

Dialogue

History “in” the Pacific

GREG DENING

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Twenty-two years ago Harry Maude invited me to contribute to the first issue of the *Journal of Pacific History*. I still see the article I then wrote—“Ethnohistory in Polynesia”—cited in student papers and dissertations and even an occasional publication. We all know what a strange feeling it is to be caught in a footnote—looking out forever like some open-mouthed goldfish in a bowl, scoring one more point in the eternal arithmetic of Social Science Indices and the like. Even the time it takes to make an abstract of our thoughts in the publication of them gives distance enough to make us feel the otherness of our writing. We become participant observers of ourselves, our own historiographers.

It will not be different to write on history in this new journal, *The Contemporary Pacific*. The past is never contemporary, but history always is. History is always bound to the present in some way. History always represents the present in the ways it re-presents the past. My thoughts will be just as contemporary to 1989 as they were to 1966.

So I would not write of “ethnohistory” now. There is too much politics in the word for it to be worth the trouble of the argument about it. (I would use it with those who want to talk about the cultural determinants of everyday historical consciousness, however.) I would not write of “Pacific history,” either. Any regional designation of a history as “Pacific” or “Australian” or “American” has only very limited usefulness—for subject catalogues, journals, associations, bookshops. Regional designations can be worse than useless. They can be dangerous when they are allowed to define the problematics of a history. Regional designations demand deference to some normal, usually empiricist, science. They invite attention to topics more than discourse.

The Pacific is, in any case, a hard place to identify with—so much ocean, too many islands. Who can claim authenticity for their history in their connection to something so amorphous and so divided? The

“Pacific” is too much a construct of an outsider’s mind to have a living past. When even the apparently more immediate historical experience of cultures such as “Tonga,” “Fiji,” “Solomons,” “New Guinea” has an overarching quality, “Pacific history” has a hard time seeming relevant, has a very academic air.

I would have fewer qualms about the term “Pacific history” if by it we meant history *in* the Pacific rather than history *of* the Pacific, and if by history *in* the Pacific, we were much more tolerant of all the varieties of histories there are.

I stress that there needs to be history *in* the Pacific more than “Pacific history” for this reason. In areas of colonial experience—I include, of course, Australia, and maybe even the United States of America—there is pressure from both the political right and the political left to claim that “real history” is not *in* the colonial experience at all. The political right experiences a cultural cringe that says “real history” is in the “mother country.” (Australian history was not taught in Australian universities until the 1930s. “Real history” was “British history” or “European history.”) There is, in this view, no trust in the worth of one’s own past experience as proper history. Triviality seems so much grander when it can be called “Medieval” or “Tudor.” This is a cultural cringe that new nation states also experience. “Real history,” in new states that mimic all the reifications of old empires, must be that celebratory, empiricist sort on which the power of public institutions thrives or on which public institutions believe they thrive.

The political left, too, tends to believe that “real history” is knowing the enemy in imperialism and capitalism. The “mirror for man” is reversed. See the power and strength and cruelty of a dominating world and you will see your reflection as poor and exploited. Try and see yourself directly for who you actually have been, they say, and you will only see yourself as object in somebody else’s museum. Readers who attended the Pacific History Association meeting in Suva in 1985 may remember how divided Pacific Island academics were between those who sought to raise historical consciousness by expressions of cultural experience and those who sought to raise historical consciousness by knowledge of the world systems that control Pacific lives.

There are others, too, who are not tolerant of history *in* the Pacific. They have no sense of how contemporary history is. They can be anthropologists whose people—“their people”—have no present other than an

ethnographic present. Such presents have no Coca-Cola bottles in them, no consumer ambitions, no politics of religion. Somehow or other “real” historical consciousness is separated from all the present passions that drive “their people” to make sense of the past. This sort of history is not *in* the Pacific at all. This is history in the anthropologist’s mind, “Samoans,” let us say, reduced to “Samoanness.”

There are those, too, whose claim for the authenticity of their history depends on its being somehow divorced from the present. Their history begins with a past seen with some X-ray vision, unpolluted, uncorrupted by all the cultural changes between then and now. Their past moves not through time, but through a corridor of time, untouched by anything other than itself, and the present has a closed-off innocence which those without X-ray vision cannot share. This innocence is really another form of cultural cringe. It is ahistorical; it is essentialist; it catches culture in a “time before” and robs it of its life and process. It accepts, in fact, the dominator’s image of the dominated as littered with the rags of civilization. It closes its eyes to the modernity that every culture seeks if it is to live. It cultivates living museums and Disneyland’s of culture. The cultures of the Pacific are not fatally impacted. They are mummified. With bandaged eyes these mummies cry out, “You can’t see us.”

In the particular contemporaneity in which I write—a United States presidential election campaign in which the word “liberal” was used to lynch the poor, the black, the troubled, or anything that might be the object of social conscience—I have little patience with the proponents of “real history” of whatever sort. I have heard a retiring federal secretary of education say that there should be more “real history,” more history that children can *learn*. And I have heard his replacement say that there are histories that pose moral dilemmas too hard for children. So a high school textbook that gave a history of the Holocaust and with it showed the banality of the evil of the bureaucrats who caused it was unacceptable. Children needed to know that Good had a white hat and Evil a black hat. A history that taught the perception of good and evil in the blurred genre of everyday behavior was not “real history.”

The effort by officers of education to define “real history” in precise ways is neither new nor uncommon. There is much power in history and those who wield power never say history is irrelevant. They say history of a particular sort is wrong or irrelevant. Or they will say history distracts from the present. History is wasteful of cultural energies. So they say that

economics, sociology, science, or psychology even, is a must for education from beginning to end. But history is too much a luxury for education. In my view the contemporary Pacific needs history precisely because history breaks the hegemony of these sciences of the present. The pragmatism of politicians and educationalists who claim that education is the learning of vocational facts is an instrument of false consciousness. They eschew history because they know history to be liberating. (“Real history” is allowed, because “real history” is the vocational learning of the meaning of the past as fact.)

The contemporary Pacific needs history *in* the Pacific because history is liberating. History is liberating from more things than empires and capitalists. History is liberating from bureaucrats and churches, from television and advertisements, from anybody who claims our human contrivances are outside our power to change.

I know that this sounds impossibly optimistic, unintelligibly gnomic, and wimpishly liberal. But I can say with confidence that it is unlikely that I will read what I write now twenty-two years on in *The Contemporary Pacific* of the year 2011, as I read what I wrote twenty-two years back in the *Journal of Pacific History*, 1966. That confidence gives me another confidence. I say again that history is liberating and that the contemporary Pacific needs a liberating history *in* the Pacific.

To be liberating, history *in* the Pacific needs to be two things. It needs to be vernacular and vernacularly tolerant of great variety. It also needs to be somewhere—in school, in university, in publications, in the media—*somewhere* reflective. If the only circumstance in which it can be reflective is in being academic, then so be it. *Somewhere* in the cultural system history needs to be reflective and academic.

History *in* the Pacific needs to be vernacular and vernacularly tolerant of great variety because it is in the variety of vernacular histories—legends, ballads, anecdotes, plays, dances—that we develop skills in the poetics of history—its reading—and in its production. History surely is not something to be learned so much as to be made. History surely is our expression of our understanding of some part of the past in whatever way it is pertinent to our present. History surely is the narration of our lives in its roles, in its structures, in its symbolic environments. Making these histories in whatever form we become conscious of our contrivance. Who can perform these histories without some sense of authorship and within that of modes or presentation? Who can *tell* a story without some sense

that the *telling* is not the reality, that the past is not history? Who can narrate in all the ways we can narrate without sensing that mere repetition is not reality?

There would not be many among us who in publishing a book or article, giving a lecture, making some religious or secular witness does not discover something of self in the presentation of an expression. Making, telling, singing, performing, dancing histories is the same. Know the past, know yourself personally, culturally. Express your knowledge of the past, present yourself personally, culturally. If I were a federal secretary of education, or a minister, or a director, or a teacher, I would be saying to my domain not “learn history,” but “make history,” and I would be encouraging my students to “write,” “write,” “write”—or dance, or sing, or make poetry. The paraphernalia of criticism will come when it will be needed. The need now is for *everybody* to know they have an expressible past.

The contemporary Pacific seems to be saying so often these days that it does not need academic history in the way it needs academic economics or academic business management. But modernity needs humanities as emperors need small boys to tell them they have no clothes. The Pacific needs academic history *in* the Pacific because academic history is a humanity.

I have told a story to my history classes for years to show why I think history is a humanity and why it is a human necessity. Maybe to put the story in writing will be a suitable monument for these twenty-two years. The story concerns Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran minister caught up in the plots against Hitler in the Second World War. He was thrown into a concentration camp for that. In the last days of the war, with the sound of the approaching Allied armies in the air, he was in a room with Jews and other Christians praying. The SS guards broke in, dragged him out, and strangled him. As he left the room, he broke away and picked up a Bible and quickly scribbled his name, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer.” I think he spoke for all humanity in that. We all seek to leave our signature in this world—in our children, in our poetry, in the things we build and make, in the constitutions we form, in the human spirits we touch. I have always felt that one of the special privileges of academic history is to be the guardian of the signatures human beings put on life. A maudlin, mawkish concept? Maybe, but the words human beings speak cannot be unspoken—not Jesus Christ’s nor Kamakau’s, not Karl Marx’s nor Tupaia the Tahitian’s. Nor can the discoveries human beings make about living be de-discovered—about gender, about race, about individual life, about evil. Academic

history displays the words spoken, the discoveries discovered by joining them to contemporary discourse about humanity. There is no better way to know the contemporary present in the Pacific than to make contemporary history *in* the Pacific.

Contemporaneity in my making history in the Pacific binds me to many things and binds many things to me. I am bound to Roland Barthes, to Michel Foucault, to Marshall Sahlins, to Clifford Geertz, to an endless litany of those whose spoken mind cannot be unspoken and to whose sentences I respond even if I have not read them. History *in* the Pacific can never just be Harry Maude, Doug Oliver, John Beaglehole. I, the stranger historian, am bound to all those Pacific historians who know themselves as more native than I. We are bound together because it is the present that we share and in that present we are strangers to a native past that neither of us can really share. The politics of my history are in the now, not in the then. Only the living have politics. The dead are always waiting for resurrection to have theirs. But for strangers of Pacific outlands and natives of Pacific islands to have a bound-together present means that we share a dead past. Neither of us can say to the other: You have no history to make. Our histories might be different. Our histories will always be political. But we each must say to the other: My past is your past and you must make sense of it as you can.