**Abstracts for “Poe, Islands, and Archipelagoes,” a 2020 MLA Panel**

**Pacific Sensations: Rebellions, Race, and Travel Writing in Edgar Allan Poe’s Sea Tales**

*Colleen Marie Tripp, California State University at Northridge*

While Edgar Allan Poe’s transatlanticism has been richly documented, the peculiar presence of sinister Malay figures amidst the specters of rebellion and chaos in Poe’s sea tales—from “MS. Found in a Bottle” to *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*—reminds us of equally important transpacific contexts that played key roles in shaping American cosmopolitan culture. In fact, Poe’s figuration of transpacific archipelagoes and their people underscores the complexities of nineteenth-century Orientalism and the myriad of historical moments where people, empire, and commodities connected the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

In the presentation that follows, I argue that Poe’s sea tales—while set abroad—suggest in form and content the significance of the figure of the Malay sailor in his stories and an evolving American frontier cosmopolitanism that both looked to its forebears (Old World Europe and its West Asian influences), while also considering the South Pacific and East Asia as its future mainstay of expansion, labor, and culture. Texts of travel writing, like Poe’s, participated in what Elizabeth DeLoughrey refers to as Islandism (the construction of anticipated Pacific colonialism through the representation of the Pacific islands as isolated and contained spaces) as well as the mixing of Orientalisms when articulating difference and similarities between East Asians and Pacific Islanders. Poe’s world of South Pacific and Asian pirates on the decks of ships headed to the Arctic and Antarctica—all narratives of abstract struggles over global capital and encroaching global ends with of-color foreigners—functions as a collective harbinger of modern changes in labor and economy that threaten American racial nationalism, even as the financial health of the US is shown to increasingly depend on the developing East Asia–Pacific shipping network. This Asian and South Pacific cosmopolitan influence, seen through portrayed cunning threats and commodities, articulates an emasculating and corrupting influence of Orientalism.

**Island Fantasies and Archipelagic Resistance in Poe’s South Sea Fictions**

*Caleb Doan, Louisiana State University*

Poe’s islands are alluring and deadly. In “The Poetic Principle,” Poe defines poetry through man’s “thirst unquenchable” for immortality, and he finds apt metaphors for the poetic drive in “the desire of the moth for the star” and “the suggestive odour . . . from far-distant undiscovered islands, over dim oceans, illimitable and unexplored.” Because Poe’s poetics fixate on the fatal pull to outer edges, his South Sea stories simultaneously illustrate his poetic principles and, consciously or not, critique his nation’s extraterritorial ambitions.

Beginning with “MS. Found in a Bottle” and then focusing on *Pym*, this paper explores the collapsed prospects of Poe’s island adventurers. In “MS. Found in a Bottle” (1831), the narrator sails from the “island of Java, on a [commercial] voyage to the Archipelago of the Sunda islands,” and he ultimately drowns in an Antarctic vortex. Arthur Gordon Pym, with pre-trip “visions of . . . some . . . desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown,” joins an attempt to establish a colonial enterprise on the island of Tsalal and barely escapes death. *Pym* explicitly reveals what “MS.” hints at through coded symbolism: islands present doomed prospects, because the island represents a fantasy—a colonial construct destined to fail. In *Pym*, crewmembers of the *Jane Guy* view Tsalal as an island with resources and “savages” ripe for exploitation. But the “jet black” Tsalalians violently resist Euro-Americans, preventing them from gaining control. By connecting Tsalalian opposition to the potential grand-scale revolution of American slaves, Pym sketches an archipelagic relationship between communities of color commonly threatened by global imperialism. Identifying the colonial pull of the island and the anti-imperial push of the archipelago, Poe’s South Seas fiction offers a prescient understanding of imperialism’s global and race-based project and signals the system—grounded on Poe’s poetics—will inevitably fall.

**Plotting Poe’s Islands of the Mind**

*Sonya Isaak, University of Heidelberg*

This paper will examine Poe’s use of the trope of the island in both the literal and figurative sense. While works like “The Island of the Fay” or “The Gold-Bug” overtly feature islands, Poe also uses island imagery more subtly throughout his literary corpus. In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” both the house and its inhabitants constitute a microcosm that is no longer in touch with the macrocosm. Like an island, the Usher estate is set off from the world by water, symbolically dividing it from its surroundings and thwarting its inhabitants’ perception of reality. We will explore how, like Usher, many of Poe’s protagonists are comparable to islands in that they are isolated. Their solitude urges them to center on their own monomaniacal fetishisms. The second part of the paper will consider “The Gold-Bug” to examine how, in Poe’s writing, islands can represent an intersection of the natural and the cultural worlds. After Thomas More created his ideal island, *Utopia*, the displeased King Henry beheaded him. Perhaps as a *memento mori* (or *memento Mori* if one considers the pun on More’s name), the painter Ambrosius Holbein redrew the map of More’s utopia to make it appear like More’s skull, satirically alluding to the author’s subsequent execution. Holbein’s map demonstrates the intersection of the physical and mental worlds in that it represents both the somatic (‘utopos’ or ‘no’ place) and the cerebral (More’s brain). This dual map uncannily anticipates Poe’s in “The Gold-Bug”. Here, too, the physical and mental worlds overlap. We will explore how the parchment Legrand finds, which designates both a human skull and an ideal location, can be read as a mind map. Here, the physical discovery of the treasure’s location on Sullivan’s island and the mental decodification of the hieroglyph come together.

**Edgar Allan Poe’s “Liquid Landscape”: An Archipelagic Rereading of *The Journal of Julius Rodman***

*Micah Donohue, Eastern New Mexico University*

Water courses through Poe’s unfinished novel *The Journal of Julius Rodman*. Words like “river” (and the proper names of rivers such as the Missouri, the Mississippi, etc.), “ocean,” “lake,” and “island” occur more than 200 times in the *Journal*’s six chapters. To better illustrate the prevalence of riparian and terraqueous imagery in the text, consider that the word river appears approximately 145 times—more than the *Journal*’s use of geographic terms like prairie, mountain, plain, land, desert, forest, territory, continent, and ground combined. Yet criticism of the *Journal*, limited as it is, has discussed it almost exclusively in ground-based, continental terms. To borrow from Rachel Adam’s pivotal study *Continental Divides*, the “continent” has provided the dominant “frame of study” for the *Journal* for decades. That continent, however, dissolves across the chapters of the *Journal* into islands and shorelines interconnected by the Missouri River that floats the eponymous Rodman and his band of voyageurs between and among them.

Poe’s island-studded and riverine narrative transforms North America into what Michele Currie Navakas calls a “liquid landscape,” an indeterminate space “where land and water continually combine.” The *Journal* and the continent it surveys disintegrate into streams, eddies, and islands—potamic topoi in which opposites converge: the imperial and anti-imperial, the national and transnational, the mercantile and sublime, the original and plagiarized, the archipelagic and continental. Formally, the *Journal* exemplifies Poe’s turbulent, liquid poetics: his texts are whirlpools intermingling myriad streams of ink. Thematically, the novel mirrors the contradictory, archipelagic nature of the antebellum United States. As such, the *Journal* begs analysis from the “archipelagic perspective” that Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens adopt in their groundbreaking formulation of an archipelagic American studies. Poe’s text widens our understanding of the nineteenth-century “Archipelagic Americas,” and it invites us to reconsider American islands in river-based contexts.