



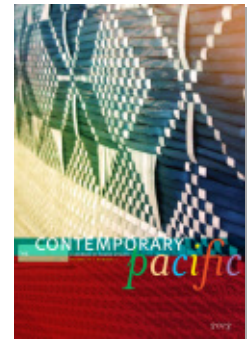
PROJECT MUSE®

Remembrance of Pacific Pasts: An Invitation to Remake History (review)

Gina Balawanilotu, Anurag Subramani, Robert Nicole

The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 15, Number 1, Spring 2003, pp.
198-203 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: 10.1353/cp.2003.0003



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cp/summary/v015/15.1balawanilotu.html>

Remembrance of Pacific Pasts:

An Invitation to Remake History, edited by Robert Borofsky. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000. ISBN cloth, 0-8248-2189-0; paper, 0-8248-2301-X; xvi + 557 pages, tables, figures, photographs, abbreviations and newspapers, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$56.00; paper, US\$24.95.

The writing of history and of the ways the past transmits itself to the present is a dynamic process that necessitates every now and then some form of stocktaking about where we've come from, what we have achieved, where we are now, what problems we face, and where we could go. Pacific history has reached this point and the publication of this book is a timely call for all stakeholders to reinvigorate Pacific history with new approaches.

This landmark collection of twenty-four articles and ten creative pieces (most of them previously published), along with three new interviews, brings together some of the most prominent names in Pacific history, cultural anthropology, and literature in a courageous and highly credible attempt to broaden the scope and vision of Pacific history. This it does by formulating a number of responses to some of the most fundamental questions about history in this region. The following are a handful of such questions, which must form the basis of any teaching, learning, and researching in Pacific history: What, for instance, is Pacific history? How has the past been written or recorded in Pacific history? How should it be written or recorded? How does one frame a credible history from the

myriad of documents, letters, journals, eyewitness accounts, legal papers, newspaper articles, church records, medical records, poems, paintings, artifacts, dances, songs, works of architecture, landscapes, and so on, that make up the entire Pacific history archive? What are the issues involved in the selection of such materials? Who can write Pacific history? Who has received primary attention in the writing of Pacific history? What makes some events and people of historic significance and not others? Why? How does the human body carry memory? How does a historian make his or her writing of history more inclusive, participatory, accessible, and useful to people in their contemporary realities? How much more reliable is the written archive than its oral counterpart? How legitimate is history told around the kava bowl? Must we necessarily define or position ourselves in terms of the dominant insider-outsider dichotomy that pervades and occasionally overshadows present debates about Pacific history? Are there more creative and productive ways of understanding Pacific history and our location in it? What of language issues? How do we convey or translate different realities across language?

An invitation to remake history in the Pacific is a noble but ambitious project. Fortunately, in his introduction, editor Robert Borofsky provides a very lucid account of the evolution of Pacific historiography, the major debates in contemporary Pacific history, and the contours of exciting new developments in the discipline. This introduction provides the solid framework on which the book's four broad sections are arranged. Section one

gives a context for understanding the volume and develops some of the frames of reference raised in the introduction. The other three sections follow the linear chronology from the dynamics of contact, through colonial engagements, and on to postcolonial politics. Each of the sections is prefaced by some excellent contextual notes by the editor, including an outline of the main arguments and debates, some first-rate footnotes directing readers to further specialized readings, and a few very useful discussion questions. Each section also includes a "View from Afar" in which some of the heavyweights of cultural and postcolonial studies (including James Clifford, Gyan Prakash, and Edward Said) offer excellent comparative perspectives and insights from their respective vantage points.

One of the most important points that the book makes is that writing history is a deeply political process. The past is not a virgin arena waiting for the historian's objective pen to bring it to life. Rather, it is an intensely conflictual and contentious battleground. Furthermore, it does not transmit itself in a single voice. The collection therefore represents a challenge to those historians who have largely been accessories to power and gatekeepers about the past, its truths, and its stories. Traditionally, such historians have legitimized certain truths, and participated actively in censoring, omitting, and occasionally criminalizing others. This book knocks these historical metanarratives and their theoretical foundations off their pedestal and provides decisive justification for the inclusion of other truths of history, particularly those that have been mar-

ginalized, suppressed, or silenced. This worthwhile intention, as we see it, also serves to disrupt and subvert the power and coherence of hegemonic histories in order to reestablish a semblance of history and its writing as a broad-based participatory process. This is something that several contributors (including Borofsky, Hempenstall, Neumann, Prakash, Said, and Hau'ofa) stress in their respective articles. Hempenstall, for instance, argues that history must be reread with new self-consciousness. It should be broken up into several histories; look beyond self-chosen, elite players; and strive to release the voices of others and express their multiple dramas. There must be greater openness to multivocal storytelling, and more effort to identify the gaps and silences in "standard accounts" (52). The book therefore implicitly acknowledges that all histories are partial and tentative; furthermore, they do not all enjoy equal visibility, space, and status. These latter arguments are illustrated with great expertise by Dening, Thomas, and Belich in their respective contributions.

A second essential point that the book makes by virtue of its inclusion of several poems and short stories, is to acknowledge the value of these and other art and cultural forms in rendering peoples' past worlds to present audiences, as well as the equally pivotal role of oral transmission in representing people's realities. Inevitably, questions will be raised about the place that poems and stories have in a book on history. Many historians have expressed a degree of unease about using poetry, fiction, art, dance, song, and other more creative forms

of (hi)story telling. But as Mario Vargas Llosa poignantly puts it in *The Truth of Lies* (1990), although literature is full of illusions, half truths and lies—and even *because* of this fact—“literature recounts the history that the historians would not know how, or be able, to write because the deceptions, tricks and exaggerations of narrative literature are used to express profound and unsettling truths which can only see the light of day in this oblique way” (quoted in Borofsky, 9). We are sympathetic to this conception of truth because we understand fiction and poetry to be partly responsible for disrupting the frames that neatly order the colonial and postcolonial worlds, the neat dichotomies and polarities that collectively discipline and imprison us and others into our own narrow intellectual spheres. We see literature and the creative imagination as legitimate vehicles to explore, review, and refine *niu* approaches to Pacific history. In a region where oral history carried knowledge across hundreds of years of history, Albert Wendt’s bold decision to choose poetry rather than academic prose to write history is commendable and adds an exciting dimension to the representations of ourselves and our past. The grey areas between these disciplines are mutually profitable for history and literature, and worth exploring and exploiting. It is therefore important that the literary pieces selected in this collection are not treated as a token gesture (even if these prominent poets and writers have pieces in the body of their work that are better and more relevant for the purposes of this book).

In the same vein, it is rather ironic

that while we have striven to meet western standards of literacy, we have conversely become illiterate in reading and understanding the elaborate systems of signification that were used and transmitted by generations of the ocean’s oral historians. This issue is alluded to by Vilsoni Hereniko in his provocative article, “Indigenous Knowledge and Academic Imperialism” (and later by Epeli Hau’ofa). Although objectionable on several fronts, Hereniko’s article is must reading for all students of Pacific history. It challenges many of the assumptions about history and its (re)sources in this region. His discussion of the subtleties of people’s cultural forms of expression across various periods of history is very valuable, as is his suggestion that reciprocity in research has huge potential for collective growth. Both students and professional historians of all backgrounds have tended to plunder Pacific communities for knowledge and information in much the same way that others did for raw materials and labor. The ultimate aim of writing history cannot be another line on some self-serving curriculum vitae, as is too often the case. History and its writing must involve a meaningful exchange that can come from but must also be returned to the people. However, Hereniko’s critique of academic practices that work against the emergence of an indigenous historiography may be construed by some as essentialist rhetoric, which we would prefer to guard against.

Indigenous academia need not fall prey to the same reductive binaries that we as Pacific historians lament western orientalisists having fabricated about us in their discourses. We won-

der if the only prism through which we should see, understand, and take pride in our history is the relentless reassertion, reestablishment, and reinscription of the insider–outsider dichotomy. In Fiji, the political events of the last few years suggest to us that we cannot reduce complex phenomena to a simple “us versus them” binary, and that we need new approaches that are not only politically engaged but also inclusive and visionary. Important differences, fragmentations, and hybridities existed (and continue to exist) within island communities, particularly in relation to subaltern groups. We must be alert to essentializing discourses of authenticity, for more often than not they end up alienating the very people they claim to represent. Moreover, while we are conscious of academic imperialism and critical of it, we also know of counterparts in the Islands who are just as unscrupulous in gatekeeping and plagiarizing as the western bootleggers to whom Hereniko refers in his essay.

In this regard, it must be said that the collection does Pacific history a great service by providing a fair balance of gendered, Islander, nonacademic, youthful, multidisciplinary, and other voices and approaches that earlier collections were insensitive to or ignorant of. This is important because it now makes possible many new conversations that were previously impossible. If the opportunities are grasped, it could help us move beyond old polarizations and narrow disciplinary concerns to the excitement of the new challenges that await us. One such exciting development is Vicente Diaz’s work on signs of cultural demise

among Chamorro and the critical task of rereading them as moments of survival and vitality. Guam’s history need not be understood as the definitive Euro-Americanization of the Chamorro people at the tragic expense of indigenous culture. The increased use of the English language, for instance, is not necessarily a sign of the demise of the Chamorro people. “Chamorro history and culture are not about the tragic death of quaint native customs,” Diaz says. “Rather Chamorro history and culture are better understood as contested sites, local spaces here in Guam, and sometimes there, outside of Guam” (379–380). This transforms Islanders from the position of powerless victims to that of active participants in their own destiny. It also offers a vital counterpoint to the legions of globalization doomsdayers whose prophecies, if we believed them, would have us mysteriously lose our vibrant and dynamic cultures.

The book suggests, therefore, that no single narrative today can fit all sizes, all contexts, or perspectives. History-telling must extend beyond professional historians and academics because it belongs to a much wider audience. As Borofsky advocates, it is something that we should all participate in, to personally place ourselves in the continuum of time. Besides, as he continues, “what we call *history*—the study of times past with what remains of these times in the present—gains greater credibility, gains greater objectivity, through challenges and counterchallenges” (11). How we might build bridges across the sometimes wide schisms of difference that mark much of our oceanic existence is left to that seasoned wise man of

Oceania, Epeli Hau'ofa, to comment on in his "Pasts to Remember" epilogue. He suggests that "we could locate the past in front and ahead of us and the future behind, following after us" (458). Among other things, this would help us reconceptualize what the past means to us in the present and reprioritize our current responses to it. The subsequent alternative histories he calls for would have the paramount responsibility of countering the tendency for dominant powers in the region (both internal and external) to go out of their way to suppress memories, or histories, and implant what they wish in order to consolidate their control. We must therefore be more vigilant, rigorous, inventive, and creative than we have been in the past. In Hau'ofa's words, we must "actively reconstruct our histories, rewrite our geography, create our own realities, and disseminate these through our educational institutions and our societies at large" (469).

Inevitably, a work of this length and breadth will provoke some criticism. The art of deciding what to omit is riddled with pitfalls. Some will ask, justifiably or not, why this or that text was or was not selected. On this point, we regret the oversight of significant Pacific Island scholars whose hybrid and borderland experiences and insights would greatly have benefited readers. For instance, Pacific Islanders of Asian origin have become part of the land and seascape of this region and have made significant contributions to Pacific history and its debates. We are surprised that their collective voice is missing from a book whose explicit aims and vision are to be inclusive. In the same vein, we think that greater prominence could have

been assigned to oral history. There are excellent examples of oral historians and their histories around. More discussion of this exciting area of Pacific history is warranted. One might also question the rationale for choosing a chronological, linear approach to the subject matter, particularly because no comprehensive argument is offered for choosing contact as the cutoff mark for the beginning of the discussions. A growing, challenging, and insightful literature exists on precontact history, which both students and professionals would have found worthwhile. Other claims for inclusion will come from exciting new work that is pushing the boundaries of Pacific history (see that by Teresia Teaiwa, Katerina Teaiwa, Damon Salesa, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, among many others), though much of it was yet to be published when this collection went to press. Some will be disappointed by the lack of strong feminist perspectives, with the exception of Grace Molisa's "Colonised People" and Patricia Grimshaw and Helen Morton's "Theorizing Maori Women's Lives: Paradoxes of the Colonial Male Gaze." There is certainly room for a long overdue Pacific feminist statement on history and for discussions to formulate a larger body of Pacific "herstories." Finally, we question the value of the Highland and Saito articles, which appear weak and outmoded in this particular collection, and we query the hopelessly feeble timelines on pages 185-188. We venture to suggest that a collection of Pacific timelines constitute a major publication-in-waiting.

Yet on the whole, Borofsky's audacity has paid off. Students will find this an invaluable textbook to

cherish and refer to repeatedly in the course of their undergraduate and postgraduate studies. It is an excellent point of reference for thinking about and reflecting on the region's pasts. Teachers will welcome its attempt to debunk the widely held view that history is about nothing more than dates and dead white men. History is projected as more than a product to memorize, more than a set of facts collected and organized by others that one dutifully learns in order to be conversant with times past or to affirm a connection to those now dead. Rather, history-telling in this book becomes an active, participatory process (28). It invigorates the present. It affirms who we are by describing what we have been and it inspires what we may yet become. This book's readability will encourage readers from a variety of backgrounds and interests (including anthropology, cultural studies, literature, political studies, and, of course, history) to weave their own narratives and develop further conversations across our many shared experiences and differences. Readers will also appreciate the delicate tandem between the "how" (theory and historiography) and the "what" (content) of Pacific history that Borofsky has successfully orchestrated. This makes it more useful than such large, content-based texts as the *Cambridge History of the Pacific Islands* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). The comprehensive bibliography is another excellent feature of the book that is sure to benefit serious researchers across several disciplines. The onus is now on us, the multivocal Pacific, to make a reality out of the book's honorable intentions. For as Hemenstall so aptly puts it, "Historicizing colonial

encounters for the present demands not the discovery of hidden caches of documents, but the releasing of voices that were previously muted or ignored . . . so that the storytelling that is history attains a fresh honesty and richness" (60). Whether we are novices or established academics, we must continue to reframe and reconceptualize what has been said in the past. In this process, it may well be that some of the established personalities and events of Pacific history will fade to the wings where they will be less visible and more tentative. But we are confident that this exercise will create the necessary space for whole previously invisible groups to claim an identity and their share of center stage.

GINA BALAWANILOTU,
ANURAG SUBRAMANI, AND
ROBERT NICOLE
University of the South Pacific, Suva

* * *

Government by the Gun: The Unfinished Business of Fiji's 2000 Coup, by Robbie Robertson and William Sutherland. Australia: Pluto Press; London: Zed Books, 2001. ISBN 1-84277-115-9; xix + 169 pages, glossary, chronology, endnotes, index. A\$34.95.

In May 2000, failed businessman George Speight and his accomplices seized hostages in Suva's parliamentary complex. Labour Prime Minister Chaudhry, his cabinet, and parliamentary colleagues then remained incarcerated for almost eight weeks. The army's failure to secure and isolate parliament, deny Speight generous access to the news media, or prevent