

Paul Lyons 2006: *American Pacificism. Oceania in the U.S. Imagination*. Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures. London and New York: Routledge. 271pp + xii.

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In the last decade numerous critics (see, for example, Ahmad 1995; McClintock 1992; Shohat 1993) have become aware of the shortcomings of postcolonial studies as a discipline affected by several contradictions. One of the aspects which has often been criticised is the celebratory use of the term *postcolonialism* whose temporal focus seems to disregard the prevalent effects of colonialism, or the impact of processes like global capitalism, neoimperialism or diaspora. Likewise, critics have questioned the generalist approach of most postcolonial theories, which depart from a common rejection of colonialism, but cannot always respond to historical or cultural specificities. In a recent study, Graham Huggan revises some of these issues, calling attention to the implications of a discipline which, despite its aims, is sustained by an industry centralised in western countries, unified by the use of English as a vehicle of literary and critical expression, and often reduced to the study of a privileged elite of writers and critics (2001: 4).

This privileging has also affected some geographical areas, with the subsequent tendency to ignore or exclude others from the global postcolonial map. Oceania, and more specifically the literature produced in the Pacific Islands, is a case in point. In her recent study, *Postcolonial Pacific Writing. Representations of the Body* (2005), Michelle Keown calls attention to this omission in several recent books on postcolonial literature, where the Pacific Islands are either subsumed by labels such as 'the Asia-Pacific region' or ignored in preference to more commercial literatures (8-9). Likewise, Paul Sharrad opens his book *Albert Wendt and Pacific Literature. Circling the Void* (2003) stressing that although the works of Pacific writers respond to "the demand of postcolonial theory (and of its critics) for cultural and historical specificity", this has paradoxically placed them outside "the largely afrocentric and indocentric concerns of postcolonial diaspora in the transatlantic metropolises that still dominate anglophone publishing" (32). Sharrad's and Keown's studies are just two of the most recent works to have plunged into the depths of a literary ocean virtually unexplored since Subramani published his pioneer *South Pacific Literature: From Myth to Fabulation* in 1985. Their aim has been to offer new critical perspectives on the fiction of Oceania's most prominent authors, who are revising colonial views and producing 'alter/native' representations of their Pacific cultures both from their countries of origin or from their new countries of residence.

Another aspect of this revision has involved reassessing historical, literary and anthropological discourses on these islands as presented in western texts. This has been the concern of a series of works (Calder *et al.* 1999; Edmond 1997; Edmond and Smith 2003; Fausett 1994; Howe 2000; Nicholas 1997; Smith 1992, to name just a few), among which Paul Lyons' *American Pacificism. Oceania in the U.S. Imagination* occupies an outstanding position, first because it continues with the revision of colonial discourses about the Pacific, and secondly because it does so from a perspective which had been

traditionally ignored by more generalist approaches. Despite the fact that crosscultural exchanges between Euroamericans and Oceanians have been analysed in several works and that some of them include chapters or sections devoted to American authors, like Jack London or Herman Melville, Lyons' work constitutes the first consistent and systematic effort to analyse the literature about Oceania produced in the United States.

In *Representing the South Pacific* (1997) Edmond acknowledges a "terminological imprecision" when it comes to using the terms *European* and *western* in the context of intercultural encounters in the Pacific, an inaccuracy which in his view reflects "not only the changing map of an unravelling post-colonial and post-Cold War world, but also the fluid and contested nature of our cultural and intellectual categories" (1997: 16). These terminological inaccuracies are in fact solved in Lyons' work, precisely because he concentrates on what is specifically American in the works he analyses. This allows him to avoid the generalist tendencies so often attributed to (post)colonial studies, while illuminating these texts from a perspective which has also escaped the paradigm of American studies. His aim is to show that, despite the fact that the images of Oceania have been deconstructed from different angles, the American approach still needs to be reassessed, especially when considering U.S. influence on the region. The portrayal of these islands in American texts reveals not only a historical ignorance about an area where "the U.S. has formed states and territories, tested weapons, recruited soldiers, exploited resources, induced dependencies, displaced populations, and ruptured cultures" (8), but also a deeper lack of consideration for indigenous epistemologies, beliefs, and traditions, which was pervasive not only in colonialist literature but which prevails in contemporary critical responses to those texts.

The introduction already displays what I consider to be one of the strengths of the book: the author coins several terms to solve critical deficiencies and to systematise the most common tropes employed in the works of American authors, which are studied through the lens of what he calls "American Pacificism". This term refers to the Orientalist discourse employed to reinforce U.S. national narratives in different historical periods, demonstrating that "it is clearly not the 'essential nature' of the Islander that changes, but the material relation and the discursive needs of the receiver" (16). Lyons employs the term *Pacificism* to avoid the flaws of the term *Orientalism* with its tendency to "marginalise Oceania under the rubric of the Orient" (36). This has been a critical step taken by other scholars; Elizabeth Deloughrey (2001), for example, has redefined the Orientalist discourses in the oceanic context with the term *islandism*, considering that western views were articulated basically through the representation of these islands as isolated and contained spaces which demanded control and favour continuous visitation. Lyons' focus is even more specific since he establishes the connections between representations of Oceania in the context of diverse debates on U.S. national identity, economic expansion, or military history, pointing for example at their similarities with discourses about Native Americans or African Americans.

A deeper analysis of the terms American and *Pacificism* is offered in the first chapter where Lyons reviews the main images of Oceania looking at the pervasive tropes of cannibalism and tourism. The description of the islands and their indigenous populations as simultaneously hostile and friendly proves the ambiguous premises on which these discourses were formulated, presenting the islands as useful stepping stones for U.S. economic, political or development and as places in urgent need of progress

(24), simultaneously constructed “to be civilized and as escapes from civilization” (27). Lyons detaches thus the term *Pacificism* from its literal meaning calling attention to the violent legacy which still today remains hidden under apparently harmless contacts like tourism.

The rest of the chapters are organised chronologically to cover the literature about Oceania produced from the nineteenth century to the present. Chapter two deals with the literary accounts of the Pacific in the context of U.S. commercial expansion, arguing that the line between non-fiction and literature was erased when authors began to rely on travellers’ accounts and nautical literature to produce literary texts which in turn contributed to the narrative of national advance through the narration of maritime adventures in the area. The texts discussed in this section are Edgar Allan Poe’s *Native of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) and James Fennimore Cooper’s *Mark’s Reef; or, The Crater, a Tale of the Pacific* (1847), which are read as complementary ways of channelling economic nationalism through ambivalent perceptions of Islanders. Lyons claims that the way in which Poe’s work has been studied, in the light of black and white issues in America, has made critics ignore the relevance of its location, which he interprets as Poe’s way of displacing “antebellum debates about race into a vast, resource-rich, fantasmic Oceanian space” (55). Poe’s text is studied in connection with other commercial pro-slavery texts (such as James Kirke Paulding’s *Slavery in the United States* or Benjamin Morrell’s *Four Voyages*) which fed the myths of the natives’ need to be rescued by U.S. commercial expansion. Lyons concludes this section suggesting that Poe’s text is a failed parody which appropriates previous texts, not with the aim of questioning the myths they project, but with the clear intention of perpetuating them in the light of the prevailing economic discourse. Using an allegorical approach, Cooper’s work reveals a similar purpose, displaying a clear-cut ideology according to which natural hierarchies and moral unity are defended as key ingredients in the formation of the colony.

The next two chapters form a unity in themselves, since they are organised around the notions of fear and friendship, which in turn derive from the images of the hostile and accessible natives mentioned above. Chapter three starts with an excellent analysis of fear as a pervasive element in the literature of encounter, determinant to understanding the production of historical knowledge about the Pacific. The chapter comments on Charles Wilkes’s *Narrative of The United States Exploring Expedition* (1845), in contrast with one of the best known literary works about the Pacific, Herman Melville’s *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846), considering the ways in which these authors put this archival fear to use in their portrayals of cannibalism. For Lyons, Wilkes’s text is an obvious response to the nationalistic mission, intended to corroborate pre-existing assumptions about natives and proving that he “was not a discoverer but a surveyor, not an original describer but a certifier of existent knowledges” (79). Melville’s text, on the contrary, does not permit such a straightforward analysis: his work displays a citational form of cannibalism (89) which took him to appropriate existing knowledge in order to fulfil the audience’s expectations while attempting to parody these views, conscious as he was of their constructed nature. And yet, Lyons stresses the inherent difficulties in a text whose subversive potential is undermined because it continues to be informed by a prevailing

notion of fear difficult to escape when “structures of belief were deeper than parody could cleanse” (90).

The next chapter analyses the portrayal of friendship between Oceanians and U.S. citizens in the literature of encounter, describing its recurrent features in texts by Henry Dana, Herman Melville, Henry Adams, Willowdeen Handy and Jack London. The narrations of these encounters were based on the proverbial hospitality of Oceanic cultures and combined remarks about their chaotic and exaggerated reactions with veiled erotic references, often narrated in scenes of arrivals and departures which took place on the liminal space of the beach. These relationships served to establish alternative interpersonal networks among Oceanians and Euroamericans not traditionally registered in official narratives and where fear was not altogether absent, thus stressing the links between fear and friendship as part of a ‘discursive continuum’ (98).

The following chapters open what, in my view, is the most interesting part of the book. Chapter five highlights the transition from colonial encounter to literary tourism, focusing on the mechanisms by means of which twentieth century literature has continued to reveal an image of these countries as paradises to be discovered and controlled, despite the fact that by this time they had already been corrupted and transformed in various ways. The propagandistic role carried out by adventure narratives or nationalist texts in the past is now the responsibility of works apparently different in motivation and contents, but informed by similar ideas. To encapsulate their views Lyons uses the terms *cannibal tour* and *lotus-eater tour*, the modern versions of the literature of encounter, both of which are determined by the need to overcome “colonial shame by embracing Oceanians, who are now considered as unthreatening” (136), but remain intent on presenting the islands in similar terms, as spaces accessible to westerners, as the settings of colonial fantasies whose refreshed versions continue to be realised. Lyons devotes part of this chapter to the discussion of Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), which he reads as an extension of the lotus-eater school of writing with which she shares similar assumptions about the sexual availability of the natives and a common need to fulfil her expectations after the encounter. The chapter concludes with a brief analysis of a more recent but equally controversial book, Paul Theroux’s *The Happy Isles of Oceania* (1992), which he defines as a “postmodern cannibal tour” (145), considering that it moves between a postmodern incredulity about Oceanic myths and a stubborn resistance to reject those images, as if Theroux was entitled to continue with the task performed by previous authors.

The last chapter is devoted to several works related to U.S. perceptions of Oceania in the context of the Second World War and concentrates on the evolution from literary tourism to what the author calls ‘histotouricism’. This is a term he coins to account for the code which dominated Cold War writing about Hawai’i, which combines the authority of historical accounts with the typical features of touristic texts, “presents history as a ‘tour’, essentializes group characteristics, and takes on the structure of guidebooks” (151). In the introduction of the book, Lyons had already referred to the contradictory position of Hawai’i, as an area which is excluded both from Pacific and from American studies, having been incorporated as part of the States, and yet not having become properly American either. At this point in history, Hawai’i was presented as “a paradise redeemed in Cold War terms” (152), which displayed the full

effects of a successful colonial mission now perpetuated in its touristic promotion. The chapter contains an analysis of James Michener's *Hawaii* (1959), the work which Lyons considers as the paragon of histotouricism.

The conclusion, 'Changing pre-prescriptions: varieties of antitourism in the contemporary literatures of Oceania', is not a mere summary of the book but rather a substantial chapter meant to be read contrapuntally with the rest of the volume. Whereas the whole book is devoted to the reassessing of American visions, in the conclusion Lyons stresses the need to renew the images of the Pacific from the inside, connecting the views of these authors to their social and material contexts. This section surveys the contemporary literatures coming from Oceania and the ways in which indigenous authors have fought Pacificist imaginings and its prevalent effects through the articulation of 'antitourism', a type of writing which "puts the pains and pleasures and social situations of Islanders center stage [and] positions Islanders in front row seats, whoever actually attends" (179). The chapter analyses this antitouristic frame in several works by Albert Wendt, Sia Figiel or Alani Apio, who have added the diversity, richness and quality of their literatures to the postcolonial spectrum.

My only concern has to do with Lyon's style. The book is, at some points, heavy reading because of a tendency towards obscurity, and the abuse of quotations. This is, due without any doubt to Lyons' vast knowledge on the topic, but some of these paragraphs (on pages 63, 93, 131, 180, to enumerate just a few) should be edited for the sake of clarity and fluidity. There are also a couple of typographical errors (the name of the author Keri Hulme is misspelt on page 182, and the Spanish word he refers to on page 214 should be *tocayo* not *tacayo*); a certain confusion is found when Lyons refers to the film *Once Were Warriors* as *Where We Once Belonged*, which is in fact the title of one of the novels he comments on in the conclusion and which, as far as I am aware, has not been adapted for the screen.

Despite these formal issues, this is a work of great value which displays many strengths. Its interdisciplinary focus, its undeniable scholarship and its illuminating literary, theoretical and historical views make it a notable and original addition to the studies on Oceania and will be of interest to anyone working in Pacific, American or postcolonial studies.

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