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RESEARCH ONLINE

Maritime mobilities in pacific history : towards a scholarship of betweenness

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In examining the significance of mobility in the long sweep of human history in the Pacific, the world's largest ocean where seventy per cent of the world's islands are to be found, one cannot but begin with the words of the late Tongan scholar, writer and visionary, Epeli Hau'ofa. In 1993 Hau'ofa proposed a new way of thinking about the region he called Oceania. He critiqued the limitations of an imposed regional imaginary, fostered by imperial rulers, western diplomats, academics, aid donors and the like, which emphasised the smallness, isolation and dependency of tiny islands in a far sea. Starting instead with the ways indigenous inhabitants understood their own environment, he embraced the sea as an expansive, active, connecting space, rather than a dividing element. Regarding both water and land equally as sites of history, Oceania is, he argued, 'Our Sea of Islands'.[1]

Hau'ofa emphasised the longstanding processes of maritime connectivity and exchange between island societies. He drew continuities between Islanders' ancient navigational practices and their present-day transnational mobilities, now by air routes, as people travel in ever-greater numbers to the larger nations on the ocean's rim, particularly Australia, New Zealand and North America.

[1] Epeli Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands', in Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu and Epeli Hau'ofa (eds.), *A New Oceania : Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands* (Suva : The University of the South Pacific, 1993), 2-16 ; Hau'ofa, 'The Ocean in Us', *Contemporary Pacific*, 10 :2 (1998), 392-410.

It is in the process of re-imagining this ocean basin from a vast emptiness or 'waste' of water, to a deeply historical space of oceanic transits and community, that the conceptual frameworks offered in the emergent field of transport, traffic and mobility studies become most useful. There is as yet no well-established or unified body of scholarship in the Pacific that engages such themes. It might seem odd to reflect that in a world where so many of its inhabitants have had an intimate understanding of the sea, have lived near it, or have depended on it as a transport space and natural resource, no rich scholarly tradition charts the historical interdependency of island societies, maritime mobilities and the sea.[2] A longer historiography of the Pacific has instead emphasised islands over the ocean, examined grounded attachments to place and conflicts over territory.

The professional origins of Pacific History lie in the post-World War Two era as scholars began to critically interrogate the limits of empire and the British historical tradition. James Davidson, the first Professor of Pacific History at the Australian National University, advocated 'island-centred' scholarship to circumvent histories that subsumed the Pacific into narratives of European imperial expansion. By beginning with islands, scholars would, it was hoped, give primacy to local stories and experiences.[3] By the late 1970s there were some concerns that detailed studies of specific islands overlooked the imprint of broader historical processes. Kerry Howe lamented that Pacific historians appeared to collectively suffer 'monograph myopia' in documenting more and more about less and less, while Oskar Spate memorably reflected that historians 'may on occasion not see the Ocean for the Islands, may be content to be marooned in the tight but so safe confines of their little atoll of knowledge, regardless of the sweep of the currents which bring life to the isles'.[4] In other quarters the pressing concern was that island-centred histories were less often *Islander*-centred, effectively eliding indigenous perspectives and experiences.[5] More recently, scholars have called into question the traditional tripartite division of Pacific, New Zealand and Australian history. These three historiographies have developed quite separately. Furthermore, North and South America figure in Pacific history in fragmented and uneven ways. There are increasing calls to reinvigorate scholarship from transcolonial and transnational perspec-

[2] It is worth remembering, however, that not all Islanders were intimate with the ocean, notably those who lived in the interiors of large continental islands, particularly further west in Melanesia.

[3] James W. Davidson, 'The Problems of Pacific History', *Journal of Pacific History*, 1 (1966), 5-21.

[4] Oskar H. K. Spate, 'The Pacific as an Artefact', in Neil Gunson (ed.), *The Changing Pacific: Essays in Honour of H. E. Maude* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1978), 32-45; Kerry R. Howe, 'Pacific Islands History in the 1980s: New Directions or Monograph Myopia?', *Pacific Studies*, 3:1 (1979), 81-90.

[5] David Hanlon, 'Beyond "the English Method of Tattooing": Decentring the Practice of History in Oceania', *Contemporary Pacific*, 15:1 (Spring 2003), 19-40.

tives, to bridge the histories of the larger island nations on the ocean's rim with each other, and with the smaller islands scattered across it.[6]

In this respect, perspectives from newer transport and mobility history and, more particularly, from cultural histories of shipping, have much to offer. To be sure, questions of maritime mobility have not escaped historical attention in the Pacific. But it is, as Damon Salesa reflects, archaeologists, anthropologists and sociologists, rather than historians, who have been most concerned with the movement of Islanders. These studies are therefore informed by different methodological and theoretical frameworks.[7]

There is a rich scholarly tradition devoted to the first human discovery and settlement of Oceania. These works have rendered untenable older arguments that Islanders' capacity for long-distance deliberate voyaging was at least questionable.[8] The recovery of traditional navigational knowledge and canoe construction techniques has been the focus of postcolonial 'identity voyaging' in much of the Pacific.[9] Paul D'Arcy's *The People of the Sea : Environment, Identity and History in Oceania* has enriched the study of pre-colonial indigenous mobility. In this book, which examines the period 1770-1870, D'Arcy charts the many ways Islanders were at home with the sea, and understood it as both a place and a connecting space. The ocean was divided into a series of regional seas, connected by known pathways or sea roads. Customary travelling practices, including *malaga* in Samoa, *solevu* in Fiji and the *sawei* exchange routes in Micronesia, bound communities together in economic, political and social relationships. Unlike earlier studies, which tended to examine navigational techniques and technologies as isolated subjects of enquiry, D'Arcy carefully integrates the infrastructure of sea travel into the analysis, with a chapter dedicated to the social structures, institutions and values that shaped the meanings of voyaging technologies and practices.[10]

European maritime exploration has produced a vast historical literature and the voyages of James Cook in particular are an enduring source of scholarly and

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[6] Kerry R. Howe, 'Two Worlds ?', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 37 :1 (2003), 50-8 ; Damon Salesa, 'New Zealand's Pacific', in Giselle Byrnes (ed.), *The New Oxford History of New Zealand* (Melbourne : Oxford University Press, 2009), 149-72.

[7] Damon T. Salesa, '"Travel-Happy" Samoa : Colonialism, Samoan Migration and a "Brown Pacific"', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 37 :2 (2003), 171.

[8] For one collection of essays, see Kerry R. Howe (ed.), *Vaka Moana, Voyages of the Ancestors : The Discovery and Settlement of the Pacific* (Auckland : David Bateman, 2006).

[9] Ben Finney, *Voyage of Rediscovery : A Cultural Odyssey through Polynesia* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1994) and Finney, *Sailing in the Wake of the Ancestors : Reviving Polynesian Voyaging* (Honolulu : Bishop Museum Press, 2003) ; Vicente Diaz, *Sacred Vessels : Navigating Tradition and Identity in Micronesia*, video documentary, 29 mins (Guam : Moving Island Productions, 1997).

[10] Paul D'Arcy, *The People of the Sea : Environment, Identity and History in Oceania* (Honolulu : University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).

popular fascination.[11] Other works have explored the participation of indigenous people in new maritime circuitries instigated from the late eighteenth century, as Europeans and Americans entered the region in search of maritime cargoes such as seal skins, sea otter furs, whale bone and blubber and beche-de-mer to trade in China, India and Europe. Thousands of Islanders boarded their ships as seafarers and travellers, expanding their horizons and forging new mobile identities. Many never returned.[12] Others have explored the indigenous regional mobilities associated with the plantation labour trade in the second half of the nineteenth century, as well as the imperial networks which brought thousands of Indians to Fiji on terms of indenture. The focus here more readily lies with the consequences of these large-scale labour movements as they unfolded on land, and how the intermixture of diverse people in colonial sites altered identities and forms of community.[13] The maritime infrastructure that enabled these movements and people's shipboard experiences as passengers and as workers less often serve as the key lines of enquiry.[14] 'Oceanic Passages,' a conference to be held at the University of Tasmania in June 2010, promises new insights, as it seeks to 'engage in meaningful interdisciplinary dialogue about the role of travel, mobility and oceanic geographies in the British Empire and in the Pacific region'. It also envisages one conference stream which will explore 'the mobility – free or otherwise – of indigenous peoples, artefacts, and ideas about indigeneity'.[15]

The historiography of the maritime world of the latter nineteenth century, as imperial engagements in the Pacific intensified, and as sailing ships gave way to steamships with their more regular and extensive services, is comparatively thin. The historiography of other ocean basins also demonstrates a tendency to focus on the age of sail over steam.[16] As in other contexts, traditional economic

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[11] For example, Oskar H. K. Spate, *The Spanish Lake* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1979); Annick Foucrier (ed.), *The French and the Pacific World 17th-19th Centuries: Explorations, Migrations and Cultural Exchanges* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005). Recent Cook books include Geoffrey Blainey, *Sea of Dangers: Captain Cook and his Rivals* (Camberwell: Penguin, 2009); Nicholas Thomas, *Discoveries: The Voyages of Captain Cook* (London: Penguin, 2004).

[12] David Chappell, *Double Ghosts: Oceanian Voyagers on Euroamerican Ships* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997); Marion Diamond, 'Queequeg's Crewmates: Pacific Islanders in the European Shipping Industry', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 1:2 (1989), 123-42.

[13] Tracey Banivanua-Mar, *Violence and Colonial Dialogue: The Australian-Pacific Indentured Labor Trade* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007); Dorothy Shineberg, *The People Trade: Pacific Island Laborers and New Caledonia, 1865-1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999); Kenneth L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: A History to the End of Indenture in 1920* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962); Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra: Journal of Pacific History, 1983).

[14] For one exception, see Laurence Brown, '"A Most Irregular Traffic": The Oceanic Passages of the Melanesia Labor Trade', in Emma Christopher, Cassandra Pybus and Marcus Rediker (eds.), *Many Middle Passages: Forced Migration and the Making of the Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 184-204.

[15] See: http://colonial.arts.utas.edu.au/oceanic_passages/oceanicpassages_home.html (Last visited November 23 2009).

[16] As noted by Jonathan Hyslop, 'Steamship Empire: Asian, African and British Sailors in the Merchant Marine, c.1880-1945', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 44:1 (2009), 50.

and business history approaches have shaped our understanding of the rise of industrial transport operations. There are a number of comprehensive business histories of the main shipping companies active in the Pacific from the late nineteenth century, particularly the Australian Burns Philp & Company, the Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand, and the American Matson Line, while older studies have canvassed transpacific operations and the ships that plied these routes.[17] These are typically nationally focused studies, not generally written with an eye on the ways the new world of transport knitted together, albeit unevenly, the west and east 'coasts' of the Pacific or the islands scattered across it. They also overlook the people working on or travelling by these ships. This is not to disregard the value or importance of these earlier studies, but newer approaches from cultural and postcolonial history are beginning to locate transport in a wider world of power and meaning.

Using the case study of Samoa, Damon Salesa explores the colonial transformations of indigenous mobility from the late nineteenth century. Although shipping remains implicit in his account, Salesa shows that while Islanders continued to travel, attempts by the colonial state to regulate, monitor and terminate precolonial mobilities and to instigate new forms of regional connectivity impacted negatively on their activities.[18] Similar concerns also animate my study of the infrastructure, working cultures and regional networks of the Union Company, one of the largest maritime enterprises in the Pacific basin around the turn of the twentieth century. This project examines the multi-faceted and contested meanings invested in steam technology by imperial officials, colonial nationalists and commercial elites, as well as by the common shipboard workers and the indigenous communities to which steamers traded, challenging seamless narratives of improved transport services in the age of steam. It highlights the ways in which transport operations often collided with the racially exclusive nation-building projects in the white settler societies of New Zealand and Australia on the ocean's western rim, a regional politics which restricted access to shipboard work and regional steamer travel on the basis of race.[19]

In the steam age scholarship, more attention to the intersections between histories of transport, mobility and colonialism through the modal specialisation of shipping is needed. Maritime history has itself been reinvigorated in recent

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[17] Ken Buckley and Kris Klugman, *The History of Burns Philp : The Australian Company in the South Pacific* (Sydney : Burns Philp & Co, 1981) ; Gavin McLean, *The Southern Octopus : The Rise of a Shipping Empire* (Wellington : New Zealand Ship and Marine Society and the Wellington Harbour Board Maritime Museum, 1990) ; William Worden, *Cargoes : Matson's First Century in the Pacific* (Honolulu : University of Hawai'i, 1981). The more general works include William Lawson, *Steam in the Southern Pacific : The Story of Merchant Steam Navigation in the Australasian Coastal and Intercolonial Trades, and on the Ocean Lines of the Southern Pacific* (Wellington : Gordon & Gotch, 1909) and Lawson, *Pacific Steamers* (Glasgow : Brown, Son & Ferguson, 1927).

[18] Salesa, '"Travel-Happy" Samoa', 171-88.

[19] Frances Steel, *Oceania Under Steam : Sea Transport and the Cultures of Colonialism, c.1870-1914* (Manchester : Manchester University Press, forthcoming).

years (but more often outside the Pacific context) by a range of influences from social, cultural and postcolonial history, bringing new insights into shipboard labour relations and connections between ship and shore from the perspectives of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality as well as class.[20] Furthermore, an emphasis on networks, circulation and exchange in imperial and world history has invested seas, oceans and maritime traffic with greater significance and explanatory power.[21] More work is needed to bring together questions of shipping infrastructure with the experiences of workers and passengers, alongside the shifting local, national, regional and imperial investments in maritime transport operations. For Pacific historiography this would entail shifting the frame of enquiry off-shore to the oceanic spaces inbetween, to more fully conceptualise and materialise ships as sites of history and to understand the significance of 'sea time' for a range of historical actors. It would also require more of a transcolonial or transnational sensibility to chart the ways a new industrial culture of mobility reordered space and time in the Pacific basin.

A forthcoming collection of essays details some of the modern cultures of transpacific crossings.[22] We still need to know more about the people who boarded steamships and the projects undertaken in the process. How did a modern culture of mobility produce new sites of transnational and cross-cultural encounter on the high seas? How did ideas about race, gender and class both inform and get transformed by these practices? How were the key ports of call such as Suva, Papeete and Honolulu, as well as Sydney, San Francisco and Vancouver, refigured through their placement along these networks? And what of the infrastructure developed to cater for the growing traffic onshore, such as hotels, roads and hinterland excursions?[23]

To conduct such research, historians must place shipping company records alongside state archives, travel diaries, newspaper articles, visual and literary material and other scattered ephemera, and do so in more places. But such work promises a greater awareness of what was shared within and across Oceania – truly an ocean of highways – and with what effects.

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[20] Including, Marcus Rediker, 'Towards a People's History of the Sea', in David Killingray, Margarette Lincoln and Nigel Rigby (eds.), *Maritime Empires: British Imperial Maritime Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2004), 195-206; Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling (eds.), *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700-1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

[21] For an excellent survey of the British context, see Glen O'Hara, '"The Sea is Swinging into View": Modern British Maritime History in a Globalised World', *English Historical Review*, 124:510 (2009), 1109-34.

[22] Prue Ahrens and Chris Dixon (eds), *Coast to Coast: Case Histories of Modern Pacific Crossings* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, in press).

[23] For an earlier examination of Pacific maritime history and the cultural impact of port towns in the age of sail, see Carolyn Ralston, *Grass Huts and Warehouses: Pacific Beach Communities of the Nineteenth Century* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1977).