

SALESA, DAMON. *An Indigenous Ocean: Pacific Essays*. Bridget Williams Books. 2023. 382 pages. ISBN: 978-1-991033-60-4 (hardback);, ISBN: 978-1-991033-63-5 (PDF).

Damon Salesa's *An Indigenous Ocean* is a collection of 15 essays on Oceanic history and society, with a particular emphasis on New Zealand and Sāmoa. In disciplinary terms, the book falls somewhere in between Pacific studies and history rather than anthropology. But, as the author also notes, Pacific history is a sub-field where the disciplinary boundaries between history and anthropology have always been porous.

The book covers a broad range of topics, from ancient ocean voyaging or established viewpoints in Pacific history-writing to New Zealand's Pacific imperialism and discourses on race in the Pacific. Most of the essays re-narrate history from an Oceanic point of view. Salesa's aim is to write historical accounts centring on Oceania and, in so doing, to replace older, outside-looking-in accounts of events impacting the region; 'to reconstitute relations with the past', as he phrases it in an essay discussing the work of historian and author Albert Wendt (p. 324).

In order to depict the Oceanic point of view, Salesa tries to define that viewpoint. He wants to distance himself from bigger political totalities like 'the Asia-Pacific' or the 'Pacific Rim', but also the smaller constituent units of Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia. He does this by specifically highlighting one socio-cultural feature from Oceania: interisland mobility, especially as exhibited by the region's maritime accomplishments. Salesa writes consciously in the wake of Epeli Hau'ofa's 'Our Sea of Islands' (1993) to argue that the Pacific

Ocean has always connected rather than divided Oceania's various sea-going peoples.

Salesa's Oceania exhibits a marked preference for ocean voyaging and, in more recent times, various other sorts of mobility. The book opens with accounts of Oceanic peoples' past accomplishments in navigation and ship building to reveal the unique maritime history boasted by the region. At the same time, the author emphasises the importance of the region by repeatedly defining it as an area that comprises one-third of the world's surface and one-quarter of the world's languages unified by ancient mobilities. Later, Salesa shows us how Oceanic seafaring was transformed into work on cargo vessels and into routes and connections established by outside forces, until 'our sea of islands' gradually becomes a 'sea of connections, as geography, waters, and reefs gave way to journeys in the air' (p. 173). It is at airports like Auckland or Faleolo, Salesa argues, that 'we can still experience Indigenous mobilities', describing the 'sea' of airports and connections as 'a cultured ocean of stories and history' (p. 176). Judging by Salesa's account, this appears to be a fitting description with respect to people travelling between Sāmoa and New Zealand, but begs the question: What about those peoples of Oceania who neither sail nor frequently travel overseas? It is one thing to seek a common Oceanic viewpoint in a shared migration history, but to define the region in terms of present-day international mobility sounds a lot like privileging a privileged viewpoint.

Yet, Salesa accomplishes his mission in providing a Pacific history that refuses to discuss Oceanic people as merely acted upon—that is, as passive recipients of history. Salesa writes about a history made in the Pacific, even when he finds that history distasteful, such as in his analyses of the imperial-colonial aspirations of New Zealand. But he does not write about ‘agency’—for Salesa (p. 60), the term implies a tendency to ‘bring individuals and particular events into focus’, while being ‘less useful for capturing larger scales, structures, or comparisons’ such as the Oceanic point of view he seeks to establish. For Salesa, agency ‘severs rather than joins’ histories (p. 60).

As an anthropologist reading work from a neighbouring field, I found Salesa’s distaste for particularity thought-provokingly interesting. He deploys a familiar tool from the anthropological toolkit—comparison—but he uses it to find commonalities: to generalise from the particulars rather than to particularise through contrast. For me, this often results in a style of essay writing which, although well-written and thoroughly researched, zooms out from the most interesting questions.

Take, for example, the deliciously set-up comparison between Sāmoan and New Zealand legislations and discourses concerning the colonial category of ‘half-caste’ people: ‘Sāmoa, a tropical country, raised completely different medical and health questions from New Zealand, which was temperate. Regarding Sāmoa, and the tropics more generally, it was occasionally suggested that native blood might fortify European blood, and allow Europeans to survive in the tropics. (...) In New Zealand it was not Europeans who were considered endangered, but, of course, Māori’ (p. 217). In the end, however, the conclusion Salesa draws from this material is somewhat underwhelming, namely that ‘the category of half-caste was

constantly in motion’ and that half-castes ‘forced the boundary [of race] to be actively and visibly policed’ (pp. 219–220). For me, this reads something like a ‘mid-range’ generalisation, wherein the author seeks to find Oceania-wide commonalities from two highly disparate cases. I cannot but wonder whether the contrasting roles of the ‘half-caste’ category might have been better deployed to open up new questions about race, law, colonialism, or numerous other topics, instead of trying to make these cases answer an insipid question.

To be fair, however, this is not a theory-driven book, nor does it claim to be. Salesa’s essays are an attempt to narratively draw up an encompassing view of Oceania, and, for this purpose, the theoretical threads developed in the individual essays are often just means to an end. They provide the ‘plot’, but one gets the sense that it is the socio-cultural and historical depictions that really motivate Salesa. The essays are calm, carefully weighted accounts, where each paragraph provides a further set of evidence. Salesa writes in a level tone and presents his subject matter in a clear, readable form.

The range of subject matter is broad, and so the book rarely goes very deep in its analysis. I could use chapters from Salesa’s book as assigned reading in an introductory area studies or perhaps Oceanic ethnography course. Yet, I also assume Salesa has other intended audiences in mind, particularly in Sāmoa and New Zealand. The book sometimes appears to address an academic audience, at others a broader Oceanic readership. I find this slight sense of indecision regarding the book’s audience refreshing, because it reminds me of a perspective that, I believe, we all could at the very least keep in mind while writing—that academic texts should not aim at alienating the general reading public, but go the extra mile

in accommodating readers from beyond our narrow fields of expertise. And, also, vice versa, that these wider audiences do not need to be protected from distinctly academic frames when our questions are embedded in or arise out of such framings.

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## REFERENCES

**Hau'ofa, Epeli** 1993. Our Sea of Islands. *The Contemporary Pacific* 6 (1): 148–161.