

Lawless Intervals: Washington Irving's *Astoria* and the Procession of Empire

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Abstract: *This article examines Washington Irving's writing on U.S. imperialism in Astoria, or Anecdotes of an Enterprize Beyond the Rocky Mountains, his 1836 history of the John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company. It argues that there are two different accounts of U.S. imperialism present in this history, which frequently clash and interfere with each other. The history of Astor's company is framed in the text as a key moment in the colonization and settlement of the U.S.—a version of U.S. imperialism that connects it to the fortunes and expansion of the nation-state. At the same time, the history of Astoria's enterprise shows traces of a different kind of imperialism, which is linked to trade and commerce, and which stands asymmetrical to the interests and projects of the nation-state. Focusing on the different relationships these interrelated but distinct forms of imperialism have to frontier spaces and the cultures inhabiting the areas of the U.S. west of the Mississippi, this article argues that Irving's Astoria needs to be read in terms of the amorphous but interferential relationship between these different forms of imperialism.*

Keywords: *Washington Irving—Astoria—empire—U.S. imperialism—frontier—transnationalism—hybridity*

It is safe to say that had not Mr. Astor moved in this matter as he did, had his plans been frustrated or his purpose delayed, the northern boundary of the United States might today be the forty-second parallel of latitude. Thus we see the momentous significance of the movement, which, though resulting disastrously to the projector, was pregnant with the most beneficial results to the nation.

—H.H. Bancroft, *Chronicles of the Builders of the Commonwealth*, Vol.1, 46

Upon his return to the U.S., Washington Irving confessed in the introduction to *A Tour on the Prairies* that he feared he “had lost the good will” (6) of his countrymen after seventeen years in Europe. He had reason for concern; not only did his transatlantic allegiances fit in strangely with the nationalist mood of American literature in the 1830s, but in *A Tour on the Prairies*, as well as the subsequent *Astoria, or Anecdotes of an Enterprize Beyond the Rocky Mountains* and *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U.S.A.*, he also took as his subject the territories in the West, and the westward expansion of the United States, matters that seemed at odds with the urbane, cosmopolitan mode of storytelling Irving preferred. In his *A Tour on the Prairies* there is certainly a cosmopolitan double-vision at work: the frontier resembles a “noble park” (60), while the woodland and prairie “only want here and there a village spire, the battlements of a castle, or the turrets of an old family mansion rising from among the trees, to rival the most ornamental scenery of Europe” (62). Irving presents the American frontier according to “European models of the picturesque” (Reynolds 91), suggesting a fusion of American content and imported narrative forms that incorporates the frontier within a European spatial imaginary. He only touches in the volume on the political context of the 1830s, but, as Peter Antelyes has shown, Andrew Jackson’s championing of the colonization and exploitation of the continental U.S. constitutes the ideological framework for Irving’s western trilogy. To speak within this frame of the frontier as an English park or a European scene is to rhetorically domesticate and cultivate it, and prepare it for settlement. Irving’s framing of the frontier in picturesque terms might appear out of place, but it tacitly supports the ideology underwriting the imperial expansion of the U.S., and suggests that this affects how American spaces are conceptualized and represented.

Irving’s direct reckoning with U.S. imperialism, and its relation to American spaces, would occur in the next volume of his western trilogy—*Astoria, or Anecdotes of an Enterprize Beyond the Rocky Mountains*, his 1836 history of John Jacob Astor’s short-lived Pacific Fur Company. Commissioned by Astor as a public relations book, Irving intended *Astoria* to be a romance of commerce and empire that would secure Astor’s reputation as “having originated the enterprise and founded the colony that are likely to have such important results in the history of commerce and colonization” (Irving qtd. in LeMenager 685). He based *Astoria* on the letters and diaries of the traders and trappers who established Astor’s trading company at the mouth of the Columbia River, as well as accounts by explorers of the areas

of the continent west of the Mississippi. Detailing the history of the Pacific Fur Company from June, 1810, to December, 1813, when Astoria was surrendered to the British, Irving offers in *Astoria* both a history of the first significant American commercial venture in the West, and a detailed account of the western frontier, its inhabitants, and the traders and trappers operating in the Far West, all of which are subjected to anthropological scrutiny.

Astoria recounts how Astor was spurred on by the example of the Canadian North West Company to attempt to monopolize the fur trade in the area stretching from the Missouri, over the Rockies to the Pacific Northwest. To this end, two parties were sent to establish Astoria; one party was the first American expedition after Lewis and Clark to make a transcontinental crossing, while the other, aboard the *Tonquin*, sailed around Cape Horn to reach the mouth of the Columbia River via Hawai'i, where they stopped for provisions and laborers. During these journeys, Astor was negotiating with the Russian American Company to secure access to Chinese fur markets. Astor's enterprise came to an end during the War of 1812, which tested the loyalties of Astor's Canadian employees to a breaking point. The Oregon territory would remain until 1846 a disputed zone in which American, British, Russian, and Canadian commercial interests and ventures co-existed uneasily in a space largely under commercial rather than governmental rule. At the same time as *Astoria* narrates this history, it shows Irving's fascination with the far western trading culture, a hybrid culture with links to Hawai'i, the United States, French Canada, Scotland, and numerous Native American homelands, and, more crucially for him, a culture in which various nationalities and ethnicities intermix.

Irving offers then an early variation on Fredrick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, for whom the frontier is the "meeting point between savagery and civilization" (3), with this "savagery" encompassing for Irving the western landscape, its inhabitants, and the trappers who become "savages" in this land. *Astoria* is filled with characters casting themselves "loose upon savage life" (193), as Irving says of Mr. Miller, a partner in the Pacific Fur Company who joins a party of trappers; it is even insinuated that some trappers resorted to cannibalism to survive their "sufferings in the wilderness" (314). Unlike Turner though, for whom the frontier is an unpopulated space in which the Anglo-Saxon American self sheds the vestiges of Europe, Irving depicts in detail "the hybrid race on the frontier" (97), including such figures as the Sioux interpreter Pierre Dorion, the son of Lewis and Clarke's French Creole interpreter Dorion and an unnamed

Sioux woman. Irving views the frontier as a space for mixing, and hybridity, and spends much of *Astoria* taxonomizing the various hybrids of the Far West. For Irving, contamination by “savagery” is at once the risk of colonial enterprises like Astor’s and the pragmatic consequence of such commercial ventures.

For a long time empire was a disavowed category in American studies, serving only as a description of the U.S.’s acquisition of overseas colonies in the 1890s. It is clear, however, that U.S. imperialism needs to be situated within a longer timeframe: Amy Kaplan suggests that U.S. literature is implicated in the processes of empire prior to the Spanish-American War, while John Carlos Rowe indicates that “the extraterritorial policies of U.S. colonization [...] began as early as the War of 1812” (*U.S. Imperialism* 78). Astor’s early imperial venture served to make the U.S.’s imperial potential legible to the then semi-peripheral nation as Thomas Jefferson acknowledged when he called Astoria the “*germ* of a great, free, and independent empire” (qtd. in Ronda xii, my emphasis). Jefferson’s description of Astoria reiterates his call for the U.S. to become an “Empire for Liberty” that would expand into the western territories and liberate them from British, French, and Spanish control.¹ Indeed, Irving links Astor’s fortune directly to the U.S.’s imperial fortunes, aligning commercial and national interests as if these were isomorphic: “Mr. Astor [...] considered his projected establishment at the mouth of the Columbia as the emporium to an immense commerce; as a colony that would form the germ of a wide civilization; that would, in fact, carry the American population across the Rocky Mountains and spread it along the shores of the Pacific, as it already animated the shores of the Atlantic” (23). The colonization of the continent emerges here as the truth of Astor’s commercial venture: Astoria would be the first settlement in a series stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific, a series Irving imagines as not just a commercial venture, but as the enlargement of the U.S. in all of its aspects. There was little that was strange about this alignment in a period during which the U.S. “remained a series of temporary networks coalescing around endeavors of capitalist expropriation

1 It remains a matter of debate whether Jefferson intended by this that the U.S. should become a continental empire, or whether he imagined a series of nation-states, which all emulate the U.S. model. If the latter is the case, then Jefferson’s vision of an empire needs to be conceptualized in terms of the establishment of U.S. hegemony on the continent, rather than the continent’s colonization.

of space and subsequent development” (Stephanson 20).² While Astor’s venture prepared the way for the continental expansion of the U.S., it was also supposed to secure a trade passage to China, and to ensure thereby the status of the U.S. as an international commercial empire. Astor’s efforts substituted here for the government’s “ineffectual measures” (17), even while they were authorized by this government, and directed towards ends beneficial to the nation. Commercial and public interests, and business and governmental ventures are integrated here, and put to work in the service of the transformation of the U.S. into an imperial power.

Indeed, the War of 1812 is rendered as a clash between established and emergent imperial powers, while Astoria’s failure is presented as an imperial setback:

We should have had a fortified post and port at the mouth of the Columbia, commanding the trade of that river and its tributaries, and of a wide extent of country and sea coast; carrying on an active and profitable commerce with the Sandwich Islands, and a direct and frequent communication with China. In a word, Astoria might have realized the anticipations of Mr. Astor, so well understood and appreciated by Mr. Jefferson, in gradually becoming a commercial empire beyond the Mountains, peopled by “free and independent Americans, and linked with us by ties of blood and interest.” (356)

The metaphor of the “Virgin Land” “enabled the American people to replace the fact that the land was already settled by a vast Native population with the belief that it was unoccupied. And the substitution of the national fantasy for the historical actuality enabled Americans to disavow the resettlement and in some instances the extermination of entire populations” (Pease 4). This metaphor is at work here in both the emphasis on “ties of blood” and Irving’s elision of the Native population. Irving, furthermore, purifies this description of traces of the hybridity characteristic of frontier life. He makes good on his claim that there “appears to be a tendency to extinction among all the savage nations” (158), and projects the Far West as a land ready for settlement and commercial exploitation, even as the Native inhabitants are implicitly projected as non-synchronized figures disappearing into the past—a strategy that naturalizes the disappearance of these Native inhabitants as an effect of their so-called “savage” culture. *Astoria* concludes then by noting

2 Michael Mann indicates that “Modern empires have contained an unusual degree of economic imperialism, because capitalism can better integrate the economies of core and periphery than did previous modes of production. This has been prominent in the British and especially the American empires” (8-9).

that the “flag” of the U.S. “again waved over ‘Astoria’” (356)—a move that converts the U.S. imperial retrenchment in the northwestern territory into a momentary interruption in its imperial project, and which ties the future of the U.S. to its westward expansion and emergence as an empire.

The histories in *Astoria* are inscribed within a conventional imperial framework, one that owes perhaps more to the era of Andrew Jackson than the period of 1810 to 1813. In fact, Irving’s account of British interference in the northwestern territory resembles John O’Sullivan’s complaint regarding the obstructions posed to U.S. expansion by the presence of European powers on the continent: these imperial powers are responsible for “limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions” (5). Irving’s history and O’Sullivan’s phrase “manifest destiny” both link ventures into the Far West to the expansion and consolidation of the nation-state, and does so within a framework in which the U.S. is competing with other imperial powers in the name of national self-interest. In this frame, business and national interests are interchangeable, imperial metaphors stand-in for actuality, and these substitutions deny the coeval existence of U.S. citizens and native peoples.³ These metaphorical resemblances and exchanges produce a compact between various histories and interests, which are aligned and synchronized in the procession of U.S. imperialism, even as these substitutions catachrestically disavow the truth of this imperialism—its settlement of inhabited spaces—in favor of tropes such as the “Virgin Land.” It might be the case, however, that to read *Astoria* within this imperial framework, and in terms of its metaphorical logic, is to perform another catachresis or aberrant imposition of a trope. David Harvey has suggested in relation to contemporary forms of imperialism that territorial and capitalist imperial logics “frequently tug at each other, sometimes to the point of outright antagonism” (29). The point here is not to distinguish between the democratic nation-state and empire, but to distinguish between two imperial logics, one pointing to the territorial expansion of the nation-state beyond its circumscribed boundaries, the other to a transnationally located, commerce-driven form of imperialism that sometimes works in concert with the nation-state and sometimes not. These logics are potentially interferential; their co-existence introduces ten-

3 This discussion stems from Johannes Fabian’s work on coeval relations and the “radical contemporaneity of mankind” (xi).

sions within imperial frameworks. Is a similar interference between the imperial designs of the nation-state and commerce visible in *Astoria*? To what extent does the imperial discourse framing the text serve as an adequate container for the histories it deploys?

It is becoming a commonplace within its study that imperial histories circulate across the boundaries of empires, creating a set of shared practices informing individual imperial endeavors. Studies of U.S. imperialism situate it within an expanded field, paying attention to the transnational traffic of imperial discourses (Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties"). The historical archive Irving examines is similarly transnational. Astor's project was both modeled on the practices of the North West Company and funded in part by Canadian investments—when the Scottish-Canadian partner, McDougall, sold Astoria to the British during the War of 1812, he was thwarting the imperial designs of the U.S., but doing so without breaching business agreements that were in place. The Pacific Fur Company was an international collaboration, perhaps the first American multinational corporation, and it was expected that it would draw British and Russian investments. It operated within a global nexus constituted by points such as St. Petersburg, London, Canada, Washington, Hawai'i, and China. The trappers, traders, and company partners were as much parts of a cosmopolitan community as the contours of the Pacific Fur Company were transnational, with their origins stretching back to French Canada, Scotland, New York, and the lands of the Native population. In fact, Irving foreshadows the eventual fate of Astoria by describing how several of the Canadian partners deceived Astor into thinking that they naturalized as American citizens when they never intended to do so. The corporate model on which the Pacific Fur Company was based is asymmetrical to the nation-state, which enables it to act in concert with the nation-state in some cases, but equally imbues it with the potential to frustrate the designs of the U.S. government, as its eventual fate indicates. The history of Astoria is one of transnational corporate models, international investments, and agents who operate within various imperial histories, which makes this history irreducible to a narrative of the westward expansion of the U.S. It is a history that is legible only within a transnational model of imperialism in which loyalty to a particular nation-state is not a given.⁴

4 For Antelyes, Irving's Western histories are to be read as promotions of the marketplace, in which corporate self-interest is aligned with the communal and national interests of American expansionism. Where this

Not only the transnational character of the Pacific Fur Company makes it resistant to absorption by a national narrative. The kind of transnational network in which the company is embedded is conducive to processes of hybridization and creolization; in fact, during periods in which citizenship is racially codified, it creates the potential for these processes. U.S. imperialism, taken as the enlargement of the nation-state, is constituted by its disavowal of the violence it performs on the racialized bodies of the Native population; this disavowal is frequently accompanied by the displacement of the “conquest of the continent and the ‘doom’ of the American Indian into an earlier century” (Sundquist 146), a move that makes possible the occupation and domestication of the western territories. This is an agrarian ideology enabling what Myra Jehlen describes as a “conjunction of personal identity and national identification” that discovers its ground in “the very earth of the New World” (2-3), which is to say that the settling of land, defined in the public imaginary as uninhabited, unites the population and the landscape into a coherent, consolidated narrative.⁵ This conjunction identifies space rather than time as the essential feature of the U.S.’s national narrative. *Astoria* stubbornly resists incorporation into such a narrative: land is something to be traversed as quickly as possible in the text; it is something to be negotiated over or claimed from the Native population, and temporarily inhabited, rather than settled and cultivated. Trading cultures do not have the same relation to the land as the agrarian population around which much of U.S. imperialist rhetoric is constructed. The party making the transcontinental crossing had neither the time nor the resources to set up a series of posts linking the Atlantic and the Pacific, while Astoria, with its mobile population, only centered trading activity in the region, rather than functioning like a permanent settlement.

At the same time, the practicalities of frontier trade prevent Irving from projecting “extinction among all the savage nations” as anything more than an unrealized prospect. The frontier here is a space for interactions between the Pacific Fur Company and its Native inhabitants. Moreover, Irving links

relation breaks down, we encounter, according to Antelyes, cautionary tales regarding market excesses. My reading differs from this in that it seems to me that Irving illustrates how corporate forms and the nation-state are potentially asymmetrical because they operate at different scales and within different constellations of power and interests.

5 At stake in this conjunction is then also the civilizing of the continent and, reciprocally, of its population. The U.S. Native inhabitants and many European immigrants were excluded from this compact.

hybridity and trade in a manner that instrumentalizes the former as serving the latter. Hybridity has been privileged often as “a way to resist global homogenization” (Rowe, “Transnationality,” 78), and a means whereby to recover peripheral histories. Irving’s hybrid figures require a different sort of reading that needs to account for a convergence between hybridity and commerce. Those “classes which have derived their peculiar characteristics from the fur trade” (81), the freemen and voyageurs, are more suited to life on the frontier, and more capable of pushing forward Astor’s project than the Anglo-American partners. These “peculiar characteristics” stem from ethnic mixing and modes of living that make these “classes” “resemble the Indians in complexion as well as in tastes and habits” (82). Tamaahmaah, sovereign of Hawai’i, encourages marriages between his subjects and “Europeans and Americans” (47) so as to promote trade, while McDougall marries a Chinook to strengthen relations between Astoria and the Chinooks. It might very well be the case that Irving lingers over McDougall’s duplicitous marriage to emphasize his potential for treachery; even so, hybridity and cross-cultural contact are clearly characteristics of a successful trading culture, and trade, as a consequence, carries with it the potential for hybridization. The Native population constitutes something of a double bind for Irving in *Astoria*: on the one hand, it consists out of racialized “savage” bodies, which need to be disavowed in the name of civilization and U.S. expansion; on the other, these bodies and what they present constitute a resource for the trading culture, and, indeed, trade intensifies processes of hybridization.

Ann Laura Stoler suggests that rigid systems of classification, taxonomies, and boundaries “matter to nation-states in ways that for vast imperial states in expansion they cannot” (“Opacities of Rule,” 55). She asks:

What if the notion of empire as a steady state (that may “rise or fall”) is replaced with a notion of imperial formations as supremely mobile polities of dislocation, dependent not on stable populations so much as highly mobile ones, on systemic recruitments and “transfers” of colonial agents and native military, and on a redistribution of peoples and resources, relocations and dispersions, contiguous and overseas? What if we begin not with a model of empire based on fixed, imperial cartographies but one dependant on moving categories and moving parts whose designated borders at any one time were not necessarily the force fields in which they operated or the limits of them? (“Opacities of Rule,” 55)

The deterritorialized imperial formation suggested by Stoler’s questions resembles the Pacific Fur Company with its mobility, its transnational allegiances, and its instrumentalization of hybridity and cultural contact zones.

Astoria contains two narratives regarding empire: a framing narrative that recuperates a nation-state based form of imperialism from Astor's venture, and the history of the Pacific Fur Company, which suggests a more dispersed, inchoate imperial model operative on a transnational scale, a model, furthermore, dependant on figures and agents that challenge rigid classificatory systems. The differences between these match the differences between understanding empire as an expansion of the nation-state, as much of American studies tend to do, or as a deterritorialization of the nation-state.⁶

These differences are also the differences between a metaphorical understanding of empire predicated on the resemblances between national and imperial projects, and a metonymical imperial formation in which contiguous figures—the nation, the corporation, international agents and models, and the frontier's Native inhabitants—are mobilized as the contingent agents, the “moving categories and moving parts,” of imperial processes. In such a syntagmatic structure, it is not necessary to imagine the unity of the nation-state and imperial endeavors, the relation between them is much looser; they form part of a series established by “purely relational metonymic contact” rather than the “‘necessary link’ of resemblance” (De Man 14, 66). This contingent relationship between the parts of Astor's project explains the asymmetries visible within it: without a guaranteed unity of purpose, there is no reason why these parts should act in concert. It also explains the various boundary crossings—whether cultural, ethnic or national—visible within this imperial formation. Contiguity, contact, and relationality are all modes that put the stability of boundaries and classificatory systems into question, and which create the possibility of hybridization and mixing. As Bhabha points out, hybridity “is best described as a metonymy of presence” (115); it is a metonymical substitute for coherent identities that produces identities consisting out of contingently related parts. Therefore, for Bhabha, hybridity is metonymy, a conflation borne out by Irving's discussion of hybrid figures and the imperial project with which they are entangled.

6 Paul Giles remarks that the “concept of ‘United States imperialism’ seems often to extrapolate a view of American influence abroad from the realist epistemologies associated with the nationalist era at home, thereby simply extending the familiar domain of U.S. nationalism around the globe” (57). He suggests that we should read the “United States itself as one of the objects of globalization, rather than as merely its malign agent” (57). This same foreclosure of an analysis of empire in terms other than those of the nation-state is produced by Irving's framing and containment of the history of Astoria within the imperial rhetoric of the Andrew Jackson period.

The connection between the framing narrative of *Astoria* and its history of the Pacific Fur Company is then the same as that existing between a unifying, totalizing figure and its constituent parts, parts standing in a more fragmentary relation to each other and to their metaphorization than suggested by their frame. This relation can be particularized in several ways: it is the temporal relation between imperial projects and their subsequent narrativization; the difference between empire as a single reified agent and as the mobilization of a loose network of agents and forces; and, perhaps, the distinction between imperial models based on the nation-state and on corporate forms. But how does this relation work according to Irving? Does he indeed distinguish between two imperial logics in *Astoria*, or does he insist on the unity of his text and the history it depicts, the history of the expansion of the U.S.? At stake here is the possibility of recuperating a history of the settlement of the Far West that easily lends itself to tropes such as the “Virgin Land” and “Manifest Destiny” out of elements resistant to incorporation within this particular imperial model. Another way of posing this problem is to relate it to how Irving negotiates between describing the U.S. as a “capitalist culture” and “the paradigm of American exceptionalism” (Noble, xxxvi), which denies its own imperialist and capitalist characteristics, or, at least, reinterprets them as subordinated to the nation-state’s interests.⁷ In whatever terms the overlapping imperial formations in *Astoria* are described, the main text Irving offers on their interferential relation occurs when he relates how the Hunt party crossed the “Great American desert” at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, that “land where no man permanently abides” (151).

This passage is distinctly marked in *Astoria*, within which it appears as the first of two speculative digressions in which Irving gains sufficient distance from his historical material to conceptualize its implications in more general terms. The scene for it is set within a thematic of a monotonous wilderness interrupted by “belts of sand and lime stone [...] looking like the ruins of a world,” and the Rocky Mountains peaking at the “limits [...] of the Atlantic world” (151). Thus, the entry into the Far West is staged as

7 Noble’s *Death of a Nation* illuminates how U.S. exceptionalism is structured as a disavowal of its capitalist and imperial roots, while also suggesting that this disavowal has been replaced in the 1980s by a reinterpretation of the marketplace as the structure within which exceptionalist fantasies are to be realized: the marketplace is now a “‘state of nature’ where each individual should have the liberty to develop his/her essential identity” (294).

an entry into a space resistant to the outside world and to cultivation. Irving further establishes the symbolic significance of this setting by presenting it as outside the realm of the law, where “rugged defiles and deep valleys [...] form sheltering places for restless and ferocious bands of savages” (151). Irving’s rhetoric reaches a pitch when he counts the costs of the frontier for American expansionism:

Such is the nature of this immense wilderness of the Far West; which apparently defies cultivation, and the habitation of civilized life. Some portion of it along the rivers may be partially subdued by agriculture, others may form vast pastoral tracts, like those of the east; but it is to be feared that a great part of it will form a lawless interval between the abodes of civilized man, like the wastes of the ocean or the deserts of Arabia; and, like them, be subject to the depredations of the marauder. Here may spring up new and mongrel races, like new formations in geology, the amalgamation of the “debris” and “abrasions” of former races, civilized and savage; the remains of broken and almost extinguished tribes; the descendants of wandering hunters and trappers; of fugitives from the Spanish and American frontiers; of adventurers and desperadoes of every class and country, yearly ejected from the bosom of society into the wilderness. We are contributing incessantly to swell this singular and heterogeneous cloud of wild population that is to hang about our frontier, by the transfer of whole tribes of savages from the east of the Mississippi to the great wastes of the Far West. (152)

The key figure here is that of the “lawless interval,” a spatial formation in which Irving’s reading of the relations between American expansionism and the frontier becomes visible. The opposition between the land “east of the Mississippi” and this figure spatializes not only the distinction between the nation-state and that which resists its advances, but also the difference between the U.S. grasped as a coherent, expanding whole, and as a deterritorialized aggregate of imperial agents, Native inhabitants, and loosely incorporated, if at all, territories. Stephanie LeMenager is correct in linking Irving’s “lawless interval” to him entertaining the possibility that the “Far West might never be ‘American’” (689), that it resists the designs of manifest destiny as much as it refuses to be resolved back into the so-called Virgin Land. Here the procession of empire grinds to a halt, and Irving discursively shifts the “great wastes of the Far West” outside the bounds of imperial expansion. There is thus a temporal aspect to this “interval”: it interrupts the teleology of empire, and leaves this history incomplete. Additionally, this passage has paradigmatic significance for a text narrating the emergence of an imperial project: it suggests that Astor’s imperial venture leads into territories inassimilable to the U.S., and that through this movement this venture too becomes resistant to incorporation into national

narratives. After all, Hunt's party too has been "ejected from the bosom of society into the wilderness." This possibility is then set in opposition to the possible "cultivation" and "habitation" of the Far West, which indicates that this "lawless interval" needs to be understood within the context of two contrasting imperial trajectories—the first being the commerce-driven form of imperialism leading Hunt's party into this "interval," the second being a form of imperialism leading to the settlement of the Far West.

This "lawless interval" displays four characteristics in relation to imperialism. First is the splintering effect associated with this "interval"; it fragments territorial units into a series of disaggregated settlements. It raises the specter that land between the Pacific and the Atlantic cannot be grasped as a coherent unit, and that the frontier, the Far West, can only be incorporated partially, as discrete settlements, within the U.S. There is then a double splintering at work here: in the first instance, the Far West is transformed into a series of unintegrated territories; in the second, the U.S. becomes a loose array of dispersed units rather than a consolidated spatial formation. A metonymic logic can be discerned in this splintering, which constitutes the second feature of the "lawless interval." Operating as a spatial configuration, it does not confer any unity on the multiplicity it contains. The "tracts" of land, "the 'debris' and 'abrasions' of former races," and the various fugitives, adventurers, and desperadoes that dwell in this "interval" form a heterogeneous swirl of elements contingently related to each other. Each element in this "cloud of wild population" is also a fragment from a greater whole, making this "interval" both the producer and product of a splintering effect. The U.S. and this "interval," the frontier, do not then relate to each other as two nation-states or imperial powers would. This relation takes the form of that between the nation-state and a heterotopia—a space in which "several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 3) are juxtaposed.

Under these circumstances, the frontier becomes a space for hybridization, for the production of "mongrel races" via the "amalgamation" of interrupted wholes. This association of the frontier with hybridity, which I take as the third significant feature of this passage, is a commonplace in *Astoria*. What Irving adds here is the qualification that this process produces a "heterogeneous cloud of wild population," a swirl in which differences are not resolved but maintained. What we see here then is an understanding of hybridity as the production of the juxtaposition, rather than the integration, of different traits and cultures. Finally, Irving demystifies in this passage

an organic association between the landscape, the “lawless interval,” and the population inhabiting the frontier. Initially, he aligns these via a simile associating the “new and mongrel races” with “new formations in geology,” and attributes the intractable qualities of the landscape to the “heterogeneous cloud of wild population” of the frontier. This can only be a partial association though. If this landscape resembles a prenatal space resisting assimilation by the nation-state, and thus belongs to a pre-judicial state of nature, this “wild population” is equally “lawless,” but for different reasons. They have been “ejected from the bosom of society,” expelled from the juridical order of the nation-state, and reduced to a biopolitical state resembling Agamben’s bare life.⁸ Irving’s suggestion that “[w]e are contributing” to the population of the frontier defines this population as a socio-political product determined by the legal order of the nation-state. This means that Irving’s “lawless interval” resists interpretation according to the conjunction of landscape and personal identity Jehlen identifies as central to the settlement of the U.S.—this compact, as Irving shows, is preceded by the workings of the state’s juridical order.

There is also an irony to be noted here, the “threatening tribes of savages” that resist the expansion of the nation-state are exempted from the legal control of the nation-state by the nation-state’s production of an exception to its disciplinary system. The narrative of empire, understood here as the expansion of the nation-state, emerges then as a self-consuming logic, which produces its own obstacles. Lest we be inclined to read this passage as being content to point towards a space or population external to the U.S., there is good reason to read, as I have suggested, this passage as conflating these “new and mongrel races” with the trading culture central to Irving’s history. The hybrid denationalized and foreign subjects making up this “wild population” straddling the line between “civilization” and “savagery” resemble the traders and trappers crossing the continent, who are depicted repeatedly as hybrid figures combining civilized and “savage” traits. Furthermore, the task of this party was not to cultivate the land, but to cross the “interval between the abodes of civilized man.” Whatever else might be said of it, this “heterogeneous cloud” is doing its work by entering into this “lawless interval” and engaging in

8 Agamben remarks that bare life “is a product of the machine and not something that preexist it, just as law has no court in nature or in the divine mind” (87-8). For this reason, bare life cannot be associated with a state of nature.

the practices expected from a trading culture by not doing the work of settling the Far West.

Irving's "lawless interval" emerges then as a heterotopic interruption of processes of imperial settlement, an interruption that engenders hybrid cultures, even as it constitutes a state of exception to the governance of the nation-state. At the same time, as we have seen, the series of connotations emerging from this passage links the trading culture of the West with Irving's "lawless interval." This suggests that Irving's "interval" is also a way of thinking how Astor's corporation operates within a state of exception produced by the nation-state. The interplay between the nation-state and the corporation produces a situation in *Astoria* in which the differences between these are at once accentuated and indistinct: on the one hand, the Pacific Fur Company is positioned as an extralegal, extra-national entity; on the other, it has been produced as such by "society" to continue by other means the state's imperial mission. What is more, Irving makes it clear that a form of imperialism predicated on trade is not only asymmetrical to the designs of the nation-state, but also introduces "lawless" situations and factors into the imperial landscape, which are antagonistic to the expansion of the nation-state. Immediately after his account of this "lawless interval," Irving offers a historical anecdote serving as an apt summary of this interdependent yet corrosive connection:

The Spaniards changed the whole character and habits of the Indians when they brought the horse among them. In Chili, Tucuman and other parts, it has converted them, we are told, into Tartar-like tribes, and enabled them to keep the Spaniards out of their country, and even to make it dangerous for them to venture far from their towns and settlements. Are we not in danger of producing some such state of things in the boundless regions of the Far West? (152)

As Irving tacitly acknowledges at the end of this passage, horses are items of trade, items that in a moment of hybridization produced "Tartar-like tribes." The corrupting influence of Europe, commerce, is linked here to another "lawless interval" resistant to imperial annexation, which also disaggregates space into inhabitable zones, and zones unincorporated into the imperial disciplinary system. What emerges from *Astoria* is that for Irving imperialism based on trade and commerce is inherently a risk; it is a "lawless" form of imperialism. Without it being necessarily yoked to the designs of the nation-state, the effects of this imperial model remain incalculable. It might perpetuate a trade culture, while producing resistance to its own

imperial project. It might emerge, moreover, as a force blocking the state's continued settlement and annexation of territory.

It is hardly surprising that in the next chapter of *Astoria*, Irving mounts a defense against these insights. Not to do so would exacerbate the tensions and contradictions between *Astoria's* framing narrative and Irving's reading of commerce-driven imperialism. The narrative mode is again digressive, but this time the western territory is a classified and named space:

[W]e cannot but pause to lament the stupid, commonplace, and often ribald names entailed upon the rivers and other features of the Great West, by traders and settlers. As the aboriginal tribes of these magnificent regions are yet in existence the Indian names might easily be recovered; which, beside being in general more sonorous and musical, would remain mementos of the primitive lords of the soil, of whom in a little while scarce any traces will be left. (156)

This digression inverts the previous one; here settlers have populated and named the West, and the "primitive lords of the soil" are fading into history. It is clear that what we find here is not a prolonged, potentially enduring, interruption of the internal colonization of the U.S., but its completion in the production of a mapped and named "Great West." It is no coincidence that this completion is linked to the renaming of the spaces of the Far West. This passage reproduces in many respects the metaphoric, biopolitical settlement that produces the elision of Native inhabitants from accounts of the West's settlement. The presence at the time of the writing of *Astoria* of other imperial powers within what would become the U.S. is also excised here. Is Irving simply substituting this vision of a colonized and settled U.S. for his earlier reflections on the risks of Astor's venture? The "mementos of the primitive lords of the soil" clearly recall nothing so much as "the 'debris' and 'abrasions' of former races" filling Irving's "lawless interval." Here these "mementos" function like inscriptions on gravestones, both commemorating and marking the disappearance of Irving's "primitive lords." Yet, the fact that these names can be recovered and used in relation to the settled western territories indicates that Irving is not metaphorizing the Far West as a "Virgin Land." Memory opposes complete extinction here, and enables the mixing of imperial cartographies and Native languages into a hybrid signifying system. The hybridity Irving associates with the frontier can potentially be transferred into the signifying system whereby the western territories are navigated, which suggests the possible substitution of a hybrid epistemology for a cultural, ontological hybridity,

which Irving historicizes as a prior moment in the settlement of the west. Irving is not disavowing his account of the “lawless interval” constituted by Astor’s imperial venture; he is displacing and historicizing it within an account of a different kind of imperialism dedicated to settlement. This passage recollects then, first of all, not old place names, but Irving’s own account of the hybrid forms inhabiting the “lawless interval” of the Far West, which emerges as the pre-history of the settlement of the west. What is intimated in this scene is the possibility of the contamination of one mode of imperialism by the categories of another, the hybrid, metonymic imperialism of the corporation. This passage and the “lawless interval” one are indeed inversions of each other. In the previous passage, it became apparent that the “lawless interval” inhabited by Astor’s enterprise depends on the nation-state production of exceptions to its rule. Here, it is clear that the expansion of the nation-state remains vulnerable to assertions of hybridity that would demystify and historicize this expansion.

Taken together, the two digressions in *Astoria* form a chiasmic structure. They describe not only contradictory imperial formations, but also relational, interdependent systems. The nation-state is dependent upon trade and commerce for its expansion, while trading cultures operate within a state of exception produced by the nation-state. At the same time, the “lawless interval” opened by trade interrupts the settlement of the continent, while in the domesticated and settled West the hybridity on which trading cultures depend is retained only through mnemonic traces. To put this differently, the corporation deterritorializes the nation-state, which is, in part, to say that it allows for its dissemination, while the nation-state grounds the corporation, which is only partially to imply that it allows trade cultures to flourish. These relations also lend themselves, of course, to more corrosive descriptions. The contradictory motions of U.S. imperialism suggest that what Stoler describes as a “model of empire ... dependant on moving categories and moving parts whose designated borders at any one time were not necessarily the force fields in which they operated or the limits of them” should be taken not only as a model of imperial agents and strategies operating within a coherent imperial project, but also, in this instance, as a model of U.S. imperialism, and its amorphous, often contradictory character. It has long been a commonplace to speak of the U.S. as either a democratic nation-state or an empire; Irving allows us to see that it is more fitting to speak of different variations of U.S. imperialism and of different relations between imperialism and the state. Within such a structure, imperial tropes

like the frontier, manifest destiny, and the Virgin Land do not always occupy the same position of importance or hold the same meaning as we expect of them. Conversely, relatively affirmative figures, such as the transnational and hybridity, emerge from *Astoria* as entangled with imperial discourses; while the ideology of, say, Jacksonism turns out to be inadequate to account for U.S. imperialism. *Astoria* asks for a richer, more varied account of U.S. imperialism, one that treats it as more than the nation writ large across the globe. After all, what does Irving's "lawless interval" amount to if it is not the un-writing of the nation-state?

To schematize Irving's account of U.S. imperialism according to chiasmic relations might not be sufficient, however, to account for its complexity. At the same time as Irving presents exchanges and interferences between imperial structures, he also plots these as pointing to different, asymmetrical futures. As we have seen, he projects both the completion of the settlement of the western territories, and the blockage of this expansive project by a non-negotiable "lawless interval" maintained and enlarged via the project of U.S. imperialism itself. These are mutually exclusive potentialities synchronized through Irving's account of U.S. imperialism. One way of making sense of this conjunction is to realize that what is interrupted by Irving's "lawless interval" is the settlement of the continental U.S. and not activities of trade or commerce; these activities are on the increase according to his account, with no apparent end in sight. At the same time, his digression on the settlement of the Far West suggests the termination of the imperial form associated with the "lawless interval" in the settlement of the U.S. Irving's *Astoria* is of another time; it emerges from a period in which the terms and nature of U.S. imperialism were still being worked out. As such, it provides a rich taxonomy of imperial possibilities and forms. In this juxtaposition of different possibilities, we can see Irving deliberating between two different futures opened by the procession of U.S. imperialism. One culminates in the settlement of the Far West, and takes the nation-state as its telos. The other future needs to be understood in terms of an open-ended process of trade and commerce. Irving's account of American spaces and imperialism in *Astoria* opens up into questions regarding whether the nation's spaces should be thought of primarily in terms of land for settlement or zones of trade and commerce.

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