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Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field by Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen

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Hoskins, Janet, and Viet Thanh Nguyen, eds. *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014. vii + 270 pages. Paperback, \$25.00.

In this volume, the editors—an anthropologist and ethnologist, both with a focus on Southeast Asia—have collected in ten chapters a vivid scholarly discussion about the meaning, usefulness, and relevance of transpacific studies. The daunting self-imposed task is to “develop a new research paradigm that would go beyond conventional area studies and American studies models” (p. vii). This new transnational research paradigm, centered mostly on population movement, also attempts to instill a sensitive understanding of views from Asia and the Pacific.

The conceptualization of the Pacific as a field of study in the humanities is not entirely new, but has acquired new life in recent years. As described in this volume, the seminal work of authors such as Arif Dirlik, Rob Wilson, Miyoshi Masao, and Wang Hui illuminate the discussion around the power relations at play within and outside the ‘Pacific Rim.’ More recently, the scholarship of Matt Matsuda, as well as the May 2014 special journal issue of the *Pacific Historical Review* dealing with transpacific history, further contribute to this debate. In this book, the importance of transpacific studies is based upon the perceived necessity to confront its nemesis: an U.S.-led economist view of the Pacific region with efforts to deploy it through the Transpacific Partnership, a region-wide tariff and trade agreement which is currently under negotiation. Nevertheless, the Introduction is somewhat deceiving, for this book is much more than a postcolonial intellectual effort. Indeed, one of the virtues of this book is that it opens the arena to an enriching dialogue about the scope and content of transpacific studies as an emerging field.

Some of the contributors to this volume adhere to the thesis advanced in the Introduction, which tethers U.S. economic (and military) imperialism to the societies in the Asia Pacific region. For example, in Chapter 1, Wiqiang Lin and Brenda S.A. Yeoh call for a more “fluid, balanced and circumspect” transpacific agenda (p. 45), because “the epistemological clipping together of two sides of the Pacific has less to do with any essential basis than with the imperial desire of the U.S. and its allies to naturalize a particular way of mapping and organizing the world” (p. 57). Nancy Lutkehaus and John Carlos Rowe, in chapters 4 and 5 respectively, concur in the colonial character of a U.S. position in the Pacific Ocean. In Chapter 8, Yen Le Espiritu elegantly reexamines the ‘rescue and liberation’ operation in Vietnam, where tens of thousands of refugees were airlifted out of the country and resettled in the U.S. She notices the contradictory character of the operation since it bridged the Vietnam War (an act of U.S. imperialism) and the Vietnamese refugees overseas. A more nuanced view of the Pacific is presented in Chapters 2 and 6. In Chapter 2, Heonik Kwon brings to the fore the Cold War history in the Asia Pacific region. He suggests that transpacific studies should be placed in the intersection between postcolonial realities and the divided Cold War nature, the latter permeating state to state relations as well as kinship relationships within local societies. In Chapter 6, Francisco Benitez and Laurie Sears examine the so-called ‘post-colonial melancholia’ found in the racial elements of Asian-American fiction.

The book also presents three chapters that challenge the notions of colonialism articulated in the Introduction. In Chapter 3, Biao Xiang attempts to frame the relationship between the socioeconomic integration across the Pacific on one hand, and the “political, ideational, and military tensions on the other” (p. 87). Thus, U.S.-China relations are conceptualized as the ‘Pacific Paradox.’ That is, from the Chinese perspective, the definition of the ‘state’ should be organized without rejecting the ‘triumph of individualism’. In Xiang’s words, “the popular

imagination in the 2000s in China sees the world as the Olympic games where one can participate only by following the rules, and can win only by being recognized by the common standards” (p. 89). Thus, interstate political tensions are not only part of the Pacific engagement, but are also what makes the engagement meaningful. In Chapter 7, Akira Mizuta Lippit goes a step further in giving meaning to transpacific studies. Delving into contemporary Asian cinema, Lippit concludes that absence of language (dialogues), as well as the deconstruction of state-supported historical narratives, and multicultural casts, imply the transcendence of national identities. Indeed, he points out the collapse of national languages, disintegration of national cinemas throughout Asia, and the emergence of a transnational Asian cinema in its place. Finally, in Chapter 9, Hung Cam Thai explores the ambivalent meaning of money earned overseas in Vietnam. The center of attention in this chapter diverts from Western imperialism towards the way in which family relations in Vietnam are transformed by the positive and negative effects of remittances coming from various origins. All three chapters present a more subtle, Asian-based understanding of the trends and flows within the region.

The book attempts to define some of the “parameters of this new field of transpacific studies in order to awaken scholars to the shifting tides of the world’s greater ocean” (p. 33). It opens up a significant dialogue; however, the book presents two obvious problems. As acknowledged by the authors, the volume is insufficient in its coverage, for the Pacific Islands and Latin America are almost completely ignored (possibly due to the editors’ own academic affiliation to Asian studies). A second problem is its America-centrism. By considering the U.S. and its policies in the region (economic and otherwise) as a focal point in the emergence of transpacific studies, the editors are perpetuating the power imbalance in the very same narrative that they seek to overcome. Moreover, the justification for a volume on the transpacific does not require a straw man: the social spaces that fill the intra-Pacific relations—which are aptly developed in most chapters—are rich enough to justify the intellectual effort of rethinking the Pacific as an area of study. Despite its limitations, the editors should be commended for their openness to views that do not necessarily reflect their own, and this ambitious book is a valuable resource for scholars and the general public with an interest in the Pacific.

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