Mobile representations of a "New Pacific": a comment

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This comment reflects on the contributions to this special section on print culture and mobility in the Pacific. It focuses on the ways in which changing attitudes toward ocean-going mobility and its mass commercialisation in the first half of the twentieth century encouraged new textual and visual forms of appraisal and representation of the Pacific. This, in turn, facilitated the fashioning of new mobile subjectivities, which illuminate a range of gendered and racialized aspirations being projected into the Pacific region from the white settler states around its rim. Together, the articles suggest avenues for further research on the impact of shipboard and island port encounters on forms of Australian self-presentation and engagement in the region.

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This comment reflects on the contributions to this special section on print culture and mobility in the Pacific. It focuses on the ways in which changing attitudes toward ocean-going mobility and its mass commercialisation in the first half of the twentieth century encouraged new textual and visual forms of appraisal and representation of the Pacific. This, in turn, facilitated the fashioning of new mobile subjectivities, which illuminate a range of gendered and racialized aspirations being projected into the Pacific region from the white settler states around its rim. Together the articles suggest avenues for further research on the impact of shipboard and island port encounters on forms of Australian self-presentation and engagement in the region.

**Keywords:** Australia, interwar years, mass culture, mobility, Pacific, representation

This special section on print culture, mobility, and the Pacific takes as its backdrop the new associations of sea travel with pleasure, leisure, and social distinction that gained traction from the 1920s, and that gradually diminished its prior associations with grim necessity, discomfort, and peril. The focus here is naturally not on technological and operational advances. Rather, the authors variously chart, through disciplinary perspectives from literary studies, cultural history, and visual culture, the ways in which changing attitudes toward ocean-going mobility prompted new textual and visual forms of appraisal and representation of the Pacific and, in turn, fashioned new mobile subjectivities.
The heightened opportunities for oceanic travel from white settler rim states into the Pacific entailed making not only sea time but also the islands and their indigenous inhabitants safe, accessible, and profitable for European consumption and enjoyment. As a number of contributors note, images of order, industry, and the picturesque began to jostle with older representations of Pacific peoples through tropes of “dark” savagery and barbarism. Such shifts followed the establishment of deeper European engagements in island communities through colonial administrations, churches, schools, export-oriented plantations, and port amenities. Max Quanchi has termed this the production of the “new Pacific”—a region remade by and under imperial control, which Nicholas Halter describes here in terms of a process of “sanitization.”¹ Their conclusions echo those of K. R. Howe, who in an earlier series of lectures plotted “a growing sense of psychological control over the Pacific world” in the first half of the twentieth century, where the region was “reformulated to meet the changing expectations and requirements of Western culture,” of which a key manifestation was the growth of tourism.²

Importantly, though, this special section goes further in drawing out not only how ideas about the Pacific, emanating largely from Australia, were changing, but also the forms in which they were expressed and through which they circulated. New market possibilities generated by a growing urban middle class in particular stimulated the production of a range of glossy magazines, illustrated newspapers, and books of travel packed with photographs. While such outputs might be read for the operation of the distancing “gaze” of white settler ascendency and the marking of lines of separation, they also promoted and responded to the curiosity and worldliness of interwar readers, satisfying an emotional and experiential engagement with the wider Pacific in Australia, as Anna Johnston stresses.
This emerging print culture, characterized here broadly as middlebrow, rendered a world of volitional mobility for the aspirational globe-trotter, tourist, or traveler. This had a particular gendered power. While recent collaborative scholarship has charted the appearance of the “modern girl” or “modern woman” across the world, a figure that idealized youthful female empowerment through consumption, her appearance in the Pacific has hardly been noted. Here it is perhaps only to be expected that the ship, a public space of heightened female visibility in the interwar decades, serves as the preeminent space of action and display. In their respective contributions on magazines, Sarah Galletly and Victoria Kuttainen and Susann Liebich draw on images, advertisements, and fictive portrayals of women at sea to emphasize the cultural power of vicarious, aspirational, and imagined mobility. This preoccupation with the ship-as-stage certainly transcended the Pacific; Jo Stanley has observed that 1930s issues of *Vogue* depicted women posed on ships more than any other location. When seen together, this encourages more overt attention than in previous work to the modern woman on the move, indicative that cultural definitions of female high-status mobility and the way it was publicized were subject to significant change after 1920.

Staying with the ship, both Galletly and Halter ponder the significance of interpersonal mixing en route. Halter characterizes steamships as forcing houses of exchange, exposing people to different worldviews and diverse forms of self-presentation. Intriguingly, he posits that shipboard communalism stimulated experimentation, producing creative outputs more identifiably middlebrow in tone and content—a point that seems ripe for further analysis. Galletly, on the other hand, emphasizes rigid social hierarchies and class divisions and the risks (but also the potential rewards) of transgression, particularly for the lone female traveler. So, what did time on board mean for an individual’s self-awareness and expanding awareness of the
world? Did different ships, routes, or even oceans have different expectations, or produce different outcomes? Did fiction fashion this world differently to firsthand accounts? Recent work on oceanic transits in the decades immediately preceding World War I has inquired into the significance of the “on board” in global history, including the “multiple transits on board even a single ship,” and ponders whether passengers’ experiences entailed “longer-term consequences that lasted beyond the arrival of a ship in port.” In this earlier period, the cultures of transit developing on the Pacific, particularly between the white settler colonies in Australasia and North America, differed significantly from the more established patterns and habits on the Atlantic and Indian oceans, notably with respect to the imprint of social class and imperial formalities. Were these divisions as marked in the interwar decades too, or did the heightened mobility witnessed in this period generate something more like the standardization of shipboard culture?

Moving from the ship to islands en route, these networks of regional mobility at sea, and later in the air, drew rim states into relation with each other and the islands between. Earlier accounts of the shoring up of “white men’s countries” around the Pacific through immigration restriction and ideas about Anglo supremacy from the late nineteenth century on paid limited attention to the very islands through which Australians and Americans were connected. In this special section, the Pacific is accorded more mediating power, as the diverse non-Anglo populations are written back into the ways in which rim state Anglo affinities were expressed and mobilized. This is explored to good effect in Johnston’s discussion of Australian travel writer and broadcaster Frank Clune’s account of his mid-century transpacific flight to Canada. Clune’s impressions of the racially mixed ports en route, even when comparatively enthusiastic, such as in Honolulu, only reinforced his anti-Asian sentiment and underscored his commitment
to the boundary work of White Australia. This transpacific connection through an ocean of difference, Johnston concludes, served to confirm and affirm white privilege.

Yet in other contexts, Hawaii did “go to work” on Australian travelers, notably the internationally minded liberal intellectuals that Warwick Anderson has recently examined for the 1920s and 1930s. On their transpacific travels, Honolulu evidenced to them an apparently successful “cross-racial paradise” and thus “an alternative racial destiny”—a powerful counterpoint to White Australia. Indeed, for many commentators in the interwar years, these flourishing mixed populations, attenuating long-held fears of island depopulation that had overshadowed debates about the future of the region from at least the 1870s, represented the “new Pacific.” The publishing outlets and audiences of the Australian intellectuals in Anderson’s study may not have been as immediately middlebrow or mass-market, yet he points to their “deep commitment to the Pacific” and its transformative effects. This analysis thus dovetails with the focus of both Halter and Johnston on individuals who were Pacific-minded and who grappled with big-picture geopolitical questions and concerns in the course of their travels.

In their exploration of the interplay between modes of movement and modes of representation, these articles offer varied perspectives on the layered histories and multifaceted geographies of the Pacific. The textual and visual cultures generated by episodes of European mobility have been central to the framing of this ocean’s history. By pushing the analysis into the first half of the twentieth century and the new and emerging mass consumer experience, the authors highlight the importance of attending to Australian regional power and engagement, reconfiguring its identity as a Pacific-oriented nation in an international age.
Notes


5 For more on the modern girl that centers mobility, see Alisa Freedman, Laura Miller, and Christine R. Yano, eds., *Modern Girls on the Go: Gender, Mobility and Labor in Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).


