, any capitalistic conversion” (59). It is Ahab, however, who is *Moby-Dick*’s most devoted (or should I say “monomaniacal”?) collector. Huang reads Ahab as a “capitalist turned connoisseur,” who rejects the mercantile capitalist agenda of the *Pequod*’s owners, Peleg and Bildad, in favour of his own non-productive, non-profitable, and ultimately destructive desire to “collect” Moby Dick (61). While regular whales represent profitable raw material that can be acquired, processed, and sold as commodities, the white whale defies this logic of capitalistic accumulation. Ahab’s obsession with Moby Dick also represents his journey away from his nominal role as a representative of US capitalism, and this move from capitalist to collector is reflected in his behaviour toward the crew of the *Pequod*. He offers a monetary reward (the doubloon) that he has no intention of ever awarding and, to hunt the white whale, employs a crew of “yellow boys,” a group of Asian-Pacific servants — “virtually slaves” in Huang’s analysis (68)—who are exempted from productive labour and reserved only for Ahab’s anti-capitalist agenda. There are numerous studies of *Moby-Dick* that touch on Melville’s attitudes toward both capitalism and the Pacific, but few—if any—present as coherent and tightly argued an account of the connections between Ahab’s monomania, the *Pequod*’s capitalist mandate, and Melville’s transpacific imagination. This second

part of *Transpacific Imaginations* alone makes it essential reading for any scholar interested in Melville's writing.

Part three of Huang's book takes up his concept of "Counterpoetics." Over the course of three chapters, Huang offers insightful interpretations of three Asian American texts written from spaces of exception and reflecting the uneven power dynamics of the transpacific twentieth century. What unites Angel Island poetry, Lawson Fusao Inada's *Legends from Camp*, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* is an interest in the "poetic reterritorialization" of America's "racial frontier" (99). Huang's analysis reveals how counterpoetic strategies in these texts serve to theorize the "deadly space between" that defines the transpacific experience. Such texts do not substitute "East" for "West," or "literature" for "history," but rather draw their efficacy from dwelling in the "gap" between these "extreme positions" (144). Given the significant role of the Pacific in teleological accounts of history and American "manifest destiny," Huang's case for the importance of counterpoetics is both convincing and necessary for the development of a useful transpacific critical methodology. Although Huang's argument here is grounded in close readings of three literary works, his critical method certainly points toward a more malleable interpretive technique that can be brought to bear on a much wider corpus of transpacific texts.

Huang draws on an impressive range of critical traditions and thinkers to undergird his theory of transpacific imagination. Hsuan Hsu also brings transpacific American literature into conversation with a theoretical tradition in *Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, although in Hsu's case it is the field of cultural geography instead of the continental tradition Huang favours (Benjamin, Hegel). Although Hsu's book is not exclusively concerned with transpacific spaces, his interest in "how nineteenth-century authors responded to the encroachments of vast, external spaces" does often turn to the Pacific (1). As Hsu writes in his introduction, his "argument is that literary texts responded to the unsettling transnational connections brought on by territorial and commercial expansion by moving readers to identify with spatial scales such as the home, region, city, nation, and globe" (1). While the politics and production of space might seem like an obvious topic in a text like *Moby-Dick*, Hsu's study deftly reveals the transnational agenda of a host of works that, on first glance, do not seem to be explicitly concerned

with territorial expansion, such as Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* or Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." Although in this review I will limit my analysis to Hsu's transpacific interpretations of nineteenth-century American literature, it is important to note that Hsu's study takes up the question of geography in a more capacious—indeed, global—sense, revealing transnational circuits of spatial production across the Atlantic, the Pacific, Europe, the South Seas, and within the geopolitical boundaries of the United States itself.

Hsu's book begins with an ingenious reading of what he calls "democratic expansionism" in Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* and *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*. Hsu's analysis is often more comprehensive and historicist than Huang's, and this chapter is rooted in the critical tradition of Brown criticism and Hsu's impressive presentation of the geographical concerns that confronted Brown as a citizen of the early Republic. Hsu draws on Brown's own interest in geography in order to illuminate the overdetermined status of both domestic and foreign spaces in Brown's fiction. Perhaps most interesting is his comparison of the expansionist rhetoric (and anxiety) that accompanied the Louisiana Purchase with Brown's representations of the colonial potential of "New Holland" (Australia) and the South Seas. The displacement of Native Americans by continental US expansion, in Hsu's analysis, prefigures the nation's later expansion into the Pacific. As Hsu puts it, "In Brown's geographical fictions, immense blank spaces in the frontier and the Pacific evoke the vertiginous indeterminacy of the nation's boundaries: the USA always seems situated beyond itself, in unknown, elusive, and potentially limitless spaces" (33). This geographical "beyond itself" has its gothic analogue in Carwin's remarkable "biloquism" (ventriloquism) that—for the other characters in *Wieland* and *Memoirs*—transforms the human voice, indeed Enlightenment rationality, into an "unknown, elusive" entity as well. Hsu's interpretation of Brown's geographical aesthetic thus brings the author's well-documented gothic concerns into conversation with more recent transnational and transpacific criticism.

Subsequent chapters in Hsu's book examine questions of scale and nation in texts like Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Sphinx," Henry James's "The Jolly Corner," Harriet Beecher Stowe and Catharine Beecher's *The American Woman's Home*, Sui Sin Far's *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, Sarah Orne

Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, and Melville's *Moby-Dick*. While Huang's analysis of Melville's masterpiece revolves around the novel's transpacific, anti-capitalist aesthetic, Hsu's interpretation of *Moby-Dick* focuses on what he calls its theme of "cosmopolitan despair." For Hsu, this term designates "a response to the darker aspects of global unity: the uneven geographical development precipitated by imperialism and capital accumulation" (131). Hsu's analysis of Melville's "checkered globe" presents the Pacific as a space of asymmetrical power relations and as a site of both imperialist desire and protectionist anxiety. Reading Melville alongside Walt Whitman's poetry and contemporary geographical texts, Hsu reveals Melville's Pacific as part of a broader cultural movement that was both drawn to and repulsed by US expansion in the South Seas and East Asia. According to Hsu, such spaces "in Melville's writing do not evoke the transnational, utopian possibilities of the ocean so much as they represent denationalized spaces whose inhabitants are deprived of the self-determination and human rights accorded to citizens of nation-states" (153). Hsu's analysis of Melville and Whitman draws on transpacific and transnational criticism, Melville's own interest in geographical literature, and emerging fields like oceanic studies. Much like Huang's chapters on *Moby-Dick*, Hsu's writing on Melville is essential reading for anyone interested in the role of the Pacific in *Moby-Dick*.

While Huang and Hsu draw on a wide range of authors, texts, and figures in their books, Cynthia Wu adopts a narrower approach in her fascinating new study *Chang and Eng Reconnected: The Original Siamese Twins in American Culture*. In Wu's book, Chang and Eng Bunker emerge as powerful and enduring figures in the literary, cultural, and affective history of the transpacific nineteenth century. Born in Siam (now Thailand) to parents from predominately Chinese backgrounds, the conjoined twins were "discovered" by the Scottish merchant Robert Hunter, who conspired with Abel Coffin, an American sea captain, to bring Chang and Eng to the United States in 1829 on an exploitative five-year performance contract. When this contract was over, the twins took charge of their careers, became naturalized US citizens (despite the 1790 Naturalization Act, which reserved naturalized citizenship for "free white persons"), adopted an Anglo-American surname, married two white sisters—Adelaide and Sarah Yates—from a prominent Southern family, owned African American slaves, and between the two of them fathered twenty-two children, two of whom fought for the

Confederacy during the Civil War. Such racial and social mobility for non-white persons was essentially unheard of during this time; the fact that Chang and Eng were also “physically anomalous beings” further complicates the picture. “The Bunkers eluded categorization,” Wu writes, “but this indeterminacy was emblematic of American life during this period” (5). As Wu points out, the Bunkers were able to occupy so many unusual subject positions not only because of their conjoined bodies, but also because they arrived in the United States at a point when racial categories, national frontiers, and America’s relationship with the Pacific and East Asia were in a state of significant upheaval. As extraordinary figures in the history of the United States, Chang and Eng Bunker reveal both the contradictions and conditions of possibility for what Huang would call America’s “transpacific imagination.”

Although Wu’s book is focused exclusively on Chang and Eng, her critical method, and impressive collection of literary, cultural, and social sources, reveals an original and interdisciplinary approach to American studies scholarship. In addition to nineteenth-century cultural and literary sources (including political cartoons, broadsides, advertisements, and literary texts by Herman Melville and Mark Twain), Wu tracks the semiotic history of Chang and Eng through medical literature, the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia, a host of contemporary film and literary representations of conjoined twins, and—perhaps most intriguingly—several Bunker family reunions in Mount Airy, North Carolina. This broad interdisciplinarity can yield fascinating results: Wu’s anthropological analysis of the Bunker reunions reveals the complex affective bonds that connect dozens of Chang and Eng’s descendants with their “esteemed ancestors.” At other points in her book, Wu’s breadth of analysis can leave her reader wanting more. Although she devotes several pages to a discussion of Siamese twins in Mark Twain’s fiction, she makes only brief mention of Herman Melville’s interest in, and allusions to, Chang and Eng. As we have seen in Huang’s and Hsu’s books, Melville had a considerable interest in the Pacific and East Asia, and he found in Chang and Eng Bunker a productive metaphor for human connection both at sea (Ishmael imagines he and Queequeg are “united” by an “elongated Siamese ligature”) and among his fellow writers (he told Richard Henry Dana Jr. that they were “tied & welded” by “a Siamese link of affectionate sympathy”). Needless to say, in a book with such an impressive chronological range, Wu can only cover

so much material. And, for the most part, she does a fine job of balancing works from different centuries, genres, and disciplines. There are moments, though, like that brief allusion to Melville, where I did find myself wishing that she might linger a little longer on a text or topic. With that being said, I think Wu's study is stronger for its capacious scope than it would be if it were concerned solely with nineteenth-century representations of the Bunkers, or with strictly literary texts about their lives.

Wu necessarily adopts a multitude of critical approaches in *Chang and Eng Reconnected*, but the most important of these is what she terms the "conjoinment" of disability studies and Asian American studies (5). Wu's argument, she writes, is that "a critical interrogation of ableism—that is, a system that produces and privileges physical, sensory, and neural normativity—invoked racial difference from the onset" (5). Wu builds her case by looking at classic works of American literary criticism by Leonard Kriegel and Leslie Fiedler that analyse physical difference—in the figure of the "cripple" for Kriegel and the "freak" for Fiedler—through "an invocation of racial difference" (6). On a historical level, these two disciplines are conjoined via two pieces of discriminatory legislation that were both passed in 1882: The Chinese Exclusion Act, which placed severe restrictions on Asian immigration to the United States, and the Immigration Act, which "actually barred the entry of prospective immigrants based on disease, disability, or other broadly defined conditions that would make the individual less likely to become a public charge" (8). Following her argument about the fundamental conjoinment of these two fields, Wu writes that Chang and Eng Bunker, "[f]ar from being exceptions that proved the rule" instead "beg a reconsideration of easy divisions between privilege and oppression that accompany the global circulation of Asian bodies" (9). The "early transnational circuits of popular culture" that "grew up alongside Chang and Eng" (2) thus prefigured the transpacific circuits of Asian labour that would play a central role in the United States's western expansion in the decades after the Mexican-American War, and the closing off of these circuits in the wake of xenophobic and racist sentiments directed at Asians and Asian Americans toward the end of the century. The fact that these circuits are premised on the ability of Asian bodies to perform physical labour makes it clear that "ableism" and "Asian American" were conjoined terms from the very moment Chang and Eng arrived in America.

Yunte Huang, Hsuan Hsu, and Cynthia Wu offer a powerful critique of American nationalism and exceptionalism through convincing literary and theoretical arguments about the United States's protean attitude toward the Pacific and East Asia. Although "transpacific" circulates as a key critical term only in Huang's book, reading his concept of "transpacific imagination" alongside Hsu's and Wu's texts further illuminates the significance of the critical arguments they put forward. For Hsu, America's transpacific imagination is intimately connected to its geographical imagination, as the vast space of the Pacific Ocean often proves a fertile space for the "crises of scale" that Hsu identifies as a central preoccupation for many nineteenth-century authors. For Wu, transpacific imagination is coextensive with the reification of Asian American racial form and normative attitudes toward ableism in the nineteenth century and beyond. Thinking of the role of the Pacific in the US imagination, as Huang does, as a "gap between literature and history that is riddled with distortions, half-truths, longings, and affective burdens never fully resolved in . . . unevenly temporalized space" (2) resonates with Wu's account of Chang and Eng's seemingly anomalous place in the antebellum Southern United States and Hsu's account of how writers like Charles Brockden Brown, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Herman Melville projected their own anxieties about American expansionism onto the vast ocean that loomed, as Walt Whitman put it, when "facing west from California's shore." If, as Huang claims at the beginning of *Transpacific Imaginations*, the Pacific has too often been a blind spot in American literary studies, books like his own, Hsu's, and Wu's will go a long way toward correcting this critical myopia, replacing it, perhaps, with an interrogation of the "double vision" that Huang claims is endemic of US writing about the Pacific. "In this bifurcated schema," Huang writes, "the Pacific is seen both literally and symbolically—literally as an area of territorial/economic expansion and symbolically as an instance of historical/typological fulfillment" (23–24). Indeed, this foundational tension between the economic and imperial appeal of the Pacific and the creation and circulation of Asian typologies (what Colleen Lye refers to as "America's Asia") is evident in most of the literary and cultural texts that Huang, Hsu, and Wu investigate. Looking at the Pacific, then, is not simply a matter of paying attention to something that has been heretofore ignored. Rather, what these three studies challenge us to do is look at the ways that the Pacific has

always been visible in American literature, but also how this vision has frequently been doubled, distorted, and disguised.

**Ross Bullen** teaches English at OCAD University in Toronto. He is currently working on a book that examines the figure of the “white elephant” in nineteenth-century American literature and culture.