

**LEARNING ... TO LOVE IT!  
SOME THOUGHTS ON TEACHING HISTORY\***

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I am honoured to have been invited to deliver this address to you. Let me say first of all, that I admire all of you. I have never taught in a secondary school, and I imagine that it takes an enormous amount of courage to try to teach History to teenagers.

Teenagers are an odd breed, aren't they? How do you get young people to appreciate History? Why would they care about the past? They are so enchanted by the present! And they are arrogant about the future. So why do they take History?

I ask this question on the assignments I set for HPP01 and HPP02, the University of the South Pacific's Preliminary Extension courses on Chinese History and Japanese Politics respectively, for Form 6 level students. Some students write, "This is my favourite subject". But I suspect that they're just trying to *tabetabe*<sup>1</sup>. Some students write, "I really admire Japan's development and want to learn how the Japanese did it, so that my country may develop well too", and I think, *isa*<sup>2</sup>, such dreamers! But most students write, "I am required to take six subjects and this is my sixth." And I think that History is in trouble if that's the main reason students are taking it.

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<sup>1</sup> *tabetabe* - doing something simply to please

<sup>2</sup> *isa* - an expression; like 'my goodness!'

**\*Opening Address to a History Teachers' Workshop in October 1996**

As teachers of History, we must all ask ourselves, "Do we really care about the past? Why? Why do we teach History? Why do we think it is important?" If we are able to begin answering these questions for ourselves, we will find that we have more and more students who can sincerely state that, "I am required to take six subjects, and *History is my first choice*. This *is* my favourite subject."

What I would like to share with you this morning are some thoughts on teaching History in general and Pacific History in particular. I would like to share with you some techniques that I have found useful, and refer you to some exciting new directions in Pacific History. The underlying academic ideas in my talk are Historiography and Pedagogy. The first being an examination of the ways in which History is represented and the second being an understanding of the ways in which information is shared. At this point, I would like to ask you all to kick off your shoes. You will understand why later.

### **Passion for History**

As has been mentioned, I am in the simultaneously delightful and painful position of being both a student and a teacher of History. I am a student in the sense that I am completing my doctoral thesis for a programme called History of Consciousness at the University of California in Santa Cruz. At the same time, I am officially a lecturer in the History and Politics Department at the University of the South Pacific. This semester I am teaching a 200-level course called *Women and Society*, and next I will be teaching a 100-level course called *The Politics of Pacific History*. Let me say right at the beginning, however, that my pedagogical practice (approach to teaching) is not a top-down one, with the teacher dictating to the students. I call my approach cooperative learning. I have found, especially with Pacific History, that when you allow students to share what they already know, or help students to discover that they know more than they know they know, they learn more, and love it!

For me, as both a student and a teacher, Pacific History means passion, wonder and discovery. Pacific History is my great love! Indeed, for many historians, men and women who have devoted their lives to

studying the past, History is the great love of their lives, their all-consuming passion. Have you ever met anyone who loved History passionately? Are you someone who loves History passionately? There is no doubt that passion and conviction are infectious.

When people find out what I do for a living, they often respond by saying, "Oh ... History ... I never really liked History in school," or "Oh, that's all about the past, eh?" or "You must have a really good memory for all those names and dates!"

Let me tell you, History in school did not excite me too much either. But History is *not all* about the past. And I do not have a good memory, but what I do have is the curiosity to learn and a desire to remember.

### **Exercise 1: Picturing History**

- Ask workshop participants to draw a picture representing History in their mind (2 minutes)
- Ask a few participants to hold up their pictures and explain them (5 minutes)
- Are there any common themes in the participants' pictures? What are these?

### **What is History?**

As an academic discipline, History emerged at around the same time as the rise of the nation-state in Europe. History was thus often used to inculcate national pride, and it was this kind of History which promoted the idea that grand events, like wars and battles and the signing of treaties, and great men, like kings and statesmen and warriors, are the proper subjects of History. Since the nation-state gave order to what was previously the anarchy of warring tribes and principalities, History became an ordered, rational story Europeans were able to tell about themselves.

What are some of the different ways that Europeans have looked at their own past and pictured their own histories?

<b>Picture</b>	<b>What's Important?</b>	<b>Who's Important?</b>	<b>Where?</b>
Cyclical	Reproduction	the gods/great men	popular culture
Linear-Christian	Revelation	God's/great men	popular culture
-Scientific	Event	Great Men	dominant culture
Marxist Dialectic	Structure	The Workers	marginal/ elite
Postmodern/ Postcolonial	Kinesis	The Multitude	marginal/ elite

The value in understanding Historiography is that it enables you to ask yourself, "What do I believe?" "Do I believe that History repeats itself?" Or "Do I believe that History moves in a straight line, from an origin to a destination? Who do I believe makes History? Is it only God? Or only great men? Can ordinary people - women, men and children make History?"

Asking the right questions is as vital to a historian's project as finding the right answers.

Having pictured History for ourselves, we still have to ask, "What is History?"

Is it simply a chronology of events? Is it only contained in books, libraries and archives? That is what we are taught and what we often teach. But where do we get such ideas from?

As I said earlier, the discipline of History originated in Europe. As I also mentioned, History was used to develop national pride, and this led to European nations' imperialist and colonial conquest of the rest of the world. You've heard the saying, "The History of the world is the History

of the victors." Those who win, those who conquer, are those who write History. Their version of the past becomes the Truth, the Way it Was, the Way it Is. The History of the world, then, becomes European History. European approaches to History contain a bias towards written material and evidence. History begins and ends with the written word.

For a long time historians were plagued by a sense of insecurity when comparing their profession to the more "scientific" disciplines. While the scientists could talk about directly-observed facts, historians by definition were unable to observe for themselves the subjects of most of their studies. Historians could only make educated guesses about the past, based on surviving evidence.

A westernised way of thinking pictures the past, the present, and the future on completely different planes. Many non-western cultures, however, do not conceive of time in this way; many cultures, in fact, see the past and the present as having a particularly close relationship. The past is never quite past, and always makes itself felt in the present; the dead are never really dead, and always make their presence felt among the living.

The western linear construction of time which is always leaving the past behind, always moving into the future, almost colonising the future, can wreak great psychic and environmental damage. In the Pacific, on the contrary, for many Polynesians, like the Hawaiians, the Maori, and the Tahitians, the past is never left behind. Rather, the past is envisioned before us, while the future follows behind us. For the Polynesians, such historical thinking teaches responsibility. We then think of ourselves as following in the footsteps of those who have gone before us, of walking into the past, walking in the known, taking care to leave the world as well as we found it. This, certainly, is not backward thinking.

### **Decolonising History**

Although many of us here this morning are products of a colonial or colonially-influenced education, some of us have not forgotten our own indigenous ways of seeing the past, and the opportunity is still open to

the rest of us to decolonise our histories.

One way of decolonising History is to look beyond books. I am not advocating that we stop reading altogether! But I do believe that a richer, more fulfilling appreciation of Pacific History emerges from other texts. By "text", I mean "something that you can read", a system of signs which hold meaning.

In an extract reprinted in the HPF02 Foundation Pacific History Extension Course Book, a former teacher of mine, David Hanlon, recounts the story of Pohnpeians' first encounter with western History. A beachcomber had with him a History book from his homeland, which he often showed with pride to the islanders. The Islanders were very impressed that the little lines on the flimsy pages could contain the History of a whole nation. One day, heavy rain came through the ceiling of the beachcomber's hut, and soaked his History book, causing the ink to smudge and dissolve into illegibility. Quite distressed, the beachcomber took his book to show the islanders, who consoled him, but were relieved that their own way of recording History was much more durable. For Pohnpeian History was tattooed on their skin, and would never wash away with the rain.

Tattooing, tapa designs, rock drawings, and even place names, these were Pacific Islanders' ways of writing History. Colonialism has made us illiterate in our own History. But we can learn to read again.

### **Exercise 2: Learning to Read History in Other Texts**

- Show Hawaiian tapa.
- Ask participants if they can see any "pictures" or stories in the design. (2 minutes)
- Describe the oral History of the tapa design (*Holo mai Pele*). (7 minutes)
- Stress the integration of "written word" (the tapa design), the voice (*'oli*/chant), and the body (*hula*/dance).

I was surprised once, when a student of mine dismissed the oral Histories we were reading about in HPF02 as mere "fairytales". "How are these relevant to my life now?!" he asked. I was shocked at his reaction, for I had presumed, perhaps foolishly, that he would value these indigenous traditions. After giving his comments some thought, I realised that I needed to help him (and myself) discover how oral traditions and ancient histories might be relevant and enabling to our lives today.

The Samoan writer, Albert Wendt, once said that literature was the truest form of History. His comment addressed the belated acknowledgment by historians that they do have their own "pictures" of History and that they have neglected "reading other texts". Wendt also believes that the artist, in using his or her imagination and creativity, is often imbued by a better historical sense than the historian who is dependent on archival evidence. In effect, Wendt is challenging Pacific peoples with this question. "Do you want to be History, or do you want to make History?"<sup>1</sup>

## **Creative History**

### **Exercise 3: (Arm) Chair History/Creative History**

- Ask participants to write a History of the chair they are sitting on. (5 minutes)
- Select a few participants to share their (arm) chair histories. (10 minutes)
- How is the History of the chair relevant to your life in the present?

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Dening, Emeritus Professor at Melbourne University, has advocated a similar approach: "History in the Pacific needs to be vernacular and vernacularly tolerant of great variety because it is in the variety of vernacular histories-legends, ballads, anecdotes, plays, dances - its reading - and its production. History is surely not something to be learned so much as made." (Dening 1989: 137)

- How might it be connected to the "ancient" past of oral histories?
- Identify key stages in the different histories of the chairs; natural/oral/environmental/industrial/labour/class/gender(?) histories.

I would like to share with you some examples of what I consider to be the most inspiring creative histories I have ever come across. The first is by Sudesh Mishra, who is a writer and literary critic, and teaches in the Literature and Language Department at the University of the South Pacific.

*In the beginning was the word and the word was lila and the lila was Ram's. Evening. Dye from prayer flags mounted on bamboo poles runs into the western sky. They have fluttered here for over a century now and it is impossible to imagine the landscape without them: the mast of bamboo, the spinnaker of flag, the hulk of shack and the rudder of plough steered by a boy through scalloped earth. My jahajibhai. My shipmate. Though on terra firma, he still sways to the raga of the sea, preparing the land for the advancing season. Draw near him and you see that his skin is salt, his hair kelp, his fingers coral and those are the eyes of a drowned man. The sea. Sagar. Kala pani. Five generations of howling at it has left an indelible mark on him. Now it is a habit, this howling. The sea: sponsor, foe, lover, tormentor. You left him in transit between Calcutta and Nadi, between state and state you left him stateless. Why? The scrolling waves publish dumb sheets in reply. As always. No clues, no riddles. The boy tilts the rudder; he is guided by the earthworm, the koraning cicadas, the sun now the pallor of kavika, the star-apples ripening against an olive sky. His sparring with the sea is familiar to both of them, but sometimes he forgets if he is pushing a prow through clods or a plough through surf. For the earth is like the sea here, always moving beneath him. It is leased. They call it the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act. He calls it a disturbance in his soul. (Mishra 1994: 649)*

*Once in high school, I chose to study Fijian instead of Hindi. I'm in a group of seven non-Fijians who make that choice, but the teacher isn't interested in us and we, in turn, are interested in smuggling issues of 'The Phantom', that white ghost who walks in Bengal among servile pygmies and sobbing willows and has a private beach of carated gold. What delirious visions of capital enthralled us then, kept us from mining the golden rasa of language? Teacher and pupil - there was an abdication of responsibility on both sides. But the streets didn't let us down. Now and then straggler word-bees would fly up our nostrils and make honey in our heads. Ko iko cakacaka tiko na Adi Bee. The honey trickles down our tongues, never enough but always sweet. Vinaka vakalevu, Degei. (Mishra 1994: 654)*

As someone who grew up in Fiji, I have taken a lot for granted. So many things have passed by me; I have passed so many things by. I had looked at Indo-Fijian history before, I had read works by other Indo-Fijian historians, but Mishra's Creative History made me see things in a way that I hadn't been able to before. The poetry and beauty of his words rise to Albert Wendt's challenge.

The other readings that I will leave with you are by actual "Historians", but they too are creative histories. Vince Diaz's *Simply Chamorro: Tales of Demise and Survival in Guam* takes a historical text, the writings of an American commenting on Chamorro culture in the context of World War II and its aftermath, and relates it to both the "ancient" history of Guam's early colonisation by missionaries in the 17th century and the contemporary history of Chamorro struggles for political and cultural sovereignty. One example of his creative linking of past to present is his interpretation that the present-day low-rider trucks which are popular with young Chamorros are reincarnations of the water buffalo/carabou which were so integral to the lives of early Chamorros.

The second reading is Jonathan Kamakawiwo'ole Osorio's *Songs of Our Natural Selves: The Enduring Voice of Nature in Hawaiian Music*. In this article, Osorio selects a few popular Hawaiian songs, and narrates the History of land and cultural struggles out of which the songs emerged. In a very special way, he gives depth and meaning to what might

otherwise be simply considered "pretty songs", and gives beauty and spirit to what might otherwise simply be considered a "partial" History. I hope you enjoy these histories by Mishra, Diaz and Osorio and I hope that they will inspire you in your teaching and learning as they have inspired me in mine. More than anything, I hope that these readings will help your students see that between the extremes of ancient "fairytales" and the dry chronological approach of textbooks, there are exciting possibilities for History.

### **Empathy in Studying/Teaching History**

#### **Exercise 4: Putting Yourself in Someone Else's Shoes**

- Ask participants to exchange shoes with one another, and walk around in each other's shoes. (4 minutes)
- Ask a few participants to describe what it feels like to walk around in someone else's shoes. (4 minutes)
- Are there any similarities in their descriptions? What are the common themes?
- Ask the participants to note patterns in who exchanged shoes with whom? Was it only neighbours who exchanged shoes? Did people only exchange shoes with others of the same gender? Did any participants exchange shoes with workshop leaders? etc.
- Ask the participants what they think the consequences of wearing someone else's shoes are - for a little while? for longer?
- Emphasise the importance of **EMPATHY** in studying History.
- Describe the influence of anthropology on Pacific History.

The best example I have come across of a History by a historian who has tried to put himself in other people's shoes is Howard Zinn's *A People's*

*History of the United States* (1980). In this book, Zinn looks at the "discovery" of America by Columbus, not from Columbus's perspective, but from the perspective of American Indians; he looks at the institution of slavery not from the perspective of the slaveowners, but from the perspective of African-American slaves; he looks at industrialisation not from the perspective of the factory owners, but from the perspective of the female textile workers. The result is a critical, humbling and necessary revision of conventional American History.

As I have said, History has often been used to inculcate pride - national pride, cultural pride, gender pride, religious pride, racial pride. But History's best lessons come from teaching the dignified humility of respecting other human beings, other creatures, nature, all the elements, and God, however you conceive of God.

History is the struggle of memory against forgetting - good things and bad things. Having a sense of History means recognising your own place and role in the world. History is not all about the past; it is very much about the present, and the future. And History is very much a process of learning .... to love it. Thank you.

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