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The Cruise Ship

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The late nineteenth-century cruise ship was more than a mode of transport, ferrying white tourists to island shores; it was a destination in and of itself. In Michel Foucault's formulation, the ship might be conceived of as 'a floating piece of space, a place without a place that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea'.¹ This assumes a deep-ocean location. A ship docked at the wharf or lying at anchor in harbour was a space where rituals of entry and exit took on particular significance. Attending to the flows from shore to ship, rather than following European passengers as they disembarked and toured port towns or wandered along native tracks and through villages, opens up new angles of vision on the sites and spaces of colonial tourism. Indigenous Islanders boarded the ship, also as mobile subjects and consumers of different sights, sounds and new encounters. These reversals direct us to the highly contextual and negotiated nature of colonial touring and, in so doing, raise new questions about the touristic value and meaning attached to the novel, exotic and unfamiliar.

1 Michel Foucault, 1986, 'Of other spaces', *Diacritics* 16(1): 22–27.

Cruise tourism developed on a commercial scale in the Pacific and elsewhere from the early 1880s as shipping companies began offering tours dedicated to leisure travel independent of their regular trade routes. The Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand (USSCo.) played a key role, operating four island cruises before the turn of the century, pitched to wealthy settlers in the Australasian colonies. Two month-long tours in 1884 linked Sydney and Auckland with Fiji, Samoa and Tonga. Later, two six-week cruises offered more wide-ranging itineraries: in 1898 a tour extended into the eastern Pacific, touching at Rarotonga and French Polynesia and returning to Australia via Samoa and Tonga. In 1899 the cruise ship steamed west, linking Fiji, Tonga and Samoa with the New Hebrides and New Caledonia.² Cruising was marketed as a superior way to know the Pacific, even as the package tour locked passengers into a company-managed itinerary. Ordinary steamers with their more mundane concerns of cargo and mail only stayed in port long enough 'to enable the work to be done', as one 1898 brochure put it, while the cruise ship prioritised the interests of passengers not traders.³

As a space dedicated to leisure and consumption, the cruise ship appeared to skirt around contemporary colonial interventions in island life. On the passage between Auckland and Suva, it dawned upon one man as he ordered alcoholic beverages from the stewards that they were 'a party on pleasure bent, and not a missionary expedition carrying with us a cargo of tracts and flannel waistcoats for the little heathens'.⁴ Tourists were understood to require levels of comfort and sophistication superior to other empire travellers, with one shipping official enthusing that the 3,000-ton vessel 'has been fitted up, equipped, and provisioned exactly as if the tourists had purchased her and themselves fitted her out as a private yacht'.⁵ Neither steerage nor second-class tickets were issued; all passengers travelled first class, reinforcing the association of cruising with exclusivity and privilege. On the inaugural cruise in 1884, one tourist delighted in the fact that they were treated 'with the respect due to

2 This chapter draws on and extends some of the evidence and arguments discussed in Frances Steel, 2013, 'An ocean of leisure: Early cruise tours of the Pacific in an age of empire', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 14(2): 1–12.

3 USSCo., 1898, *Off To Tahiti! Trip to the South Seas Islands*, Dunedin: J. Wilkie & Co.

4 'The cruise of the Wairarapa', *Nelson Evening Mail*, 25 June 1884.

5 'A winter excursion', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 July 1898.

pioneers'.⁶ This pioneering quality spoke to the sense of occasion in opening up a new traffic. Regardless of the attendant comforts and structured itinerary, this chronicler also fancied they were embarking on an 'expedition', following directly in the wake of prior voyages of 'discovery'.⁷ But with its level of provisioning and especially the new technology of refrigeration, the cruise ship represented a turning point in the maritime history of the Pacific. It was now a question, one passenger quipped, 'whether Vanilla icecreams ... were ever before eaten in a similar expedition, certainly not off the islands of Samoa'.⁸

The excursion steamer was not automatically hailed or recognised as such in island ports. Rather, its entry was linked to longer associations with ships as bearers of potentially harmful influences: alcohol, disease, new ideas, or 'unsavoury' characters. Passengers were informed prior to disembarking in Suva that they were liable to fines if offering Fijians alcohol or for 'striking a native', indicative of a sense of unease about the relative hedonism of the cruise. It was perhaps feared they were to enter a world in which the normal restraints did not apply. In any case, the very first cruise was disrupted by an outbreak of measles amongst the crew after leaving Fiji, which prevented passengers landing at either Samoa or Tonga. Here it was as if they arrived on a 'veritable plague ship'.⁹ The tourists could not be assured of a welcome reception at destination ports as harmless, high-status pleasure seekers. In quarantine (their 'prison life') in Apia harbour, they performed their own *meke* (ceremonial dances) and kava ceremonies 'in clumsy Australian imitation of the Fijians'¹⁰ (Figure 24). Their expectations of encounters with primitive Islanders were reduced to a one-sided enactment, with the cruise ship serving as a self-contained stage whereupon passengers played with boundaries of selfhood.

6 'Among the coral islands', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 June 1884.

7 Ibid.

8 'The Wairarapa's cruise in the Pacific', *Te Aroha News*, 9 August 1884.

9 'Among the coral islands', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 July 1884.

10 'Among the coral islands', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 July 1884. Another passenger recorded that this 'solemn meke' developed into 'imitations of a menagerie, with crowing of cocks, the barking of dogs, the howling of lost spirits in pain'. See 'Oceania: Steam-yachting in the Pacific', *Otago Witness*, 19 July 1884.



Figure 24. 'English Méké', *Wairarapa*, June 1884.

Source. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Burton Brothers Studio, O.000762.

In ports where disembarkation went smoothly, the ship did not simply lie at anchor, at the periphery of the tourism encounter. As the European passengers came streaming on shore and 'spread themselves over the place to see all that was worth seeing', so too did 'a moving mass of gaping natives' board the steamship, as a female passenger

from Adelaide, M. Methuen, reported in Fiji, and ‘even penetrated into the cabins, where they felt and examined the dresses and boxes of the absent occupants with greedy wonder’.¹¹ The scene on the decks ‘was one long to be remembered’, reflected Dunedin photographer Alfred Burton, with Islanders ‘impelled by curiosity and wonder; some on trading thoughts intent, and others perhaps full of tenderer feelings’.¹² In both Fiji and Samoa, with an estimated 200 visitors at the latter, ‘though the ship was crowded with them, and they poked into every hole and corner, yet nothing was missed by any passengers of the many attractions which lie about’.¹³ On arrival at Pago Pago, however, ‘the natives were disappointing after our previous experience. Many of them were as bad beggars as one would expect to find in a large city, and they were not all averse to playfully picking pockets of handkerchiefs and small articles.’¹⁴

‘Invading’ the ship was one of the immediate means available to Islanders to undermine or avoid the voyeuristic tourist gaze. The over-determined speculations about indigenous motivations and actions—as greedy, grasping or desiring—reflected a self-conscious awareness on the part of the European passengers that they were themselves objects of scrutiny and curiosity, and that the ship was not a space reserved solely for their ‘play’. Here the passengers became spectacles: ‘All of us will bear in our minds the many handsome faces framed in as many portholes, as they gazed on the *beauties* and the *beasts* feeding [emphasis in original]’.¹⁵ This mild amusement at the indigenous response to their presence was not shared by everyone and it may have been a retrospective construct. An insistent Islander gaze was certainly discomfiting for some. As one Australian passenger remarked with reference to their reception on shore, they were scrutinised by the Fijians ‘till we felt quite embarrassed’.¹⁶

11 *Fiji Times*, 5 July 1884; M.M. ‘A trip to Fiji in the Wairarapa’, *South Australian Register*, 28 July 1884.

12 Alfred Burton, 1884, *The Camera in the Coral Islands*, Dunedin: Burton Brothers, p. 15.

13 C.G. de Betham, 1884, *The Wairarapa Wilderness: In which will be found the wanderings of the passengers on the second cruise of the S.S. Wairarapa from Auckland to the South Sea Islands and back during the month of July 1884*, Wellington, p. 17; ‘The Wairarapa’s cruise in the Pacific’, *Te Aroha News*, 9 August 1884.

14 de Betham, *The Wairarapa Wilderness*, p. 17.

15 *Ibid.*

16 ‘Among the coral islands’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 July 1884.

Such attention and curiosity might also confirm in the minds of tourists the seeming ‘innocence’ and ‘naivety’ of the Islanders. The steamship carried extra lights to hoist into the rigging, with which, the captain had enthused in Sydney, ‘we hope to be able to “astonish the natives”’.¹⁷ Moments of ‘techno-drama’ where Europeans sought to elicit or evoke wonder from indigenous communities were a kind of ‘set piece’ in narratives of cross-cultural encounter.¹⁸ The captain’s remarks implied that a scripted demonstration was almost expected of them, the cruise intended as a spectacle of modern industrial efficacy. Once on board ship, some Islander visitors were ‘sorely puzzled’ by the electric lamps, ‘the problem being to discover the pipe which supplies the kerosene’.¹⁹ This apparent befuddlement denied that the indigenous observers inhabited a rational realm, inspecting these ‘mysterious’ objects on the basis of their existing knowledge. One young boy caught his reflection in a mirror hanging in the saloon. Captivated, he returned again and again ‘when he fancied no one was watching’.²⁰ Later in the century, the gramophone on board the *Waikare* was an object of intrigue: ‘the old men and women gazed open-mouthed at the talking devil, whilst the younger and more enlightened laughed as if they understood it all’.²¹ This unwillingness to acknowledge Islanders as ‘knowing subjects’, to insist on their failure to recognise correctly how such objects worked, was to claim the power and authority of magic.²²

The refrigerating equipment was a highlight, with passengers recording Fijians’ confusion at the ice. A man ‘dropped it in fright, as if it had been a hot coal’. A ‘practical joke’, another passenger related, ‘is to clap a handful of snow on a Fijian’s bare back and see him jump’.²³ This kind of mocking play with unsuspecting Islanders was also an assertion of power over the terms of encounter. As these exchanges occurred in a space controlled by Europeans, this seemed to encourage a certain physical licence. When some Samoan women sat on deck, they were quickly surrounded by ‘an admiring group of

17 ‘Steam-yachting in the Pacific’, *Otago Daily Times*, 15 July 1884.

18 Chris Ballard, 2010, ‘Watching first contact’, *Journal of Pacific History* 45(1): 21–36, p. 34.

19 ‘Steam yachting in the Pacific’, *Otago Daily Times*, 15 July 1884.

20 M.M. ‘A trip to Fiji in the Warirarapa’, *South Australian Register*, 28 July 1884.

21 ‘With the Waikare’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 August 1899.

22 Gyan Prakash, 1999, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 48.

23 ‘Among the coral islands’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 July 1884; ‘Oceania: Steam-yachting in the Pacific’, *Otago Witness*, 19 July 1884.

young men and officers, all desirous of obtaining at least one glance from the beautiful wild dark eyes that gleamed'.²⁴ One crew member 'made himself specially conspicuous' by distributing cigarettes to the women and lighting them. 'The ladies smoked and flirted and laughed with the utmost grace and complacency', Methuen reported. But friendliness turned to familiarity: 'the young man produced and applied ice to their fair lips, they resented it so thoroughly that two of them pushed all the ice they could lay their hands on down the nape of his neck'.²⁵ Though still on board ship, the women took charge and asserted control, marking out their own boundaries of interpersonal contact.

White women were also placed in potentially inappropriate situations, notably with indigenous women. One 'beautiful girl' called 'Ruth' followed Methuen about deck. She 'stroked me all over, felt with her slender brown fingers if I was solid good material, and then said "Savonake"' [(sic); translated by her as 'very good']. Methuen 'answered her by feeling her loose blue robe, rubbing her hands, stroking her head, and by saying "Savonake"'.²⁶ This episode suggests a mutual fascination with the physical proximities afforded by the confines of the ship, a fleeting intimacy that collapsed the distance expressed through 'the tourist gaze'. It also worked to disrupt the dominant agential position of the voyeuristic white male, placing white and indigenous women in more active roles in these spaces of encounter. Same-sex intimacies, though not necessarily erotic or sexual, were also part of the cross-cultural mix, particularly as these cruises carried a significant proportion of women. Yet other passengers narrated the tour as privileging heterosexual male desire. The photographer Alfred Burton drew an on-/off-ship distinction to suggest more covert liaisons, such as the 'select circle' of male passengers who left the ship after dinner one evening, for they were 'in on a secret' that a 'proper' Samoan *meke* would be performed by women at a private house in Apia.²⁷

These episodes show that even a single encounter could encapsulate rapid shifts in contextual relations of power. Such unstable boundaries were unsettling enough, it seems, to have prompted tighter regulations

24 M.M., 'A trip to Fiji in the Wairarapa', *South Australian Register*, 28 July 1884.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Burton, *The Camera in the Coral Islands*, p. 13.

over the flows from shore to ship. Even on the first cruise it was 'thought advisable' after leaving Suva en route to Levuka, 'not to berth alongside in these ports, because the anchorage is pleasanter and the ship not over-run by people from the shore'.²⁸ In finalising preparations for a cruise at the end of the century, the captain insisted on keeping the ship 'in hand' and placing checks on visitors, especially in Fiji. The island's 'principal magnates' could come to dinner on board ship, but only 'a few at a time'. He felt that 'the people will think the better of us for keeping our ships in order'.²⁹ 'The essence of shipboard life was boundary maintenance', Greg Dening observed. He depicted sailing ship captains keeping 'their ships at sea, as it were' when anchored in Pacific harbours, preventing crew from toing and froing freely, for ports 'were beyond the boundaries of the ship' where 'the rules did not apply'.³⁰ In the context of a tourist cruise the fears rested with incursions from shore, the crew (mostly invisible in these accounts) were tasked instead with mediating connections between passengers and Islanders, and in a sense schooling them in the way of the ship. Shutting out indigenous visitors also entailed a forced self-denial of pleasure given the fascination previously expressed with shipboard 'swamping'. But, again, these published travel narratives have not shed light on passengers' more private thoughts, including possible anxieties about or distaste for cross-cultural proximities. A stricter policing of flows may have been a welcome intervention.

In other ways the ship was embraced as a retreat from the islands, a space at a distance, from where one might safely reflect upon experiences ashore. The prospect of swimming in the seas off Mago Island in Fiji was enticing, but deemed too dangerous. 'More secure, if less romantic, is the saltwater bath available on board', related one man, where he could safely 'wash off the dust and sweat' from shore, the ship serving as a space of purification, even of ritual cleansing.³¹ For others, too, time on board was important for physical restoration and recuperation, for 'we go the pace too hard on land', remarked one Scotsman.³²

28 T.W. Leys, 1884, *The Cruise of the Wairarapa*, Auckland: Evening Star, p. 11.

29 Richardson to Mills, 3 July 1899, Hocken Collections, USSCo. Records, AG-292-005-001/057.

30 Greg Dening, 1980, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas 1774-1880*, Melbourne: Dorsey Press, pp. 158-59.

31 'Oceania: Steam-yachting in the Pacific', *Otago Witness*, 19 July 1884.

32 'Sailing in the South Seas', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 August 1899.

In keeping with the desired image of a disciplined, well-ordered vessel, the cruise ship was a space for selective diplomatic exchanges, conforming to a longer maritime tradition. The passenger lists included lawyers, shipping magnates and retired politicians, many of whom hosted island dignitaries on board, dispensing hospitality rather than receiving it. In Rarotonga, members of the royal family and a number of chiefs joined the passengers for dinner, and were made to feel 'quite at home'. Wandering freely over the 'mammoth yacht' they seemed 'greatly impressed', and after an evening of dancing, singing and speech-making they left at midnight, 'giving us many cheers'.³³ At Pape'ete, 250 leading members of the indigenous and French communities partook of a Sunday cruise on the *Waikare* to Moorea. It was reportedly 'a great treat, as it was an opportunity rarely afforded to the residents'.³⁴

The cruise ship offered a stage for performing and enacting roles of contested hierarchies. The only recorded Māori passenger was the prominent Ngāti Kahungunu landowner Airini Tonore (Donnelly), who travelled with her daughter Maud. We only learn of their presence on the *Waikare* from the account of fellow passenger, journalist Forestina Ross, who was commissioned by the USSCo. to write up the tour for the Dunedin press. At Apia, Tonore invited the 18-year-old Samoan vice-King, Malietoa Tanumafili, on board. The likeness between the 'two natives of the highest rank' struck Ross as 'remarkable', and 'pointed plainly to these islands being the home of the Maori'. With his retinue on board as well as commissioners and officers of the competing imperial powers of Britain, United States and Germany, the saloon was 'filled with personages, naval, political, and regal'.³⁵ Given that the *Waikare* had steamed into the thick of political unrest in mid-1899 as negotiations over the imperial partition of the Samoan Islands continued, these shipboard intimacies were highly sensitive. As reported later, 'some unpleasantness' occurred during the week 'owing to the invitations to a dance given on board being chiefly confined to Germans'.³⁶ The ship appeared to be used as leverage in a

33 William Meeks Fehon, 1898, *Six Weeks' Excursion to the South Seas and Eastern Pacific Islands: Comprising Raratonga, Tahiti, Raiatea, Samoa and the Friendly Islands, by the new steamer "Waikare", 3,000 tons : (Union Steam Ship Company of N.Z., Ltd.) from Sydney, 30th June, 1898*, Sydney: S.D. Townsend & Co., p. 8.

34 'The Waikare's excursion', *Otago Daily Times*, 8 August 1898.

35 Mrs Malcolm Ross, 'In Southern Seas: The Waikare's excursion', *Evening Post*, 12 August 1899.

36 'Affairs in Samoa', *Launceston Examiner*, 7 August 1899.

performative role between imperial rivals, dispensing and according privilege. En route to Pago Pago the *Waikare* ferried a number of chiefs and their relatives back to their homes in Tutuila after a key meeting before the commissioners as part of the political negotiations. Ross remarked, 'It was judged safer to get them away from the simmering intrigue of Apia and they themselves were pleased to be granted a deck passage on so grand a boat'.³⁷

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While the promotional literature of the period orients us to the imagined appeal of the tropics to white settler audiences around the ocean's rim, focusing on the cruise ship points us instead to the meanings generated in the course of touring, to the action unfolding in specific encounters. Docked at island ports, the cruise ship was variously a space of wonder and display, diplomacy and hospitality, a symbol of civilisation and ties to a wider imperial community. Centring the ship as a tourist space shows the extent to which passengers hoped to make an impression on the people living in these 'exotic' locations, just as they desired similarly novel experiences ashore. The extent of the reversals from shore to ship were perhaps unanticipated and at times unsettling, but they also reveal colonial touring as an inherently open, negotiated and unstable practice, one of cross-cutting mobilities, improvisations, and multi-sensorial encounters.

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