

Sean Metzger, *The Chinese Atlantic: Seascapes and the Theatricality of Globalization*,
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The Chinese Atlantic is an interruption into the current configuration of Atlantic studies, offering a reorientation of the narratives that describe globalization as it intersects with discourses of imperialism, capitalism, and race. Sean Metzger uses the term “Chinese Atlantic” not to recover or supplement knowledge about the role of China in globalization, but as a method of investigating the processes that create such categories of meaning: What are the fantasies at play in the global cultural imaginary about China and Chineseness? How are these fantasies produced, presented and perceived? And how can we perceive the “shifting status of the human” (p.251), a process we ourselves are immersed in, through our local experiences of global processes?

The Chinese Atlantic overflows the boundaries of Atlantic, black Atlantic, Chinese diaspora and Asian American studies, complicating the geographic and conceptual parameters of these fields. Metzger follows artistic production to explore less frequented narratives of the Atlantic theater, mapping networks of cultural exchange around the globe. His method of inquiry begins with a question of *how* one senses the forces of globalization when we are already submerged in its “global flows” (p.11). In this sense, *The Chinese Atlantic* engages a similar methodology to Lisa Lowe’s *The Intimacies of Four Continents* – Metzger seeks to defamiliarize established methods of apprehending Chineseness in particular, and globalization in general, in order to make available “alternative forms of knowing, thinking and being” (Lowe 2015: 137). Buoyed by in-depth examinations of artworks – including film, video, immersive installation, public art, performance and mixed media – that take the form of detailed descriptions of his intimate relationships with cultural objects, Metzger invites us to “imagine ways of seeing the world and its interconnections that push against dominant paradigms” (p.3) and open up possibilities of sensing the processes of globalization otherwise, despite our immersion in its forces.

Metzger's multi-scalar and multi-sited investigation visits small islands in the Caribbean as well as sites in Canada, England and South Africa, in order to decenter the forces of globalization away from the United States, highlighting "Chinese-inflected processes of cultural assertion, capital accumulation, and artistic invention" (p.5). Throughout the book, Metzger employs the term "Chineseness" as a deliberately unstable referent to describe the inflections he seeks in cultural productions, specifically to "indicate the forces that construct the term *Chinese*" (ibid.) whose meaning fluctuates with the movement of historical and spatial contexts. Metzger's dedication to tracing the constant flux of the processes of meaning-making, reflected in aesthetic, financial and human movement, is anchored in first-person descriptions of his encounters with people, places and artworks. As such, the anchor of the text is also subject to the wavering meaning of positionality as it is represented by identifying categories such as "Chinese", "queer", "American" and "academic." Metzger's investigative method aligns with his questions about how projections of fantasy are enabled by the global dissemination of media, and what kinds of agents and subjects are produced through "technologies of visibility" (p.165). The author invites the reader to navigate multiple networks of cultural exchange from a position of inconsistent, active movement, putting into question the conditions under which we perceive these interconnections.

Metzger launches his global exploration from the premise that "globalization is a theatrical discourse" (p.27) in the sense that it is "always about representation" (p.28-29): a series of processes, connections and relationships *imagined* as a totality. He refers to Samuel Weber's (2004: 342) observation that "*Globalization* names ... the conditions for all objectification" (quoted on p.28), and as such, names a totalizing process that restricts possibilities for imagining within the bounds of its "self-contained world" (p.28). Players and spectators alike are immersed in a drama that plays out over "vast distances and scales" (p.29). Understanding globalization through theatricality renders the processes of representing this totality apparent. Thus, it is through aesthetic encounters between art and beholder where Metzger locates the potential for us to recognize our "productive immersion" in the "layers of mediation, approximation, substitution, and fakery" (p.31) of globalization, actively choose our

relationship to it, and release the potential otherwise hampered by the appearance of it as a closed system.

In order to practice this method of active spectatorship, Metzger guides his readers through a number of encounters with artworks that engage a variety of senses and embodied experiences. He focuses on the artistic genre of seascapes, especially those depicting islands, as a tool for exploring beyond the national formations that often mediate and institutionalize our experiences of globalization. His expansive definition of the genre is equal to the challenge of destabilizing epistemological frameworks for thinking globalization and envisioning “an emergent episteme that describes new waves of Chinese investment – fiscal and cultural – in the Atlantic world” (p.18). The seascape is defined by Metzger as an epistemological frame itself as well as a genre (a watery landscape) and an event (through the actions of both representation and spectatorship); the seascape is “both a concept and a practice” (p.17). Metzger’s formal, archival and ethnographic investigations of his chosen seascapes trace shifting understandings of Chineseness under different historical and geographic conditions. Rather than revealing definitive meanings, what is accentuated is how the “circulation of certain cultural forms invents and iterates” (p.17-18) a sense of Chineseness as brief arrests of meaning that float to the surface of a deep, churning history. In *The Chinese Atlantic*, what could be called “Chinese seascapes” (p.27) provide a method of perceiving the perpetual motion of globalization, how its processes impose, enable and sustain moments of stasis, and the “ripple effects emanating from such constructions” (p.20).

Metzger takes on the challenge of creating a space to practice perceiving-in-immersion by inviting the reader to engage five particular styles of movement defined by the chapters of the book, named after specific forms of watery motion: reeling; incorporating; flowing; ebbing; and eddying. Each chapter explores artworks that the author associates with the movements described by its heading. For example, Metzger associates “reeling” with the instability of documentary as a genre in its position at the porous boundary between representation of “real life” and constructed narratives (p.39). Reeling connotes technologies of film (editing processes that mix, montage and superimpose sound and image) as well as activities like fishing (reeling in

the catch) and staggering (in the wake of impact). Metzger asks his reader to engage this action of reeling as a means of framing our perception of the documentary films he investigates in this chapter. It is suiting that *The Chinese Atlantic* opens with an exploration of the complexities of documentary – the first chapter is an initiation to the demands of the book in which the reader’s positionality is constantly destabilized in relation to perceiving diverse works of art. Each chapter invites a different active method of engaging, inspired by the author’s direct experiences of reeling, ebbing and eddying in his voluntary immersion in the artworks he chooses to explore. Through encouraging the reader to practice this sensation of ungrounded perception, Metzger emphasizes the necessity of embracing our roles as active, rather than passive, spectators, viewers and participants.

This *practice* of active perception feels like an individual’s rehearsal for a more threatening act of theatricality that runs in the undercurrent of *The Chinese Atlantic*, namely “collective theatricalization” which, as Metzger writes (paraphrasing Édouard Glissant) is “one of the first drivers of resistance” that generates movement “against the passive enjoyment of representations” (p.92). Collective theatricalization in the form of “insurgent practices and unexpected collectivities” (p.132) are presented to us via the artworks and the meaning produced by assemblages within which the artworks are networked. A viewer or perceiver may fall short of participating in these collective actions. However, Metzger seems to insist on an intimacy and relationality (following Lowe and Glissant, respectively) inherent to active spectatorship that maintains our potential to “transform how we envision a particular worldview” (ibid.).

In the chapter entitled “Ebbing”, Metzger focuses on the theatricality of human trafficking, pointing to the individuals who “conceal, impersonate, and pretend” in order to evade law enforcement and regulations, and how they “exhibit various forms of agency” in the different roles involved in trafficking networks (p.166). The two works of art he examines in this chapter are both inspired by the case of the Chinese cockle-pickers: 23 Fujianese migrant workers who drowned in the rising tides off the coast of northwest England on 5 February 2004 (p.164). Metzger chooses to investigate two works in this chapter, by (film director and documentarian) Nick Broomfield and (filmmaker and installation artist) Isaac Julien

respectively, because they both find ways to frame what is known, and most importantly, what cannot be known (in the sense of empirical knowledge), about the 23 people who lost their lives in the incident at Morecambe Bay. By engaging in a deep analysis of his own experiences of these works, in which the author immersed himself on many occasions and, in the case of Julien's work, in different parts of the world,¹ Metzger explores the possibilities for understanding global human relations beyond the contracts of "documented and undocumented human labor" and the empirical formulations of human rights discourse that ultimately limit "human agency and subjectivity" (p.165). The works of both artists instead present us with layered and complex portraits of both people and processes that follow the ebbing motion of absence, or "what remains to be seen", and refuse to be captured within the dialectical tension between "consent and coercion" that drives the dominant story of global migration (p.167). Instead of regarding the incident at Morecambe Bay as a series of "human rights abuses", as so much journalism and sociological scholarship has framed it, these artworks compel us to consider a multitude of underlying factors that motivate migration.

Ultimately, Metzger demonstrates that artworks can be vessels that cut pathways through surface representations and move us with the undercurrents of our global networks: art offers us the experience of sensing the world in ways that release us from the script of a totalizing representational system. *The Chinese Atlantic* contributes to a growing body of scholarship dedicated to exploring the role of aesthetics and cultural production in the totalizing representational system of liberal humanism. As Kandice Chuh (2019) and Robert Reid-Pharr (2015) have shown, art can both direct us according to the totalizing drama of the global theater and it can offer us methods of abandoning the script. Metzger dedicates *The Chinese Atlantic* to his belief in the latter proposition, presenting us with "seascapes as ways of knowing" otherwise (p.38).

¹ Metzger visited Julien's nine-screen installation *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and again at Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town.

<https://www.isaacjulien.com/projects/ten-thousand-waves/>



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