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OCEAN PASSAGES

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ERIN SUZUKI

OCEAN PASSAGES

*Navigating Pacific Islander and
Asian American Literatures*

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INTRODUCTION

If we listened attentively to stories of ocean passage to new lands, and of the voyages of yore, our minds would open up to much that is profound in our histories, to much of what we are and what we have in common.

—EPELI HAU‘OFA, “The Ocean in Us”

While the focus of Ruth Ozeki’s novel *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) is the relationship between a Japanese teenager named Nao and a middle-aged Japanese North American author—also named Ruth Ozeki—who comes across Nao’s journal and letters when they wash up on the shoreline of her island home in Canada, perhaps the most central “character” in the book is the Pacific Ocean that brings them together. The ocean, whose currents bring Nao’s words to Ruth’s attention, emerges in the novel as an entity that possesses its own, distinct modes of agency and temporality. Not only does it serve as a literal medium of communication between the novel’s two protagonists, but its crowded waters, gyres, and tides gesture toward submerged and belated histories that have been ignored or occluded by the capital-driven structures of contemporary transpacific politics, economics, and policy. At various points within the novel, Nao and Ruth imagine the ocean as an animate entity that both exceeds and resists containment by human endeavor. By reflecting on how oceanic circulations highlight the limitations of anthropocentric perceptions of time, space, and self, *A Tale for the Time Being* engages the sea not as an object or metaphor but as an assemblage of material and epistemological complexity.

The tides and currents of the Pacific Ocean are likewise bound together with the violent remnants of transpacific history in Māori (Ngā Puhī) novelist James George’s *Ocean Roads* (2006). As in *A Tale for the Time Being*, the

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trajectory of *Ocean Roads* moves through the Pacific wars of the twentieth century—this time through the complex genealogy of the Henare/Simeon family. Etta Henare is an award-winning war photographer, and her partner, Isaac Simeon, is a British nuclear scientist who developed the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; their children, Caleb and Troy, end up on opposite sides of the Vietnam War. While these characters' stories move through London, Antarctica, Hiroshima, Los Alamos, and Saigon, the novel remains centered on the family's coastal home at Rangimoana, just outside Auckland. Rangimoana—a place whose very name combines the heavens and the seas—is a space that invokes the ocean, its moods, and its tides. Throughout the novel, we can see Etta in particular filtering and interpreting the world through this oceanic perspective. For example, when she first photographs Isaac in the ocean near her home, she sees him as “a man of waves and troughs,” reading his scientific accomplishments through his kinesthetic engagement with the ocean around him; near the novel's end, she turns to the sea and perceives it as an “immense book of ocean waves leafing down to the sand.”¹ The novel's other characters and storylines—Isaac's work in nuclear physics, their son Troy's military achievement, their son Caleb's illness, and their daughter-in-law Akiko's choreography—are likewise mediated through an oceanic sensibility that illustrates their interconnectedness and the slow dispersion of their “nuclear” family through the ebb and flow of their lives. In George's novel, history is filtered through an oceanic lens rather than the other way around: instead of representing the sea as an object of study (or even a subjective assemblage, as *Tale* does), *Ocean Roads* posits that the sea operates as both an interpretive framework and a source, rather than subject, of knowledge.

This book attends to these narratives of ocean passage and explores their potential to engage in a deconstructive interrogation of race, subjectivity, and subject formation alongside the Indigenous-centered transnationalism of Epeli Hau'ofa's reconceptualization of the Pacific as an expansive, Oceanic “sea of islands.”² In so doing, I seek to analyze how these ocean passages disrupt and revise hegemonic constructions of the region. If Ozeki's representation of oceanic space seeks to *deconstruct* hegemonic mappings of the Pacific to reveal the multiplicity of oceanic ontologies, George's novel *reconstructs* these submerged or occluded connections through a place-based, Indigenous-centered aesthetic that begins at a specific site on the North Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand and radiates outward to engage with the fraught and violent transpacific histories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While the ocean described by Ozeki breaks down and recombines human refuse and remains, returning them to the shore as

so many fragments shorn of context—“fishing lines, floats, beer cans, plastic toys, tampons, Nike sneakers. A few years earlier it was severed feet”—the “ocean roads” described in George’s novel extends the protagonists’ trajectories from Aotearoa/New Zealand outward to the rest of the world. Yet both novels turn to material and metaphoric qualities of the Pacific Ocean not only to critique how the broader region has been made invisible and instrumental in the transpacific conflicts of the twentieth century, but also to construct ways of imagining otherwise.

In what follows I heed Hau’ofa’s call to pay careful attention to these different “stories of ocean passage” as a way to read across the fields of transpacific Asian American and Indigenous Pacific studies for “what we are and what we have in common.”³ More specifically, I argue that these ocean passages operate as critical and dynamic sites from which to analyze how Asian American and Indigenous Pacific subjectivities have been constructed against and alongside one another in the wake of the colonial conflicts that shaped the emergence of the modern transpacific. While the sea has played a central role in Indigenous Pacific thought for centuries, and much of the work published by Indigenous Pacific scholars has repeatedly emphasized the importance of the oceans to Indigenous activism, art, and theories of globalization,⁴ transnational Asian American studies—mapped across the same “sea of islands”—has been slower to address this body of Indigenous critique.⁵ Yet as Asian American studies has begun to engage more substantively with Indigenous Pacific studies, particularly around the topics of militarization, nuclearization, and Asian settler colonialism, there has been an increasingly “oceanic” turn within the field of transpacific scholarship.⁶ This project seeks to build on and extend this work by exploring what new ideas, alliances, and flash points might emerge when comparing and contrasting Asian and Pacific Islander passages across a shared sea. How might centering the Pacific in transpacific studies foreground points of intersection between Indigenous displacements and Asian migrations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? How can ocean passages disturb—or reinforce—settler colonial discourses *and* racialized fears of Asian “invasion” that linger as the discursive legacies of European, American, and Japanese imperial projects in the Pacific? How might a range of Indigenous Pacific and Asian American reflections on the meaning and materiality of ocean space serve to rethink and reshape a region that has been constructed largely on its abstraction? And how might a critical engagement with Indigenous studies and decolonial feminisms inform and contribute to theories of relationality emerging in transpacific scholarship in gender studies, science studies, and the environmental humanities?

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The stories of ocean passage addressed in this volume highlight kinesthetic, experiential, and nonlinear modes of knowledge drawn from both Indigenous and Asian American histories and epistemologies; they both critique and assemble alternatives to the post–World War II geopolitical formations alternately known as the “Pacific Rim,” “Asia/Pacific,” and—by the turn of the twenty-first century—the “transpacific.” Calling attention to the links between the discursive evacuation of Indigenous presence and anxieties about Asian ascendancy that served as the groundwork for these transpacific formations to emerge, I argue that attending to the ocean passages where Indigenous Pacific and Asian American cultures and communities have been intimately, although unevenly, intertwined is central to reimagining both “a new Oceania” and a “decolonial transpacific.”⁷ More specifically, I posit that as the term “transpacific” has become increasingly adopted as shorthand for an Asian American or Asian diasporic critique that seeks to move across national borders and boundaries, transpacific scholars must also be rigorous about insisting on its material and cultural entanglements within the Pacific itself—or risk repeating the colonial evacuation performed by earlier “Pacific Rim” formations.⁸ Such evacuations of the Indigenous Pacific from the purview of transpacific scholarship illustrate the persistence of what Danika Medak-Saltzman has called the “specters of colonialism” that continue to haunt transnational studies paradigms that aspire to critique and move beyond the settler colonial stakes of the nation by taking for granted inherited scholarly methodologies that make it “arduous to work across disciplinary and temporal boundaries in attempts to call attention to subjects other than those privileged by conventional periodization.”⁹ In other words, scholarship that frames itself as “*transpacific*” *must* engage with Indigenous Pacific histories, frameworks, and methodologies, or else the term loses its unique critical purchase. If the term “transpacific” is to meaningfully distinguish itself from the Pacific regional imaginaries that have directly preceded it, then scholars who pursue this line of study must address not only the sociopolitical dynamics and material and cultural objects that circulate between Asia and the Americas, but also how these circulations have been materially and imaginatively shaped by both colonial legacies *and* Indigenous Pacific epistemologies.

It is for these reasons that I return to the figure of passage to frame this study. By focusing on movement *through*, in addition to travel *across*, the ocean, these passages invoke and engage the dynamic potential that inheres in the prefix “trans-,” speaking not only to the movements of peoples, objects, or ideas between fixed points, but also to how these very acts of circulation create their own epistemologies of passage with the potential to change

and shape the worlds around them.¹⁰ In contrast to neoliberal transpacific frameworks that rely on abstractive or extractive visions of the Pacific, a transpacific studies that remains critically attuned to Indigenous and Oceanic epistemologies can illuminate and emphasize an analytic of *relation*: a mode of comparison malleable enough to note the shifting and relative positionalities of different communities and cultures and the different ways that they continue to be entangled within and responsible to one another's histories. Such a comparative methodology indeed requires, as Hau'ofa observes, careful attentiveness to our varied "stories of ocean passage" in and across the sea, and here his specific focus on the role that *stories* have to play in this process highlights a second meaning of the word "passage": an extract from a book, poem, or other artistic work. Literary study often relies on the extraction of such passages to analyze how texts create and convey meaning, yet in doing so, it is important to preserve the sense of movement and connection that the term "passage" also implies. A text is not an isolated fragment to be explored as an object in and of itself; it also operates as a conceptual *passage*, connected to and emerging from a range of cultural, historical, and aesthetic contexts. Stories of ocean passage ask us to remain mindful of this fluidity and connectivity and to understand how position and context can shape both composition and interpretation. It is to these intersecting and overlapping passages, as articulated in contemporary Indigenous Pacific and Asian American literatures, that this study turns.

Navigating Ocean Passages

Within the mainstream of transpacific discourse, the Pacific Ocean is a site that is often rendered invisible through its very visibility. Often invoked as a site through which the region itself is imagined and brought into being, it is less frequently engaged in terms of its direct or material mediation of broader networks of trade, transportation, and cultural exchange.¹¹ This tendency to consider oceanic space as a metaphoric rather than material presence is by no means exclusive to transpacific scholarship. As Hester Blum observes, the ease with which oceanic fluidity gets taken up as a metaphor for cultural or historical fluidity means that the sea is often rendered "immaterial" in any number of transnational ocean-centered paradigms, such as Fernand Braudel's "Mediterranean World" and Paul Gilroy's "Black Atlantic."¹² Yet while this "oceanic turn," as Elizabeth DeLoughrey has termed it, has opened up important discussions of historical and cultural dynamics that move both through and beyond national and continental borders, its tendency to abstraction has often served to occlude the material

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. George (2006), 164, 383.
2. Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands" (1994), 152. From here on, I capitalize "Oceanic" when referring specifically to the regional formation "Oceania"—as used by Sāmoan writer Albert Wendt in "Towards a New Oceania" (1976), and later by Tongan author and academic Epli Hau'ofa in "Our Sea of Islands" (1994)—to indicate the deep historical and ongoing cultural connections between different Pacific communities and cultures. These communities are not limited to those who identify as Native or Indigenous peoples, but they imply a deep cultural and political commitment to Indigenous Pacific communities, epistemologies, and environments (Hau'ofa [1998], 401–402).
3. Hau'ofa (1998), 408.
4. See, e.g., Crocombe (1976); Diaz and Kauanui (2001); Hau'ofa (1994, 1998); Teaiwa (1995); Wendt (1976), to name just a few well-known examples.
5. Works by Wilson (2000), Wilson and Dirlik (1995), and Najita (2006) are early exceptions that address both Asian American and Indigenous Pacific work in an explicitly transnational frame.
6. See T. Chen (2020).
7. See Wendt (1976); Yoneyama (2017). I discuss these (as well as the formations of the "Asia-Pacific" and "Pacific Rim" mentioned earlier) in greater detail in the next section of this chapter.
8. Suzuki and Bahng (2020).
9. Medak-Saltzman (2015), 18.
10. Ong (1999, 4), Cruz (2012, 8), and Allen (2012, xiv–xv) have each observed that the prefix "trans-" when applied to the terms "transnational," "transpacific," and "trans-indigenous," respectively, can simultaneously imply movement *across*, passage *through*, and "states of transition and change."