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The future of ethnographic museums
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The hermeneutics of transpacific assemblages:
Museums, material culture, meanings

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Aims

Nations in the South Pacific face the dramatic dual pressures of local reinventions and global engagements over processes of political decolonisation, cultural revitalisation and economic development. However, we have a limited understanding of the complex relationships between these pressures and their impacts on lives because of disciplinary constraints and a paucity of ethnographic studies. This project seeks to address this situation by documenting and analysing the function of museums in these processes, arguing that they play a key role and thus offer a window into the underlying complexity. The project entails an ethnographic study of curatorial work with Pacific collections and their living cultural links to people at four South Pacific museums (National Museum Australia (NMA), Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa), Tjibaou Cultural Centre and Vanuatu Cultural Centre). These case studies represent specific national places that are simultaneously enmeshed in transpacific negotiations involving traveling objects, meanings and lives for political, cultural and economic purposes. The project aims to illuminate the contested understandings of Pacific heritage and messy entanglements of Pacific historiography, pointing to their significance for future decolonisation, revitalisation and development.

The focus on cultural productions through curatorial agency within a transnational framework is the distinctive and path-breaking feature of this project. This entails an approach to the institution of the ‘museum’ as a kind of practice that entangles curatorial work and material culture, facilitating an exploration of the relations between local and transpacific realities. This approach will enable me to:

1. Analyse the entanglement of material and discursive as well as local and transpacific dimensions of curatorial practice in mediating objects, meanings and lives
2. Investigate the role of curatorial work in managing the relationships between Pacific collections held at the above museums and their multiple, mobile and intersecting source communities across the Pacific.

3. Document the role of curatorial work in mobilising these relationships for:
   - political decolonisation through historical interpretation
   - cultural revitalisation through the politics of heritage
   - economic development through museums, heritage and tourism

By studying transpacific phenomena through cultural practices, the project aims to tell a larger story through the experiences and lives negotiated by cultural actors in socio-political and historical contexts. That is, the project addresses questions of globalisation and transnationalism through particular theoretical and methodological orientations, such as interpretation and assemblage theory, which will generate specific empirical insights into how those involved in these processes produce meanings. By venturing beyond the limiting definition of local or national research questions, the project aims to dissect how the production, use and interpretation of material culture draws on multiple, mobile and intersecting influences from across the Pacific, thus unravelling the entanglements of transpacific historiography and heritage.

**Background**

It has become an axiomatic conviction to say that we live in the age of globalisation. The South Pacific Region seems to be particularly affected by global forces such as mass migration and media through rapid technological developments in transportation and communication. However, while these transpacific connections and crossings have multiplied and accelerated over the last decades, one should not lose sight of their grounding in
historical processes of sea voyages, encounter and exchange. Scholarship has begun to illuminate the endemic movements of people, histories and practices across the Pacific, which cannot be exhaustively explained through totalised understandings of colonialism and its postcolonial critique, or conventional categories of analysis such as the nation. Instead, the South Pacific Region has always been characterised by transpacific entanglements of histories, cultures and economies (Thomas, 2011).

Museums have not only functioned as mirrors that reflect these processes, but have been involved as actors in the processes themselves (Bennett, 2006). That is, museums have played an active role in imperial colonisation and its political decolonisation, scientific and anthropological knowledge production and its postcolonial critique, and contemporary cultural revitalisation and economic development. Museums, then, offer a window into these larger processes and an empirically grounded illustration of the underpinning complexity. The complex function of museums in mediating the cultural, political and economic dimensions of contemporary life is particularly prominent in the South Pacific. Here, a plethora of new museums, such as the cases under scrutiny in this study, have emerged and been branded ‘experiments in culture’ (Healy & Witcomb, 2006) implicated in the ‘making of culture’ (Message, 2006) and the creation of ‘destinations’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). South Pacific museums appear at the cutting edge of recent developments in museum and heritage theory and practice, especially through the active engagement with Indigenous concepts, practices and forms of knowledge production (Kreps, 2007). Scholars have shown the influence of Indigenous thought on museum practice (McCarthy, 2011), the relationships between museums and source communities (Peers & Brown, 2007), and the dialogue with notions of Western theory (Schorch & Hakiwai, 2013).
Most perspectives, however, focus on a singular case and, while often gesturing towards processes of globalisation, do not pay sufficient attention to the ways in which museums, collections and interpretive practices are relationally constituted through traveling objects, meanings and lives. Due to the ‘cosmopolitanisation’ of the contemporary world, however, it is essential to deconstruct the predominant ‘methodological nationalism’ (Beck, 2006) in the humanities and social sciences so as to analytically grasp transnational realities, as some useful cases in the museological literature show (Macdonald, 2003; Schorch, 2013a).

Although the idea of a ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’ is gaining momentum, the debate remains mainly on a theoretical and normative level without offering sophisticated empirical investigations (Calhoun, 2010). This project addresses this gap by studying four museums that are each situated within a single national place while simultaneously being interrelated and enmeshed in a transpacific space of discursive and material negotiations.

Such a focus is also aided by the material turn in Museum Studies, Anthropology, and other related disciplines, which has enabled researchers to liberate themselves from the confinement of textual sources and thus refine understandings of ‘entangled objects’ exemplifying entangled colonial histories (Thomas, 1991) by looking at the ‘social life’ (Appadurai, 1986) and ‘cultural biography of things’ (Kopytoff, 1986), and the position of ‘museums in the material world’ (Knell, 2007). Recent scholarship in Museum Studies has expanded on these lines of enquiry by emphasising the material nature of experiences (Witcomb, 2010) and the construction of meanings (Schorch, 2012). This project adds a new dimension to these approaches by bringing museum objects into dialogue with curatorial practice and communities, thus intertwining interpretive and material agency in a complex web of relations that connect human life and the material world.
Significance and methodology

This project’s focus on cultural productions through curatorial agency within a transnational framework offers an original and significant contribution to Museum and Heritage Studies and related disciplines in theoretical, methodological and empirical terms. By drawing on interpretation and assemblage theory, the framework of this study simultaneously entangles materiality and its embodied qualities with narrative interpretations of history and culture, as well as specific localities with a transpacific space. Museum objects and curatorial practice are considered as ‘ships’ (Gilroy, 1993) or mobile interpretive vessels that embody and navigate the material and discursive relations between different places across the Pacific. The project thus contributes to the further development of a Transnational Anthropology (Appadurai, 1996) through a relational understanding of museums and their collections (Gosden & Larson, 2007), and their active role in the interpretive assemblages of heritage and history for cultural, political and economic purposes.

By creating a theoretical and methodological synthesis of assemblage theory (DeLanda, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1981, 2006), this study draws both body and language into the politics of culture, thus shaping a refined analytical literacy of an often-impoverished language of agency (Schorch, 2013b). The advantages of doing so are that the curatorial work with Pacific collections at the four South Pacific museums and their living cultural links to people can be analysed as a hermeneutic moment, or ‘act of interpretation’ (Schorch, 2013a), in which meanings are made as part of the process in which transpacific assemblages are produced. Museums and cultural heritage provide concrete spaces, places and themes that are involved in the ongoing construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of meanings and the interpretive becoming, emerging and making of transpacific forms of life. That is, museums and cultural heritage play a significant role in the
complex negotiations of a ‘flexible citizenship’ (Ong, 1999) of Pacific actors who simultaneously constitute and are constituted by Indigenous connections, migration and new mobilities, political and economic relations, and the (dis-) continuities of contemporary histories. Illuminating this complexity will allow us to treat the hermeneutics of transpacific assemblages not only as ‘anthropological problems’ (Rabinow, 2005), but as actually existing and thus lived and interpreted phenomena.


