ing a long-overdue attention to transnational sexuality, race, and gender to the study of Asia, the Pacific, and their western (post)colonizers.

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Oliver Sacks, professor of neurology at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and author of several popularly acclaimed books, has written an account of his travels to Micronesia. He describes his book as a “very personal, idiosyncratic, perhaps eccentric view of the islands, informed in part by a lifelong romance with islands and island botany” (xii). It certainly is that. Sacks recounts two trips to the region, though the exact dates of these journeys remain unclear. The first, to Pingelap via Pohnpei, both islands being in the Eastern Caroline group, appears to have taken place in late 1993; the second trip, to Guam and the Northern Marianas Islands, may have occurred in 1994. Confusion over the exact location in time of these trips is of lesser concern, however, than the intellectual, literary, and colonial genealogies informing Sacks’ narrative and his representations of various Micronesian peoples.

Lifelong interests in islands, island botany, and neurological disorders provide the immediate motivation behind the trips. Sacks visits Pingelap to observe a community among whose members exists an unusually large percentage of people suffering from congenital color blindness or achromatopsia. Man of science that he is, Sacks wonders what kinds of heightened and compensatory sensitivities achromatopic people develop in lieu of color. His interest in Guam centers on a neurological disease endemic to the island and called by the Chamorro people lytico-bodig. The disease manifests itself in two forms. There is sometimes lytico, a progressive physical paralysis resembling the motor neuron disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. On other occasions, there develops bodig, a degenerative disease similar to parkinsonism and sometimes accompanied by dementia.

In the early 1950s, 10 percent of all adult Chamorro deaths were attributed to lytico-bodig; the prevalence of the disease in this period was one hundred times greater on Guam than on the North American mainland. In some areas of Guam, specifically the village of Umatac, the incidence of the disease was four hundred times greater than in North America. The cause of lytico-bodig on Guam has been the subject of considerable investigation by neurological scientists the world over. Foreign researchers have considered a variety of genetic and environmental factors, the most persistent suspect being a starch extract from the fruit of the cycad tree that is most often served in the form of tortillas. Called fadang, this popular food was consumed in great quantities by the Chamorro people until the mid 1950s. The decline in its consumption over
the last four decades parallels a dramatic drop in the incidence of lytico-
bodig, thus sustaining for some a belief in cyasin toxicity as the source of the
disease.

In many ways, Island of the Color-
blind is more about Oliver Sacks’ own past than late-twentieth-century Micro-
nesian realities. I am reminded of
Anthony Pagden’s point about the
ways in which otherness is so often understood in terms of the self and the
self’s world. There is a consciously articulated personal history that pre-
cedes and informs Sacks’ encounter with Micronesians. Fragmented mem-
ories of an English childhood visit to
the Isle of Wight, supplemented by
stories from his parents, create in
Sacks’ mind the idea of an island as a
special, remote, mysterious, attractive,
and frightening place. Bouts with
visual migraines as a youth invite spec-
ulation on what life might be like in a
totally colorless world. The works of
Arthur Conan Doyle, H G Wells,
Herman Melville, and Robert Louis
Stevenson add to the fascination with
islands. Later intellectual engagements
with the works of Charles Darwin,
Alexander von Humboldt, and Alfred
Russell Wallace add a Victorian veneer
to Sacks’ parallel interest in the primitive and the natural. Within the
Pacific, Arthur Grimble’s A Pattern of
Islands, David Stanley’s Micronesia
Handbook, and Paul Theroux’s The
Happy Isles of Oceania serve as Sacks’
personal travel books.

A literary lineage such as this helps explain the touristic, highly romantic-
cized nature of Sacks’ writing and his fascination with what he perceives to
be the more exotic aspects of life in the
islands. Sacks recounts his participa-
tion in a fishing expedition during his
last night on Pingelap, an expedition
that took place under a magnificent
star-filled sky, upon an ocean lit up by
the bioluminescence of tiny protozoan
creatures. The megalithic ruins of Nan
Madol, a series of artificial islets linked
by watery channels just off the south-
eastern coast of Pohnpei proper, stir
Sacks with their enormity; he finds
their abandonment and emptiness uncan
ny. And there is his highly erotic
walk in a primordial forest of cycad
trees on Rota, the island closest to
Guam in the Northern Mariana chain.

This fascination with the exotic and
erotic dimensions of seascapes and
landscapes does not preclude more
poignant moments of encounter during
the course of Sacks’ travels. Knut
Nordby, a vision researcher at the Univer-
sity of Oslo and an achromat him-
self, accompanied Sacks to Pingelap.
His status as a fellow sufferer, observes
Sacks, allowed him an immediate,
intense, and deep bond of fellowship
with the color-blind members of the
Pingelap community. There is the gift
of a visor to a young boy living in the
Pingelapese village of Mand on
Pohnpei. With his hypersensitive
achromotopic eyes now shielded from
the sun’s blinding glare, the boy runs
toward the shore yelling gleefully, “I
can see! I can see!” On Guam, Sacks
writes of Dr John Steele’s unceasing
devotion to his patients in the village
of Umatac and of the physician’s con-
tinuing struggle to find the cause and a
cure for lytico-bodig. Even more mov-
ing are accounts of the quiet dignity of
Chamorro victims of the disease—
people such as Jose and Estella, the
Commissioner, Juan, Tomasa, Roque, Euphrasia, Felipe, and Jesus—and of the loving care, attention, and support given them by the members of their extended families.

What compromises this otherwise sympathetic series of personal portraits is Sacks’ failure to name fully the victims of the disease. Indeed, we know these people only by their disease and their first names. Researchers and doctors, on the other hand, are fully named, and their theories and findings minutely detailed, while Chamorro understandings of the disease are devalued quickly and simply as “folk neurology.” This privileging of the foreign as enlightened, scientific, and exceptional shows itself in Sacks’ description of the effects of sakau, an intoxicating drink made from the roots of the pepper plant (Piper methysticum). Chronic consumption of sakau helps explain for Sacks the lethargic pace of life on Pohnpei; his own consumption of the drug, however, leads to a vision of James Joyce’s “heaven-tree of the stars hung with humid nightblue fruit” (88).

There are other problems with the text. Sacks accepts uncritically the written ethnographies and histories of the islands he visits. At other times, he invents his own. The principal town of Kolonia on Pohnpei is described as unchanged from the 1830s; more accurately, Kolonia was not built until 1887 by the Spanish colonial government and, along with the whole island, has changed considerably over the more than 110 years and three separate colonial regimes since. Far more disturbing than any simple historical error is the attention Sacks gives to the travel writer Paul Theroux’s very irresponsible, wrong, and harmful ideas on the link between canned luncheon meat and cannibalism. Sacks muses recklessly, if inconclusively, about Theroux’s theory that Pacific Islanders’ alleged modern-day fondness for Spam and corned beef reflects the earlier and widespread practice of cannibalism in the region. It’s an unfortunate, very sad digression from his account of life on Pingelap.

Despite the charm of much of its narrative and the fluidity of its prose, Island of the Colorblind remains little more than another travel account of life in the Pacific that reduces indigenous peoples to the category of observed and controlled subjects. Writing of his travels after returning home to New York, Sacks admits to the ways in which reflecting and remembering contribute to a reinvented experience. Memories of personal interactions and cultural differences become more romantic, fanciful, and creative in the retelling. I would add the word colonizing to this confessed litany of textual affectations. Inadvertently perhaps, Island of the Colorblind offers images of Micronesia and Micronesians that draw from and add to the histories of colonization in the area.

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