

Dialogue

The Right to Misrepresent

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Empowering Imaginations

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*Tradition in the Politics of the Pacific: Interviews with
Simione Durutalo and Bishop Patelesio Finau*

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Following is the text of a keynote address delivered at the eleventh Pacific History Association conference at Hilo, Hawai'i, 12 July 1996.

I have, at my age and in these circumstances, to avoid the temptation to be nostalgic, but let me say to begin that my first teaching appointment after leaving Harvard and my postgraduate studies was at the University of Hawai'i nearly thirty years ago. The Vietnam War was still on. The airports everywhere, but especially on the West Coast, were full of young men in uniform. The military presence in Hawai'i was massive. My appointment was across both the anthropology and history departments on the Mānoa campus. The History Department wasn't into two-sided Pacific history in those days. "Real history" was American, European, and perhaps Asian. They did not know what to do with me. The Anthropology Department, however, set me to teach first-year ethnology.

My class was made up of students of various cultural origins—Hawaiian, Sāmoan, Philippine, Japanese, Macao-Portuguese, Chinese, and a few waterlogged and beached Anglo-Americans. Our textbooks came from that Holt, Rinehart & Winston series, Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology—Ian Hogbin's *Guadalcanal Society*, Leopold Pospisil's *Kapauka Papuans* among them. I quickly realized that the invented and formalized otherness of the peoples in these textbooks would provide no "ethnographic moment" for any of my students. So I set them to do their own ethnographies. I asked them to transcribe some event or ritual or drama or experience of otherness in their lives into a narrative of some sort. Some did their "pot" parties. Some did a wedding luau. Some did my Sunday mass and sermon. I was stationed at the cathedral in Honolulu at the time. Some, in fact, thought they would provide an experience of otherness for the bishop with whom I was staying by coming to dinner cross-dressed—a very Polynesian thing.

I remember especially, because it was one of those cathartic moments

in teaching that do not happen very often, one Hawaiian-born student's ethnography. He was a fairly reluctant reader of books. He chose as his ethnographic moment the Sunday morning beach touch-football match at Kāneʻohe between local Hawaiians and the US Marines. They were vigorous and violent affairs, full of subliminal hatred. I remember his excited discovery that a touch-football match was a parable about something else—about identity, about political domination, about macho gendering. He then confronted with some relish the problem of how he would make theatre of that in an ethnography of the many meanings at different levels he saw in the game, how he would tell his story with the plagiarism of his learning and the inventiveness of his understanding. I felt that he had empowered his own imagination to discover that even the most particular detail of living is larger than itself.

All through my academic teaching life, I have taught history of the past by first requiring my students to do some ethnography of their present. This has not been some presentist gimmick, not some escape from the difficulties and boredom of looking at the past, not some rejection of the “relevance” of history. On the contrary, my students soon discovered how difficult it was to describe their present. They soon learned that there was nothing they observed but was the subject of reflective discourse by somebody else. They soon discovered, as I liked to say, that if they looked at their navel long enough all they would see would be their belly button. They would never learn about themselves without going outside themselves. They soon learned that cultural living in its bare bones is talk, talk translated into all sorts of symbols. That is its realism. We make all our relationships by talk, all our institutions, all our roles. The theatre of our everyday life is talk, and to be cultural survivors we need to be experts in reading the immediate meaning of our words, but more important, what those words really mean. To catch what Wittgenstein called the fictions of our languaging, we need creative imagination. But that is an everyday thing, not something for special occasions. We need creative imaginations just to survive in a world full of sham and facade, full of “spin doctors” and advertising agents.

All of us know that the one thing we historians never do is observe the past. All we observe is the past transformed in some way into history. All we ever observe are the texts made of living experience—whether these texts are something written down in a letter or a journal, whether they are oral traditions transcribed in some way, whether they are material

objects, like a feather cloak, enclosing its narrative in a color, a design, a texture, whether it is some story caught in a dance or a painting or a tattoo, whether it is gender, power, class, wealth, poverty in the shapes and shadows of an archaeological site. We all make history by observing somebody else making history.

I never have recovered from the excited discovery that most of the history that the past makes of itself comes from unpublished and unexpected sources—from letters, journals, diaries, logs, from museums and archives, from kitchen drawers and church basements, from palaces and hovels—all imprinted with the tears, sweat, blood, and dust of time as much as by ink and pencil. I have always counted it the great privilege of a historian's life to finger those pages, sometimes even for the first time since they were made. Forty-five years of reading them have persuaded me that there will never be enough years to read even the smallest fraction of the texts into which men and women have put their lives. But I am persuaded, too, that the historians' impulse to saturate themselves in all that there is is the correct procedure. The webs of significance of any event, place, or person are fine lined and faint. It takes a lot of looking to see them. And the answers to any question that we have of them are never obvious, because the questions we ask of them are not the questions the people of the past were asking of themselves.

If the texts of the past are mountainously high, the silences in them are unfathomably deep: silences of pain, and of happiness, for that matter; silences of guilt; silences of fear; silences of exclusion; silences of forgetting. The language of the deepest passion is often trite, bland, and without apparent depth. The highest and lowest moments of human living often have no elaboration. These are sorts of silences too. But these silences are not likely to be an emptiness. They are more likely to be, in Paul Valéry's words, "the active presence of absent things." I suppose I believe that is what we have to empower imaginations to do: to see these absent things, to hear these silences.

Imagination is rather unnerving for most historians. Imagination seems to demand that they loosen their grip on the reality that makes their histories different from fiction. But imagination need not be unnerving. Imagination need not be fantasy. Imagination is the ability to see those fine-lined and faint webs of significance. Imagination is hearing the silence because we have heard some of the sounds. Imagination is seeing the ab-

sent things because we have seen so much else. Imagination is an act of human solidarity, or rather imagination is an act of solidarity in our humanness. I guess that here I am at the point of the most important thing I feel I have to say. I would like to take it slowly.

Yes, imagination is an act of solidarity in our humanness. But there is a dilemma in that. The humanness we share with the past is at the one time the same and different. The most unhistorical thing we can do is to imagine that the past is us in funny clothes. Our imagination has to allow us to experience what we share with the past and see difference at the same time. When we write history, if we are young, we have to imagine what it is to be old; if we are old we have to imagine what it is to be young; if we are male, we have to imagine what it is to be female, and female, male; black, white and white, black; poor, rich and rich, poor; strong, weak and weak, strong. Imagination is our capacity to see ourselves as somebody else.

Ironically—and I am following the American philosopher Richard Rorty here—our ability to see ourselves as somebody else rests on our capacity to experience solidarity with different people as fellow sufferers, in the broadest sense of that word suffer. *Suffer* is the word we use when we quote Scripture: “Suffer little children to come unto me,” or when we protest that we don’t “suffer fools gladly.” *Suffer* means to allow in some way, to accept. When we accept different people as fellow sufferers, we are not just accepting the pains of living. We are also accepting the limitations of our human existence, accepting ourselves as we actually are. Perhaps you have heard me say it before, to suffer ourselves is to have a performance consciousness of ourselves as human beings.

That solidarity with different people as fellow sufferers, writes Rorty, is not discovered by reflection but is created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking, “They do not feel it as *we* would,” or, “There must always be suffering so why not let *them* suffer.” This process of coming to see other human beings as “one of us” rather than as “them” is a matter of detailed description of who unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like. (Rorty 1989, xvi)

There you have it. When we empower the past by returning it to itself, we empower our imagination to see ourselves. Our certainties are our

greatest enemy when we approach the past. Hindsight is always blinding. We know from our living experience that our present moment—this moment—has all the possibilities of the future still in it. None of us prescribes the reality we live in. None of us controls the consequences of our actions. None of us can predict with absolute certainty anybody else's reaction to the simplest gesture, the clearest sign, the most definite word. But we have to cope with these ambivalences, interpreting these never-ending possibilities. Hindsight, on the other hand, reduces all possibilities in the past to one. Hindsight leaches out not all our uncertainties, but all the past's uncertainties. Hindsight closes down our imagination. In hindsight we do not see the past as it actually was, only as it would have been if all its uncertainties were taken away. Hindsight freezes the frame of every picture of the past. Hindsight removes all the processes of living. Makes the past our puppet.

Our imagination to see the past as it actually was has to return to the past its own present, with all the possibilities of its future still in it, with all its uncertainties, with all its inconsequentialities. Imagination restores independence to the past by showing how partially it can be known. Imagination humbles the author in any of us to accept what we cannot know or cannot say.

I have to believe that we must empower our imaginations to do that in all sorts of ways—by doing ethnographies on our living presents, by being open to those other ethnographers of our living experience—our poets, our novelists, our comics, our cartoonists, our filmmakers and photographers. *Anuanua*, *Nuanua*, *Ānuenuē*—it has been said before by writers who belong to the Pacific more than I—*Nuanua*, Rainbow, our creative imagination must be Rainbow.

The humanness we share with the past is difficult enough to imagine. The difference of the past is even more so. We cling so strongly to the present moment as the most civilized of moments. We easily think of the past as something grotesquely familiar. But the past is different. Make no doubt about it. The past is different. The privilege we feel in being male or female, young or old, black or white, powerful or weak is only toward those of our living political present. The past is much farther off and nobody gets there but by giving a little. No one catches the reality of the past but by giving some deference to it. That deference is part of the empowering imagination.

I suppose that is one reason I have always been attracted to the beach-

combers of the Pacific, those who crossed the beach either way, the people of the *diaspora* as we have come to call them in this conference. There is one thing about the people of the diaspora that joins them together, whatever way they cross the beach. They are always translators of some sort. They are always transforming the languaging of one sort of living into another. They always begin their translation with some deference to the cultural realism of the other. That deference is not necessarily an act of sympathy or affection, not necessarily an act of approval. They don't have to like what they see, or think it better or right. All sorts of motivations move that deference. But the deference is in essence an act of understanding, no matter how dim, of the metaphoric nature of reality. The deference catches the interconnectedness of things in the other culture. It becomes an entry point into other ways of seeing things. That realization of difference in others is always in some ways a transformation of self, not necessarily a denial of self, more usually an enlarging of self, a realization of the potentialities of self. There is no discontinuity in that. Nothing cultural has died in that. On the contrary, life has been extended in that.

Translation is always a transformation. Translation is always an act of imagination. Ortega y Gasset once said something about translation that I think is pertinent to what I am trying to say:

That stupendous reality that is language cannot be understood unless we begin by observing that speech consists above all in silences. A being who could not renounce saying many things would be incapable of speaking. And each language represents a different equation between manifestations and silences. Each people leaves some things unsaid in order to be able to say others. Because everything would be unsayable. Hence the immense difficulty in translation: translation is a matter of saying in a language precisely what that language tends to pass over in silence. (Quoted in Becker 1995, 6)

I have never felt that the response of island peoples to changes put upon them by empire, mission, and trade was something less than creative aboriginality. Their translations were never a denial of self. They were empowered by an imagination that filled the silences of their own language. I suspect that is the same for us. When we translate the differences of the past in our histories, we empower our imagination to hear the silences in our own language.

I was there, with others here this evening, in the Clare Valley, South

Australia, in 1981 at the foundation of the Pacific History Association. As I remember it, there were two principal debates at that foundation meeting. The one was whether we would call ourselves a Pacific Studies or a Pacific History Association. The other was how we would ensure that no one national, cultural, or institutional interest would dominate the association.

I suppose that by natural inclination I might have been thought to favor a Pacific Studies Association. All my academic life I have been preoccupied with the effect of beaches and boundaries. All my academic life I have decried polarities of every sort. I have said it often enough. It is my ultimate liberal conviction. All polarities are fraud. If there is a secret of life, it is that living is always something in between. All my academic life, in that sense, has been postmodern. Not postmodernist: not a theory of literary criticism. Postmodern, an era of global experience. There is no one here who is not postmodern. Postmodernity is the discovery that modernity has been a false prophet. Modernity has not saved us from two world wars, or a holocaust, or Bosnia, or Rwanda. Modernity has not saved us from our racist and greedy selves. There is nobody here who has not been affected by Picasso or Stravinsky or Wittgenstein. There is nobody here who has not been affected by Franz Fanon. We are all plagiarists of our own past. There is not an idea in our heads that has not been shaped in some way by the events and understandings of the twentieth century and the centuries before.

Modernity flowed out of the great movement in human culture that we have come to call the Enlightenment. “The enlightened,” Immanuel Kant declared, “dared to know” (1973, 384). The gamble most took in daring to know was to take a perspective on the world and human nature, to see something partially so that they could see more deeply, to blinker themselves so that they saw the world differently from everyday experience. They would see the world scientifically, in the broadest sense of that word. They saw geological strata as time, radio waves as stars, lines on screens as neutrons. They saw genes, cell structures, ids and egos, supply and demand, highs and lows. It takes a lot of social energy and a lot of politics to see the world in these blinkered ways. But these blinkered visions become dangerous when their partial view is thought to be whole.

My postmodernity, as I see it, has always been a struggle against any claim that any blinkered perception, whether it be theological, genetical, economical, psychological—a struggle against the claim that *any* blink-

ered perception has a priority over other perceptions because its blinkers allow it to see what others don't.

That's why I agreed totally to calling ourselves the Pacific History Association. The grace of history is that it is a humanity. It is the great unblinkered science. History is scientific in all ways save one. It is not exclusive of any perspective or any understanding. History has demands of accuracy and exhaustiveness. It demands that if we say something, anything, about the past, that anybody else seeing the same thing could say the same thing. It demands that insofar as we can delineate it, we reveal our own persons in our work, not just our biases, but those things that affect us in our reading and writing. It demands that we seek the truth. But it also demands that we should be open to being surprised at what that truth is. And that truth that we discover in history has the same qualities with which we experience truth in everyday life—sometimes uncertainly, sometimes contradictorily, sometimes clouded by the forces that drive us to it, sometimes so clearly that it blinds us to its untruth.

History is a humanity. History is a nonexclusive art. There is no part of human endeavor that is not the object of history's inquiry. There is no way of understanding that is not its tool. That, to me, is a very special quality. But there is more.

That term *history* in our title, Pacific History Association, is much broader in concept than the term that describes what brings us together, *the Pacific*. Maybe I would have preferred that we called ourselves the Pacific Histories Association to indicate the varied ways we represent the past. We dance our histories, we paint them, sing them, picture them, film them, mime them, as well as write them. Our histories have as many varieties as there are dimensions of living. But by describing ourselves as an association of histories, we do something more than show patience with our diversity of histories. We make ourselves open to discoveries that are global as well as regional. Our ears become open to many conversations around the world. Who among us has not had our imagination empowered by what Franz Fanon wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth*, or E P Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class*, or Oscar Lewis in *The Children of Sanchez*? Who among us has not had our imagination empowered by subaltern studies, by gender studies, by Edward Said's *Orientalism*?

We know that when we hear these voices, we don't clone them. We

don't impose their understandings on our own like some template. No, we use them to enlarge our way of seeing. We make them groan and protest, Michel Foucault once said (1975, 33). It is not our point to be faithful to them. We are in conversation with them. That makes our history global, if not in topic, then in discourse.

It is the *history* in the title of our Pacific History Association that empowers our imagination. That history is never frozen still. It is always in flux. It is now. It always has been. A long time ago I was one of the prize undergraduate students in history at the University of Melbourne. The trouble was that I did not want to do what was considered to be "real history" at the time—British history, Renaissance history, Medieval history. I wanted to do what we thought of as the two-sided history between the island peoples of Oceania and the strangers who came to dominate them. To do that I thought I needed skills other than those that history to that time had given me. I thought the skills I needed were anthropological. I did not know what anthropological meant, but I knew I did not want to do the history of the "civilized" and the anthropology of the "uncivilized." I wanted to do the history and the anthropology, the anthro-history if you like, of both the island peoples and the intruding strangers. My professor, when I went to see him to tell him I was going to Harvard to study anthropology the better to write the sort of history I wanted to do, said, "Dening, this is the end of your academic career." It wasn't, as it turned out. But for years we tried to find a name for the special sort of history we thought we were doing. We called it "ethnohistory," "culture contact," "zero-point history." But each of those terms became unsatisfactory as we began to use them and delved into their ramifications. "Ethnohistory" seemed to indicate that we were doing a lesser sort of history. "Cultures" did not come in contact. "Zero-point" conceived as the true culture that was All Time Before was a denigration of all that came after. It was a denial of creative aboriginality and a denial of cultural continuities. But the discovery of these words' limitations was not instant. It was a discovery in discourse. It was discovered in undergraduate essays, in PhD theses, in learned articles, in constant debate and conversations. It was a discovery that every insight is fleeting, that the instant interests and politics close down a discipline, imagination will open it.

There is a story I have often told. Forgive me if you have heard it. I

remember telling it to that first class of mine in Hawai'i. I told it at the beginning of my academic life, and I told it at the end. I doubt that I will have the honor and privilege of speaking to the Pacific History Association in assembly again. I have to wonder even whether I will be back in Hawai'i again. So be patient with me.

Fifty years ago my postschooling education was begun in a seminary. Offices and duties were distributed in a seminary less with an eye to talent than with an eye for the good of one's soul. One year I was appointed *Magister Equi*, Master of the Horse. The horse's name was Eustace. He was an enormous brute with great rolling haunches and a huge belly inflatable at any given point to frustrate tight girths. City born, I was innocent of any real knowledge of horses. I thought they all knew some sort of farmland patois like "Whoa," or "Giddap." Eustace only knew violence. He had come to the seminary from timber haulers in the mountains. He was trained to give of himself instantly and totally, which was good for logs but bad for mowers and ploughs. One of the tasks of the Master of the Horse was to plough the orchard. My image of ploughing had come mainly from the Dutch masters. I saw it as a serenely meditative occupation, tripping over occasional larks, lunching on bread and wine at the noon Angelus. I discovered that ploughs are heavy, unmanageable things. They required two hands just to hold them upright. Where, I asked, did the reins go? They went around one's neck, I was told. With Eustace steaming into the middle distance of the orchard, one had a poor choice. Pursue him at a break-neck pace with the plough, or break one's neck by dropping the plough. It was then, I think, that my skepticism for sacred Scripture began. It sometimes takes more courage to take one's hand off the plough than to keep it on.

Of course, the more imagination you have, the more courage you will need, either to hold on or take your hands off the plough. So be warned. The more your imagination is empowered, the more you empower the past with your imagination, the more troubles you can expect. But remember what Albert Wendt said in his poem "Walls" (1995, 324):

Walls frame our seeing
Walls don't happen
We grow them.

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