The Archaeology of the Post-Colonial Pacific Rim

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In his 1912 edition of *The New Pacific*, Hubert Howe Bancroft made a prophecy:

> So far as we are able at present to judge, the year 1898 will ever remain memorable in the history, not alone of the United States, but of the world. In that year, a new power was added to the nations of the earth; a new America was discovered, a new Pacific explored.... Almost since yesterday, from the modest attitude of quiet industry the United States assumes the position of a world power, and enters, armed and alert, the arena of international rivalry as a colonizing force, with a willingness to accept the labor and responsibilities thence arising. Thus the old America passes away; behold a new America appears, and her face is toward the Pacific! (Bancroft 1912(1898):14–15).

Indeed, the distinguished western historian of his generation seemed oddly surprised, albeit in a proud and proprietary way, at the speed with which the Pacific had apparently emerged as the preeminent realm of political and economic destiny following the Spanish-American War. Nearly one hundred years later, Bancroft's startled tone finds an echo, not only in the popularized forums of *Time* and *Newsweek*, but in the writings of modern economic historians, scrambling to interpret a bewildering tableau of mounting trade deficits, Pan-Pacific migration, and dragons in assorted sizes (cf. Jones, Frost, and White 1993: 5–7).

In particular, there is a popular image of the region's history that begins with a dramatic curtain rising at the moment of European contact and conquest. Most of the Pacific then quietly disappears behind a hazy timelessness, vaguely reminiscent of Garcia Marquez novels or Gauguin paintings, only to reappear with equal drama from the black smoke of Pearl Harbor.

And yet the period beginning with the closing decades of the eighteenth century and ending in the opening decades of the twentieth encompassed: the independence of all the former Spanish colonies of Central and South America, the entire European colonization and nationalization of Australia and New Zealand, the commercial and political expansion of Pacific Canada, the emergence of industrial Japan, the collapse of imperial China, the Russian colonization of Siberia and Alaska, and of course, the first overseas armed conflict of the United States. The complex processes that shaped this post-colonial Pacific rim are obscured by the presentism and narrow bilateralism of current popular American views of the region, focused as they are on the immediate past of US/Asian military and economic competition.

It has become something of a truism to state that this is the kind of historical blind spot that historical archaeology is ideally suited to address. Certainly, people like James Deetz, Kathleen Deagan, Merrick Posnanski, and others have demonstrated that an archaeology of

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colonialism, focused on Europe's sixteenth through eighteenth-century expansion around the Atlantic, is a powerful comparative and integrative framework. Furthermore, historical archaeologists in a number of Pacific basin countries have already begun to create such a framework for that *new* sea and more recent time. This paper calls attention to the potential for such research, and provides an initial, thematic sketch of some of the possible topics around which those of us involved in such work might collaborate.

The archaeological and documentary record of the Pacific rim during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries indisputably provides a phenomenal opportunity to examine the creation of the modern world from a perspective often slighted or ignored in the Europe-centered traditions of American history. But the opportunity here extends well beyond the laudable goals of shedding light into historical lacunae, or giving substance to voices otherwise either unheard or misheard in the past. First, such work would provide us with the chance to expand considerably the comparative realm in which we practice our craft. The crucial analytical breakthrough for the Atlantic-focused work referenced above was the recognition that what had been addressed as *colonialism* had to rendered in much more specific and problematized forms as English, Spanish, and Dutch colonialism on various American, African or Indonesian shores. It is possible, and indeed necessary, to do the same with terms used to describe the dominant processes of later centuries, like *mercantilism*, *industrialization*, or *capitalism*. Expanding the scale of comparison to include a Pacific interaction sphere would move us much closer to a legitimate claim to a global approach in our field.

Secondly, the challenges of inventing a comparative framework capable of encompassing the magnitude of the subject could also support some extremely creative reworkings of how we define and interpret the data of our field. The complexity of the social groupings in contact around the Pacific rim, and of the material culture that both marked and made their interaction, demands a sophistication in terms of scales of analysis and data integration that should satisfy even the most methodologically ambitious amongst us. In particular, the nature of both written and wrought records of pan-Pacific interaction over the last 200 to 300 years make this a powerful context in which to test and elaborate on current redefinitions of what is meant by *text* and *artifact* in historical archaeology.

Finally, and even more relevant to the growing interdisciplinary visibility of historical archaeology, the efforts to conceptualize the paradoxical diversity and unity of the colonial and post-colonial Pacific has inspired some of the most creative integrations of history and anthropology in recent years. The challenge has attracted some of the most innovative thinkers around, in a range of related fields. Historical archaeologists working in this context find themselves immediately in a dialogue with the most westward-looking post-Turnerians of the American "New Western History" (cf. Limerick et al 1991), the historical anthropology crafted for Polynesia and Australasia by the likes of Marshall Sahlins (1981, 1985) and Greg Dening (1988), and the comparative cultural geography of D. W. Meinig (1962, 1968) and his successors. This is an exchange to which we have much to contribute, and from which we can learn a great deal.

Trying to provide a comprehensive overview of this exchange, and the already significant role of historical archaeology in it, is beyond the scope of this presentation. But an initial list of related themes that might be highlighted would be comparative studies that address:

1. the broad range of responses to the Enlightenment played out in the shift from colonies to nation-states;

2. the broader economic and social transition from mercantile to industrial capitalism;

3. the quantum shifts in technological scale and material culture complexity spawned by the Industrial Revolution

4. the cultural dynamism of cosmopolitan, multicultural, polyglot, and highly mobile societies on the Pacific Rim.

Looking first at the emergence of nation-states from former colonies, and the concurrent shift from mercantile to industrial capitalism, the research potential goes far beyond supplementing documentary sources, and finding out whatever did happen in nineteenth-century Latin America, Russian Siberia, or imperial China. We need to examine the extent to which, as American archaeologists, we have defined processes called *mercantilism*, or *industrialism*, which were in fact much more narrowly British-American mercantilism and industrialism. Furthermore, it is clear that even British industrialism exhibited significant differences between its Atlantic and Pacific spheres. We need to explore the analogs (and homologues) for the transition from Georgians to Victorians in czarist Siberia, inter-revolutionary Mexico, early colonial Australia, western provincial Canada, or industrializing Japan.

Was there, for instance, a corollary *Bourbonization* among Spanish colonies, like and yet unlike the *Georgianizing* bourgeois of the American east? What happened when one's colonies were not on a separate land mass, as with Siberian Russia—or, as some would have it, the American west? What were the impacts of each process of national transition on other neighbors around the rim, that created such a complex and inherently unstable net of *manifest destinies*?

On another tack, given the profound cultural, economic, and ideological significance attributed to the creation of an American popular culture during this time, it would be enlightening to create some broader context for it: to find out when, where, and how folk/peasant cultures became popular/mass ones, in different places undergoing similar phenomena. Add to this picture the inseparable links between nineteenth-century nation building and the constructed identities and ideologies of distant Pacific regions, like those created in and for the western frontier of the United States, the Australian outback, or Russian Siberia, and the power that such images had in the definition of each of these nations.

This last point becomes even more cogent given the shared geographical stamp of much colonial and postcolonial expansion around the Pacific: the parallel expansions into marginal ecological zones, such as the American and Canadian wests; the rain forests, deserts and Andean highlands of central and South America; the arid zones of central and eastern

Australia, and the forbidding steppes of Siberia. This phenomenon had at least two major areas of impact. First, there was the effect of this environmental remoteness and marginality, and the vast scale of human mobility needed to settle such places, on the formation of national territories, and in particular on the development of technologies of transportation and communication. Secondly, there is the economic component of marginal ecozone expansion and the extractive frontiers, such as mining, lumbering, commercial agriculture and livestock industries, that often characterized this form of territorial settlement, and that drove so much of the Pacific's social and cultural dynamics, as well as its broader economy.

Regarding the transformation of the material world through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, historical archaeologists have the advantage of being able to use analytical and interpretive techniques already developed for the study of mass production and consumption patterns. One set of questions revolves around the potential for these methods to address very broadly comparative contexts, particularly with reference to systems of value and status, and their cultural as well as economic transformation. Who, and what, marked the elites of Maximillian's Mexico, Lillilukalani's Hawaii, or Vancouver's British Columbia, for instance? One intriguing opportunity is the comparative study of the subsidiary and often illicit economies that formed to challenge national and international dominance of corporate entities: what is the archaeology of Pacific-centered smuggling, piracy, illegal migration, and black markets (cf. Deagan 1991)?

Which brings us to the final major focus of such research: who are we digging up, in these widely varied yet oddly similar contexts? An archaeology of the post-colonial Pacific should address what happened, (and continues to happen) after contact: what was the nature of these multicultural, polyglot, cosmopolitan, and often contentious societies? Issues of cultural continuity, of the tension between national definitions of identity and minority resistance, force an examination of diversity not only between emerging nation-states, but within them. Here, more than ever, the distinction between prehistory and history recedes in the context of overwhelming complexity. Analyses must address how it is that multicultural societies are composed, and the dynamic roles played by both constructed history and everyday material culture in that composition.

This diversity was amplified dramatically by the previously unparalleled physical mobility of populations around the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Pacific rim. Declining transportation costs, the inevitable overabundance of labor at any given time for at least one nation or region, and a near-constant presence of highly localized boom economies had turned the Pacific into a freeway by the 1850s. At the same time, it would be interesting to know to what extent, in the face of such apparent cultural diversity, pan-Pacific economic and social phenomena combined to produce what Kevin Dwyer (1992) has described elsewhere as an internationalized bourgeoisie: what parallels existed in the languages of dominance and resistance, and in the struggles over definitions of identity at all social scales between, say, the early coffee plantations of Pacific Guatemala and the vast ranches of late nineteenth-century California agribusiness?

Much of the resolution of such questions will come through addressing the consummate methodological issue of scale. These are problems similar to those encountered by archaeologists working in earlier colonial contexts around the Atlantic. The question

becomes, how to compare archaeological assemblages at local, national, and international levels? When, where, and in what ways do porcelain, pearlware, or cast iron, mean the same thing, or different things?

The first dimension to be explored archaeologically has been essentially spatial. Although the scope and diversity of data are overwhelming when viewed as a whole, it has been somewhat straightforward to trace the dramatic collapse of relative distances that accompanied rapid increases in human mobility, innovations in transportation technologies, and the escalating volume of trade and traffic throughout the region. In addition to the familiar analytical problems inherent in interpreting such mass-produced material culture, there is the real methodological question of what to do with the nineteenth century as first effective European settlement: with colonists who arrived on steamships, clippers, and railroads, and communicated by telegraph.

But there is also another picture, besides this simple yardstick of technological intrusion, and more subtle forms of social and economic innovation that cannot be dismissed as simple artifacts of increasingly available industrially produced goods. Tensions and strategies emerged in the multivalent and often conflicting connections that linked technology and capital, at scales ranging from the local community to the international arena of commercial and military competition. Again and again, people around the Pacific rim developed strategies for boomsurfing: unparalleled numbers of individuals from both the top and bottom of society skipped from country to country, and from gold rush to wheat boom, in a truly international pattern of migratory labor and capital.

Even more commonly, a vast range of smaller middle-level capitalists, skilled workers, and extended families developed practices for surviving in one place from one rush to the next. These strategies were as dependent on social ties and intensive labor as on any technological innovation, and they created entire communities whose precise location might float up and down a set of mining ridges, or drift around an agricultural district, but nonetheless would persist for generations. These strategies can often be read in the superficially haphazard assemblages of machinery, tools, structures, and other material culture whose logic lay in functional flexibility, localized maintenance, and portability, rather than in cutting-edge technological sophistication (e.g. Hayes and Purser 1990; Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1993).

The result is one in which multiple technological systems are interdigitated. Items normally seen as temporal markers of discrete periods can be in use at the same time in the same place, often by the same people. In these instances it becomes crucial to sort those cases that can be attributed to the vagaries of erratic supply lines, and those that represent alternative technological strategies for processing old mine tailings, opportunistically harvesting unclaimed timber, maintaining indigenous agricultural or foraging traditions, or any number of other expedient—and overwhelmingly undocumented—means of making a living in such places and times.

Issues of scale are not made any easier by the difficulty that can arise in trying to define the appropriate *assemblage* with which one is working. Because of both scale and time depth, relevant categories of material culture can be enormously inclusive: pots, bottles, plates and tin cans, but also industrial equipment, structures of all sizes and functions, settlement

patterns, transportation and communication networks—including roads, railroads, sea lanes. It is also the case that conventionalized distinctions and segregations between, for instance, *prehistoric* or indigenous, and *historical* or postcontact materials are often meaningless in sites postdating about 1750 or 1800. In short, the entire *material culture system* or *material life* of extremely complex societies can be appropriate data for such sites. Questions arise as to what methodological and interpretive strategies are appropriate to the analysis of each category, never mind the daunting task of integrating interpretations among them.

Whatever the category, the objects in question were produced in a context of consumerism, mass production, global markets, mass transportation, and rapidly fluctuating popular culture trends. These in turn produced a widely distributed, highly variable material culture, that again can range from bottles and tin cans to architectural styles or entire prefabricated structures. Furthermore, these objects can not only have multiple ports of origin in any number of European, American or other industrial centers, but may well be recovered from the same archaeological contexts that produce any range of indigenous articles. Archaeological methods that conventionalize identities of either nationality, culture or class are often strained to the breaking point in such contexts.

At this point it should be clear that neither the research interests nor the methodological concerns discussed thus far could be described as unique to the post-colonial Pacific rim. Indeed, the purpose here was not to identify what was unique to the region, but rather what defined such a disparate set of cultures, environments, and histories as a broader sphere of interaction, influence and exchange. For all its complexity, what emerges is not a coincidental assemblage of geographical accident, peripheral fringes of a single, distant European core. At the risk of shadowing Mr. Bancroft, to the extent that the nations now bordering the Pacific share a collective, and far from certain, future, it has been shaped by some form of collective past. Continuities from past to present include political and intercultural conflicts both between and within nations, continuing population growth and resource exploitation in increasingly marginal environments, and the enduring power of foreign capital and the people who bring it, and take it away.

To the extent that historical archaeology can, and has already begun, to address the historical and cultural context of these continuities, it has opened the door to an enormously rich area of research, and an equally profound arena for interdisciplinary collaboration, cross-cultural exchange, and contemporary critique. The Pacific rim is indeed a place where the discipline can test some of the emerging redefinitions of what we do and how we do it, in a context that is intellectually challenging and immediately relevant.

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