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*Beyond “the English Method of
Tattooing”: Decentering the Practice
of History in Oceania*

David Hanlon

HISTORY TELLING AS PREFACE

I have told a story on previous occasions that I would like to tell again here. I hope that those who have heard it before will bear with me. No story or history, you know, is quite the same in the retelling of it. My story concerns the beachcomber, James O’Connell, and his encounter with a different, locally focused, and culturally ordered form of historical expression on the island of Pohnpei in the eastern Caroline group of the larger geographical area known to many as “Micronesia.” The story relates, I believe, to the current and future practice of history in Oceania.

Considerable uncertainty surrounds the historical personage of James O’Connell; we are not sure of his real name, the exact circumstances by which he found himself on Pohnpei, or the actual duration of his stay on the island (O’Connell 1972; Hanlon 1988, 36–46). An informed guess, sustained by a careful consideration of the evidence available, suggests a residence of roughly three to five years, ending in early December 1833, when O’Connell left the island aboard the Salem trading brig *Spy*.

During his stay on the island, O’Connell demonstrated an openness to the island and its people not evidenced by most foreign visitors. We should resist labeling him sensitive or even tolerant, however. More likely, the particulars of his situation as a shipwrecked sailor or escapee from a prison vessel bound for the Australian penal colony necessitated such compromise. Whatever the motivation, his accommodation to Pohnpeian society included the extensive and painful tattooing of his body. Aside from their decorative or ornamental value, the patterns of a Pohnpeian body tattoo (*pelipel*) identified an individual’s lineage and recorded in symbolic form

the clan and other relational histories and associations that marked one's identity. In a real sense, Pohnpeians wore their histories on their bodies. In the political theater of cross-cultural encounters, Pohnpeians could be seen as incorporating O'Connell's presence on the island by tattooing their histories on his body. Whatever he thought of it, the markings on his body proclaimed the reality of an island past and evidenced a form of expression or consciousness about that past quite different from what O'Connell's world understood to be history.

Having imprinted on O'Connell's body a history of their world, Pohnpeians, not surprisingly, wondered how white people (*aramas pwetepwet*) recorded their past. Responding one day to the inquiries of a group of women who sat with him under the thatched roof of a community feasting house (*nahs*), O'Connell showed his hosts a copy of Jane Porter's *Scottish Chiefs*, a book he had somehow brought with him to the island. O'Connell explained to the women how the people of Europe wrote down events in books in order to remember those parts of the past that were important to them; it was, he said, "the English method of tattooing." The women were apparently intrigued. As they had sought to place or better possess O'Connell in their world by making his body a text for their past, these Pohnpeians now endeavored to record a consciousness of O'Connell's world within their own histories. Their bodies, or rather the spaces closest to their bodies, provided the sites for this somewhat impromptu mixing of historical styles and memories.

The women tore out pages from the Porter book, especially those with drawings or figures, and wove them into the bark-cloth shoulder wraps that they wore for protection from inclement weather. O'Connell wrote of how proudly and smartly they modeled these histories. The women's enjoyment proved short-lived, however. Heavy rains later that day caused the ink on the printed pages from the Porter book to run, creating quite a mess. The women complained bitterly to O'Connell; one exclaimed quite emphatically that the history of the white man was no good because it washed away with the rain. Pohnpeian tattooing was a much better method for recording the past, she asserted, because it lasted. Looking at the Pohnpeian history etched on his own body, O'Connell conceded the point.

The story of O'Connell and his discursive encounter with Pohnpeians over the validity and durability of varying forms of historical expression marks, I believe, an important moment in Oceanic historiography that has been forgotten or largely unnoticed. The forces of Christianity, colonial-

ism, and capitalism have helped see to that. In O'Connell's wake followed increasing numbers of foreigners to Pohnpei's shores, bringing with them disease, disruption, colonial rule, world war, and later, a whole new way of being and knowing called "development." This is a history that, in its most general features, is quite common across the region we now call Oceania. I offer the story of James O'Connell's encounter with Pohnpeian history because it challenges still-reigning and colonialist paradigms about what history is and how it is best expressed. Through this story's retelling, I seek to underscore the existence of other, more local ways of doing history: ways of history that have always been with us, ways that are reemerging and being transformed in their reemergence, and new ways that appropriate existing technologies from beyond Oceania in selective, subversive, and complicated manners.

A SHORT HISTORY OF PACIFIC ISLANDS HISTORY

To better foreground the emergence or reemergence of these more local histories, I perhaps should re-present first a very brief account of written history in Oceania, or the "English method of tattooing," as James O'Connell deemed it. We know that Europeans brought with them to Oceania both their definition of history and their practice of writing it. "The Pacific," as it was called then, seemed but another theater for imperial expansion, a site for the exercise of Euro-American desire, fantasy, and self-display. These outlanders could find little within the region and among its peoples that struck them as history. To borrow from Vince Diaz, island peoples might be recognized as possessing a culture worth studying or salvaging ethnographically, but not a history (1997). Island inhabitants were among the "people without history," to use Eric Wolfe's phrase. The histories that Europeans wrote about this region, then, would be largely about themselves, that is, from their own frames of reference and focusing on European personalities and activities. In their displacement or erasure of Oceanic histories, these written histories provided a discursive dimension to the colonizing process; the rendering of difference in terms that were familiar, and thus knowable and controllable, proved every bit as much as an act of taking possession as planting a pennant on an island shore in the name of some distant sovereign.

The beginnings of what would come to be called "Pacific history" as something distinct from the history of Euro-Americans in the Pacific are found in Australia, a land itself deeply disturbed and transformed by colo-

nialism. In 1954, James Davidson, in an inaugural address at the Australian National University that reflected the general postwar spirit of decolonization, proclaimed the need to get beyond old, tired, imperial histories of areas such as the Pacific to a more regional approach that looked not to foreign national forces—abstract, distant and yet powerful—but rather to the importance of islands as stages for the engagement of different foreign groups with local cultural orders (1955). Davidson's advocacy of island-centered history drew on the recognition that decolonization was an intellectual as well as political process. Colonization was about more than the usurpation or displacement of indigenous polities, about more than the exploitation of land and other resources; colonization also affected, and deeply, a people's sense of themselves and their pasts.

If James Davidson and his fellow practitioners were aiming at an immediate target, it was the idea of fatal impact and the companionate assumption of island peoples as total victims.¹ Drawn from the writings of late eighteenth century explorers, the fatal impact theory found its clearest expression in Alan Moorehead's popular history (1966). The publisher's blurb on the book's dust jacket reads in part: "When Captain Cook entered into the Pacific in 1769, it was a virgin ocean, pristine and savage, and its inhabitants lived a life of primeval innocence. Seventy years later, firearms, disease, and alcohol had hammered away at this way of life until it crumbled before them, and where Satan had sown the Protestant missionaries reaped: the Tahitians, who 'had known no God but Love,' came to accept the morality of an English suburb."

This reductionist approach to Oceanic pasts also showed itself in more academic and scholarly works that could not locate any past or future topics of historical investigation beyond the fatality of impact and first encounters. Davidson argued with conviction against the seemingly sympathetic, but flawed, ultimately diminishing assumptions regarding the absolute and terminal effects of European intrusion on island societies (1955; 1966). Instead, Davidson wrote of islands whose beaches outsiders might breach but whose heartlands they could never penetrate or conquer. Agency would constitute the conceptual framework through which Pacific history might be advanced. Those who followed Davidson insisted on histories that were not just island- but Islander-oriented.²

But how was one to foreground island peoples in the writing of what was now being called "Pacific Islands" history? Some advocated a multidisciplinary approach, including the use of oral traditions as a source for writing histories that privileged Islanders and not just the physical space

that they inhabited (Maude 1971). The employment of oral traditions and other unwritten sources, however, raised a host of methodological issues not easily or quickly accommodated by a still-dominant form of historical inquiry that remained empirical in its approach and positivist in its epistemological assumptions. The emergence of Pacific or Pacific Islands history as a specialty of academic historical discourse evidenced the limits of liberalism in a post-World War II climate. Despite its humanistic inclinations, Pacific Islander history as it evolved from Davidson through his students at the Australian National University remained largely the province of Europeans writing about and for Islanders. The paternalistic bias of doing a history of others or of helping them to do a history of themselves seemed not to matter. Davidson's brand of Pacific history thus retained a colonizing quality about it; its liberal gesture was to include Oceanic peoples in a form of historical expression that continued to render island pasts in terms of the conventions and values of European history. Replacing overtly imperial or colonial history with a more liberally inclined history that still relied heavily on alien forms and criteria to order the past remained, in a sense, no less colonialist.

Davidson's advocacy of a Pacific Islands history did not go unchallenged by those who believed that "history" was the particular purview of Europe, reserving the term for the mechanism or process whereby Europeans understood and expressed their sense of their past. Whatever other peoples did to or with their past, it was not history in the sense that Europeans understood history. Peter Munz cautioned against allowing a commitment to political decolonization to obscure serious methodological and theoretical issues involved in the study of the past (1971). He defined history as Europe's informed way of dealing with its past in terms of location in time, determinable fact, and category of inquiry. Munz characterized history, in essence, as a distinctly European practice based on a certain set of distinctive and determining thoughts drawn from the Judeo-Christian tradition. "In other societies with other thoughts," he wrote, "the view of the past must necessarily be different. In societies where there are no recorded facts or where the facts recorded are the precipitate of a different form of thought, history in our sense is not possible" (1971, 17; see also Davidson's response [1971]).

For Munz, history was about the actions of European men on battle-grounds, in throne rooms and assembly halls, and over political, legislative, or diplomatic negotiations. On the surface, his dismissal of the possibility of history among nonwestern peoples suggested the kinds of imperial

arrogance and intellectual colonization that Davidson wrote against. But Munz's essential caution regarding the distinctive approach of the West to dealing with its own past as something different from what other societies might do with or to their pasts inadvertently offered a critical insight into the idea of history as culturally produced, locally ordered, and vernacularly expressed. The kind of criticism advanced by Munz unwittingly helped articulate the recognition that all history is, in a sense, ethnohistory.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES TO PACIFIC PASTS

The history of "the English method of tattooing" in Oceania does not stop here. Indeed, the area called the "Pacific Islands" has not gone unaffected by the intellectual ferment challenging established academic disciplines and their foundational assumptions. The region has proved a major site for the disciplinary convergence of anthropology and history, and the possibilities that such a convergence raises for the study of island pasts. The practice of history in Oceania has been affected deeply by a strong sense of the symbolic, by the consideration of events in time as historical metaphors for deeper mythical realities, and by the metaphor of islands and beaches. The problematics of history in Oceania have been compounded too by more recent voyaging theories that contest the organizing (some would say normalizing) concepts of culture and history—theories that investigate narrative strategies and contextual issues involved in the production of written histories, and that underscore the ideological, patriarchal, and hegemonic influences often infusing historical studies, especially studies of subaltern groups or colonized others.³

The disturbance of conventional academic practices and understandings caused by a critical attention to the discursive practices of history has created spaces for the reemergence of more local voices and their histories. However, acute tension has developed as more local expressions of the past struggle against the still alien, potentially neocolonizing intellectual dimensions of these more hospitable theoretical perspectives, which, in Teresia Teaiwa's words, can lose as easily as loose the native (2000). The limitations of the Davidson school and more recent ethnographic and discursive approaches leave open the very real and vital question of what exactly constitutes history in Oceania. This haunting question has been addressed by prominent scholars both in and beyond the region. Marshall Sahlins has described himself as an essentially old-fashioned historian

who, like Thucydides, believes in history's "laying out the matter as it is" (Sahlins 1994, 41). Sahlins' concern is not so much for facts as for the understanding of the cultural construction given to events. He wrote against the "pseudo-politics of interpretation," a contemporary phenomenon that he described as the required identification and condemnation by theorists critical of the racist, sexist, and colonialist sentiments assumed to infect all historical texts.

Conceding the autobiographical nature of history, Sahlins nonetheless argued that people of the past lived neither for us nor as us. The past is victimized by the concerns of a postmodernist present that demands the recognition of a counter-hegemonic multiplicity of views while portraying the author and her or his work as the unmediated expression of a totalized system of power. According to Sahlins, the science of the other, or heterology, begins with a recognition of the scandals that other peoples offer to our categories, our logic, and our common sense. An admission that history is constructed in light of contemporary issues and purposes does not preclude the worth and value of endeavoring to discover how other people conducted themselves and understood the world according to their own purposes, interests, and priorities.

Greg Dening would not deny the value of Sahlins' approach to history, though he might be less optimistic about the actual extent to which a history produced in the present can fully and accurately reconstruct the mind-set or worldview of those who have gone before. Dening is as much interested in the ways in which people make history as he is in trying to write a history of other peoples in other times. Attention to the making of history allows for transcending any preoccupation with the more sensational aspects of cross-cultural encounters. Dening viewed the first contacts between Tahitians and Europeans not in terms of raw violence or crude sex but as a mutual, if unequal, process of appropriation, whereby different groups of Tahitians and Europeans attempted to make sense of one another, to give each other a place in their respective worlds, and to create consciously expressed memories of their encounters (1986). As the British sought to incorporate Tahiti and Tahitians into their world by planting pennants, writing ethnographies, and performing plays, so too the Tahitians placed a portrait of Cook, the skulls of *Bounty* mutineers, and those same colonizing pennants within the sacred structures, spaces, and garments through which they knew their world.

Of course, the danger in focusing on first contacts or cross-cultural encounters is the privileging of the Euro-American presence in the history

of the islands of Oceania. If we admit that contact, encounter, and colonialism are the loci through which Oceanic pasts have been approached, we must also admit that these events and processes are but a part of the pasts of this area of the world, and not the only, first, or necessarily most important foci for historical investigations of the region (see Schieffelin and Crittenden 1991, 289–290).

Ethnographic or anthropological approaches to the study of the past are not exclusively the practice of Euro-American scholars. I find impressive Pat Hohepa's deeply and culturally contexted bound-together history of muskets, missionaries, and mana in Aoteaora, a history related against a much deeper past and from the author's own position as a member of the Ngapuhi Tribe (1999). Hohepa's work demonstrates the possibilities of counter-ethnographic histories that challenge, subvert, or otherwise extend the writings of Euro-American scholars. I am impressed too by August Kituai's courageous study of local policemen in early twentieth century Papua New Guinea, whose active and uniformed presence constituted one of Australian colonialism's most effective administrative instruments (1998). Amid situational ambiguities and conflicting loyalties, these Papuan policemen showed themselves to be agents rather than victims or unwitting intermediaries of colonialism.

One of the ways to decenter or decolonize the study of the past in Oceania is to identify and critique the ways in which the process of empire, and the ideological and mythologizing forces behind it, affect the writing of history. Racist, ethnocentric preconceptions can overcome the authority of fact in creating the myth of conquest. James Belich, for example, wrote about how the British won the Māori Wars through historiography (1986). Assumptions about the superiority of British martial skills and the subsequent inevitability of victory worked to create myths masquerading as history. The issue then becomes the ways in which the Māori wars were mythologized to support the assumed inevitability, desirability, and righteousness of the British conquest in the land that came to be called New Zealand.

More locally grounded ways to regard old texts also exist. What Renato Rosaldo (1993) has termed "imperial nostalgia" can be seen as quaint liberal narratives that lament the demise of island peoples and, in so doing, obscure evidence of cultural struggle and survival in lands long assumed to have been silenced and defeated by centuries of colonial domination.⁴ And what of the history of religious change in Oceania? Does the word "conversion" accurately and fully describe Islanders' engagements with

Christianity? Might there not be scandalous and persisting complexities in the negotiations between indigenous and foreign systems of belief—scandalous and persisting complexities that an often colonially affirming word like “conversion” fails to convey?

RECONCEPTUALIZING HISTORY AND ITS PRACTICE IN OCEANIA

The voices from the academy are nonetheless strong, persuasive, sympathetic, and even seductive in their search for a middle ground on which natives and strangers might exchange their understandings of encounters and of the even deeper pasts that preceded those encounters. However, they do not satisfy those who argue for a reconceptualization of Oceanic pasts, and against the distortions created by colonialism and its accompanying practices, including history. Oceanic studies in general, and more particularly the practice of history, have been deeply, irrevocably affected by Epele Hau‘ofa (1993). The Tongan writer, gardener, educator, and director for the University of the South Pacific (USP) Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture has expressed the belief that to examine the history of Oceania under imposed, largely artificial designations such as Melanesia, Micronesia, or Polynesia is to perpetuate the subjugation of the region and its peoples by relying on categories created, sustained, and reified by colonial hierarchies and epistemologies.

More local histories might include a sense of the ocean as a site for history instead of as an impediment or simple highway linking landed theaters of human activity. Hau‘ofa has described a “sea of islands” that is vibrant, alive, expansive, accomplished, and connected, and that is better understood as “Oceanic” rather than Pacific. More appropriate and sensitive orderings of Oceanic pasts, he has suggested, might involve a consideration of long-standing exchange systems such as the Kula and Lakatoi, which operate off the southeastern and southern coasts of New Guinea respectively, and the Sawei network of the central Carolines. It might focus on the spread of the worship of Oro in eastern Polynesia; it might investigate the contact and interaction among Samoans, Fijians, and Tongans for centuries prior to the arrival of Europeans; or it might consider the history of voyaging in the Pacific as something both very old and now being reborn.

Hau‘ofa has also written that historical truth is an elusive entity, given the negotiations and politics that surround the representation of history

in Oceania (2000). While colonialism has resulted in an assault on the memories of the past, Hau'ofa has urged us to think of creating new memories in a present that is ever in the process of becoming the past for current and later generations. What might be the sources or avenues of approach to these different histories? What might be the sources and content of these new memories and the different histories they enable? I am stunned by the power of poetry as a source of historical expression. A poem entitled "Parrot" by Sam L Alaisa of the Solomon Islands tells of the powerful memories of a departed loved one evoked by the call of a parrot (1995). "Trees," by Sampson Ngwele of Vanuatu, reflects on how those forest entities, possessed of sacred or supernatural powers in ancient times, now stand as silent witnesses to the events about them and offer special testimony on those events through their bark, roots, and leaves (1989). And a poem by Russell Soaba helps reconfigure historical understanding even more dramatically by imagining the past through the eyeholes of a dead ancestor's skull (1995).⁵

Acute attention must be paid to the definitions and meanings of history in Oceania and how they are constructed so as to be meaningful. Such recognition is not intended to create false and simplistic distinctions. To reduce the issue of historical differences to a stark opposition between the West and "the Rest" would be an ultimately defeating simplification. Vilsoni Hereniko, a Rotuman scholar and playwright, has reminded us of the multiple and varying ways Islanders define the term "history," the distinctive ways of knowing and transferring knowledge in island societies, and the ways in which history is read and validated in the physical environment (2000). For Kanalu Young, the Hawaiian phrase "haku mo'olelo" is more appropriate than the foreign term "history," which does not begin to capture the complex process of composing Native Hawaiian accounts of their past (1998).

Works by Islander scholars reinforce the varied and particular features of history in Oceania. Hawaiian historian Lilikalā Kame'eleihiwa has written of Hawaiians standing firmly with their backs to the future and facing the past (1992). Māori writer Tipene O'Regan has noted too that for many Māori of New Zealand the words for past and future can be heard or read as synonymous (1993). Histories in Oceania, then, need to allow for the varying relationships among past, present, and future, and the possibility that the future is in the past, and that the past can be read, seen, heard, and felt in the future. One begins to realize, then, that the practice of history in Oceania is something quite distinct from what is

commonly understood to be the practice of history in the Euro-American world, as well as something inherently variable and particular within this “sea of islands.”

A decentering or decolonization of history in Oceania might begin by recognizing this incommensurability. What has come to be understood as history in the West may not be history to, for, or even about “the Rest.” It may be that we have arrived at the recognition that certain definitions and practices of history are incommensurable and not transferable across cultural boundaries and divides. A liberation of sorts lies in this recognition and the differences that underlie it. It is not that the practice of history in Oceania has gone unaffected by the intrusion of modernity. Far from it. I see, though, local histories and forms of historical expression that persist against and within what Dipesh Chakrabarty has termed the life process of capitalism (2000).

Recognizing different styles of history does not presume the abandonment of a critical posture. Local histories can themselves be expressive of power and privilege. This is not to invoke the distinction that the late Roger Keesing made between the “real” past and the creations of indigenous “activists” (1989), but rather to see the way in which all histories are in a sense political, representative of or affected by certain clan, family, regional, or title considerations, and hence partial because of these affiliations. Oceanic history done for and by Oceanians, and through a variety of new and established forms, is confronting issues of its own.⁶ Having helped enable the emergence or reemergence of island nations, history, to borrow Prasenjit Duara’s phrase, is now in need of being rescued from the nation in some areas of Oceania. At the same time and in other areas of the region, contesting histories challenge the formulation of national narratives or even threaten the operations of current state governments such as those in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands.

POWER, PLACE, AND WAYS OF KNOWING IN THE DECENTERING OF HISTORY IN OCEANIA

I have employed the word “decentering” to suggest the ways in which more indigenous and local practices of history might separate—indeed are separating—themselves from the places, people, academic criteria, and institutional practices that remain essentially colonialist. The decentering or decolonization of history requires, for some of us anyway, an appreciation of all of the different ways in which a consciousness of the past can

be expressed. History, it seems to me, can be sung, danced, chanted, spoken, carved, woven, painted, sculpted, and rapped as well as written. I have a very strong suspicion that listening to the stories of an elder, sailing aboard a double-hulled voyaging canoe such as the *Hōkūle'a*, or witnessing a powerful performance of *Holo Mai Pele* by the accomplished hula troupe Hālau o Kekuhi often brings one a closer connection to the past than any lecture, article, or book ever could.⁷

A decentering of history in Oceania also requires an awareness of the local knowledges and epistemologies that inform the many varied and particular practices of history in the region. In fact, not just recognition but primacy must be given to local epistemologies and the ways in which knowing and being in various locales differ from the pragmatic, logical, and rational assumptions that western science makes about the world (see Smith 1999). This is no easy task, to be sure, given the asymmetrical distribution of power in this world. Anne Salmond provided a translation and transcription of Mohi Tawhai's words, spoken to a gathering of Māori and Europeans on 12 February 1840 over discussions on the Treaty of Waitangi: "Let the tongue of everyone be free to speak; but what of it. What will be the end? Our sayings will sink to the bottom like stones, but your sayings will float light like the wood of the whau tree, and always remain to be seen. Am I telling lies?" (Salmond 1991, 11).

Closely linked to power is the issue of place. I have spoken and written elsewhere about the chill or cold that often accompanies the practice of history in Oceania (1999). People from cold lands brought this chill with them to Oceania, a chill that can still be felt physically in the air-conditioned places where books and records are kept and history is taught. Some of us too often forget the ways in which libraries, archives, universities, and colleges are linked to, indeed are products of, preceding and enabling colonialisms. It should not be surprising that so much of our concern for the practice of history in Oceania centers on colonialism when we not only employ colonial and colonizing forms of history, but also do so in colonial and colonizing sites.⁸ I consider it one of the haunting, ongoing ironies of my career to teach history in enclosed, drab, air-conditioned spaces that could be anywhere, and that by their very character attest to the distance of academic historical study from those Oceanic pasts that are the objects of its inquiry.

It is important to remember too that academia is by no means the only locus for the practice of history in Oceania. Many of us who teach will have to make special efforts to decenter the practice of history in Oceania.

We will have to make our classrooms more open and hospitable to expressions of history that are exhibited, performed, or crafted. We will have to look beyond our classrooms to see the histories in the landscapes, seascapes, places, and faces of the people around us. We will have to encourage the doing of history in ways that are different, varied, and that do not privilege the written word. We will have to recognize too that our students can also be our teachers.

As graduate chair for the UH Department of History, I occupied office number A-202 in Sakamaki Hall. Right next to that office is Sakamaki A-201, a room that serves at various times as a library, classroom, and meeting place for the department. It's not a very attractive room—physically, aesthetically, or spiritually. One Native Hawaiian student, a member of a graduate seminar in ethnographic history that I taught in that room in 1999, remarked that the place felt bad and needed to be cleansed. He sensed the imprint of years of harsh words, ill feelings, and unkind thoughts. He was, I think, not at all wrong, given the history of that room and the encounters that have taken place within it.

That room so disturbed two Islander scholars that they wrote poems about it. Sakamaki A-201 is the setting for Teresia Teaiwa's "In a Room Full of Academics," a poem about the alienation and anxiety that results from having to defend one's ideas against professional historians whose antipathy is both aggressive and hostile (1995a). Anne Perez Hattori's poem titled "Sakamaki A-201" describes a department of historians who go about their lives largely oblivious to the displacement of Native Hawaiians, a displacement that has made possible their academic presence and privilege (1999). Many of us occupy very flawed, troubled, and complicit sites that nonetheless might still be landscaped differently and for other and better purposes. I understand one of the purposes of this conference is to consider new technologies, pedagogies, and other sites that might contribute to this refashioning.

MAKING HISTORY EMOTIONAL, TAKING IT PERSONALLY

There is also the issue of the personal in practice of history. Tipene O'Regan has noted the cold, distancing, impersonal nature of Pākehā scholarship, which is very much at odds with the ways in which Māori relate to their pasts, their land, and each other (1993). The result of such an impersonal posture is a colonizing history that says little about Māori, and much about its authors. Jonathan Kamakawiwo'ole Osorio has writ-

ten and sung about the need for scholarship to be emotional as well as personal (1992). It's a point well taken. Recent Pacific studies gatherings have witnessed tears of justifiable sadness, anger, even rage in presentations describing the effects of colonialism on island peoples. And what kind of history does not include or acknowledge such emotion? My answer: Bad history, or perhaps no history at all.

In support of this contention, I draw on my own family history. My grandfather, David Edward Hanlon, was the community doctor for Hyde Park, an Irish-American enclave within the city limits of Boston, Massachusetts. He assumed that responsibility in 1909 following the death of his older brother, Daniel, and served in that capacity until his own passing in 1944. During the influenza pandemic of 1918 (which also swept across this sea of islands, with devastating effect), Dr Hanlon turned his veranda into a makeshift hospital to accommodate all of the sick he tended. Another piece of family history tells us that he died from pneumonia, caught from going out on a stormy winter's night to deliver the baby of an Italian-American woman in Boston's North End. Tensions between Boston's Irish and Italian communities were such that some in Hyde Park thought it neither necessary nor advisable to give aid to Italian-Americans in any weather.

We know that my grandfather was the first individual in Hyde Park to own a motor vehicle; he was also the first individual in Hyde Park to drive a motor vehicle through his garage wall. We remember him for his better moments, but also hear disquieting, hushed talk about his bouts with alcoholism that resulted in periods of hospitalization. We know little about whether his troubles resulted from the demands and strains of his medical practice or from some other problems that plagued him. In any event, you now know almost as much about my grandfather as I do. If I am a bad historian for Oceania, I am a worse one for my own family. It's no accident, however, that we, his descendants, know so little about him.

Family history for people of Irish-Catholic descent in America has been a consciously suppressed practice—suppressed to hide the personal pain, sorrow, embarrassment, and often self-destructive behaviors of a people still struggling with dispossession from an ancestral homeland and the need to acculturate to a foreign land that didn't much welcome or want them initially. Excluding those sad memories and bad experiences sought to create sterilized histories from which the next generation might begin fresh, unencumbered and free to assimilate. It didn't work out that way, though. The playwright Eugene O'Neill warned his Irish-American brothers and sisters to be careful what they wished for, because it might actu-

ally come true. That warning went unheeded, and what resulted can best be summed up in the title of Noel Ignatiev's 1995 book, *How the Irish Became White*. It strikes me that, among other meanings, white is what you become when a fuller, more accurate consciousness of the past has been bleached out of you.

THE FUTURE OF HISTORY IN OCEANIA?

There is so much more to consider in decentering current practices of history in Oceania. I have focused largely on issues involving written or European-style history. Certainly other alien, equally limited or flawed, heavily politicized, and highly ideological forms of historical expression exist. I have in mind the kinds of history conveyed through museum displays, public memorials, tourist sites, commercial films, and other popular media. Museums, in particular, are sites that in dramatic, highly visible ways manifest efforts to appropriate, control, and refashion Oceanic histories. Outsiders collected indigenous material goods, including those with spiritual, religious, and political significance. The process of acquisition initiated the transformation of these goods into artifacts or curios, many of which came to be displayed in public museums as evidence of imperial accomplishments. The local histories of the production, meaning, and relationships that informed these goods, as well as the entangled histories of their acquisition and transfer across physical and cultural space, were ignored—or dismissed in favor of imperial purposes requiring the presentation of different histories to justify European understandings of hierarchy, race, difference, evolution, and progress. This appropriation and transformation of material goods mirrors more general attitudes toward Pacific pasts and the forms of expression through which they are remembered or otherwise accessed. It should surprise no one that the reclamation of Pacific pasts involves contestations about museums as well as academic centers.

I am skeptical by nature, but optimistic about the future of history in Oceania. My optimism stems not from a belief in the purity but rather in the persistence and creativity of nativeness. I believe that emerging and reemerging Oceanic histories will undermine many of the colonially imposed boundaries on our historical understandings. The practice of history in Oceania will extend further back in time and place to encompass places and peoples within the areas currently designated as “Asia” or “Southeast Asia”; it will move forward to embrace such topics as the appearance of hip-hop culture within the urban centers of the region and in diasporic communities beyond. Oceanic history will be both made and

practiced in such places as Daly City, California; Enid, Oklahoma; Kansas City, Missouri; and Aberdeen, Scotland; and by Tongan “gansta grrls” living in Salt Lake City, Utah, and “body-shop” Banabans currently residing in Canberra, Australia.⁹

Archival research and histories employing footnotes and bibliographies will certainly retain their place and purpose as contributing, not colonizing, forms of historical expression in Oceania. If the practice of history varies so significantly and dramatically across different ethnoscapas as to be incommensurable at times, there is still this bound-together present we all inhabit—the product of a relatively more recent part of Oceania’s past involving natives and strangers. The provincializing of European historiography in favor of more local histories and forms of historical expression does not entail a denial or diminution of Europe’s presence and influence in an area of the world such as Oceania. As Chakrabarty has argued, European thought is at once indispensable and inadequate to the study of subaltern or subordinated peoples. The universities, libraries, museums, and archival collections that have contributed to the production of colonial and colonizing histories also house evidence to enable the creation of counter-colonial histories. Their resources can be embraced in what Chakrabarty has called an “anti-colonial spirit of gratitude” (2000, 265). The decentering (or is it recenterings?) of history in Oceania is in part, then, about making the writing of history, or “the English method of tattooing,” but one of many possible forms of historical expression in the region.

* * *

I PRESENTED *an earlier version of this paper at the 2000 conference of the University of Hawai‘i’s Center for Pacific Islands Studies. I wish to thank Wilsoni Hereniko and Terence Wesley-Smith for their comments on my presentation draft. In making changes and adjustments to that text, I have opted to retain much of the informal language and phrasing of my conference address.*

Notes

1 For a very different, more contemporary take on the issue of victimization as it affects the practice of history by Islander historians described as “activists,” see Chappell 1995.

2 The most recent effort to provide a general, written history of Oceania is *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Islanders* (Denoon and others 1997). Ter-

ence Wesley-Smith offered an astute review of this work in the journal *Race & Class* (2000). A critical history of the discipline of Pacific Islands history can be gleaned from the various essays in the volume edited by Brij V Lal entitled *Pacific Islands History: Journeys and Transformations* (1992). An even earlier text, representative of the “Davidson School” of Islander agency, is Kerry Howe’s *Where the Waves Fall* (1984). For a contemporary critique of this volume and the larger school from which it came, see the book review forum in *Pacific Studies* (Meleiseā and others 1985).

3 For a very useful, concise summary of the more global intellectual currents affecting the practice of history and its interdisciplinary connections, see the introduction in Dirks and others 1994, 3–45.

4 For a wonderful example of reading imperial nostalgia in participant-observer texts, see Diaz 1994.

5 My reference to these three poems does not begin to measure the extent to which Oceanic poetry has served as a vehicle for historical expression and consciousness.

6 Even the most well intentioned efforts to promote local histories crafted by indigenous authors can be compromised by unwitting complicity with colonialist practices. The USP Institute of Pacific Studies (IPS) has been at the forefront of efforts to promote indigenous scholarship and other forms of creative writing. The institute has facilitated the publication of works by more than 2,000 Pacific Islanders. This is an impressive record, indeed. Particularly notable are the histories of Kiribati (Talu and others 1984), Niue (Hekau and others 1982), Tuvalu (Faaniu and others 1983), and Western Sāmoa (1987 Peseta and others), projects produced by local groups of writers with the assistance of on-site coordinators and under the general supervision of a professionally credentialed historian and other IPS or USP staff members. Each of these four histories focuses on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century themes of colonialism, development, and self-government, and with first and perfunctory chapters on the precontact periods in the islands’ pasts. In their organization, topics, themes, periodization, and commitment to nation building and citizenship, these works seem more reflective of European understandings of the past. In no way do I mean to disparage the editors, contributors, or general historiographical significance of these works. Still, a critical revisiting of these writings and their production might well raise the question, “Whose history is this really?”

7 Drawn from Hawaiian myth, *Holo Mai Pele* presents the story of the volcano goddess Pele who sends her sister Hi’iaka to Kaua’i to bring back Lohi’au, the handsome young chief (*ali’i*) with whom she is in love. *Holo Mai Pele* is the creation of Nalani Kanaka’ole and Pualani Kanaka’ole-Kanahēle, the hula masters (*kumu hula*) for Hālau o Kekuhi of the island of Hawai’i. *Holo Mai Pele* was first performed in 1995 in Hilo, Hawai’i. More recently, it was filmed for an October 2001 nation-wide broadcast on PBS, the American public television channel.

8 On the difficulties experienced by Islander scholars in academic environments, see Teaiwa 1995b. In contrast, Peter Hempenstall has written of the personal, professional, and cultural distances that separate academics from Oceanic peoples and their pasts (1994).

9 In making this point, I take inspiration from a very impressive panel convened by Katerina Teaiwa for the millennial conference of the Pacific History Association held at the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia, from 26–30 June 2000. Among the participants were Fuifuilupe Niumeitolu, who presented a paper entitled “Wildly Loving Brownness: The ‘Gansta Grrl’ as a Subversive Mimesis for (Re)inventing and (Re)instating a Pacific-American Feminism,” and April Henderson, who spoke on “Eye on the Prize? At the Intersections of Informal Economy, Masculinity and Samoan Rap Music in California (In a Theoretical Lowrider, Hittin’ Switches).”

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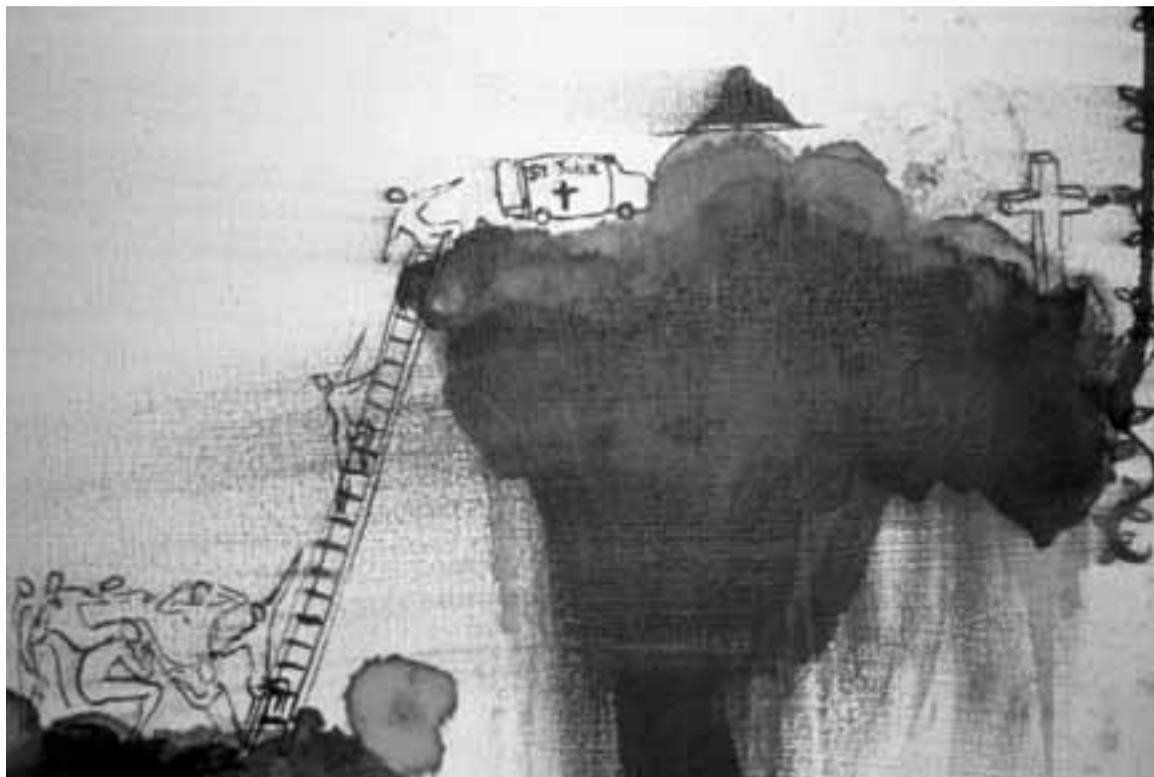
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Abstract

Questions abound as to the very nature and meaning of history in contemporary Oceania. Much conventional scholarship in the Euro-American world continues to focus on the search for a single, knowable, verifiable past. The recent disturbance of conventional academic practices by ethnographic and theoretical investigations into the practice of history has helped make space for the reemergence of more local histories. However, acute tension arises as more local expressions of the past struggle against the still alien, potentially neocolonizing dimensions of these more hospitable academic perspectives. Multiple, varied, and contentious indigenous expressions regarding the past suggest that what has come to be understood as history in the West may not be history to, for, or even about the peoples of Oceania. Vernacular as well as appropriated forms of history in the region must be appreciated. The decentering of the practice of history in Oceania requires a recognition that writing—“the English method of tattooing”—is but one form of historical expression.

KEYWORDS: colonialism, decolonization, discourse, historiography, indigenous scholarship, Oceania, Pacific history



Whenua Liku (detail)

2001

Oil and ink on canvas

Photographed by John Pule