

# The Cultivation of Difference in Oceania

Chris Ballard

This volume marks the first attempt to assemble the writings of a group of scholars with a common interest in the history of racial thought in Oceania. If some of the contributors refuse to be definitive, the collection nevertheless yields some unanticipated results. As a group, we were led to the topic by a preliminary sense — now largely confirmed — of the scarcity of original scholarship on race in Oceania, as distinct from the uncritical repetition of a small litany of received truths. What we failed to anticipate was the degree of significance of Oceanic materials in the development of metropolitan raciological thought, a theme partially documented in this volume, or the extent to which Oceania was promoted as a potential source of authoritative solutions to questions generated elsewhere. Equally as surprising was the paucity of scholarship on a global scale upon which to draw in framing our regional accounts. Bronwen Douglas's groundbreaking investigation in Chapter One into the etymology and shifting connotations of the term 'race' is perhaps the most obvious example of the need to undertake fundamental historical research in a worldwide field that we had naively assumed to be comprehensively charted and documented.

The regional scope of the volume provides a critical focal length for questions about the relationship between field and metropole in the development of theories of human difference, bridging the particularism of local or national accounts and the abstraction of global narratives. The geographical contiguities within a region enable us to follow trans-local connections, to identify interactions and exchanges between individuals, and to trace the evolution of specifically regional grammars of distinction — a process further enhanced by the emergence of regional metropolitan centres such as Singapore, Sydney, and Honolulu. If regional perspectives have the capacity to challenge and even reconfigure the form of metropolitan histories of raciology, the contributors to this volume would also contend that Oceania offers a number of distinctive possibilities. The earliest documented encounters between Europe and Oceania are of an antiquity not dissimilar to those between Europe and the Americas and sub-Saharan Africa. Yet from the early sixteenth century, the slow and sporadic unfolding of European exploration and colonial acquisition in Oceania, which would see 'first contacts' extend as late as the 1960s in parts of interior New Guinea, has produced an exceptionally long sequence of engagements between changing metropolitan ideas about difference and ongoing encounters with 'new' peoples. The range of apparent variation in human forms and cultures across broadly similar latitudes

and environments within Oceania has also provided a critical stimulus for European thought: witness the unsavoury sobriquet of 'natural laboratory' which continues to feature in scholarly writing on the region.

We do not pretend that the volume provides the final word on such questions but see it as also plotting the outliers of a new archipelago of enquiry. This epilogue briefly considers four specific areas for further investigation: the relationship between raciological elaboration and the politics of settler colonialism; the legacy and imprint of raciology in Oceania beyond the early twentieth century; the focus on embodied encounters as a critical locus or moment in both the performance and production of raciological knowledge; and the nature of indigenous Oceanian adoption, reworking, and subversion of raciological ideas.

First, however, it is necessary to address the problem of writing at all about raciology as a science or a system of knowledge. The attribution of 'slipperiness' to race presumes a substance or content, however labile, that might ultimately be grasped. As an enterprise of contested knowledge in which any verifiable results of scientific consequence have been outweighed so overwhelmingly by the sheer mass of intellectual and other investments, the science of race is perhaps challenged only by pre-Enlightenment alchemy. How then are we to write of the history of racial thinking in the progressive terms deemed appropriate to other sciences? In what respects might Cuvier be said to 'improve' upon Buffon, or Wallace upon Crawford? How are we to account for the hydra-like quality of the naturalized idea of race which sees individual elements of racist theories repeatedly slain, only to rise again, perhaps euphemized but seemingly unharmed and multiplied?

Much of the power of raciology as an institutionalized system of knowledge has derived from its capacity to inform, and to be informed by, both popular understandings of difference and the machinery of state and colonial administrations. Few other branches of science have been so promiscuously engaged with popular discourses or so susceptible to the fashions and demands of settler and colonial politics. In the most banal of terms, while race may not have achieved much as a science, it has certainly done work in the world. What this suggests is that we need to appreciate the visceral efficacy of the fundamental logic of raciology which extends beyond its pretensions as a science to cater to more profound and more widely shared understandings of human difference and identity. An account of the history of racist thinking which is capable of exposing the underlying structures of differentiation, such as the role of dualisms or the function of hierarchy in the comparison of different individuals or populations, might dispel any impulse to seek order and progress in the development of racist ideas. Such an approach offers the added advantage of allowing for the incorporation of indigenous Oceanian and foreign theories of

difference within a single frame of analysis. To what extent did Oceanian and European modes of distinction resemble each other and how might this have enabled the mutual exchange and adoption of concepts of difference?

With respect to the presumed but not systematically historicized nexus of raciology and settler colonialism, a closer correlation is needed of the changing tone of raciology and the political and economic imperatives that accompanied the transition to settler colonialism. The common observation that raciology hardened as the colonial demand for land stepped up the requirement for moral legitimation is itself in need of more extensive empirical demonstration. Can it be shown that discourses of race particular to different colonies in Oceania transformed not so much in step with developments in global thought but rather at a pace with changes in the local politics of land?

The relatively long time depth and extraordinary persistence of fundamental raciological precepts invite consideration of the possibility that many of these precepts still endure in scholarly, as well as in popular conception. Just as the history of nineteenth-century raciology in Oceania has been largely neglected, so too its legacy and subsequent imprint is an open-ended and largely unconsidered field. This lack makes recent scholarly discourse on difference in Oceania an obvious area for further attention. The gradual unravelling of consensus on the biological concept of race between the World Wars and the explicit post-war rejection of race as a valid social concept, enshrined in the 1952 UNESCO statement on race, might have lifted a burden of guilt from the social sciences but also encouraged a collective amnesia about anthropology's intellectual antecedents. The euphemization and sublimation of race as 'ethnicity' or even 'identity' leave scholarly debates on these themes open to the forms of analysis employed in this volume to characterize eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinking. There is no reason to suspect that late twentieth-century anthropology, for example, is any more immune to popular conceptions of difference than were its predecessors. The expression of difference in fiction, encyclopaedias, school texts, photography, and cinema should form part of any comprehensive analysis of that intellectual history.

A quick survey of post-war Oceanic anthropology will yield any number of statements about Negritos and other primordial, dark-skinned inhabitants of island interiors; casual analogies asserted between contemporary Oceanic communities or practices and the Pleistocene or Neolithic Europe; and comparisons between the tool-making skills of chimpanzees and Tasmanian Aborigines. But these are simply the more clumsy and egregious instances of a discipline painfully and often wilfully ignorant of its own past. French racial cartographies developed for Oceania during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have furnished the region with perhaps the most powerful of legacies, commonly condensed into the binary contrast between Melanesia

and Polynesia. Many of the region's classic ethnographic distinctions such as egalitarianism and hierarchy, big-men and chiefs, diversity and homogeneity, and gender antagonism and complementarity are aligned along this axis. If ideas about race were never free of culture, can theories of culture ever be free from race? The crania of human beings — living and dead — continue to be measured (if not collected) into the present but, since 1945, confidence about our ability to fix human difference has shifted from metrical studies of anatomy to blood group analysis and, most recently, to genetics. The particular quality of confidence expressed during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by anatomists and then anthropologists, for whom the biologization of difference removed analysis from the realm of subjective speculation, is closely echoed in the conviction of contemporary geneticists that the answers to our questions will be definitively resolved. The longer historical perspective promoted in this volume would suggest that, while the increasing sophistication of technologies of differentiation is evident, elaboration of the questions being posed might not have kept pace. The need for a sustained cross-disciplinary encounter between geneticists and historians and other social scientists has never been more pressing.

The centrality of embodied encounters in the constitution of raciological knowledge about Oceania emerges clearly from each of the contributions as a focus for further close analysis. It forms the theme of the editors' ongoing Australian Research Council Discovery project on 'European Naturalists and the Constitution of Human Difference in Oceania: Crosscultural Encounters and the Science of Race, 1768-1888'. Raciology shares with most other field sciences the tendency to expunge all traces of subjectivity in the extraction of its raw material, writing out from its published accounts all the performative qualities of the encounter. Yet race (on both sides) is, foremost, a perception of performed qualities: of civility or savagery, of bodily decoration and the arrangement of clothing and hair, of the relations between men and women or between social categories. European observations on the colour of skin often appear as summary statements on all these other perceived qualities and commonly vary considerably from one member of an expedition to another. Much as indigenous agency is now acknowledged and sought in the composition of artefact collections, so too the data of raciology must be interrogated for evidence of what Bronwen Douglas has called indigenous countersigns, for a more nuanced and often more troubling sense of connections and missed connections in the encounter.

For many states, communities, and individuals in contemporary Oceania, the categories of distinction received from raciology have assumed new forms of significance, whether through challenge, reclamation, or subversion. Bernard Narakobi's philosophy of a Melanesian Way, the Anglican order of the Melanesian Brotherhood, and the international cross-state Melanesian Spearhead Group, along with Polynesian Airlines, the Polynesian Society, and the Polynesian Cultural Center have all embraced the contours of a French geography elaborated

from the mid-eighteenth century. Papuan nationalists in the Indonesian half of New Guinea, long subject to racist discrimination under Dutch colonial and later Indonesian rule, themselves repeat the distinctions advanced by Crawfurd, Earl, and Wallace when they insist on dichotomizing black-skinned, curly-headed Papuans and their straight-haired Indonesian Malay opponents. But while there may be some liberal discomfort about the uses to which these categories are now put, any awkwardness about their historical origins is a problem only for scholars. These days, as in the past, the question to be posed in addressing any classification or hierarchy is what purpose and which agenda it serves, rather than seeking to determine its fit with any presumed reality.