
BUCHBESPRECHUNGEN

Lon Kurashige (ed.): Pacific America. Histories of Transoceanic Crossings, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 2017, 288 pp.

Reviewed by
Steffen Wöll, Leipzig

An associate professor of history and spatial sciences at the University of Southern California, Lon Kurashige has published extensively in the field of transpacific and global American history.¹ Kurashige's most recent academic foray is an edited volume released in 2017 and with a paperback edition set for publication in April 2019. Firmly embedded in recent paradigm changes brought about by (Trans)Pacific and Archipelagic American Studies,² the book provides a variety of takes on the reciprocal histories, knowledges, and conflicts across the Asia-Pacific region and the United States, as seen from an East-West perspective. In fifteen chapters and on 250 pages, the authors trace these connections alongside four thematic parts that focus on early modern Chinese history, diasporic networks of identities and trade, racism and imperialism, as well as the archipelagic

regions of Oceania. Thanks to Kurashige's careful editing, the quality of the collected essays remains consistently high and the book manages the balancing act between accessibility for a general readership and 'quotable' material geared toward experts in the field.

The approach to the subject of transpacific history could be described as eclectic, with essays ranging from Madeline Hsu's in-depth analysis of Chinese-American student exchanges to Greg Dvorak's fascinating meditation on networks of trauma, memory, and amnesia that connect the Marshall Islands, Japan, and the United States, therefore "reinstat(ing) the Pacific as a 'Sea of Islands,' a region deeply interconnected – not divided – by the ocean" (p. 230). In one form or another, connections are the common thread that informs the theme of the book. In contrast to other works that are often occupied with the economic and diplomatic policies behind American imperialism and expansionism in the Pacific arena,³ most authors – while certainly not ignoring the important milestones of top-down history – are interested in more personal perspectives that showcase the historical agency of individuals, social groups, and lower tier political organizations. Elizabeth Sinn's essay about "The Hong Kong Connection, 1850–1900," for instance, examines

how larger historical contexts of the gold mountain migration to California together with personal experiences of migrants created “networks that in turn facilitated further movements and transactions across the Pacific” (p. 48). Moreover, Sinn suggests that “(t)he flow of people with different interests and desires was accompanied by the flow of goods, money (as capital and remittances), communication, information, and the bones and coffins of deceased emigrants” (p. 48). In “Pop Gingle’s Cold War,” Peter E. Hamilton investigates “how nonstate actors and (...) individuals deploy and complement states’ power” during the Cold War. He fleshes out the place-making dynamics of the American expat Edward Francis Gingle and his role as an information broker between China and the US, operating from the fringes of the Bamboo Curtain in Hong Kong. These and similar approaches impressively demonstrate the importance of grassroots histories – and grassroots research, respectively – in a transpacific space that has regularly been reduced to economic factors, political tensions, and a hemispheric Yellow Peril rhetoric that has currently reemerged in US foreign affairs.

A point of critique concerns the somewhat arbitrary sequence of the essays, which are juxtaposed in the book’s chapters but do not always speak to each other thematically. In the preface, Kurashige attributes this to the authors’ diverse research interests that reflect themselves in the “partial, preliminary, and ongoing nature of our conversations” (p. ix). While this could be understood as part of an overarching discursive strategy aimed at further variegating transpacific discourses and in this way “surmount the comfortable ‘academic si-

los’ that limit conceptualization of history as a field and experience” (p. ix), a more focused approach would have benefited the book’s overall cohesion and reader guidance. At the same time, this broad-ranging narrative approach also brings to the fore the fault lines and messiness of the emerging field of transpacific history and its desire to operate outside of the rutted paths of policy-driven Eurocentric globalization narratives. Overall, Kurashige succeeds in assembling an instructive body of essays, which not only stand for themselves argumentatively but also provide valuable insights into more granular microhistories of subaltern actors and grassroots organizations and their roles in the larger picture of an ongoing transpacific history. The essays work together by reducing the geographic and epistemic distance between America and the Asia-Pacific region, thus highlighting the importance of their historical and contemporary integration. In doing so, the book puts additional and still much-needed emphasis on the blind spots of traditional historical narratives (such as the frontier and manifest destiny) that revolve around the seemingly natural sequence of East-West movement as the mainspring of Western civilization and American nation-building.

Understanding and tackling the challenges of a globalized world including assumed threats of Chinese economic dominance and migration, Kurashige’s book proposes, means engaging in a discourse that takes into account the historical experiences and agency of marginalized actors and colonized subjects. This approach seems particularly productive and relevant as it understands the nation-centric grand flows of history as the springboard for a

more granular and dialogical history that does not shy away from acknowledging the perspective multiscalarity and rippled patterns of Asian-American relations with all their contradictions and complexities. The book pinpoints the core of these contradictions in the fact that “(w)hile people in the West have been mesmerized by the potential economic fortunes to be made in and from this region, they have also been repelled by its peoples, cultures, and environments, which are seen as incompatible to the West” (p. 2). By confronting these often-painful histories imbued with colonial exploitation and racism, Pacific America allocates largely understudied epistemic connections that help in comprehending the issues of a contemporary global order, whose center of gravity continues to shift toward the Asian-Pacific region and its interplays with the United States.

Notes

- 1 L. Kurashige, *Two Faces of Exclusion. The Untold History of Anti-Asian Racism in the United States*, Chapel Hill 2016; L. Kurashige, *Global Americans. A History of the United States*, Andover 2017.
- 2 See, e.g., Y. Shu/D. E. Pease (eds.), *American Studies as Transnational Practice. Turning toward the Transpacific*, Lebanon (NH) 2015; B. R. Roberts/M. A. Stephens (eds.), *Archipelagic American Studies*, Durham 2017.
- 3 See, e.g., J. Hoskins/V. T. Nguyen, *Transpacific Studies. Framing an Emerging Field*, Honolulu 2014.

Krishan Kumar: Visions of Empire. How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2017, 576 pp.

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In this wide-ranging volume, sociologist Krishan Kumar asks what the histories of five major European empires – Ottoman, Habsburg, Russian, British, and French – might have to teach the contemporary world about governance in general, and about managing difference and diversity in particular. The justification of his choice of case studies is brief: “that is in a sense arbitrary, a reflection of my own tastes and interests as well as of the limits of my knowledge ... at least I can say that the empires I have chosen represent by any standard – size, power, impact – the most important of the modern empires...” (p. xv). For a book that covers five empires – six if you count the Romans, who provide the imperial blueprint at the beginning of the book – this gives the impression of a very personal work. And indeed, the author appears quite attached to “his” empires: “of all the empires discussed in this book, the Habsburg Empire is the most tortuous, treacherous, and protean ... at the same time, it is also – if such a thing is permitted of empires – the most lovable” (p. 145). However, if one’s point of departure is the Roman empire and the administrative as well as symbolic legacies of