no. 41 The Hermeneutics of Transpacific Assemblages

Philipp Schorch

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The Hermeneutics of
Transpacific Assemblages

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the *hermeneutics of globalisation* to venture beyond political and economic overdetermination. More specifically, I set out to inspect the interpretive complexity of the *hermeneutics of transpacific assemblages*, namely the surplus of interpretations in a transforming world, which entangles linguistic, cultural, historical and political dimensions in a complex web of negotiations. This paper sets the theoretical and methodological scene for future research on particular empirical realities. The ultimate goal outlined here is the development of an understanding, explanation and critique of actually existing transpacific assemblages as lived and interpreted phenomena. I conclude by introducing the theme 'cultural heritage' and its ongoing construction, deconstruction and reconstruction within and beyond museums to dissect the endless hermeneutic becoming, emerging and making of transpacific forms of life.

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Introduction

It has become an almost axiomatic conviction to say that we live in the age of globalisation, which has quickly become an omnipresent buzzword and the seemingly unquestionable dogma of the current era. The 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. The predominantly narrow economic and political focus on trade and political relations further impedes a potentially deeper understanding of globalisation within the transpacific space.

This paper introduces the *hermeneutics of globalisation* to venture beyond political and economic overdetermination. It is clear that the centrality of politics and the economy cannot be questioned, but it can be said that the 'political' and 'economical' are just two dimensions that inevitably collide with other 'directions in motion' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 23), which might be labelled 'cultural', 'ethnic', 'religious', 'technical' or 'material', among others. More specifically, I set out to inspect the interpretive complexity of the *hermeneutics of transpacific assemblages*, namely the surplus of interpretations in a transforming world, which entangles linguistic, cultural, historical and political dimensions in a complex web of negotiations. This paper sets the theoretical and methodological scene for future research on particular empirical realities. The ultimate goal outlined here is the development of an understanding, explanation and critique of actually existing transpacific assemblages as lived and interpreted phenomena.

I begin with some notes on globalisation by alluding to its complexity and hinting at its multidimensional manifestations in specific situations and settings in the Pacific. I proceed by bringing an 'assemblage' perspective into dialogue with hermeneutics to shed light on the moments and processes of cultural world-making, which are constantly performed through the networks and associations of multiple actors. This theoretical and methodological synthesis enables me to draw both body and language into the politics of culture, thus shaping a refined analytical literacy of an often-impoverished language of agency. I conclude by introducing the theme 'cultural heritage' and its ongoing construction, deconstruction and reconstruction within and beyond museums to dissect the endless hermeneutic becoming, emerging and making of transpacific forms of life.

Some notes on globalisation

I want to proceed with the gradual development of my argument with some notes on globalisation. It is not my goal to deny its significance, which would be naïve at best, but to qualify its nature and complicate some common assumptions. While my argument will mainly evolve on the conceptual or theoretical plane, it will also hint at particular empirical realities within the Pacific region, and thus sketch out the contours for further detailed inquiry to ultimately shape nuanced understandings of an inevitably complex process.

Firstly, it seems prudent that, even when experiencing dramatic change, we need to defy 'epochal hubris', defined by Bengt Kristensson Uggla (2010, p. 106) as the 'tempting egocentrism' or ethnocentrism 'which places us in an unfeasibly privileged position at the centre of history and the world'. Although globalisation has undergone an explosive proliferation over the last decades through major technological advances in communication and transportation, it is crucial to note that it is not a modern or postmodern invention. If understood through these clear-cut demarcations of a supposedly linear progress of history, globalisation would appear to be caused by a single and almost magical moment somewhere between the pre- and the post-. Instead, I argue that the current era only witnesses new dimensions of a historically grounded human process performed at the level of practice. I therefore prefer to speak of ruptural transformations rather than epochal ruptures.

A brief glimpse at Aotearoa-New Zealand serves well to illustrate that there exists a 'concrete human history and experience' (Said, 2003, p. xxiii) of 'traveling cultures' (Clifford, 1997). 'Pākehā', which is a Māori term that was initially granted to white settlers of European descent and nowadays refers to anyone Non-Māori, have come from all over the world whereas 'Māori' have equally travelled and migrated throughout the Pacific while always maintaining their connection to the spiritual homeland Hawaiki (Salmond, 1991). 'In world history', Ulrich Beck (2004, p. 447) argues, 'the mingling of boundaries and cultures is not the exception but the rule'. 'If we look back to the great migrations', he continues, 'we might stretch a point and say that there are no indigenous peoples'. While this point is certainly irreconcilable with contemporary New Zealand politics around the settlement of historical claims based on the Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 between the British Crown and Māori, it alludes to the modern origin of the categories 'Indigeneity' and 'Māori', the latter being assigned to a tribal diversity with a common history and experience of a 'polygamy of place' (Beck, 1997) within the transpacific space.

Secondly, globalisation is a fundamentally complex and multidimensional process. A cursory glance at Fiji, another Pacific islands nation, exemplifies this claim. Fiji's history is one of settlement, mobility and clashing interests. The island shares cultural characteristics with Melanesia and Polynesia, both being further examples of introduced concepts that have been taken up with alacrity by the Pacific islands peoples. Dutch exploration, British colonisation as well as Indian and Chinese immigration have all been influencing factors to varying degrees throughout modern Fiji's evolution. The resulting complex ethnic mix has brewed and occasionally boiled over ever since gaining independence in 1970. A series of coups has allegedly attempted to reconcile tribal power structures with national institutions and systems, leading to extended periods of suspension from the Commonwealth of Nations (from which it remains suspended following the most recent coup in 2006). Australia and New Zealand imposed sanctions without, of course, threatening their own economic interests in the billion-dollar tourism industry. At the same time, China began to expand its realm of influence into the South Pacific region by trading development aid for UN votes supporting its own ambitions in reincorporating renegade Taiwan. This growing muscular posture provoked aggressive reactions in Australia and prompted the USA to announce its own 'American Pacific Century'. The latest chapter was written when Fiji became the first Pacific nation to open a diplomatic office in North Korea, considered in the West by most as a pariah state and by some as a member of the notorious 'axis of evil'.

This highly compact historical account does not, of course, offer any ethnographic detail or impervious academic analysis. It serves, however, as an anecdotal knife to 'cut across monolithic formulations of globalisation' (Wilson, Sandru, & Welsh, 2010, p. 5). Fiji, a tiny South Pacific actor, appears to be entangled in, as Bruno Latour (2005, p. 7) puts it, a 'peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling' within a global web of connections and relations. I argue that globalisation itself should be understood as a heterogeneous complex and contested terrain, an 'assemblage' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) of competing, non-linear and unforeseen or accidental actors, processes and dimensions. The ostensibly self-perpetuating structures and systems of capitalism, which lay at the heart of economically over-determined analyses, could never exhaustively explain Fiji's experience of globalisation.

The particular case of Fiji enables me also to allude to a third note on globalisation, namely, the continued significance of locality. Location or place has not lost its relevance to human life and practice, thus defying sweeping claims of global meta-breaks and apocalyptic prophecies of a global homogenisation. Dwelling roots and traveling routes have always been at the very heart of the human condition (Clifford, 1997; Wilson, et al., 2010). While contemporary life forms become increasingly 'deterritorialised' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), diasporic and truly global, any specific locality still performs, and is performed by, the accommodation of the body and the senses through a 'special kind of sensual experience' (Hannerz, 1996, p. 27) and 'structure of feeling' (Appadurai, 1996, p. 181). A local place and the global space are mutually constitutive, assigning each

other meanings in a circular hermeneutic trajectory through the 'work of imagination' (Appadurai, 1996) and the labour of interpretation by human beings embedded in practice. To put it succinctly, the global gains a different meaning in each place, each city, each village, each neighbourhood, and the interpretive world of each individual subject.

Assemblages and their hermeneutics

As I indicated before, it makes good sense to assume an assemblage perspective in order to dissect globalisation within the transpacific space. However, I also pointed out that I would bring such an assemblage approach into dialogue with hermeneutics. This theoretical and methodological synthesis allows me to build a nuanced framework without unconditionally appropriating or imposing a particular philosophical line of thought. In other words, I think it is of fundamental importance to critically interrogate and speak back to theory throughout the entire intellectual inquiry, from the formulation of research problems to the interpretation of ethnographic insights. I therefore proceed with some useful components of an 'assemblage theory' but continue by identifying a major conceptual gap, which I need to fill by resorting to other tools.

Approaching phenomena through an assemblage lens enables us to avoid any self-evident point of departure. Key concepts such as colonialism, modernity, state or globalisation, which often assume the character of an emanatist mantra preached by an 'invisible actor behind the scenes' (Arendt, 1958, p. 185), can thus be unmasked as heterogeneous and contested complexes instead of self-enclosed totalities. An assemblage perspective, exemplified by the metaphor of the 'rhizome', chosen by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), with its principles of 'connection', 'heterogeneity', 'multiplicity', 'rupture' and 'cartography' equips us with an analytical toolkit to work with and through more subtle units of analysis to move beyond causal, hierarchical and chronological understandings. Moreover, our attention and suspicion is called to the complex processes and relations involved in the production of even the most detailed category itself to 'avoid imputing analytical divisions *a priori*', as Sharon Macdonald (2009, p. 118) puts it aptly, which would award these the unattainable status of 'magical notions'.

Thinking through assemblages, initially inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, has burgeoned in recent years and reached the shores of various academic disciplines and fields (Bennett & Healy, 2011; DeLanda, 2006; Latour, 2005; Law, 2004; Macdonald, 2009; Ong & Collier, 2005). However, while it importantly includes the 'intermingling of bodies' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), it does so at the expense of language, relegating it to a vicarious role of an outsider or, as Manuel DeLanda (2006) does, denying it a 'constitutive role'. This is exactly the point where I need to suspend or qualify my allegiance to assemblage thinking. Once we enter the realm of human life and thus of culture, we cannot ignore the significance of language in constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing worlds of meaning. I think that Deleuze and Guattari's (1987, p. 84) claim, 'language is not life; it gives life orders', derives from a limited structural and almost mechanical view on linguistics which does not capture the infinite and fluid world of interpretive and imaginative assemblages. Here I need to call for another analytical reinforcement, in the form of hermeneutics with its maxim that life – that is human life – *interprets* itself.

The need for such a synthesising move on the theoretical plane becomes clear when engaging with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) understanding of history. I argue that the dualistic stance to consider the 'rhizome' as 'antigenealogy' seems self-defeating; since, by attempting to dissolve a perceived dichotomy – here the widespread structural dominance – it tears open another rigid chasm between binary oppositions. This argument risks committing what John Dewey brands '*the* philosophical fallacy' (Jackson, 1998, p. 3), or philosophical hubris, by elevating intellectual inventions such as 'assemblage' to the status of ultimate truths, as I have argued elsewhere (Schorch, 2012). Again I think that such an understanding is informed by the reductionist equation of history with the chronological structure of events.

Paul Ricoeur (1981, p. 288) instead reminds us of the intriguing and ambiguous etymology of the term 'history' in most European languages, 'meaning both what really happens and the narrative of those events'. In English, the word 'story' is part of the word 'history' and in German, the term *Geschichte* refers to 'history' and 'story', to the content of events as well as the form of their telling. These hermeneutic implications of 'narrativity' and 'historicity' highlight the inextricable link of form and content in human language games and their constitutive function. Ricoeur (1981) further exposes the hermeneutic nature of 'historicity' and its 'imaginative reconstruction'. 'The temporal quality of experience' makes, according to Ricoeur (1991, p. 2), 'fiction, history, and time one single problem'.

The key of this argument is the *return to experience*. An 'antigenealogy' can, for example, hardly be reconciled with Māori *life* and the *experienced* 'method assemblage' (Law, 2004) of *whakapapa* (geneaology), which traces ancestral layers through *Mātauranga Māori* (Māori knowledge). But by opening universal claims to cultural variations, or philosophy to anthropology, we might be able to overcome the perpetuation of binary oppositions, or 'cultural ontology of dualism' which is absent from many Asian intellectual traditions (Liu, Ng, Gastardo-Conaco, & Wong, 2008), such as through the definition of 'a nomadology' as the 'opposite of a history' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25), by considering history or geneaology as nomadic hermeneutic assemblages. History should not be denied but seen differently, less linear and more complexly assembled, disassembled and reassembled. This, of course, alludes once again to the interpretive mode, or 'hermeneia', of life itself. Hermeneutics enables me to understand, explain and critique how the moments and processes of a particular assemblage, its critical junctures, are interpreted, negotiated and contested. My argument therefore proceeds to a more detailed discussion of hermeneutic concepts before drawing the threads together through the interrogation of the transpacific space.

I concur with James Clifford's (1988, pp. 22-23) view that 'it has become necessary to imagine a world of generalised ethnography. With expanded communication and intercultural influence, people interpret others, and themselves, in a bewildering diversity of idioms - a global condition of what Mikhail Bakhtin called "heteroglossia"'. Considering the circular relationship between the global and the local, which threads its way through this paper, it is vital to note that even undeniable and widespread inequalities have not led to a cultural homogenisation because of the diverse ways in which global discursive interventions, according to Aihwa Ong (1999, p. 10), 'are interpreted and the way they require new meanings in local reception'. This inescapable hermeneutic condition of globalisation transforms, however, the engagement with difference and the Other from an occasional assignment into an omnipresent demand.

At the heart of it lies a continuous translation between cultural worlds of meaning, which seems difficult in theory but has always been performed in practice. This capacity grows out of the daily task of translating not only *between* but *within* cultural communities. In fact, each interpretation or understanding is an act of translation (Ricoeur, 2006). It follows that human existence itself is not only a 'mode of interpretation' or 'hermeneia' (Ricoeur, 2006), but a mode of translation which is at once linguistic, cultural, political and historical. This endless flow of 'translation' proceeds, as Walter Benjamin (1997, p. 117) puts it, 'through continua of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity'. By offering 'cultural difference as an *enunciative* category', Homi Bhabha (1994: 60) opens a hermeneutic terrain of cultural negotiation and contestation without resorting to the last bastion of binary oppositions, which are produced by the inherently essentialising concept of 'a culture'. This throws open the door to cultural world-making, a process which always begins with an act of interpretation (Schorch, 2010).

The hermeneutics of transpacific assemblages

By synthesising assemblage and hermeneutic theory and methodology, I am able to dissect the hermeneutics of transpacific assemblages. In other words, I draw both body and language into the moments and processes of world-making, which are constantly performed through the networks and associations of multiple actors *within* and *between* linguistic, cultural, political and historical dimensions. Empirical research, therefore, needs to interweave ethnographic, linguistic, historical and political perspectives to get a sense of the complex fluidity of worlds of meaning. I argue that a museum offers a particular place, space and empirical reality to interrogate this hermeneutic complexity and produce empirically situated, contextualised and rich theoretical propositions.

Museums have always been entangled with the practices of 'traveling cultures' and 'contact zones' (Clifford, 1997) as places and spaces of encounter, translation and dialogue. Multiple forms of contact, which include but cannot be exclusively reduced to colonial encounters, have shaped the cultural institution 'museum' that inherently depends on the contextualisation, de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation of cultures, people and objects through different forms of travel and cross-cultural engagements. If one considers the processes of both museological production and experience, then there is no such thing as a national museum but instead a particular national *place* which is simultaneously enmeshed in the dynamics of a global discursive *space*. Even the most uneven distribution of colonisation and globalisation cannot produce a totalising prescription for the dynamic interaction and transfer between cultural worlds of meaning.

I argue that Pacific collections and their material treasures held in various places across the Pacific (National Museum of Australia, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Fiji Museum, Tonga National Museum, The Museum of Samoa) and their living spiritual and cultural links to people and biographies, embodied by the Māori concept *Mana Taonga* (Hakiwai, 2006; McCarthy, 2007, 2011; Smith, 2006), can be used to trace the hermeneutic moments and processes and put these 'back on the map' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) of transpacific assemblages. Museums and cultural heritage provide concrete spaces, places and themes which are entangled in the ongoing construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of meanings and the endless hermeneutic becoming, emerging and making of transpacific forms of life. Both museums and heritage act as transpacific forms that move 'across and reconstitute…specific situations' (Collier & Ong, 2005, p. 4), or local places, within a transpacific space. They are 'territorialised in assemblages' and define new virtual, economic, cultural, political, historical as well as 'material, collective, and discursive relationships' (Collier & Ong, 2005, p. 4).

In a previous research project, I investigated such hermeneutic or 'discursive relationships' and examined the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) as a specific 'contact zone' (Clifford, 1997) of cross-cultural travel encounters within a globalised world. I approached tourism as particular cultural practice and medium for the dynamic interaction and transfer between cultural worlds of meaning. Drawing on a long-term narrative study of global visitors from Australia, Canada and the USA to Te Papa, I offered a hermeneutic exploration of travel experiences as interpretive negotiations within the transpacific space. While all global visitors were linked to a national *place*, they simultaneously faced the dynamics of a globalised discursive *space*.

The respondents' interpretive voyage led to a *cross-cultural hermeneutics*. The research findings supported my argument that cross-cultural dialogue was processed not only through the opening towards the Other but through the interpretive ontological endeavour of what I termed the *shifting Self*. Importantly, the associated multiple identifications emphasised the relativity of otherness and shaped what I called a *pluralist cosmopolitan space*. This discursive terrain represents the 'common sphere' (Dilthey, 1976) that potentially transforms cross-cultural translation and dialogue into understandings. Its frame of reference is characterised by the simultaneous presence of a globalised horizon and the humanisation of culture through 'stories' and 'faces'.

I argued that the conceptual understanding of the *shifting Self* offers the clearest mirror of contemporary identity formations. In a globalised world, identities in their ethnographic sense are neither purely essential and coherent nor completely fragmented and fluid, as the dualistically opposed modern and postmodern perspectives claim. The inescapable mixing of 'traveling cultures' requires us to *shift* between discursive positions, a simultaneously transient and continuous task. This interpretive ontological endeavour finds its expression in a situational localisation of the Self. In other words, Self and Other, us and them, are articulated from a certain perspective until changing situations and circumstances provoke new 'moments' and 'processes' of selfing and othering. To put it succinctly, the sense of Self is at once *both* coherent *and* fluid – it is *shifting* (Schorch, 2010, forthcoming 2013).

This working paper lays the conceptual basis for a continued exploration of the transpacific space and the development of a body of knowledge. The upcoming conference *New Perspectives on Transpacific Connections: The Americas and the South Pacific* at LMU Munich, Germany (25.-28.04.13), highlights that anthropological contributions are under-represented in the novel research terrain of the transpacific space, which is mostly dominated by economic and political approaches. More specifically, contemporary transpacific indigenous connections are a particularly under-researched field. The themes and directions for future research outlined here will show how Indigeneity itself has become transnationalised. Museums and 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.

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