Archived version from NCDOCKS Institutional Repository http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/

Facing the Pacific: Polynesia and the U.S. Imperial Imagination (Book review)

By: Heather Waldroup

No Abstract

Waldroup, Heather. (2008). "Facing the Pacific: Polynesia in the U.S. Imperial Imagination." *Pacific Affairs* 81:2 (Summer 2008) p. 323(3). Published by the University of British Columbia (ISSN: 0030-851X) Permission to archive received from the editor.

Facing the Pacific: Polynesia and the U.S. Imperial Imagination (Book review)

HEATHER WALDROUP
Appalachian State University, Boone, USA

COPYRIGHT 2008 University of British Columbia

FACING THE PACIFIC: Polynesia and the US Imperial Imagination. By Jeffrey Geiger. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007. viii, 303 pp. (Figures, photos.) US$59.00, doth. ISBN 978-0-8248-3066-3.

In this exploration of American popular representations of Polynesia from the "long 1920s,"Jeffrey Geiger examines the cultural productions of a time period and imperial context that have been underexplored in scholarship. His title draws on the intriguing metaphor of "facing": American representations of the Pacific in this period functioned as the final extensions of nineteenth-century "westward-facing" expansionist politics, and also as ways of constructing Pacific people as a reduced series of exoticized types, thus "creating a kind of face for, putting a face on" Polynesian subjects (3). Without suggesting that his case studies are anticolonial, Geiger does argue, compellingly, for the ambivalence with which Americans experienced representations of Polynesia in the early twentieth century.

The book begins with a review of the history of contact between Westerners and Polynesians, noting that both "Polynesia" and "America" are contested terms. By clearly situating these terms within both Pacific studies and American studies, Geiger addresses their colonial connotations and clearly positions his discussion at the intersection of these disciplines. He similarly situates his case studies within a history of representation, both visual and textual, that began in the late eighteenth century. Geiger notes that the Cook Voyage publications and Melville's Typeewere crucial texts to emerge in an Anglophone context; he also examines French representations, including Bougainville's Enlightenment fantasy of Tahiti as "New Cytheria." While noting that the

twentieth-century "American Pacific" engaged with both of these traditions, Geiger also argues that American imperial interest in the region--and its resulting body of representations--developed alongside those of the French and British. In this way, Geiger stresses that American interest in the Pacific is not merely a development of the late nineteenth century, but a material body with longstanding historical, cultural and social implications.

Geiger's case studies draw on a standard Western trope: the (often sexual-ized) fantasy of escape to the tropics, expressed by travellers from Melville's Tommo to Paul Gauguin. He synthesizes this history, and argues for its ambivalent and contradictory public response, in chapter 1. In subsequent chapters, Geiger analyzes Frederick O'Brien's popular novels from the Marquesas, the creation of Moana in Samoa by Frances and Robert Flaherty, and the filming of O'Brien's novel White Shadows in the South Seas in Tahiti by W.S. Van Dyck; he concludes with a more generalized discussion of the "homoerotic exotic" in several films. In all of these chapters, Geiger draws on his strong knowledge of film theory, theories of the gaze, and postcolonial theory. Two chapters are particularly engaging. The discussion of Moana clearly links the narrative-documentary style of this film, the Flahertys' previous production, Nanook of the North, and developments in the practice of visual anthropology in the early twentieth century, including the work of Edward S. Curtis. Additionally, in both this chapter and the chapter on the "homoerotic exotic," Geiger explores alternate manifestations of the gaze (the white female gaze and the white homoerotic gaze, respectively, but both directed at Polynesian men) in popular productions of this period. Much scholarship has focused on white men directing their gaze at Polynesian women (here, again, we encounter the usual suspects: Joseph Banks, Melville, Gauguin). Geiger's analysis reveals the complexity of the gaze in any context, but particularly a colonial one: that the gaze is not only gendered, but also marked by racist and imperialist structures, and that heterosexual white men are not the only ones doing the looking, or the desiring. This aspect of Geiger's discussion also serves to underscore one of the key aspects of his argument: that Pacific representations were produced under a variety of conditions and were consumed in a variety of ways by heterogenous audiences, and, further, were marked by the complicated political situation of the interwar period and the contradictory racial politics of the early twentieth century.

Overall, Geiger's work is a significant addition to the literature on the history of Western representations of the Pacific, which has tended to focus on French and British productions from before 1900. He engages with the work of scholars who have also explored the cultural production of America's imperial interest in the Pacific, including Paul Lyons and Rob Wilson. Gei-ger does not go as far as to examine Indigenous response to this history of representation, or how the Indigenous gaze figures into his case studies; he does, however, engage more generally with the work of Indigenous scholars such as Epeli Hau'ofa, Futa Helu and Albert Wendt. Geiger's work thus contributes to the broader discourse on Western representations of the Pacific region, and will open up further avenues for discussion of the American Pacific in particular.