

04. The Impulse for Collecting

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The pirate treasure chest, as vividly portrayed in Timon Screech's comments, connects a pirate's imagination to the secret space of childhood memory. It contains collected fragments of faraway places, just as a child's toy chest maps out imaginary countries. A figure who combines the enchantment of ludic childishness with the striving for social justice is the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. He was one of the seafarers mentioned in cultural critic Imafuku Ryūta's poetic treasure chest *Guntō-Sekairon* (An Archipelagic Worldview).¹ Imafuku's analysis blends a vision of traffic between sea and land with the cultural anthropological notions of silent trade and gift-exchange, suggesting a parallel between the drifting existence (of Pablo Neruda) and the "minimal economy" of gift-giving as driftage or flotsam. Imafuku attempts to juxtapose such material communication with the "continental principle of private property" as an idealistic naive alternative.² Neruda states,

I also recall one day, while hunting behind my house for the tiny objects and minuscule beings of my world, I discovered a hole in one of the fence boards. I looked through the opening and saw a patch of land just like ours, untended and wild. I drew back a few steps, because I had a vague feeling that something was about to happen. Suddenly a hand came through. It was the small hand of a boy my own age. When I moved closer, the hand was gone and in its place was a little white sheep.

It was made of wool that had faded. The wheels on which it had glided were gone. I had never seen such a lovely sheep. I went into my house and came back with a gift, which I left in the same place: a pine cone, partly open, fragrant and resinous, and very precious to me.

I never saw the boy's hand again. I have never again seen a little sheep like that one. I lost it in a fire. And even today, when I go past a toy shop, I look in the windows furtively. But it's no use. A sheep like that one was never made again.³

Neruda's writings clearly indicate an intimacy between the ocean imagination and the childish joy of collecting objects. The most famous residence of the poet, Isla Negra, resembles a ship overflowing with objects in such disarray that one might be reminded of the objects brought to the shore by the tidal wave.

In my house I have put together a collection of small and large toys I can't live

¹ Imafuku Ryūta 今福龍太, *Guntō-sekai ron* 群島—世界論 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2008).

² Imafuku, *Guntō-sekai ron*, 67.

³ Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs*, trans. H. St. Martin (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 13.

without. The child who does not play is not a child, but the man who doesn't play has lost forever the child who lived in him and he will certainly miss him. I have also built my house like a toy house and I play in it from morning till nights.

These are my own toys. I have collected them all my life for the scientific purpose of amusing myself alone.⁴

One important intersection between the oceanic imagination of Pablo Neruda's poetry and his taste for amusing himself by collecting marvelous objects is illustrated in his impressive collection of seashells, which he donated to the University of Chile. This side of Neruda, the impulsive collector, as brilliantly demonstrated in Sarah Aubry's research, was reflected in the Chinese poet Ai Qing's portrayal of Neruda, especially in the poem "A Promontory in Chile."⁵ As demonstrated in Kelly Austin's essay,⁶ his habit of collecting and surrounding himself with objects was seen as contradictory and paradoxical in light of his dedication to Marxism. This is precisely where insightful parallels can be drawn between Neruda and another collector, Walter Benjamin, in the sense that the impulse for collecting and play could in intricate ways translate into a revolutionary vision against the principle of private property.

The image of the toy chest thus connects to Inaga Shigemi's idea of the vessel (*utsuwa*) as an unstable and shifting container of a collection, which could be also understood as a passage, translation and replica.⁷ The metaphor of the pirate's ship raises serious challenges to the established trajectories of the production and reproduction of academic knowledge with its often contradictory imperatives of coherence and originality.

⁴ Neruda, *Memoirs*, 269.

⁵ Sarah Anaïs Aubry, *Reefs, Waves, and Tigers: Sino-Hispanic Poetic Encounters in the Work of Ai Qing, Bei Dao and Xi Chuan*, PhD Thesis, City University of Hong Kong, December 2015.

⁶ Kelly Austin, "I Have Put All I Possess at the Disposal of the People's Struggle': Pablo Neruda as Collector, Translator and Poet," *The Comparatist* 32 (May 2008): 40–62.

⁷ Inaga Shigemi, *Sesshoku zōkei ron: fureau tamashii, tsumugareru katachi* (In Search of the Haptic Plasticity: Souls Touching Each Other, Forms Interwoven) (Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 2016), 146–165.