

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Transpacific Visions: Connected Histories of the Pacific across North and South*

Ed. by Yasuko Hassall Kobayashi and Shinnosuke Takahashi,  
Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021\*

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In the history of post-World War II historiography, the atomization of the discipline into new theoretical perspectives and subfields has followed the steps made in sociology, cultural studies, and philosophy, among others. However, in the modern reconceptualization of the Pacific Ocean—a process sensitive to the circulation of people, ideas, and goods through and within it—a number of recent publications have been framed by a lens that resonates with today's economic and geopolitical concerns pertaining to the control of the Rim. Some scholars have elevated various forms of transpacific and question the hegemonic frames of understanding for this region. The conceptualization of the Pacific as a field of study in humanities is not entirely new but has acquired new life in recent years. As described in this volume, the seminal work of authors such as Arif Dirlik, Rob Wilson, Miyoshi Masao, and Wang Hui illuminate the discussion on the power relations at play within and outside the Pacific rim. More recently, the scholarship of Matt Matsuda, as well as the May 2014 special journal issue of the *Pacific Historical Review* dealing with transpacific history and the edited volume *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field* further contribute to this debate.<sup>1</sup> In this literature, the importance of transpacific studies is based on the perceived necessity to confront a global north-based economist view of the Pacific region.

This book joins the ongoing discussion on scales and perspectives in the study of the Pacific Ocean. As the editors succinctly say in the Introduction, the volume opposes “simplistic appropriation of the Pacific as a blank canvas: a *mare nullius* on which the strategic ambitions of great powers can be projected”, and thus the focus lies on mobility, exchanges and connections that had created violence and division as well as friendship and border crossing understanding (p. viii). The book under review has set the bar high inasmuch as it aims to “illuminate the niche corners of history that might otherwise be ignored by the metanarratives of mainstream historical scholarship and might

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<sup>1</sup> Arif Dirlik, “Introduction: Pacific Contradictions,” in *What Is in a Rim: Critical Perspective on the Pacific Region Idea*, ed. Arif Dirlik (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 3–13; Rob Wilson and Arif Dirlik, “Introduction,” in *Asia/Pacific as Space of Cultural Production*, ed. Rob Wilson and Arif Dirlik (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995); Matt Matsuda, *Pacific Worlds: A History of Seas, Peoples, and Cultures* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); J A Hoskins and V T Nguyen, *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014).

possibly be left in silence” (p.xiii). How does the book approach such a daunting task? By applying a double adjustment in the lens of analysis. As they explain “an effective lens needs to be able to grasp messy histories without anchoring them by reverting to available and familiar academic frameworks” (p.xiii). The intellectual effort is to disengage the Pacific from the hegemonic global north and thus, elevate vertical (rather than the dominant horizontal) historical connections. The U.S. is provincialized, and the West Pacific placed at the center. Moreover, and since the focus is on human mobility, north-south trajectories are highlighted and by doing so, the book brings to the fore a whole new set of transpacific connections. This approach nicely complements dominant academic narratives on the Pacific Ocean and the social spaces within. As a consequence of the first adjustment, a second follows: the points of gravity are Japan and Australia forming an arch of human interactions along the West Pacific Ocean. The figure of an arch serves to include different national territorial borders, but more importantly, a vast “lived space for numerous documented and undocumented human interaction” (p.xiv). Dario Di Rosa gives further theoretical insights into the relevance of modifying the perspective over the Pacific. He reminds us that the Pacific is under constant construction, and points out that for some, local perspectives provide a more important input in conceptualizing the Pacific, and for others, the large spatial and temporal scales better suit the interpretation of the region. If all genuine history is contemporary history (Croce’s dictum), the historical approach to a region echoes the geopolitical and identarian concerns of our present and thus help us to understand the competing views on the Pacific history based on the concerns of the present.

The case studies are diverse in methodology, scale, and focus. We may put the individual chapters into three different groups based on their topic and analytical perspective.

A first group of chapters take Papua New Guinea (PNG) as a historical whirlpool. A remarkable feature of this book is the role that PNG plays in telling the history of mobility and regional connections. PNG emerges as an axis of overlapping imperial structures and as a subtle protagonist of processes of cultural amalgamation. Dario di Rosa’s chapter presents the complexities of Chinese migrants in PNG vis-à-vis European and then Japanese occupiers. As the author indicates, “at the end of the nineteenth century what Papua New Guinea is today was divided into the German colony of Kaiser-Wilhelmsland in the North and a British protectorate to the South” (p.6). Asian migrants were brought in to supply manpower in the new plantations and took residence on the island. The case of the Chinese community in PNG serves the purpose of reflecting on the value of historical consciousness and bridges the global and local perspectives on the history of the Pacific. Christine Winter’s takes on PNG history and shows how “Christianity became a survival strategy in wartime New Guinea for villages facing an unprecedented influx of outsiders” (p.21). Her study exemplifies that a small temporal frame (1942-1944) can be extremely dense in historical events and reflect grand processes. As Winter puts it, the village of the Huon peninsula and their wartime experience shows univocally the complex relationship between new Guineans, German missionaries, and the Japanese occupation forces, and revendicates Christianity as an integral part of the villagers’ lives. Caroline Norman’s study on PNG wartime experiences takes a different perspective. Norman puts the focus on the Australian army and the military’s sexual activities while stationed in PNG. Norman departs from an examination of the establishment of brothels to serve the Australian males and then pays attention to incidents of sexual exploitation that occurred during the war and the possible cases of homosexual intercourse. These case-studies portray dissimilar methodological approaches, themes, and historical agents, but they all prove that through a lens that privileges human mobility new historical vortexes, such as PNG, emerge in the North-to-South arch of the West Pacific.

A second group of chapters links people and ideas bridging Japan and Australia. Danton Leary’s comparative study on the application of anthropology to problems of colonial administration provides a rare example of how imperial Japan looked to models of colonial administration in the Southern Hemisphere. By tracing the intellectual life of Sugiura Ken’ichi, Leary sheds light on the common issues of colonial administration along the West Pacific coast; in Nan’yō for Japan and PNG for

Australia. Anthropology emerged as a useful discipline to know how to “think black”, that is, how to approach the indigenous population by the colonial administrators in both Japanese and English. Another noteworthy example of the unexpected connections between Japan and Australia is presented in volume in editor Yasuko Hassall Kobayashi’s chapter. Using a wide range of primary sources, the author follows the movement of war evacuees that were hired by the Australian intelligence based on their proficiency in the Japanese language. In a parallel lives-like approach, the author pieces together a picture of the Pacific by looking at the “muddled connections” that Japanese linguists supplied to the Australian army. The case of “John Shelton”, a Russian-born Japanese language expert who evacuated Japan and ended up working in an intelligence unit translating intercepted messages for the Australian army is a clear example of unexpected outcomes produced by wartime mobility. Australia and Japan are again brought together in Alex Brown’s chapter on the anti-nuclear movement. He examines the Australian tour of a series of panels painted by a couple of Japanese artists portraying the horrors of the nuclear bombing over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In a Guernica-type anti-nuclear manifesto, these panels toured several countries (with an initial focus on the socialist bloc) during the 1950s. The exhibition of the panels was part of the mass-based peace movement at the time when transnational engagements were “shaped by a broader transnational context in which socialist and religious imaginaries of world peace posed an alternative vision of the postwar period” (p.166). Therefore, the exhibition tour of the panels in Australia became an instance of transpacific peace activism bringing together hitherto foes: Japan and Australia.

A last group of chapters takes the concept of transpacific beyond its usual understanding by transforming the area that it supposedly indicates. Transpacific is understood here as transcending the traditional borders of the Pacific rim and expanding its social spaces beyond its waters. Shin Takahashi’s excellent essay on “Japanesia” is a valuable effort to challenge conventional wisdom about the Pacific. Japanesia, a term coined by Shimao Toshio, conveys the idea that Japan (particularly its southern islands) is an integral part of the Pacific cultural space; and thus, deepens the critique of fixed academic and geopolitical spaces of understanding. In the early post-war period, the developments of area studies were intimately connected with the emerging Cold War scenarios. The U.S. policy makers saw a contribution to the successful exercise of the U.S. world plans in area studies programmes.<sup>2</sup> In the spatial framework of understanding—the image of ‘area’—had as principal objective, as Latin Americanist Julian Steward described it in 1950, to understand ‘the nations in foreign areas so thoroughly that we could know what to expect of them’, and this exercise ‘required the data of the social sciences and humanities’.<sup>3</sup> The systematic formation of area studies in the major universities, as in the case of Ruth Benedict’s book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), was also a direct consequence of the wartime attempts to understand the enemy they were fighting.<sup>4</sup> Takahashi’s chapter departs from the traditional understanding of Area Studies, and by following the steps of Shimao’s grassroots understanding of the Pacific culture in Japan builds a strong critique against the standard division and elevates the possibility of overlapping areas. As Takahashi argues, “Japanesia was read with enthusiasm by Okinawans, as well as the Japanese, and gave a voice and meaning to their history and identity. In this sense, Shimao’s southern localism could be understood in conjunction with the reunification of Japan as a nation in the midst of the Cold War, and as a dream that offered an alternative imagery of Japan’s otherwise independent position, on neither side of the binary politics led by the major continental powers.” (p.204). In a different vein, Ryota Nishino opens the Pacific as a site of rediscovering what to be a Japanese woman means. In his chapter “Fantastic and Fanciful Gazes at Pacific Island Women: Japanese Travel Journalist Kanetaka Kaoru’s Impressions from Her Journey in 1961” the author examines the travelogue of popular TV anchor Kanetaka Kaoru, whose travels to several Pacific destinations captivated Japanese

<sup>2</sup> Tessa Morris-Suzuki, “Anti-Area Studies,” *Communal/Plural* 8, no. 1 (2000), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Julian H. Steward, *Area Research, Theory and Practice* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1950), p. xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Benedict’s book was, as she acknowledged, commissioned by the Office of War Information. See Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemums and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (New York: Riverside Bridge, 1946).

audiences. Kanetaka's experiences are read as part of the Nan'yō Orientalism tradition but at the same time are part of a private critique of the Japanese society of her time. Facundo Garasino's chapter on the Japanese settlers in Brazil shows the extent to which the transpacific can be taken to different latitudes (and oceans). Migration mediated in Brazil's nation-building and economic development, and the Japanese migrants, through several organizations, were an active part in these processes. Therefore, the unexpected connections allow us to transcend the Pacific rim and trace Pacific people—including Japanese—wherever they may go. Garasino's chapter allows us to see the Pacific from a Latin American perspective, an exercise rarely done in the English language academe but not unusual in Spanish.<sup>5</sup>

*Transpacific Visions: Connected Histories of the Pacific across North and South* is an important book that shines new light on the Transpacific studies and possibilities for the field. It shows a number of approaches to understand the historical processes in the Pacific, challenges global north-dominated views, and new interpretations of what an area is. Moreover, it trespasses the thick borders of individual, nation-based social histories, presents a fresh look at the West Pacific, and presents new vortexes such as PNG that capsulated broader imperial, religious and cultural overlapping. All chapters nicely contribute to building an overreaching and coherent argument and as such, the editors deserve praise for their work. In short, this well written book challenges many long-held views of the Pacific and provides a significant methodological contribution to the disciplines of intellectual and social history.

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<sup>5</sup> Rafael Sagredo and Rodrigo Moreno, *El Mar Del Sur En La Historia. Ciencia, Expansión, Representación y Poder En El Pacífico* (Santiago: Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, Dibam y Centro de Investigaciones Diego Barros Arana, 2015); Pedro Iacobelli and María Montt Strabucchi, "Encuentros Con Asia: Una Reflexión En Torno a La Historiografía Latinoamericana Desde La Cuenca Del Océano Pacífico," *Historia* 396 10, no. 2 (2020): 185–210.