I want you to recall 1990—or imagine it, if you are too young to remember. I had been teaching Pacific history at La Trobe University for nearly 20 years, but the subject’s once-exotic glamour had seriously faded and too few history students wanted to take it. What, I asked myself, could I teach that would be relevant, trendy and fitted my commitment to reading texts for Indigenous presence. I know! Women! So, I circulated this memo (see Figure 1) to three people, including Martha Macintyre, an anthropologist in the Sociology Department. I do not recall if the others replied, but Martha did, saying something like, ‘this is terrific. I want to teach it with you!’

These days, our exchange would have been via email, and I would still have her reply. But, it was three years before the History Department gained any email access at all—in the form of a single computer in an administrator’s office, on which we typed our messages in DOS and could not edit them after hitting return at the end of a line. My memo to Martha was typed on my own desktop computer (one of those small square Macs), which is why I can find a copy—I’m a compulsive electronic hoarder. I then printed it and sent it through the internal mail system in a yellow reusable envelope, in which Martha no doubt returned her reply. This is doubly bizarre in today’s terms—not only communication by snail mail but also a university mail system that actually functioned.
La Trobe University
MEMORANDUM

TO Martha Macintyre
SUBJECT New subject proposal
DATE 22 March 1990.

Attached is a tentative outline of a subject I am thinking of offering in 1992. The proposed program may be too ambitious - indeed, Theme IV could probably be a half unit in its own right. I shall be able to be more precise when I have examined the texts available in more detail.

I am interested in combining exploration of traces of actual women acting in the past with a consideration of conceptual, categorical and 'political' dimensions of a variety of modes of discourse, both contemporary and later, male and female, and including formal representations by historians and anthropologists.

I should be grateful to know your reactions to the proposed subject, including its likely relevance to the majors in Family and Gender and Anthropology. Any suggestions you might make will be gratefully received. Perhaps we could have a chat about it over coffee at some stage.

Bronwen Douglas.

Figure 1: Memorandum to Martha Macintyre (22 March 1990).
Source: Memorandum composed and sent by author.
Over the next year, we formulated a new subject proposal (see Figure 2). The La Trobe approval process was still fairly casual, though sociology took longer to accept it than history. The subject began in 1992 as ‘Images of women in the Pacific’; however, in the second year, we renamed it ‘Gender, colonialism and postcolonialism’ because Martha (rightly) suggested that ‘images’ was a bad, Eurocentric term. We taught together for four years, though Helen Lee helped one year when Martha was on leave. The subject was more popular with anthropology students than history. One history student I remember very well is Helen Gardner, now at Deakin University, who took History III IWP in its first year and did Honours in 1993, when I supervised her thesis on a topic inspired by Theme 2 of our subject. We had several terrific visiting lecturers, including Pat Grimshaw, Margaret Jolly, Klaus Neumann and Nick Thomas.

Teaching with Martha was a joy—endlessly stimulating and often surprising. I did not teach undergraduates after 1995, because I was on leave the following year and then left La Trobe for a research position at The Australian National University (ANU). At much the same time, Martha also moved from La Trobe to join Warwick Anderson’s Centre for the Study of Health and Society at the University of Melbourne. However, the experience of creating and teaching our subject together set important directions for my future thinking and writing. My initial position at ANU was with the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM) program, where I devised a project on Women and Christianity in Melanesia. Martha’s inspiration and support strongly motivated the theme and the stream of publications that followed. At the same time, I was beginning to work on the history of human difference and race in Oceania. An important trigger for that interest is listed as Topic 8 in the subject proposal, on Polynesian and Melanesian women (see Figure 2). The first year we taught the subject, one workshop question asked ‘what were the major criteria of racial classification used by Johann Reinhold Forster and Dumont d’Urville?’ By the second year, I had refined it to ‘compare and contrast the casual ethnocentrism of Forster’s scientific empiricism with Dumont d’Urville’s a priori racism’, having realised that important differences existed in the language used in each text and the discourses informing them. I spent nearly 20 years determining the nature of that distinction and writing much about it (Douglas, 2008, 2014).
La Trobe University

MEMORANDUM

TO History Department

SUBJECT New Subject Proposal, 1992


HISTORY II 'WP'/III 'WP': Women in the Pacific
(hopefully a.k.a. Sociology II 'WP'/III 'WP', Women's Studies II 'WP'/III 'WP') (full unit):

Co-ordinators: Bronwen Douglas, Martha Macintyre

This subject will explore textual images of women in the Pacific, including, where available, female representations of themselves and other women. Its main methodological concern will be with ways of deconstructing the ethnocentric and gendered bias of most texts, with particular attention to the social, cultural and political contexts which they described and in which they were written. Theories of gender, representation and postmodernist cultural critique will be considered for their utility in explicating the texts consulted and will themselves be subject to critical scrutiny. There will be four main themes: images of paradise (early European contacts with Tahiti and Hawaii; the myth of 'paradise lost'); women and Christianity (especially in Vanuatu); ethnographic representations of Pacific women (Trobriands, Samoa); women in the colonial and contemporary Pacific (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu).

Class requirements: One 1-hour lecture and one 2-hour workshop per week.

Assessment: two 3,000 word essays (one per semester, 30% each), one 3,000 word take-home final test (30%) and workshop participation (10%).

Recommended reading:
Jolly, M. and Macintyre, M. (eds), Family and Gender in the Pacific: Domestic Contradictions and the Colonial Impact, CUP 1989

Proposed weekly timetable:

SEMIESTER I

1. Introduction.

2. Understanding 'others': reading about 'natives' and women (Torgovnick).

Theme I: Images of paradise:

3. Early European representations of women in Tahiti (Robertson, Banks).

4. The Bounty mutineers and Tahitian women and men (Morrison, Dening).

Figure 2: Bronwen Douglas and Martha Macintyre, new subject proposal, La Trobe University (11 March 1991).

Source: Proposal formulated by Douglas and Macintyre.
Another great gift from Martha to my future research was learning to take visual materials seriously—as engaged modes of representing encounters and Indigenous people, rather than simply passive reflections or pretty illustrations. This stimulus soon bore fruit in my enduring commitment to critical interpretation of voyage artwork as ethno-historical texts, often saturated in Indigenous presence (Douglas, 1999). We also integrated numerous videos into the subject. Martha helped transform my public performances by introducing me to sociology’s really cool new machine, which projected transparencies made on the photocopier onto a screen—otherwise called an overhead projector, but unknown at that time in the History Department. Before then, all my presentations were illustrated by slides, and these were of poor quality. I was much better at making transparencies than taking photos for slides and used an overhead projector in lectures and seminar or conference papers for more than 10 years, before graduating to PowerPoint.

In March 1993, Martha and I escaped from teaching for 10 days to attend the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO) conference in Kona, on the Big Island of Hawai‘i. She had strongly encouraged me to submit an abstract, and it found a home on a panel for which it was quite unsuited. En route, we stayed in a hotel in Waikiki, where Martha demonstrated an amazing talent for colour coding her pyjamas with the hotel room decor (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Martha Macintyre at the Outrigger Reef Towers Hotel, Waikiki, Hawai‘i (20 March 1993).

Source: Photo by Douglas.
I was enthralled by the conference. As a historian, I was out of my element and roamed about the dinner photographing anthropologists—the historical empire striking back. This annoyed some anthropologists, but not Epeli Hau‘ofa (see Figure 4), who gave a keynote at the dinner on the democracy movement in Tonga. A few days later, he spoke at the University of Hawai‘i in Hilo on ‘Our sea of islands’, having been inspired by the dramatic volcanic landscape on the drive between Kona and Hilo to rethink the notion of Pacific Islands smallness. This was the first iteration of a paper that quickly became a canonical text on Pacific Islander identity and connections (Hau‘ofa, 1994). There was a Mt Hagen big man, disguised as Andrew Strathern, photographed chatting with another celebrated highlands anthropologist, the late Paula Brown Glick (see Figure 5). I snapped the late, much-lamented Dawn Ryan talking to Melbourne University’s Mary Patterson (see Figure 6). I also took a sadly historic photo, the last ever of Roger Keesing, with his partner Christine Jourdan, approximately six weeks before his sudden death on a dance floor in Canada (see Figure 7).
Figure 5: Paula Brown Glick and Andrew Strathern, ASAO conference, Kona, Hawai’i (26 March 1993).
Source: Photo by Douglas.

Figure 6: Dawn Ryan and Mary Patterson, ASAO conference, Kona, Hawai’i (26 March 1993).
Source: Photo by Douglas.
Figure 7: Roger Keesing and Christine Jourdan, ASAO conference, Kona, Hawai’i, 26 March 1993.
Source: Photo by Douglas.

However, here are the important ones: She Who Must not Be Spoken Too Much of Today with Bob Tonkinson (see Figure 8) and the escapees from La Trobe with Margaret Jolly (see Figure 9). Puzzlingly, I am wearing a Kanak robe mission (mission dress), presumably in the spirit of the ASAO tradition of dressing up for the dinner. En route home, Martha slept most of the way while I read frantically for the class I had to travel to directly from the airport. The denouement of the trip occurred later down the track, when Martha contacted me, urgently seeking the receipts she knew I’d kept for my tax return. She couldn’t be bothered claiming her share at the time, but the Australian Tax Office had unwisely decided to audit her. In retribution, she chased up all the deductions she could find. She must be one of the few people ever to make a profit from a tax audit.
Figure 8: Martha Macintyre and Robert Tonkinson, ASAO conference, Kona, Hawai‘i (26 March 1993).
Source: Photo by Douglas.

Figure 9: Martha Macintyre, Bronwen Douglas and Margaret Jolly, ASAO conference, Kona, Hawai‘i (26 March 1993).
Source: Photo by Douglas.
After leaving La Trobe, Martha and I worked together off and on for several years, particularly on Christian women’s groups in Melanesia. She was a key contributor to a 1998 SSGM workshop I organised in Sorrento, Victoria, on ‘Women, Christians, citizens: Being female in Melanesia today’. It was a remarkable event, at which 13 women from the region gave papers (see Figure 10). Martha was one of six non-Melanesian presenters, speaking on ‘Women’s organisations in Lihir’, in place of her friend Jacklynne Membup from Lihir, who was unable to come at the last minute. Five years later, Martha published an important paper on an umbrella women’s group in Lihir in an Oceania special issue I edited on ‘Women’s groups and everyday modernity in Melanesia’ (Macintyre, 2003). Debra McDougall and Margaret Jolly were also contributors. Martha’s paper was crucial—her unsentimental pragmatism regarding the immense difficulties facing women and their organisations in Papua New Guinea was both exemplary and salutary.

That collection was my swansong with SSGM; afterwards, our work went in different directions. We were rarely in touch until a happy serendipity five years ago brought us in electronic contact on the supervision panel for Michael Main’s doctoral thesis (see Main’s contribution to this section). This virtual reconnection was materialised in 2017, when we were co-participants in a workshop at the Melbourne Museum and resumed old conversations as if they had never stopped.
References


