

# Introduction: Waves of Exchange

Brittany Myburgh, University of Toronto

Their universe comprised not only land surfaces, but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it...

- *Our Sea of Islands*, Epeli Hau'ofa<sup>1</sup>

Oceania is connected by waves of movement, from ocean-faring migration to networks of information and exchange. Tongan scholar Epeli Hau'ofa has described Oceania as a “sea of islands,” or a sea of relationships and networks that challenges prescribed geographic boundaries and scales. Arguing for the theorization and use of the term ‘Oceania,’ to describe this zone, Hau'ofa seeks to subvert the ways in which European colonizers, from James Cook to Louis Antoine de Bougainville, conceptually and physically mapped the Pacific Ocean (Te Moana Nui) as islands scattered in a faraway sea.<sup>2</sup>

The Pacific has long held space in the Western imagination. Its presence, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues, is to be found in the West's very “fibre and texture, in its sense of itself, in its language, in its silences and shadows, its margins and intersections.”<sup>3</sup> The European activity of mapping the Pacific Ocean throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century was accompanied by the acquisition of material culture from within Oceania.<sup>4</sup> The collection of

---

1 Epeli Hau'ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 6, no. 1, (Spring 1994): 152.

2 Hau'ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” 151.

3 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples*. (London: Zed Books, 1999): 14.

4 Attention is increasingly paid to provenance and biographies of objects in Oceanic collections to better assess the often fraught histories of encounter, trade, and appropriation or theft. For example see: Thomas, Nicholas, Julie Adams, Billie Lythberg, Maia Nuku, Amiria Manutahi

many Oceanic objects also occurs at a moment when the disciplines of art history and anthropology were taking their modern shape.<sup>5</sup> Historical analysis of the decontextualized presentation of Oceanic objects within ethnographic modes of display reveals the ways in which exhibitions of art and material culture were employed to reinforce a colonial European worldview. As categories for what constituted Western fine art and value in relation to Oceanic objects were being developed, European identity was also being redefined in relation to visions of a Pacific identity.

A variety of Western artistic representations of peoples and landscapes from across the Pacific Ocean were increasingly disseminated throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This occurred through various modes of display and in both artistic and literary representations. Written European accounts of Polynesia in particular which were sent back to England and France by Bougainville and Cook described the region as a utopia, and aestheticized its inhabitants with classical references. For example, Cook's naturalist on the *HMS Endeavour*, Joseph Banks, would give Maohi in Tahiti ancient Greek nicknames.<sup>6</sup> Upon arrival in Tahiti, Bougainville wrote that he believed himself "transported into the Garden of Eden."<sup>7</sup> In acts of cross-cultural ventriloquism, European authors also began writing as Pacific Islanders to hold up a mirror to British society. The first Pacific Islander to arrive in England, Mai, was frequently used to voice the relative merits of 'civilized' or 'natural' men. Many articles written in his voice, although satirical, reflect a growing unease about Europe being a civilizing force in the Pacific.<sup>8</sup>

---

Salmond, and Gwil Owen eds. *Artefacts of encounter: Cook's voyages, colonial collecting and museum histories*. (Honolulu : University of Hawai'i Press, 2016.)

5 For an in-depth discussion of how the discipline of anthropology was developed in relation to, and in turn fueled, the acquisition of Oceanic objects see: Nicholas Thomas, "Pacific Presences in Britain: antiquarians, ethnographers, artists, emissaries," in *Pacific Presences, Oceanic Art and European Museums*. Vol. 1 eds. Lucie Carreau, Alison Clark, Alana Jelinek, Erna Lilje, Nicholas Thomas, (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2018): 37-80

6 Banks would call Tutaha of Te Porionu'u 'Hercules': Henry Adams, *Memoirs of Arii Taimai e Marama of Eimeo, Teriirere of Toarai, Teriinui of Tahiti, Tauraatua i Amo*. (Paris: H. Adams, Paris, 1901): 196.

7 Bougainville quoted in Elizabeth Childs, *Vanishing Paradise: Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti*. Berkley: University of California Press. (2013): 22.

8 See: E. H McCormick, *Omai: Pacific Envoy*. (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1977): 98; Alexander Cook, "The Art of Ventriloquism: European Imagination and the Pacific," in Hetherington, Michelle ed. *Cook & Omai: the cult of the South Seas*, (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2001): 38

During the 1780s a range of ethnographic museum displays of Pacific objects acquired on Cook's voyages were exhibited in London near Leicester Square.<sup>9</sup> In addition to these displays, theatrical performances such as *Omai: OR a Trip Around the World* purported to present viewers with accurate knowledge about Oceanic peoples. For over two hundred years, these depictions informed European visions of what was termed the "South Seas," with stereotypes of the "dusky maiden" most infamously manifest in Paul Gauguin's images of Tahiti. These visions of the Pacific continue to permeate the popular imaginary, often harmfully characterizing Oceania as either a faraway paradise, or a place of isolation and dependency in need of development.<sup>10</sup>

Area Studies have historically focused on the outer "rim" of land masses that border the Pacific Ocean.<sup>11</sup> During the development of the discipline, sites of investigation were largely those regions of the world considered vital to the interests of the United States in the Cold War. The imagining and representation of the "Asia-Pacific" as a region was a geopolitical act, one that sought to define a relationship between the United States, its colonies in the Pacific, and East Asia. Increasingly, scholarship from within and about Oceania has sought to recenter the space in between this outer rim as a zone of interaction and exchange across an ocean. These discussions are informed by Oceanic theories of space and time, such as Hūfanga Okusitino Māhina's articulation of the concepts of *vā* and *tā*.<sup>12</sup> *Vā* as a spatial phenomenon is also

---

9 Ian McCalman, "Spectacles of Knowledge: OMAI as Ethnographic Travelogue," in Michelle Hetherington ed. *Cook & Omai: the cult of the South Seas*, (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2001): 9

10 Margaret Jolly, "Imagining Oceania: Indigenous and Foreign Representations of a Sea of Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific* 19, no. 2 (2007): 529.

11 For an overview of the history of area studies and this tendency see: H. D. Harootunian and Masao Miyoshi, "Introduction: The "Afterlife" of Area Studies" in Masao Miyoshi and Harry D. Harootunian eds. *Learning places: the afterlives of area studies*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002): 2-7.

12 Hufanga Okusitino Mahina, "Ta, Va, and Moana: Temporality, Spatiality, and Indigeneity," *Pacific Studies* 33, no. 2 (2010): 168. Although this concept is present across Oceania, scholars emphasize applying specific understandings to interpretations of Indigenous artistic practices. For example, Deidre Brown, Ngārino Ellis, and Jonathan Mane-Wheoki argue for the use of Te Reo Māori (the Māori language) and consideration of Kaupapa Māori pedagogy when establishing a spatiotemporal framework of interpretation for Māori art/taonga. They also emphasize the necessity of interrogating the concept of time itself in the writing of history, see: "Does Māori Art History Matter?" written for *Toi Te Mana: A History of Indigenous Art from Aotearoa New Zealand* (Auckland University Press, forthcoming 2021) and first presented at the *Gordon H. Brown Lecture Series* (Wellington, NZ: Victoria University of Wellington, 2014).

explored by Sa'iliemanu Lilomaiava Doktor, who argues for the consideration of this concept when the “scholarly dichotomies of village/metropolitan and local/global” arise in discussing mobility and migration in Oceania.<sup>13</sup> The concept of *vā* as a complex relational space may deny these binaries by enabling a deeper understanding of the way in which place is constituted through networks and relationships, placing focus on how connections and community are maintained across nations, the ocean, and time.

The theorization of *vā* has implications for the history of Oceanic art and for the study of material culture that is designed to be mobile and reinforce relations across homelands. Maia Nuku, art historian and curator of the Metropolitan Museum's Oceanic collection, has written extensively on how Oceanic material culture reinforces relations in visually dynamic ways, animating the genealogical relationships that bound Oceanic peoples to ancestors, gods, and the ocean and island environment.<sup>14</sup> The study of how materials are positioned within Oceanic cosmologies, and the recognition that objects and *taonga* housed in museums are living and connected, is emphasized in Indigenous art historical methodologies and investigations that focus on biography, genealogy, and kinship.

Contemporary artists too respond to both these legacies and new questions now raised by digital connectivity. Underwater submersion is a reoccurring theme for artist Rachel Rakena, who writes, “We are island people living in a vast ocean. We belong to water just as we belong to land.”<sup>15</sup> Historian Maree Mills considers how contemporary digital works from Aotearoa/New Zealand, such as Rakena's *Rerehiko*, emphasize the fluidity and liminality of both contemporary Māori identity and the networked territory of cyberspace.<sup>16</sup> Other works by Rakena, such as *Pacific Washup*, produced in collaboration

---

13 Lilomaiava-Doktor writes that *vā* “is a concept larger than “migration,” which implies a narrow perception of movement and human relationships limited to concerns for survival and material consumption.” See: Sa'iliemanu Lilomaiava-Doktor, “Beyond “Migration”: Samoan Population Movement (Malaga) and the Geography of Social Space (*vā*),” *The Contemporary Pacific* 21, no. 1 (2009): 1-32.

14 Maia Nuku, “Atea: Nature and Divinity in Polynesia,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 76, no. 3 (Winter, 2019): 19

15 Alice Hutchison, Sean Cubitt, Jonathan Mane Wheoki, Brett Graham, and Rachael Rakena, *Aniwaniwa*, Exhibition Catalog: Published on the occasion of the 52nd International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia (2007): 2.

16 Maree Mills, “Contemporary Māori Women's New Media Art Practice,” in Stella Brennan and Su Ballard eds. *The Aotearoa Digital Arts Reader* (Auckland: Aotearoa Digital Arts and Clouds, 2008): 76-85.

with Fez Fa'anana and Brian Fuata, reference ideas of whakapapa or genealogy as something that is traced through the ocean currents that bore Pacific voyages and established connected homelands. The work speaks to new questions of belonging and relation that arise through the navigation of airplane voyages that continue the deeper history of Oceanic migration.

Scholarship on Oceanic art and material culture is necessarily interdisciplinary, drawing upon methodologies in art history, anthropology, cultural and area studies. The term "Asia-Pacific" is still employed in area studies scholarship to define the vast expanse of ocean and land that reaches from Oceania westward across Asia. The hyphenated term is here employed to encourage scholars to explore this region as a zone of close connectivity and encounter. Where histories and assessments of colonization often center upon Europe or North-America in relation to Asia or Oceania, a critical reformulation of "Asia-Pacific" might necessarily center the discussion on the historic relationship between these two areas. It is a history that includes powerful expressions of solidarity against colonial forces, such as those held at the Bandung conference in 1955. This history is also one that is still being conveyed through a dominant European lens.

Within North America, Lisa Kahaleole Hall argues that the United States' disavowal of its imperialist past construes a relationship between Asian and Pacific Island communities (leading to the joint category of people as API) that denies indigeneity and places all within the category of migrant.<sup>17</sup> This "Asia-Pacific" relationship, framed through a North American lens, is one that results in the essentialization of these communities and the erasure of Indigenous Oceanic presence. Yet, from within Oceania these communities navigate questions of solidarity against the colonial regime on their own terms. Considering continuing questions around migration, indigeneity, and sovereignty, art writer Amy Weng argues that new decolonial allegiances between Asian communities and indigenous Oceanic peoples would allow for the recognition that "our struggle is not against the weight of history, it is for the emancipatory space that we might share together."<sup>18</sup> Weng specifically emphasizes the role that art may play in not only community building, but in

---

17 Lisa Kahaleole Hall, "Navigating Our Own "Sea of Islands": Remapping a Theoretical Space for Hawaiian Women and Indigenous Feminism," *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 2 (2009): 15-38.

18 Amy Weng, "Te Tiriti o Waitangi – An Unmet Challenge," *Hainamana: Contemporary Asian New Zealand art and culture*. (2016): 1.

assuming “a radical politics” that rejects the moot assimilation of migrants into European culture within settler societies.<sup>19</sup>

## Navigating Visions of the Asia and Pacific Worlds

With the pressing questions posed by these various disciplines and contexts, and to investigate the movement of material and visual culture across the vast networks of Oceania and Asia, *Navigating Visions of the Asia and Pacific Worlds* invited scholars to present interdisciplinary research that engaged with ideas of mobility, migration, and navigation. Papers examined works of art and literature that interrogate both the tangible objects and invisible ties that have connected Oceania and Asia, and these regions to Europe. Presentations also discussed the ways in which connectivity, mobility, and digital media now form a part of contemporary cultural landscapes that extend to North and South America, and beyond. While considering the wider implications of their research, each participant placed particular emphasis on a specific artist, object, or location.

Examining transcultural mediation between Asia and Europe in the early modern period, Holly Chen’s paper *Mediating the Foreign* explores notions of translation in works by Japanese painters Ishikawa Tairo 石川大浪 (1762-1817), Ishikawa Moko 石川孟高 (1763-1826), and Tani Buncho 谷文晁 (1763-1841). Examining their engagement with Dutch painter Willem van Royen’s work *Birds and Flowers*, Chen examines how the concept of multilingualism might allow scholars to account for intermediaries and the issues of visual legibility or illegibility which occur when one culture encounters another. Similarly examining instances of cross-cultural encounter, Renata Nagy’s *Nanban World Map Screens* explores the mediation of European cartography through Japanese Buddhist cosmology. Examining Nanban screen maps (Nanban-Bunka-kan), the paper explores how hybrid visual forms were employed to highlight Japan’s global significance by placing it at the center of the mapped world.

The role of visual culture in advancing colonialism and imperialism across Oceania and Asia is particularly examined in those papers addressing the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Maria Mendoza-Camba’s

---

<sup>19</sup> Weng, “Te Tiriti o Waitangi – An Unmet Challenge,” 1.

*Aping the Filipino Image* discusses the concept of racial hierarchy within the American consciousness and its roots in eighteenth century racial theory. Drawing on post-colonial theory and employing the Philippines as a case study, the paper examines how cartoonists of imperialism employed visual prototypes of ‘otherness’ that were grounded in these racial hierarchies. Depicting their colonies employing a series of racist tropes, the paper argues that these images sought to justify and validate the American conquest of these nations. Chao Chi Chiu’s paper on Paul Jacoulet considers the artist’s unique position as a Frenchman who grew up in Japan. Jacoulet produced a series of woodblocks informed by both Japanese and French conceptions of Oceania at the turn of the twentieth century. The paper explores how the images produced of Micronesia might portray a nostalgic longing for the past that reflected Japan’s own negotiation with notions of tradition and modernity during this period.

Papers examining contemporary visions of Oceania and Asia explore complex notions of identity and relations between people, landscape, and sites of memory and remembrance. Sophia Merkin undertakes a case study of contemporary painter John Walsh in her paper *Decolonizing Landscapes*. Exploring the history of landscape as a genre, Merkin examines how Walsh subverts traditional understandings of landscape to produce complex spaces of resistance and encounter. The paper examines how Walsh navigates the ongoing legacies of colonization in Aotearoa/New Zealand in relation to his own identity and artistic practice, exploring how his paintings investigate both indigenous and settler relations to land. In *Racializing Apparatuses and Embodiment Performance*, Hyeongjin Oh examines the contemporary performance piece *Pattern of Ngoc*, a response to a 2014 shipwreck in the Yellow Sea near South Korea. The work was designed as a platform to discuss Korean society’s refusal to mourn a Vietnamese woman among the shipwreck victims. Presenting an in-depth critique of this complex work, the paper argues that this project of mourning and remembering the marginalized within the nationalist regime in fact served to reinforce normative ideologies and government-driven multiculturalism.

*Navigating Visions* was also fortunate to be able to present arts-based research projects and an exhibition of visual work. Kari Noe, Patrick Karjala, Anna Sikkink, and Dean Lodes presented *Kilo Hōkū*, a virtual reality simulation for non-instrument open ocean Hawaiian navigation. The simulation re-creates, within a virtual environment, the experience of

utilizing non-instrument and celestial navigation techniques on a wa'a kaulua, a Hawaiian double-hulled sailing canoe. Similarly engaged with themes of diaspora and migration, Christine Germano presented the photojournalism project *Through Our Eyes*, a community arts education project aimed at understanding Marshallese children's navigation of experiences of displacement, belonging, and identity.

Exhibiting artists Christie Carriere, James Legaspi, and Florence Yee also engaged with concepts of identity and memory. Interested in the many nuances of community and culture experienced by the pan-Asian diaspora, Christie Carriere's *Grandmother's Clothing* is a self-portrait exploring familial history and complex connections to cultural heritage. The historical documentation of solely male members of the artist's family prompted a desire to address the erasure of the artist's matriarchal lineage. Considering items of clothing passed down through generations and moved across borders, as well as the way in which physical objects might act as an index for memory, Carriere appears in clothing made for her grandmother by her great-grandmother.

Florence Yee's art practice is similarly informed by an interest in Cantonese-Canadian history and exploring diasporic subjectivities. *New Fortitude* and *Whitewashed* seek to subvert the negative tropes associated with Chinese culture. *Whitewashed* specifically takes aim at the history of Chinese/Cantonese migrants in the late nineteenth century who were legally banned from many professions. Permitted occupations included laundry and dry cleaning, from which a range of stereotypes developed. The work plays with the concept of cleaning and whitewashing to address notions of cultural loss.

James Legaspi exhibited *Red on Top*, a photo-montage book that documents the artist's personal experiences with racism as a Filipino living in Canada. The work intertwines creative writing with documentary-style photographs and images from mainstream media to critique the role that visual imagery plays in spreading racial prejudice. Juxtaposing personal text correspondence with screen shots from social media and film, the work demonstrates how pervasive harmful stereotypes remain within popular imagery and culture.



Histories of navigation remain so central in scholarship about this geographic zone because they emphasize the agency, skill, and knowledge of those Indigenous peoples who originally settled the region.<sup>20</sup> The papers and artworks presented in this volume bring together a range of perspectives on visual and material culture, geographies, disciplines, and media beneath the theme of navigating vision.<sup>21</sup> They demonstrate the complex navigation of materials, forms, culture, and place that were necessary to produce these artistic visions of the Asia and Pacific worlds. In doing so they underscore the importance of re-navigating and re-envisioning our partial and contingent knowledge of the past through historical explorations that seek to better understand the present.

---

20 The understanding that Oceania was purposefully settled by skilled navigators stands in contrast to the previously inaccurate view that it was settled by accident.

21 This idea of contrasting visions and potentially incommensurate worldviews is also explored in Oceanic scholarship: Bernard Smith's 1960 publication *European Vision and the South Pacific* became a departure point for Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche's *Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific* (1999). In this work Nicholas Thomas argues that Pacific histories "require a dislocated vision because they are not, in fact, unitary histories at all": Nicholas Thomas, "Introduction," in Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche eds. *Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific* ed, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 4.

## References

- Adams, Henry. *Memoirs of Arii Taimai e Marama of Eimeo, Teriirere of Tooarai, Teriinui of Tahiti, Tauraatua i Amo*. Paris: H. Adams, 1901.
- Brown, Deidre, Ngarino Ellis, and Jonathan Mane-Wheoki. "Does Māori Art History Matter?" presented at the *Gordon H. Brown Lecture Series* Wellington, NZ: Victoria University of Wellington, 2014.
- Carreau, Lucie, Alison Clark, Alana Jelinek, Erna Lilje, and Nicholas Thomas, eds. *Pacific Presences, Oceanic Art and European Museums*. Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2018.
- Cubitt, Sean and Brett Graham, Alice Hutchison, Jonathan Mane Wheoki, Rachael Rakena. *Aniwaniwa*, Exhibition Catalog: 52nd International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, 2007.
- Hall, Lisa Kahaleole. "Navigating Our Own "Sea of Islands": Remapping a Theoretical Space for Hawaiian Women and Indigenous Feminism," *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 2 (2009): 15-38.
- Hau'ofa, Epeli. "Our Sea of Islands." *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1. (1994): 148-161.
- Hetherington, Michelle ed. *Cook & Omai: the cult of the South Seas*. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2001.
- Jolly, Margaret. "Imagining Oceania: Indigenous and Foreign Representations of a Sea of Islands." *The Contemporary Pacific* 19, no. 2 (2007): 508-45.
- Lilomaiava-Doktor, Sa'iliemanu. "Beyond "Migration": Samoan Population Movement (Malaga) and the Geography of Social Space (Vā)." *The Contemporary Pacific* 21, no. 1 (2009): 1-32. Accessed October 29, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23724742>.
- Mills, Maree. "Contemporary Māori Women's New Media Art Practice," in Stella Brennan and Su Ballard eds. *The Aotearoa Digital Arts Reader* (Auckland: Aotearoa Digital Arts and Clouds): 76-85.
- Miyoshi, Masao and Harry D. Harootunian eds. *Learning Places: the Afterlives of Area studies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Nuku, Maia. "Atea: Nature and Divinity in Polynesia," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 76, no. 3 (Winter, 2019): 1-48
- Okusitino Mahina, Hufanga. "'Ta, Va, and Moana: Temporality, Spatiality, and Indigeneity." *Pacific Studies* 33, no. 2 (2010): 168.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books. 1999, 14.

Weng, Amy. "Te Tiriti o Waitangi – An Unmet Challenge," *Hainamana: Contemporary Asian New Zealand Art and Culture*. (2016): 1.