

SESSHU FOSTER & JEN HOER / A Parallax View

Jen Hofer: What is “transPacific” in the context of Los Angeles? We share a Pacific (an intraPacific?) with Tijuana. We situate ourselves (or are situated?) in relation to a body (bodies) of water both to the west and to the south of us. We look west and face the east. We stand in the north and speak south. Is it antithetical or perpendicular? You said Antena (www.antenaantena.org) seems “intercontinental (like the name of the hotel where journalists stayed in Managua during the fall of the Somoza regime).” I would like to do an investigation of all the places called “intercontinental” (hotels, cafes, theaters, etc) to track political or skeletal linkages. A parallax view.

Sesshu Foster: Is a north south orientation antithetical to transpacific? Although immigrants’ rights are obviously one big umbrella under which all communities sooner or later shelter?

JH: These are Los Angeles questions: our pacific, our trans. How does the immigrant umbrella (or being in immigrant status—i.e. a state of being where immigrants and immigrants’ rights are the shape of how we move—as a weather) affect what we experience as “transPacific”? Do we need shelter or exposure?

SF: To be literally transPacific, to resist transPacific. In my case, one set of Anglo grandparents originally from Ohio and Illinois met in Los Angeles; my grandfather was supposedly Chief of Police of Long Beach, married my grandmother when she was a teen, sixteen or so playing keyboards with sheet music for the soundtrack for silent movies in theaters on Broadway. They moved to the Bay Area from South Central when it was whites only in the 1920s because L.A. was “too dangerous.” My Japanese grandparents were recruited as peasant farm labor from Hiroshima province (as documented later in Carey McWilliams’ excellent *Factories in the Field*, 1939), whose marriage was arranged around 1916. They worked the fields of the Central Coast—strawberries, etc.—living in houses they never owned, often without utilities, with outhouses, sometimes with a wooden tub (ofuro) with a tin bottom that my mother’s chore was to fill and heat with a wood fire. My grandfather soaked in the ofuro after working all day. After Executive Order 9066 they were sent to live in horse stalls in Santa Anita racetrack and helped construct the third largest town in Arizona at that time, the internment camp Poston, on the Colorado River Indian Reservation. After the war, when my grandfather was disabled by strokes, they returned to Santa

Maria, to live in a room rented beside a church parking lot (churches helped relocate returning Japanese Americans to areas where they weren't excluded). When she was not taking care of her nine children (two had died in their early twenties of TB in the 1930s) and my ailing grandfather, my grandmother worked in the fields. They ended their lives with nothing to their names—except that they did, indeed, leave a common Japanese American ethic of decency and hard work. I feel pretty much their grandson, in spite of everything.

JH: I write this in a bowl (cuenca) of desert that once was water, knuckled between Death Valley and Sequoia and Inyo National Forests. The wind dunes the dust into particulate ridges. The ocean is a dream away. A parallax view. On my dad's side I am the child of an immigrant who is the child of an immigrant. I'm here because they made it out. There's a lot of trans in my history, but not much Pacific, except in flight from perceived danger. My parents, of different strains of Eastern European Jewish heritage, one from the non-Pacific Southern Cone and the other from the non-Pacific Northeast of USAmerica, felt New York—where they met through the intersection of modern dance and Argentinean friends—was “too dangerous” so, like your grandparents, they moved to the Bay Area (neither had ever been west of the Mississippi—or even west of New Jersey, I don't think) and hence I am a California kid. Though not much of a kid anymore.

SF: A transPacific fusion (transfusion?) occurs of course in my parents' volatile and finally ruptured union. My parents met when my mother was a UCSB art student, mid-50s. Like my father, who'd served in the army signal corps during World War II, my mother was a Navy vet. They married in a Zen Buddhist ceremony, followed by a car caravan of bohemians to the reception party in the Santa Barbara hills. My father, born in 1922, the same year as Jack Kerouac, never liked Kerouac's self-conscious romanticism and as a thorough-going individualist would reject any such marketing label like “the Beat Generation,” nevertheless embraced the study of Zen Buddhism, abstract expressionist art, and other wine-drenched cross-cultural practices on the bohemian 1950s West Coast. For a time (everything was short-lived for them) while dad studied painting with Clifford Still, Richard Diebenkorn, and Mark Rothko at the San Francisco Art Institute, he attended lectures on Zen and art by Saburo Hasegawa—also attended by poet Gary Snyder and radio commentator Alan Watt—and drank red wine provided at poetry readings by Allen Ginsberg and others active in the San Francisco Renaissance, fomented by Kenneth Rexroth. Rexroth's

translations from Chinese and Japanese poetry are seminal landmarks in cross-cultural fertilization, and literary birthmarks of that transPacific influence can still be seen in the Chinese calligraphy used in Copper Canyon Press's logo, in the (1999) selected and (2007) collected poems of Philip Whalen (abbot of the S.F. Hartford Street Zen Center) and in Bill Porter's translations from the Chinese (as Red Pine, 1983 to the present) in Port Townsend, WA. There was, I feel, an important moment of transPacific cultural exchange going on. Not just Asian labor recruited to California fields, but a real open, active interest in world views countercultural to the Judeo-Christian. My dad was one of those white people reading D. T. Suzuki, Chuang Tzu, in the translations of Arthur Waley and others. In part, due to Saburo Hasegawa's love for the work of Sesshu, fifteenth-century Japanese Zen painter, my father named me Sesshu, and later, named my younger brother Sabro. From birth, like an ancient Chinese or Japanese painting is stamped with the artist's stamp, I was stamped with a transPacific stamp in that moment.

My parents met and married less than ten years after the 1948 repeal of California's racist anti-miscegenation laws under which their marriage would have been null. Pressures to assimilate on Japanese Americans were immense, ranging from legalized detention, internment, "relocation," prohibition of "aliens" from "outmarriage" with whites or Asians from citizenship or owning land in Calif., to confiscation or theft of their property and violence against their persons. My father's brother also married a Japanese American woman—and her sister married an African American, so I discovered in 2013 when I interviewed and spoke with the writer Luis Rodriguez at L.A.'s Last Bookstore, and by chance met my 85 year old aunt's sister Eiko Fukamaki Koyama, when she showed up with her daughter and grandson (Peter Woods, who worked at the bookstore), two generations of part-Japanese African American relatives who previously had gone unmentioned in family circles. Japanese Americans are reported to have the highest rate of outmarriage among all ethnic groups, partly in response to a history of dispossession and violence against their communities, such that many of their communities like Crystal Cove or Terminal Island Furusato were dispersed and erased, the properties "legally" confiscated by whites, with organizations such as the Western Growers Protective Association engaging in an active campaign of "ethnic cleansing" and expropriation. The "transpacific" curiously braids histories of arrogance and naiveté, wishful thinking and hopefulness, atomic bombs and farm labor, dispossession and erasure. Part of my identity as "transpacific" is looking back at histories of forced displacement, denial and erasure.

JH: The injection or intervention of a new substance, originating elsewhere, belonging to a foreign body. “Transfusion” suggests that this kind of mixing is crucial to our health, to our circulation—and it is. Which is not to say that it’s simple or simply salutary. But it seems to me that any notion of “purity” (geographic, racial, social, moral) is a total fantasy, which then must be scaffolded with more and more baroque (perhaps medieval? perhaps inquisitional?) structures to maintain the rigidity of the fantasy. To protect it from the “dangers” from which one might flee to the safety of the Bay Area.

SF: The stereotypical critique of Californians and of people in Los Angeles in particular focuses on East Coast white people Anglocentrally critiquing local whites for their supposed superficiality, their lack of historical and cultural vitality and complexity, their lack of engagement with the ideologies and ideological conflicts of Europe. Overlooked in the East-West national banter about La-La Land and California as the land of sunshine, cults, and airheads is the Faulknerian density of local history. Maybe it doesn’t matter that the bohemia of the Barbary Coast, the San Francisco Renaissance, the People’s Republic of Berkeley, of the Back to the Land movement, and communes like Black Bear Ranch in Northern California or Sunburst by Santa Barbara, or Ken Kern (Oakhurst CA author of a dozen self-published how-to books like *The Owner-Built Homestead*) are gone or forgotten, and twenty-first century Californians may view such locavore small scale proposals as quixotic, if not quaint. Mention hippies to kids these days and they laugh, if they recognize the word. The transPacific for me relates these overlooked or erased mostly Anglo bohemian countercultures to an Asian American history going back to Japanese immigrant Kuninosuke Masamizu, himself the survivor of a failed gold country agrarian commune, who married Carrie Wilson, the daughter of a freed slave in 1877. Their African American descendants in Sacramento reportedly thought their great grandfather was “some kind of Indian.” TransPacific relates an Asian American history of the West that is an open secret, erased or denied or merely forgotten—say, a black and white Library of Congress photograph from 1934 titled, “Chinese Store (ruins), Coloma, El Dorado Co., CA” or the evicted and erased communities of Terminal Island Furusato or Crystal Cove or Lover’s Point (site of a burnt out chinatown) in Pacific Grove—to the living, on-going dialogue.

JH: And that dialogue takes place in this L.A. Pacific/transPacific space in active, cacophonous, disorderly ebullience under a great and transtemporal and non-unifying and ungeneralizable and anti-universal immigrant weather system. Here is the

beginning of a list of L.A. spaces/instances/phenomena I would like to study as “trans-Pacific” and collaborative:

Cielo galleries/studios

Chuco’s Justice Center

Eastside cafe

Kaya Books

Seite Books

Tuesday night reading series;

Writ Large Press

Would it have been better to structure this piece through visits to all these spaces (and/or the books-as-spaces they instigate)? Perhaps. But instead perhaps you will add to this list and it will remain part of the eternal to-do, to be done or undone as time allows, or doesn’t.

SF: That sounds like the next phase, the next step.