

JPS



The Journal
of the
Polynesian Society

VOLUME 129 No.4 DECEMBER 2020

THE POLYNESIAN SOCIETY
THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
NEW ZEALAND

REVIEWS

BERMAN, Elise: *Talking Like Children: Language and the Production of Age in the Marshall Islands*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 224 pp., biblio., illus., index, maps, notes. £20.99 (softcover).

JULIE SPRAY

Washington University in St. Louis

Three decades ago, a “new” kind of child research posited novel ways of thinking about childhood: that children are agentive social actors; that children produce culture; that children are not innocent. As sociologist Allison Pugh points out, these now old tenets of childhood studies are unfortunately still “new” to sociology, and I would add, to a broader anthropology as well. Despite a proliferation of studies centring children, childhood often remains a “special” topic, othered by adult-centric assumptions of an adult “standard” human, while the vast theory generated from anthropological studies of children in societies is, like children themselves in western cultures, cloistered into “child” spaces and domains of study.

Elise Berman’s book *Talking Like Children: Language and the Production of Age in the Marshall Islands* is an excellent example of why the cloistering of childhood anthropology is to the detriment of the discipline. Berman rightly points out that while other variables of difference such as gender, ethnicity and class have been well examined in anthropological analyses, age as a key structure of societies has been generally neglected, leading to oddly “ageless” analyses of human culture. In six compendious chapters, Berman demonstrates how the anthropology of childhood contributes important new theory not only to childhood studies but to anthropology as a whole.

The discipline’s neglect, Berman suggests, is perhaps due to assumptions of age as biological fact rather than another socially produced axis of difference. Defined as “relative position in the life course”, Berman maintains that age, like gender or race, is an ideology, produced through family histories and relational interaction, both malleable and entrenched, and employed to explain, justify or enable particular social functionalities. For the Marshallese in the tiny town of Jajikon, children’s child status allows them to do things that would be shameful for adults: carry food in public, spread gossip, spy on others. As such, children are powerful mediators of economic and political life for adults, not in spite of but *because* of their childness.

In establishing that child–adult differences are socially produced, Berman moves beyond the (old) “new” premise that children have agency to consider how children’s agency is *different*. Children and adults both have agency, but *all* agency is aged. “Aged agency” therefore describes how age-defined social rules differently enable and constrain children and adults. Marshallese children in Jajikon hold three kinds of age-specific agency: “negative agency”, which accords them the ability to resist those in power; “encompassed agency”, which frees children from

accountability for their actions; and “non-moral agency”, which allows children to do things that are considered immoral for adults. The notion that agency is produced in aged varieties invites exciting new possibilities for advancing structure–agency theory in anthropology.

The adult-centric conflation of immaturity with incompleteness has limited much socialisation research to views of children as adults-in-waiting or unfinished adults. Berman’s intervention here asks not only how children learn to be adults, but importantly, how children learn to be *children*. What makes children different from elders within a society? Adult–child differences in the Marshall Islands are produced through language, emotion and ideologies of who children are (that they have no shame; that they cannot lie). These socialisation processes are not only the purview of adults, however; children themselves also produce differences between older and younger children: through sharing, demands, force, threats, criticisms and insults, they create their age relative to each other—which might be different from their chronological age.

This notion that “before children learn to be adults, they learn to be different from adults” (p. 146) upends conventional thinking about the processes of socialisation, even given more recent acknowledgements that children actively participate in socialising themselves and each other. Socialisation is not a progressive movement from novice to expert but a process of producing differences, of “constantly taking on and discarding age-specific modes of being and speaking” (p. 7). The implications of this are enormous; if culture is acquired multiple times throughout the life course, then, as Berman notes, the socialisation of age could represent a key mechanism of both cultural reproduction and change. Moreover, if children first learn to be children, then other kinds of novices must first learn to be novices, including those who are constructed as learners, trainees or junior members of adult institutions (hospitals, universities, churches, police).

The notion that children learn to be children will resonate with many of us who conduct research with children. In a particularly useful quote, Berman summarises what I have long noticed about children’s participation in research: “Children become immature partly because people expect them to be immature and treat them as such” (p. 56). Expect children to be competent social actors and they will demonstrate competent social actions. Treat children as though they have important things to say and they will tell you important things. The insinuation here is that children’s behaviour is not necessarily tied to their developmental abilities but to their social status as children. As well as the obvious implications for research approaches, this insight may be particularly useful to researchers who study children’s participation in health care, education, decision-making and family or community life.

Talking Like Children is an excellent text for students, using lively storytelling to explicate a variety of foundational anthropological topics, including kinship, social rules, emotions, age structures and exchange. Each chapter hooks the reader with a central mystery: Who will get Pinla’s baby? How will Elise get the soda? Will Rōka keep his lollipop? Was Ryan lying? These questions invite student discussion to piece together ethnographic evidence of multiple cultural phenomena and unpack the complexities, contradictions and contingencies of human social norms. Chapter

two, which challenges commonly held assumptions about age with cross-cultural evidence, will be of particular relevance and interest to college students, themselves encountering a socially constructed life stage.

The book provokes further questions about the role of schooling in producing immaturity and maturity and transitions from one to another. As Berman notes, schools are typically structured around chronological age, and starting and finishing school for the Marshallese also marks life transitions. Future directions could examine how teacher–student or senior–junior peer differences are produced through the institutional context and how these relate to the production of age in society more generally.

I have a (facetious) test for child research: if we were to replace “children” with “cows”, would that significantly change the nature of the research? Too many studies, especially in public health, treat children like livestock: as objects of adult actions, and as outcomes of adult interventions to be weighed, measured and returned to their paddocks. In *Talking Like Children* it would be impossible to replace children with cows. Children’s agentive actions drive both narratives and theory; they read and make social situations, and they actively produce their age status and that of others. Children, in this book, teach us what it means to be a human of any age, just as the anthropology of childhood does for anthropology.

CARREAU, Lucie, Alison Clark, Alana Jelinek, Erna Lilje and Nicholas Thomas (eds): *Pacific Presences: Oceanic Art and European Museums, Volumes 1 and 2*. Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2018. Vol. 1 254 pp., Vol. 2 512 pp., biblio., illus., index, notes. Vol. 1 £74.95, Vol. 2 £39.95 (softcovers; both volumes can also be read online for free at sidestone.com).

REBECCA PHILLIPPS
University of Auckland

These two volumes compile work associated with the project of the same name funded by the European Research Council over the period 2013–2018. The project examined Pacific collections in museums across Europe, particularly focusing on lesser-known collections in storage. This included developing relationships with communities from which the objects came, working with “scholars, curators, artists, elders and community members” (p. 9) from around the world. The project also focused on making connections between collections, reassembling assemblages in some cases. In the introduction, Thomas describes the four sets of issues the project sought to investigate. These relate to the content of the collections, the original collection context, the place of these collections in Europe, and their contemporary significance for Pacific communities.

The two volumes are distinct. The first provides a summary of the historical contexts of the assemblages and the second illustrates the nature and importance of connections between collections and communities in a variety of creative and innovative ways. At the beginning of Volume 2, Thomas uses a mapping metaphor

for the two volumes. Volume 1 provides a “historical atlas of Pacific presences across Europe” (p. 9) and ultimately a partial historical atlas of European presences in the Pacific. These chapters highlight the activities of individual nations, but also the interconnectedness of European activity and collecting in the Pacific. Because of the inherent limitations of Volume 1, Volume 2 provides space for expansion. Volume 2 traces some of the “many journeys which can be undertaken across the territories” (p. 9) as object collections included provide resources for new knowledge and artistic inspiration, as well as connections between communities and their ancestors.

In Volume 1, the tumultuous period of the seventeenth to nineteenth century is viewed through the lens of the colonial endeavour in the Pacific. Five chapters present the histories of collections now in Britain, France, the Netherlands, Russia and Germany. The chapters provide an interesting insight into the drivers of these endeavours, both individual expeditions and the wider political agendas of states. They highlight the importance of understanding the specific contexts of collections and collecting. Overall Volume 1 is an extremely useful synthesis and provides an excellent scholarly source. Although in some places handled well, at times there seems to be a slight reluctance to acknowledge the extent of the impact European presences had on the Pacific with regards to various engagements around material culture, the impact of collecting and outright destruction of material culture.

Volume 2 consists of 33 chapters and is introduced by Thomas, who gives a sense of the enormity of this project and its ultimate reach. Volume 2 is divided into four parts: Part 1 *Materialities*, Part 2 *Collection Histories and Exhibitions*, Part 3 *Legacies of Empire* and Part 4 *Contemporary Activations*. The volume of work represented here is impressive and the diversity in approaches is inspiring. Volume 2 demonstrates the many ways museums and other institutions can and do engage with contemporary communities. Several themes come through in Volume 2, including the concept of re-igniting connections between communities and collections, reassembling assemblages, the importance of collections beyond museums and academic spheres, the importance of building relationships, and different methods of engagement with the wider community.

Part 1 *Materialities* contains analyses of specific sets of objects. Through this common issues in research are revealed such as historical misinterpretation and lack of information regarding context. Despite the issues these examples demonstrate the power of research that spans across collections and across the Pacific. Nuku (Chapter 4) in particular highlights the transformative power of materials and the shared materiality and cosmologies throughout the Pacific that cut across time and space.

Some of these themes continue in Part 2 *Collection Histories and Exhibitions*, which compiles eight chapters on specific collections and their histories, including contemporary activities. The complexities of different encounter, collection and display contexts are considered. So too are the additional datasets that may shed light on the historical context of object collection, inherent challenges with collection-based research and issues with practices that restrict access to collections. Vivid accounts of the collectors themselves are also presented in this section.

Part 3 *Legacies of Empire* presents eight chapters describing collections associated with empires and their colonial contexts. The historic context of exchange forms

the focus of case studies from across the Pacific involving a variety of European political entities. This section illustrates the significance of exchange for Pacific communities in the past, but also those in the present. Understanding the history of objects, assemblages of objects and built heritage additionally reveals the complexity of colonial encounters, including the displacement of people throughout the region.

Part 4 *Contemporary Activations* consists of 10 chapters that demonstrate the significance of these collections in contemporary settings in a wide variety of ways. Many of these activations are carried out by or in collaboration with Pacific scholars and artists. In Chapter 24, Wilkinson and Adams note “the absence of the object was central” (p. 303). In many ways this sets the tone for the remainder of the section, where absence is acknowledged as much as presence. Kahanu also remarks on the importance of acknowledging absence in the introductory chapter.

In the final chapter (Chapter 33) before the Epilogue, Rosanna Raymond cuts to the heart of the matters uncovered by the project and this publication. She comments, “The museum is itself an artefact of colonization, and this legacy is deeply embedded in the core of most museum policies, practices and communities” (p. 403). Raymond suggests many collections have lost their agency. As with absence, this notion is pervasive in Part 4, although not always explicitly stated. As the examples in this volume illustrate, there are a variety of ways this can be addressed. Furthermore, changes in technology provide new opportunities for communities to access and engage with objects and collections.

The volumes bring together approaches from a variety of disciplines and modes of practice that demonstrate the value of broad interdisciplinarity. As is illustrated here, objects in European collections may serve as important points of connection for Pacific people living overseas and in the Pacific. Collaborative projects have the potential to “activate and enliven” (p. 423) relationships, and for institutions, challenge ideals and practice. Such projects create space for communities to grieve for what was lost, connect with their ancestors and think about possibilities for the future. The examples presented here should encourage scholars working in this space to think creatively about ways to engage with communities, particularly ways that are co-developed by the communities themselves.

In sum this project is an ambitious undertaking, and this publication gives a sense of the whole process of the project laid bare. The content in the volumes weaves together academic passages with creative works, interviews and ethnographic vignettes, creating a narrative that is moving and vivid. The layout is clear and the variability in approaches to chapters makes for interesting reading. The photography is excellent and brings content to life in many places, as does supplementary content such as links to videos. *Pacific Presences* is successful in highlighting the importance of connecting people and objects. It is a reminder for all scholars working on collections in the twenty-first century to think about addressing and acknowledging colonial pasts and think critically about the context (past, present and future) of objects and assemblages. The legacy of these collections and their collecting persists in both their presences and absences. New methods of analysis highlight their continuing significance and relevance.