

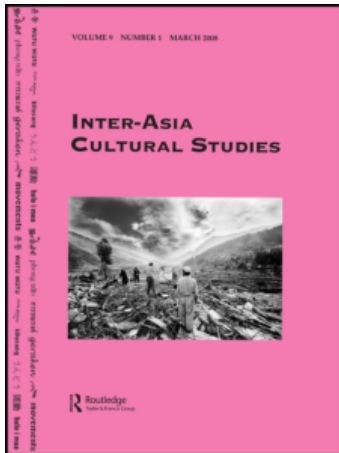
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## Spectral city: San Francisco as Pacific Rim city and counter-cultural contado

Rob WILSON

**ABSTRACT** *San Francisco, since its global takeoff in the Gold Rush Days and long-standing trafficking in Bohemian, socialist, queer, and left-leaning energies in and beyond the Beat era of the 1960s, has a complicated global/local history of trying to disentangle its city-space and urban imaginary from the Greco-Roman will-to-supremacy that would turn California into a frontier settlement of Asian/Pacific domination and US-framed empire. Forces of social becoming like the Beats and post-Beat hippies as well as more experimental authors like Jack Spicer, Maxine Hong Kingston, Frank Chin, and Bob Kaufman helped to forge a different literary-social vision of San Francisco and the Pacific Rim city as a porous community of transnational innovation and outer-national becoming. This paper will invoke some literary and film texts from Howl and Tripmaster Monkey to Vertigo to Margaret Cho stand-up performances as well as some geopolitical studies, such as Gray Brechin's Imperial San Francisco and City Light Press's Reclaiming San Francisco to substantiate this double vision of San Francisco as global/local US site of (a) imperial ratification and (b) counter-orientalist deformation.*

**KEYWORDS:** global city, world city, counter-cultural, Pacific Rim, San Francisco, Beat literature, imperialism, postcolonial, California

They [original San Franciscans] had their faults, but they were not influenced by Cotton Mather. (Kenneth Rexroth, as quoted in Cook 1971: 28)<sup>1</sup>

Now scarce a day passed but some cluster of sails, bound outward through the Golden Gate, took their way to all the corners of the Pacific. Like the magic seed of the Indian juggler, which grew, blossomed, and bore fruit before the eyes of the spectators, San Francisco seemed to have accomplished in a day the growth of half a century. (Bayard Taylor 2000: 240–241)

California is a place unlike any other on the planet. Its culture of innovation, diversity, entrepreneurship, and the-sky's-the-limit creativity are what drew me here, and countless other Californians have similar stories to tell. (Robert C. Dynes [2004], President of the University of California system)<sup>2</sup>

As a Pacific Rim commercial center of swirling energies, San Francisco has long generated its urban configuration of cultural-political power around a 'contado,' or vast geo-periphery 'hinterlands' in the countryside and across the Pacific Ocean, providing material resources (water, timber, stone, agriculture, shipping and so on) as well as huge labor needs and input to build up the wealth and splendor of the 'imperial city' à la Rome or some west-coast Constantinople at Golden Gate (Brechin 1999; Taylor 2000: 166). One of Amy Tan's Chinese immigrant mothers looks up at Saint Mary's Church in *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and sees it dwarfed by the skyscraping Bank of America (postmodern site of worship), at the same time she feels veneration for a church built by granite shipped from China and bricks from

New England, in 1853. Even more scrappy and bypassed was Mission Dolores, built in 1791, the oldest building and cemetery in San Francisco; it contains some 5000 Costanoan natives and settlers of mixed ancestry, plus the first Mexican governor of Alta California. The city is a site of discrepant layering that will generate those haunted spaces, tropes of psychic abyss, spectral eruption, and latent sense of historical disorientation in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1957), as it buries Carlotta Valdez's Hispanic-era claim to the city.

Building on this layered heritage of social vision, John Steinbeck felt that his beloved Salinas Valley was linked to 'the city' to the North as a vast nexus of culture, power, and new ideas, as he recalls in *Travels With Charley: In Search of America* (1962): San Francisco as a city of social leftism that claimed him as much as he claimed it. Akin to the promotional puffery of Bayard Taylor, Kenneth Rexroth evoked a vaster trans-Pacific cartography for the coastal US city in a 1971 interview on San Franciscan poetics (Steinbeck 1962). 'Oceans, like steppes, unite as well as separate', as Rexroth opined of his beloved city, open to the influence of Asia, Pacific, Latin America, and Europe. 'The West Coast is close to the Orient. It's the next thing out there... San Francisco is an international city and it has living contact with the Orient' (in Meltzer 1971: 30).

Since its global consolidation into a boom city during the Gold Rush Days and long-standing trafficking in Bohemian, mongrel, socialist, queer, and left-leaning energies in and beyond the Beat counter-cultural nexus of the 1960s, San Francisco has had a global/local history materializing both (a) an American imperial force and (b) a counter-cultural contestation. These forces of urban creativity and energies of mongrel innovation have been striving to disentangle the emergent city-space and urban imaginary from any Greco-Roman will-to-supremacy over the Pacific Ocean as (in the neo-Roman mythology of William Randolph Hearst) 'the white man's ocean' (Hearst 1948).<sup>3</sup>

Such an imperialist version of Occidental poetics and hegemonic vision of Western regionalism as some kind of space of trans-continental expansionism and civilizational conquest would strive, now and again, to turn California back into a white-frontier settlement of Hispanic, Native American, and Asian/Pacific domination and tie the sublime geography of California creativity into a US-centered empire of Anglo-globalization and one-way flow. At once 'so full of the sea-port nakedness, yet so new and American', as William James saw during his first visit to this thriving, half-crazed city (he was later to be teaching at Stanford University on the 'Moral Equivalent of War' when the San Francisco earthquake struck the Bay Area in 1906), San Francisco has long served to nurture and reflect these extreme creative-destructive dynamics of capitalism-on-edge, some edgy pragmatism of an emergent city-form and evolving utopia (Allen 1966: 392, 455) of which literature in some ways (as we shall claim here) has been the spectral keeper. The spectrality of literature, however residual this cultural form, still does battle against the forces of virtuality and displacement that are taking over the city.

As a long-standing global city with a cyber-innovative corridor extending into Silicon Valley and the East Bay, and a huge trans-Pacific and Latin American nexus that headquarters transnational assembly firms and service sites like Gap, Old Navy, and Cathay Pacific, San Francisco (along with Boston on the east coast) is one of those older US cities of settler romance and tourist fixation that has nowadays transformed itself from being an 'ephemeral city' of entertainment, romantic allure, ethnic enchantment, and tourist concourse, to building up, serving and now promoting a vast and increasingly elite post-industrial constituency of yuppies, net-heads, and bobos displacing place-rich neighborhoods and customs.<sup>4</sup> As Rebecca Solnit and Susan Schwartzberg have warned in their manifesto *Hollow City* (2000), which tracks the contemporary creative-destructive 'hollowing out' of San Francisco as a life-experimental scene and edge city of aesthetic multicultural openness by crazed real-estate speculation and the will to cybernetic evacuation of Silicon Valley hyper-capitalism across the 1990s,

A decade ago Los Angeles looked like the future—urban decay, open warfare, segregation, despair, injustice and corruption—but the new future looks like San Francisco: a frenzy of financial speculation, covert coercions, overt erasures, a barrage of novelty-item restaurants, websites, technologies and trends, the despair of unemployment replaced by the numbness of incessant work hours and the anxiety of destabilized jobs, homes and neighborhoods. (Solnit 2000: 14)

‘Cities give us collision,’ Emerson urged in the neo-capitalist poetics of ‘Culture,’ embracing this American modern will to interface, collage, fuse, and (if need be) demolish and forget (Emerson 1996: 850). In San Francisco, these convulsive cycles of boom-and-bust and perpetual drive to creative-destructive innovation, since the manic Gold Rush days of Bayard Taylor’s pro-imperialist *Eldorado* of 1850, through the prescient Hitchcock’s urban-flaneur malaise in *Vertigo* or the psychedelic abyss of Jack Nicholson *et al.* in the fringe hippie cultures of *Psych Out* (1968), down to the molting financial urbanscape George Oppen portrays in his poem ‘The Building of a Skyscraper,’ have caused the city to be typically figured as a maze, vortex, or disorienting abyss, a city seen troped as always ‘on the verge/ of vertigo’ (Oppen 2004). As Oppen genealogizes the city space (Gioia *et al.* 2004: 83–84), Sierra minescape and ‘bare land’ open into an abyss of wealth and gets inverted into Greco-Roman mansion and Pyramid highrise:

The steel worker on the girder  
 Learned not to look down, and does his work...  
 We look back  
 Three hundred years and see bare land.  
 And suffer vertigo. (Gioia *et al.* 2004: 83–84)

San Francisco has built up its history so fast and furiously, it always appears about to be swallowed back into an abyss, evoking a vertigo of ecological catastrophe or historical oblivion. Oppen’s force of poetic Objectivism, placing word by word in a disruptive syntax (words refracted back from historical amnesia and spatial dislocation) as the counter-Capitalist ‘business of the poet,’ aligns the city-dweller to rooted, slowed-down things which, if only a budding tree in the sidewalk, do burst green and growing ‘into the culture of the streets’ (Oppen 2004). Oppen measures the force of a counter-image, a dialectical reversal of the neo-capitalizing everyday. As Gary Snyder portrays these ‘deeply dug-in’ forces of counter-vision and reverential habitat to counter such disappearance, San Francisco was the west-coast place (as gathered around North Beach) where ‘non-Anglo’ forces surging from Costanoan natives of watershed landscape to Asia-looking Beats and Southern European immigrant questers for life-wisdom could do ‘the good work of hatching something else in America, pray it cracks the shell of time’ (Snyder 1977: 47).

Forces of mongrel becoming and ‘spectral’ eruption and material critique like the Beats and post-Beat hippies as well as more overtly experimental authors like Jack Spicer, Helen Adam, Maxine Hong Kingston, Frank Chin, Pamela Lu, Juliana Spahr, Michelle Tea, Oppen, Snyder, and Bob Kaufman (to the counter-cultural and experimentalist contrary) have helped to forge a spectral literary-social vision of San Francisco, making this US Pacific Rim city into a porous contact zone, future-drenched, and trans-cultural community evincing transnational innovation and a kind of outer-national becoming.<sup>5</sup> The mutating urbanscape and rusting industrial infrastructure are haunted by what Allen Ginsberg famously invoked as the ‘Sunflower Sutra’ in *Howl*, a counter-message of earth-care and potential beatitude, of awakening and rebirth, if only shadowed in a waste-heaped railyard south of the city, ‘under the shadow of the mad locomotive riverbank sunset Frisco hilly tincan/ evening sitdown vision’ (Ginsberg 1984: 139). As urban context resurrected to the Beat left of Baudelaire’s Paris and Whitman’s New York, it was ‘no accident that Ginsberg wrote *Howl* [and first performed it at the Six Gallery reading in 1955, and published it in *City Lights* (1956)] in

San Francisco', as Jonah Raskin has shown in *American Scream*, for 'San Francisco, with its spectacular beauty and its exuberant recklessness' nurtured and released experimental energies and the wild prosody of the Beat Generation (Raskin 2004: 9). As Gary Snyder puts the vertigo-haunted dangers and Blakean life-risk energizing the quest to live and write San Francisco culture, 'Many people risking all—following sometimes the path of excess and not always going beyond folly to the hoped for wisdom' (Snyder 1977: 47).

This west-coast city of relaxed openness rife with 'cross-continental and cross-cultural pollination' (Raskin 2004: 9, 122) seemed a counter-cultural exception to Cold War dread and colder East Coast formalism: as Jack Kerouac urged in *Desolation Angels* in 1965, coming down from Pacific Northwest mountain-highs, 'Wow, an entirely different scene, San Francisco always is, it always gives you the courage of your convictions' (Kerouac 1995: 130). Even Kerouac turned to everyday urban poetry there, and wrote his first book of poems, dedicated to Beat forms of musical emergence, mongrelizing rhythms, raunchy language, and life-beatitude in the city, *San Francisco Blues*, even as Ginsberg wrote a whole range of new poems dedicated to what he affirmed was an 'Athens-like' city (Raskin 2004: 10, 123) of art, love, eros, and political community.

This essay will further invoke some of these far-ranging literary and filmic texts from *Howl* and *Tripmaster Monkey* (1990) to *Dark Passage* (1947) as well as key geopolitical studies of the transnationalizing city-contado like Gray Brechin's center/periphery study *Imperial San Francisco* (1999) and City Light Press's more localist-based *Reclaiming San Francisco* (1998) to substantiate this double-vision of San Francisco as a global/local US site of (a) imperial ratification and (b) a counter-orientalist deformation and space of 'borderlands' becoming. This is because the eco-political crisis we face, locally and globally at home and abroad, is more than a crisis of urban space, cultural poetics, or representation as such: the US superpower is managing a crisis of global empire and dismantling hegemony, as deforestation and global heating surge across the planet and tower over green-city efforts, and off-shoring and middle-class proletarianization get taken as an everyday down-sizing practice.

The war-machine of the Pax Americana has turned from initial 'shock and awe' effects in the Iraq War into the techno-hubris reversals charted in the cautionary Third Worldist terms and desert traumas of Ridley Scott's film *Black Hawk Down* (2001). The embedding of democratic politics into war and the vulgar Social Darwinism of US 'reality TV' has reached a mass-mediated level of post-historical cynicism and meanness-of-spirit that defeats any mere Situationist call (as it were) to '*Bring the Tropes Home!*'<sup>6</sup> As the Bay Area Situationist Collective warned in a demo-based rejoinder to the global power of the Spectacle as neo-instrument of capitalist accumulation, as well as its Terrorist counter-appropriations by forces of civilizational annihilation and some kind of mass-mediated degree zero of castration, decapitation, and death, 'it remains to be seen what new mutation of the military-industrial-entertainment complex emerges from the shambles' after Ground Zero and the wars against Iraq and residual forms of populist representation and civil critique (Bay Area Situationist Collective 2004).

Urban streets bare the traces of a time of global crisis and leftist demoralization when, as Walter Benjamin put it theorizing poetry between the two prior world wars: '[even] the dream [of surrealism] has grown gray' (Benjamin 1999: 3). Against the reign of a US-led Empire of the war-machine when global hegemony scarcely 'takes a breathing spell,' we would hold out for a place-based yet innovative poetics of transpacific vision and forms of San Francisco-based regionality that is a spectral and abidingly inter-textual one, with long-standing palimpsestic ties to coalitions and authors on the coast and the Beat dharma-bum versions of the Pacific Rim (Kerouac 1982). It is a vision out of joint perchance with these times of cynical reason cum professional melancholia. The literatures of San Francisco register a far-reaching archive of memory and vision that tracks a 'spectral city' in an invisible

republic dedicated to preserving the activist politics, left-leaning energies, and vision-opening forces of prophesy, coalition, hyperbole, spirituality, and critique. Urban regionality, so configured beyond nostalgia, as an emergent topos (trope/place) for transnational community and mongrel multiplicity, becomes a site in which to register and articulate the global/local dialectics of space-transformation and the situated transnational tactics of what we could call (deforming Heidegger to counter-liberal local uses) 'world making.'

The Beat deconstructivist poet Jack Spicer memorably captured this 'image of the city' of the Bay Area urban nexus and mongrelizing cosmopolis in the warped and disjunctive stanzas of *Heads of the Town Up to the Ether* (especially in *A Textbook of Poetry* sections) of 1960–1961, when he urged, speaking of his specific locality of San Francisco as emanating from the local poetry-wars, language deformations, and willed marginality of standup poetry scenes in little North Beach bars like Gino Carlos and The Place,

Every city that is formed collects its slums and the ghost of it. Every city that is formed collects its ghosts.

Poetry comes long after the city is collected. It recognizes *them* as a metaphor. An unavoidable metaphor. Almost the opposite.

...But the city that we create in our bartalk or in our fuss and fury about each other is in an utterly mixed and mirrored way an image of the city. A return from exile. (Spicer 1980: 175–176)

Michael Davidson illuminates the *longue durée* of these over-reaching lines and providential city-vision when he urges that 'Spicer's model here is Dante, who, exiled from Florence, creates a divine comedy out of historical contingency and in the process turns his local city into a system of belief' (Davidson 1991: 156–167).<sup>7</sup> Only perhaps in San Francisco would such lofty beatitudes and a vision of transcendental imagination root down in place and find a measure, and thus live on to redeem urban existence.

Against contemporary market odds and what Emerson mocked as the *vers de societe* that seems to rule our own Gilded Era days, this city nurtures the vocation *in extremis* of the poet/culture maker in coastal and Pacific-leaning California, as a figure of theory-making and situated will plugged into world-transforming energies on this US left-coast of experimental poetics and geopolitics. Poems need to be adequate to our urban spaces and historical plight, the entanglement of empire and locality, the need for the resistance of a counter-vision. This is the poetic calling to high contrarian vision in William Everson's sense as outlined in his 'Santa Cruz Meditations,' a vocation aiming to 'throw off this malaise, this evasion, this attitudinizing and sickliness of urbanity' and, instead, tied to place and the genius loci of western vision, '[To] Shamanize! Shaminize! The American destiny is in your hands' (Everson 1982: 135).<sup>8</sup> This is because, as Ishmael Reed contends in his own ludic counter-myth 'Go East'—inscribed on Berkeley's Addison Street poetry walk, signifying the Bay Area's Anglo-American ancestry as imperial vanguard for the West—the city of Berkeley leads not back to New York City and the cultural capital of Europe but across to Asia and the myriad cultures (from Tibetan Buddhism to Hindu meditation and Chinese Maoism) of the Pacific Rim (Hass and Fisher 2004: 166):

Bishop George Berkeley  
you got it backwards  
It's 'Go East, Young Man,  
Go East.' (Reed 2004)

The situation of poetry in a late-capitalist society of sublimated Empire—whereby poetry is constructed as the site of a de-instrumentalized irrelevance, lyric quietude, and social indifference<sup>9</sup>—has aggravated the working contradictions and historical malaise into a social condition in which the need for the preservation of vision that poetry offers and the



ties to sites, languages, experiments, and places of contestation that is cultural poetics (in the broadest sense) has never been more urgent. Still, from this angle of theory and pedagogy working in California on and across the Pacific Rim, poetry (as a genre of social discourse) remains a crucial soul-making and counter-worlding project that helps to prefigure, open a space for, and regenerate 'the invisible republic' of dust-bowl poets and makers of refashioned polity, place, and language-community from Woody Guthrie and Sister Gertrude Morgan to Bob Kaufman, Pamela Lu, Sesshu Foster, Zack Linmark, and Kathy Dee Banggo to name only a mongrel few.<sup>10</sup> This is because we live in an era of material opacity, spectral alienation, and the wholesale contraction of visionary forces away from any future-making capacity or collective will: 'Therefore Los [Blake's name for the vision-keeping poet] stands in London [the global city] building Golgonooza/ Compelling his Specter to labors mighty' ('Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Great Albion', Blake 1977: 650–651). Golgonooza (Blake's term for industrializing London as a 'global city' troped into a new-born Albion/Jerusalem of redemptive political vision and blasted futurity linked to the revolutionary prophecies of 'America') stands for the fully particularized city-of-art as such. Urban literature becomes the keeper of such forces as mandates to social imagination and ecological care.

Again and again, we do 'make a start out of particulars,' meaning the grimy contexts of historical locality and the situatedness of social utterance; we have learned that much, as American cultural poesis, from the 'filthy Passaic' of Doc Williams and the more projective global-locality of Charles Olson's seafaring Gloucester. San Francisco, in keeping this post-Beat 'contado' surging its urban borders and energy-exchanges from the High Sierras, Cal and Stanford and UCSC, and Silicon Valley to the coastal reaches of Esalen self-experimentation at Big Sur (see Kripal 2007), timbers, and faux castles of Big Sur and San Simeon, stands capaciously for such a 'city of art' and nexus of leftist emergences on the Pacific Rim.<sup>11</sup> If San Francisco is to prefigure this vision-driven and art-respecting *civitas dei*, then it demands a very left leaning, bohemian, queer, mongrel, porous site of experimental energies and juxtapositions open to the future and to the free-play of the off-beat and new.

As the one Jack Spicer poem Robert Hass embedded in the grungy poetry walkway on Addison Street in Berkeley near the BART station would remind us, 'Hold to the future. With firm hands. The future of each afterlife, of each ghost, of each word that is about to be mentioned./ Don't put beauty in here for the past, on account of the past. On account of the past nothing has happened./ Stick to the new. With glue, paste it there continually what God and man has created. Your fingers catch at the edge of what you are pasting' ('Heads of the Town', Spicer 1980: 179). Spicer's tie to this caustic localism of place in post-Beat San Francisco and a coastal California of queer emergence went along uneasily with the more deconstructive recognition as well embraced by the ironist Spicer—as opposed to the incarnational Gloucester as propagated in Charles Olson personifying himself as an updated version of Melville's 'Pacific Man'—that 'Where we are is in a sentence.'<sup>12</sup> Spicer's poem on the poetics of emergence, captures what Berkeley and the Bay Area stands for: energies coming out of the future, open to free speech poetics, that kind of mode that made myself and others cross the country to get near or into it, something unfinished blessing the ground too.

In excessive, exploratory, and meandering postmodern terms of discursive over-reach and mythopoetic vision, Maxine Hong Kingston has finely captured the post-Beat and thickly archival San Francisco poetic culture and leftist politics of place through her 1960s-drenched refiguration of Frank Chin as Asian American street-theater activist in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (Kingston 1990). This remains one of the greatest postwar literary works San Francisco's post-Beat and transpacific-becoming culture has yet produced, as place and self collage and collapse into one mongrel and inter-textual mix by the suicide-haunted Golden Gate Bridge where the 'fake book' opens its psychedelic documentary: 'San

Francisco, city of clammy humors and foghorns that warn and warn—omen, o-o-men, or dolorous omen, o dolors of omen’ (Kingston 1990: 3 ff.).<sup>13</sup> Beyond white Beat canonicity, San Francisco becomes the home of five-generation native sinner and son, the grandly named Chinese/American Wittman Ah Sing out-trooping Bret Harte, Alfred Hitchcock, Frank Norris, Jack Kerouac, John Steinbeck, Peter Orlovsky, Ishmael Reed, David Henderson, and his namesake bard Walt Whitman in a space-trumping claim to speak the dramaturgy of urban polity and the poetics of self-fashioning and Chinatown as place, myth, and nation-language:

Wittman has begun a someday tradition that may lead to a job as a reader riding the railroads throughout the West. On the train through Fresno—Saroyan; through the Salinas Valley—Steinbeck; through Monterey—*Cannery Row*; along the Big Sur ocean—Jack Kerouac; on the way to Weed—*Of Mice and Men*; in the Mother Lode—Mark Twain and Robert Louis Stevenson, who went on a Honeymoon in *The Silverado Squatters; Roughing It* through Calaveras County and the Sacramento Valley... (Kingston 1990: 9)

Site of flux, risk, Hispanic fusion, orientalized danger, and psycho-political edginess, San Francisco awakens and calls for extreme forms of poesis and imaginative challenge. In film after film in the 1940 and 1950s down to the retro-thriller tropes of urban carnality in *Basic Instinct* (1992), San Francisco urban noir is made from ‘the stuff that dreams are made of’, to evoke a line from *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). The recursive entrapments of urban noir would migrate from New York and Los Angeles and turn San Francisco streets, modern apartments, hilly lifts, and corner alleys into fear-haunted labyrinths, fogs into messengers of dread, trauma, bloodshed, mute harbingers of anonymous death. As Nathaniel Rich summarizes the specter-haunted genre of dread chiaroscuro as it met the ‘peculiar mythology of vertiginous rebirth’ and transmuted into ‘San Francisco noir’, ‘From the Gold Rush to the Silicon Rush, San Francisco has come to represent an American El Dorado, beckoning spectators and gamblers, men who come to the city to reverse their fortunes and reinvent themselves, only to fail miserably in the end’ (Rich 2005: 10). However, in that quirky noir thriller set in postwar San Francisco, *Dark Passage* (1947), even the femme fatale of castrating malice turns around into some blonde beatific Beatrice, with Lauren Bacall rescuing the wrongly excused escaped convict Humphrey Bogart out of the urban labyrinths and traps of revenge and taking him to safety and salvation in the sunny harbors of Peru. Even noir can turn sunny and beatific when cast in the streets of San Francisco, that is to say, its dark spectral passages of urban dread and cold war paranoia leading outward into something bright, romantic, beatific, as midnight vertigo turns into Franciscan sunny sublimity by the Pacific healing waters.

As Brecht’s ‘Song of the Man of San Francisco’ captures this life-altering Californian optimism as some kind of anti-depressive genius loci of the west, ‘On paper/ I have a wife in the east/ And a roof over some faraway ground/ But here/ Is where the action is, and fun, and/ The city’s still growing’ (Brecht 1987: 155–156). Working within the US trajectory of revolutionary transformation on the bliss-ridden edge of the North Beach becoming Haight Ashbury and its counter-cultural *contado* spreading into poetry readings, Be-ins, rock concerts and the streets, Kenneth Rexroth could boast, after the long march of the US 1960s into the Third World and back, ‘The San Francisco scene dominates world culture’ in a nexus of post-beatnik transformation leading from California to Prague and Paris. ‘Today we are all a part of the world literature, and we have a profound effect on world literature’ Rexroth added, urging that ‘the young people coming up’ in San Francisco or elsewhere in the ever-provincial US, ‘need to be reconnected with the avant-garde tradition of the world’ (Interview with Kenneth Rexroth in Meltzer 1971: 34, 36–37). This local literary and cultural production as such could not be separated from large-scale transformations of the social and geopolitical that were coming to be fused into a huge poetics of global ecology.



In larger transpacific terms, San Francisco faces and enacts the trans-binary Pacific Rim effect of imagined transnational community functions as a key US neo-liberal capitalist space to register and adjust to global-transnational flows. Whatever the stasis and dead-end effect of global capitalism as portrayed in the burnt-out careers, lost romances, and metonymized in the entropic Tokyo urbanescapes of *Lost In Translation* (2003), say, the Pacific Rim remains a key locus of global capitalist dynamism in all its hyper-speculative risk as well as more phobic labor-class modes of transnational othering and transnational and trans-cultural becoming. However, this contemporary Pacific Rim nexus is surely a swirling, uneven space, full of huge rural-urban imbalances and labor/capital injustices and IMF ruses, all the more aggravated by the contradictions of peril and promise after 9/11. Allow me to juxtapose some uneven instances. The King Sihanouk of Cambodia, influenced by the struggle for queer marriage rights and legal legitimacy in the left-coast city of San Francisco, suddenly decreed in a handwritten message on his website that Cambodia would allow 'marriage between man and man... or between woman and woman' (BBC News 2004). Gap Inc., a San Francisco-based garment nexus that makes post-hip clothes for yuppies trying to look like Jack Kerouac on weekends, includes Old Navy and Banana Republic shops under its corporate domain with some 3009 factories scattered across 50 countries in its global 'contado.' Its annual revenues are close to US\$16 billion even in a bad year. China, with 241 factories, was accused of 73 plant violations in a recent public-relations attempt by Gap to improve its US-global image by monitoring work conditions in its Technicolor-garment 'sweatshops' (Liedtke 2004).

Geo-strategically centered around an offshore conglomeration of nuclear submarines, aircraft carriers, and cruise missiles based at Pearl Harbor and linked to the DMZ and Iraq theaters of war, RIMPAC 2004 went on holding its biennial multinational Pacific exercise in Hawaiian waters off Kauai by blasting decommissioned Navy destroyers that had served in Cuban blockade and wars in Vietnam and USSR surveillance into sub-oceanic oblivion and decay (Hurley 2004). Full of market boom and bust vitality, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, and Singapore, went on serving that global-cheerleader for *New York Times* neo-liberalism, Thomas L. Friedman, as global 'model minorities' figuring economic growth and entrepreneurial creativity to show backward countries 'cursed with oil' like Iraq and other Middle Eastern polities tied to neo-orientalist 'pathologies of the Arab world' how they might survive the new global order of transnational capitalism cum US-hegemonic mimicry (Friedman 2004).

Resisting Bollywood cover-ups in pelvic love and cultic folk dance, Arundati Roy went on decrying real/virtual discrepancies and 'the most violent increase in rural-urban income inequalities since independence' in techno-rife India (Roy 2004). At the blockbuster level of spectacular capitalism, *Kill Bill* and anime-based films amped up the inter-Asian and global cultural cachet of 'cool Japan' and Hong Kong martial arts film genres and action techniques in some kind of ludic transcultural burst of sexuality, violence, digital zen, cyberspace flight, and Asia-pop idolatry (Peques 2004). Meanwhile back in the hyper-mediated states of Hollywood distraction, a haole politician and missionary-offspring named Ed Case in multi-cult Hawaii courted Asia/Pacific ethnic votes by urging viewers of the mass-music TV show *American Idol*, 'If you want to show your support for Asian-Pacific Americans tonight, you know what number to call on what TV show right now, Jasmine [Trias, a local Filipina 17-year old who can barely sing] just finished singing' (Harada and Serrano 2004). A million plus cell phone calls from Hawaii alone kept Jasmine in the *Idol* running. Whatever the global plight, the trans-Pacific fuses transnational peril and promise, pulling race, class, nation, technology, and gender into some odd and uneven juxtapositions from the King of Cambodia and Gap Inc. as tied to San Francisco to the postcolonial longings for ethnic-recognition in Honolulu (Tsai 2004).

The Pacific Rim—as space of peril and promise—is the larger global context in which I would want to frame this expansive-yet-situated vision of San Francisco as transnationalizing

city. This vision of California regionalism and San Francisco as global city of cultural-political newness and promissory queerness, thus, will have to assume not only an abiding openness to 'transpacific' forces of Asia/Pacific becoming and Hispanic transculturation since the Gold Rush days of an impossible white nativism; it will also want to tap into those high-visionary sources from literature and popular culture (from Lenny Bruce and Maxine Hong Kingston to Jack Spicer, Bob Kaufman, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Margaret Cho) as built upon a prophetic configuration of cultural vocation, spectral forces, and an expansive urban 'contado.' These are oppositional forces of political will and imagination that Blake (as in Kenzaburo Oe's eccentrically prophetic postwar-Japan novel on this High Romantic vision called *Rouse Up Oh Young Men of the New Age!* [Oe 2002]) troped as 'Jesus-the-Imagination.' Imagination becomes a force of counter-mechanistic vision Blake opposed to the reactionary hegemony of world capital and a kind of dead empiricism of mere matter-turned-commodity as 'the fallen world of illusion'.<sup>14</sup> Margaret Cho, tying her own stand-up performances deforming Korean American trans-ethnic identity to her ties to the Queer community of her San Francisco home-girl city, claims to carry this expressive context around with her, taking such freedom and risk to the world. 'What's great about my shows', Cho affirms, 'are [sic] that they create a Bay Area phenomenon in every city in the world that I perform in' (quoted in Lau and Otani 2002).

As outlined in Brechin, San Francisco has long served as a 'contado' of a vast urban periphery ('hinterlands' of the countryside) providing material resources (water, timber, stone, agriculture, shipping and so on) as well as huge labor needs and inputs to build up the wealth and splendor of the 'imperial city' à la Rome or Constantinople.<sup>15</sup> Reflecting a more coalitional, experimental, and trans-poetics vision linked to the 'worlding' dynamics of Santa Cruz and the global contado of San Francisco as Northern California nexus linked to Asia Pacific and the Americas to the south and north, San Francisco has also long been site to a situated poetics of transpacific capaciousness and California regionality. This is an extreme, ongoing and abiding poetics of place and numinous reach, with long-standing palimpsestic ties to sites and authors, and one which is dedicated to preserving (if only in a visionary-affirmative mode of social pre-figuration) the activist politics energies and visionary reach of what Blake called 'Jesus-the-Imagination' and William Everson incarnated in his vision-keeping works to shape and abiding ontological geopolitical poetics of place, *Archetype West: The Pacific Coast as a Literary Region* (1976) and its companion work in the pedagogy of vocation and regional/national/cosmological vision, *Birth of the Poet* (1982).

From his cabin and A-frame press in Swanton along the Pacific above Santa Cruz (where he taught for years at Kresge College at UCSC and forged his sacramental vision of place and embodied poetics), this Brother Antoninus turned Dharma-Bum Blakean prophet helped to forge and enlarge the legends and myths and hyperboles of vision that allow place (regionality as such) not just to exist as geo-material fact and fate, but as mytho-poetic longing and historical-existential project to become an 'idea/archetype' in the sacramental worlding and tactical beatitudes of place. In *Archetype West: The Pacific Coast as Literary Region*, Everson invokes and challenges with a whole life-time of place-based western work the East Coast platitudes of New York critical lion Edmund Wilson who had blasted the Big Sur poetry and California exceptionalism of Robinson Jeffers in 1941 in these place-denying, smug, culture-emptying terms: 'It is probably a good deal too easy [for Jeffers] to be a nihilist on the [Big Sur] coast at Carmel: your very negation is a negation of nothing' (Everson 1976: 4). But Everson, to the contrary, living in Swanton near Santa Cruz and teaching his huge 'Birth of the Poet' course in UCSC Kresge College from 1969 to the mid 1980s in the wake of mentor-figures like Jeffers, Rexroth, Royce, and the Duncan-Spicer circle of Bay Area poets, argues for the abiding force of west coast poetics and San Franciscan incarnations; he claims that Kerouac and Ginsberg 'became the true voice of the western regional archetype,' as these Beats incarnated the primordial, sublime, and wild energies of the region as some kind of 'apotheosis' (Everson 1976: 113) even as the movement of west-coast

Hippies later diffused this energy of place into the social body (Everson 1976: 147) in sites like Haight Ashbury, North Beach, and Venice Beach.

While versions of regional locality and California exceptionality can be bounded and drenched in nostalgia and sentimentality, this is not being retrospective or rearguard here. The San Francisco of *spectral* vision I am contending for here remains emergent, mongrel, multiple, under construction, open to myriad forces of transcultural and translational becoming. For, in such a vision of western regionality, the Pacific Ocean is not an entropic end-point, smoldering 'void' (Lawrence), or beautiful 'Glass Wall' (Baudrillard, Lyotard) of blockage, entrapment, and closure where US white-settler frontier dynamism ends and suicide, death, sunset, miscegenation, acid trips, bardic flight, and narcissistic aimlessness and cultural folly begin.<sup>16</sup> This misguided sense of a continental-forged California forever closed to Asia/Pacific and native becoming not to mention shut off from the phenomenal South/North transcultural/translational interconnections between Alta/Baja Americas, was most invidiously portrayed by Louis Simpson in a 1963 Pulitzer-prize winning poem called 'Lines Written Near San Francisco' which claims utter world-weariness and second-rate wine-consumption as California *telos*:

Every night at the  
end of America  
We taste our wine,  
Looking at the  
Pacific.  
How sad it is, the  
end of America!  
(As cited in Gioia 1998)

In 'Fallen Western Star: The Decline of San Francisco as a Literary Region,' Dana Gioia invokes this delusively little-narrative poem by the New York-missing Simpson to substantiate the remarkably wrong-headed claim that San Francisco had altogether stopped being the center of US literary culture around the imperial-San Francisco heyday in 1898 and 1899 when literary figures like Frank Norris, Ambrose Bierce, Jack London, Bret Harte, Lincoln Steffans, and the amazingly banal proletarian poet of 'The Man with the Hoe', Edwin Markham, had a broad national if not world impact.<sup>17</sup>

Defending California regionality and the local basis of art, Gioia contends that present-day San Francisco has no 'literary ecosystem' or 'thriving literary culture' of presses, journals, critics, social theorists, or authors of cosmopolitan regionality or innovative vision to speak of, although he oddly remarks that 'Pundits are never in short supply in Berkeley, which is probably why it produced—albeit twenty-five years ago—the last influential local literary trend, Language Poetry.' Such a failure of vision and denial of history are so out of keeping with contemporary San Francisco and its literary-experimental contado, only somebody in New York, Denver, or Washington DC could believe its retro-fitted and nostalgia-drunk claims to defend the mythos of California as writing locality.<sup>18</sup>

The vision of place and polity is challenged by material blockage and the will to perpetual negation and rootlessness: 'Los [the poet] reads the Stars of Albion! The Specter [theory] reads the Voids/ Between the Stars.' This nervous dialectic of image and concept, theory and dream, has been transported to transpacific sites out along the Pacific Rim where Kant (as in fits of sublime lassitude) walks and walks around Taipei.<sup>19</sup> Building-up into the makings of a transnational vision 'among these dark Satanic Mills' of Connecticut and the lesser lights and 'Mental Fight' of malls and courts from Civic Center anti-war demonstrations to Berkeley classroom clamor ('Milton', Preface, Blake 1977: 514).

In these times of crisis and defeat, poetry as such becomes a way of keeping the soul alive (as in Blake's principle of Los pursuing Jesus-the-Imagination) in the late capitalist

world, say, with its codes of de-sacralization, glamour, banality, plunder, loathing, and dust. Poetry becomes a way of searching for a mantra, miming ontological traces and minority-becomings along lines of dwelling and flight, 'walking between the two deserts/singing.' In mongrel and myriad small presses from Tinfoil and subpress collective to New Pacific Press and Krupsykyia, poetry emerges anew as language charged with meaning, in the strict sense of syntax, a way of becoming; maybe (at times) a tongue or stammer on fire, selecting and finishing language in some modest act of will and *emergent intelligence*.

By such visions of polity and place, the aim is to write beyond the self into another language and place of perpetual becoming where the language of dispossession seems an act of vision, spectral eruption, lost certitude, syntactical torquing: global/local finding. The goal is to write a generative vision—poetics—of this Northern California region and globalizing and localized city and its huge contado (ever-globalizing San Francisco) that is commensurable with the edgy history and boom-and-bust dynamics of this much troped-upon city and place by the Pacific and the Golden Gate Bridge. San Francisco troped as ever-mongrelizing 'contact zone' leading to Asia/Pacific, North and South coasts, parts and formations emergent, mixed, and (in this Bush 2 regime of accommodation and fear) all but unrecognized, forgotten, and unknown.

This poetics, in effect, is a way of calling the 'spectral' forces of San Francisco back from the past and out from the future, evoking the 'spectral city' that is not so much ephemeral as waiting up ahead of us and lurking in the palimpsests of place and history on every street corner and in the emergent energies of myriad poems that bespeak the mongrel *communitas* of San Francisco as Pacific Rim nexus and site of global/local beatitudes. This anonymous poem found taped on a wall leading down to the Market Street BART Station in downtown San Francisco in April 2005 captures the swarming traditions and will to visionary 'praxis' of this left-coast city, San Francisco poetry coming down from Rexroth, Ferlinghetti, Everson, Lenore Kandell, Helen Adam, the Grateful Dead *et al.*, as an 'interview' with myriad spectral traditions rising out from the past to summons the urban future to a 'language dream' of ongoing beatitude and quest:

### San Francisco interview

For a month now over the city by the pyramid banks  
 Your hand in mine we walk out into the renovated Fillmore,  
 But do not sing those thin blue songs tonight by the taco counter  
 The ravens of my soul stand ever-watch on the street corner  
 Without reason or time they come and ask for more pimp flesh  
 Never ask the same way, just freak out the sorry soul into sad sack  
 Amid an elite army of thousands marching by the Peace Pagoda.  
 This is the hidden door to California country:  
 Men walking on the moon today, you lost in an acid zone  
 Reflux as if a molecular unity in the Haight Ashbury  
 As the language-dream rumbles on from long ago  
 And another KPFA savior is preaching a new kind of praxis.

### Notes

1. On non-Puritan offspring of literary San Francisco leading to Beat culture and beyond, see Peters and Ferlinghetti (1980). On the life-experimental dimensions of 'becoming California' as cultural fate by residents either born in, or 'born-again' in, this left-coast trans-Pacific state, see the overview by native San Franciscan James D. Houston (1992). For an array of works in various genres that claim to represent San Francisco, past and present, see also Miller (1990), Chappell (2002), and Rathmell (1998) as well as Ferlinghetti (2001) and Gregory Corso's splendid hymn to urban excess and ecstatic community, 'Ode to

- Coit Tower', in Ferlinghetti (1995: 34). On the ties of Big Sur to San Francisco literary culture and psycho-social experimentation on body and soul and place, see Kripal (2007); and on San Francisco as part of a Shasta 'bioregion' and Sierras watershed, see Snyder (1995: 233).
2. *Poesis* and the mnemonic power of the humanities help to empower Dynes' claim to California creativity and will to regional cum national exceptionality, although he centers his corporatist-aligned claim to super-creativity in the techno-sciences, bio-genetic research, and business culture of Silicon Valley capitalism.
  3. In the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, William Randolph Hearst proclaimed, 'The Pacific Ocean is the white man's ocean' and that Anglo-Saxon forces of imperialist supremacy based in San Francisco and at UC Berkeley and Stanford, 'must keep these lands and seas clean and clear for Occidental progress and civilization' (Brechin 1999: 230). Powerfully historicized and de-centering in its portrayal of imperialist dialectics from Gold Rush to Atomic energy formations, Brechin's geo-material vision of San Francisco as vast 'contado' of center/periphery interaction and hinterlands, does not claim to outline a counter-imperial poetics nor turn (except in rare moments) to San Francisco literature, performance culture, or experimental poetics as such for the makings of a counter-vision or spectral critique of this 'imperial Pacific' and its Beat counter-cultural contado, as I will try to do here.
  4. On such large-scale shifts towards a cybernetic-driven transnationalization in the post-Fordist 'posteconomy' and the pro-globalist boosterism needed to connect such urban transformations, suburban build-ups, and inner-city population displacements and down-sizing, see Kotkin (2005), Hartman (2002), and Solomon (2003), who calls for a Heideggerean place-based urban constructionism (a 'New Urbanism' [Solomon 2003: 209–219] in San Francisco) against 'the global city blues' of hegemonic mallification and freeway mania (Solomon 2003: 13), displacement visions of a kinetic elite like Rem Koolhaas devouring Pacific Rim sites into generic bland sameness (Solomon 2003: 7). *Reclaiming San Francisco* (Brook *et al.* 1998) is a collection dedicated to the excavation, preservation, and contestation of such cultural political forces aligned to the 'New Urbanism' of a place-based poetics and vision.
  5. 'Spectral City' will try to elaborate the critical dimensions and visionary powers of these literary-aesthetic and political specters surging up from local San Francisco sites and traditions to oppose the hollowing out and ephemerality that urban cultural workers like Rebecca Solnit and proponents of such global capitalism disruption like Joel Kotkin have noted to be all too characteristic of today's Silicon Valley dominated San Francisco.
  6. During the mass demonstrations and web-rallying that took place in San Francisco to prevent the blind march into another US war in Iraq in spring 2003, this Situationist slogan came down to our era from Vietnam War protests and rallies.
  7. Michael Davidson makes the case that 'the local' circulation pattern generated around Jack Spicer's vision of San Francisco did not mean seeking Beat celebrity nor academic ratification, but performing crazed poetry in a bar like The Place in San Francisco (Davidson 1991: 156–167).
  8. For Everson, Bob Dylan was exactly such a prophetic and shamanistic poet of vision in the US ecumene, extending the protest of Guthrie into the prophesy of Jeremiah and becoming thus 'a figure of confrontation than of prescience' (Everson 1982: 130).
  9. The lyric is relegated to a condition of irrelevance to the US war-machine verging on what Santayana called in First World War contexts, 'the genteel tradition': this is what Ron Silliman blasts as the US School of Lyric Quietude on his blog site defending language and post-language poetics.
  10. 'Invisible Republic' would allude to the prophetic leftist America evoked by Greil Marcus around the popular-vernacular culture work in the music of protest poets such as Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, The Band, Joan Baez, Ma Rainey, and Robert Johnson *et al.* See Marcus (1997), and for a spectral updating of the American vernacular airwaves 1965 to the present (Marcus 2005: 5–10).
  11. On the material and visionary claim to San Francisco's being 'the hub of it' and nexus of 'the new regionalism' of California-based vision, see Everson (1982: 162–163), who makes grim contrasts with the Fresno County of his birth and the postwar Los Angeles of de-racinated mythlessness, wealth, and spectacular postmodernity.
  12. The cultishness, phobias, and exclusionary tactics of Spicer's poetry circle are outlined by Michael Davidson in *Guy's Like Us* who concludes again that 'Spicer is forging a link between Dante's projection of Florence into the *civitas dei* of *Divine Comedy* by imagining a redeemed San Francisco formed out of the poet's North Beach milieu', a milieu of gender and genre experimentation Davidson would now and again relate to the west-coast Language Poets his own poetry is affiliated to (Davidson 2004: 41–42).
  13. In some ways the text forms a situated and Asian Americanized archive of every film and literary work done on San Francisco, with works like *Vertigo* and *Dharma Bums* fully embedded in the dream-life and reference system of Wittman Ah Sing, who at times also seems to embody the macho energy not just of



- Chin but of Earl Kingston, Maxine's actor husband to whom this 'fake book' and exploratory novel is dedicated.
14. Kenzaburo Oe's novel *Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age!* reconfigured his whole interventionist political and poetic vision of 'the imagination' in postwar Japan based on a re-reading of Blake's poetry, as in Oe's evocation of this line from *Milton*: 'The Imagination is not a State: it is the Human Existence itself' (Oe 2002: 128). Capital, as such, is 'a fallen world of illusion' (Oe 2002: 129). Oe, the father-novelist, preaches to Hikari the post-Hiroshima musician-son, that poets and artists are relentlessly urged to set their revolutionary vision of imagination and body 'against the Hirelings in the Camp, the Court, and the University' who would prolong Corporeal War and murderously negate global peace and poetic vision (Oe 2002: 249).
  15. See Gray Brechin's *Imperial San Francisco* (1999) as well as euphoric Gold Rush-era passages from Bayard Taylor, *Eldorado: Adventures in the Path of Empire* (1850): for example, on Santa Cruz and Oregon timber and mills (Taylor 2000: 166; first published in 1850) fueling the growth of the Bay Area city; on San Francisco's booming growth into a worldwide commercial center (Taylor 2000: 240 and 246). See also Henderson (1998) for the ties of San Francisco prosperity and power to agri-business hinterlands and water resources. As alluded to, see also Amy Tan's Chinese immigrant mother looking wryly at little Saint Mary's Church in Chinatown's fringes in *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), at the same time she sees the real American church of belief and power is in the skyscrapers, meaning the Bank of America and the San Francisco family dynasties who founded these finance, mining and real estate fortunes in the wake of the Gold Rush.
  16. These entropic tropes to describe US Pacific coast culture are used by Lawrence, Lyotard, and Baudrillard in Michaels *et al.* (1991: xi, 120, 121).
  17. Markham's poem appeared in Hearst's rival *San Francisco Examiner* and supposedly was republished in 10,000 newspapers and magazines at home and abroad in 1899.
  18. Gioia's essay was first printed in the *Denver Quarterly* in Fall 1998 and became the basis for the essays collected by Jack Foley (2001). It appears online at: <http://www.danagioia.net/essays/ewestern.htm>
  19. It was not long ago that post-romantic poets of trans-American subjecthood (like Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, Diane di Prima, Jack Spicer *et al.*) wrote to offer an expanded counter-cultural vision of region and a large-scale improvisational engagement with the un-/American drives of history, place, nation, and subject. Add to the bio-poetics of place the scrupulously gnostic deconstructionism of poets like John Ashbery, Juliana Spahr, and Fanny Howe along with the will-to-visionary dimensionality of William Blake, Emerson, and Oe which haunt all my global figurations and lyric quests here.

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### Author's biography

Rob Wilson teaches in the Department of Literature of the University of California at Santa Cruz, USA. He has two works forthcoming: *Henry, Torn from the Stomach: Towards a Poetics of Conversion and Counter-Conversion in the U.S. Postcolonial Empire* with Harvard University Press; and *Automat: Tracing Asia/Pacific Lines of Flight* with the University of Hawai'i Press. *The Worlding Project: Doing Cultural Studies in the Era of Globalization*, co-edited with Christopher Conner, came out with New Pacific Press in 2007.

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