

“THIS TERRITORY WAS NOT EMPTY”: PACIFIC POSSIBILITIES

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ABSTRACT. Narratives concerning Pacific Ocean territories are often historically derived from European and American mainland visions of great, empty oceans dotted with deserted and uninhabited islands. However, research by indigenous and outlander scholars, along with struggles for political and cultural autonomy in the Pacific, has brought attention to vital island communities and has raised questions about a Pacific-island way of understanding the world. This understanding is traced through scholarly and artistic engagements with history, island-community studies, and navigational philosophies and is framed by a growing theoretical literature on epistemologies of place from the disciplines of geography and oceanography. *Keywords:* boundaries, colonialism, community, emptiness, islands, memory, navigation, Pacific Ocean, performance, possession, seascape.

On the Pacific island of New Caledonia, Kanak Chief Jean-Philippe Tjibaou relates tales of generations of Tongans, Fijians, Samoans, and Kanak in struggle against each other. Upon arriving in another territory, warriors would lay down a challenge—“We’ll take this island”—and battle would ensue. His point was not to suggest a stereotypical picture of warring island peoples but to indicate how he thought Europeans were different: we’ll take this island, they said—because there’s no one here (Tjibaou 2002). For Tjibaou, islands could not be separated from islanders; it was islanders who shared and minded the ways that, as Edward Casey puts it, “places are lived through by human beings: discovered, explored, acted on” (2002, 265). This “living through” the intersection of place and event, the inseparability of geography and history, meant that no places could be deserted. Islander warriors were not averse to violent means to gain political authority, but they gave recognition to and challenged their foes. It was the outlanders who were so strange and dangerous in their vision of places and by the way they proclaimed islands empty—thus void of history—the fiction of *terra nullius*.

The importance of place for discussing islands is suggested by Yi-Fu Tuan’s comment: “Place . . . has more substance than the word location suggests: it is a unique entity, a ‘special circumstance.’ . . . Place incarnates the experiences and aspirations of a people. Place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it is also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning” (1974, 213; see also his introduction in Olwig 2002, xi–xx). In applying such analyses, any notions of Pacific islands as distant, isolated, uninhabited, and abstract spaces must be reexamined to see how recognition of peoples and their histories requires places. As Tuan suggests, places are unique configurations of human experience tied to geographical locales that exist only in relation to the activities and meanings created within them. No places can exist

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